

Autoharp Clearinghouse November 1993 – Idabel Brandt

The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* has been waiting for several years to dedicate an issue to **Idabel Brandt**. Although this lovely lady from Rosebud, Missouri eagerly accepted my invitation to be the subject of a cover story, her musical life has been so busy that the project spent quite some time “on the back burner.” It is always a tremendous help to me when someone volunteers to write their own profile, and I thank Idabel profusely for the story that follows. **ER**

“My earliest memories are of life on a small farm in south central Missouri during The Great Depression. After the day’s work and the evening’s chores were done, our family sat on the front porch visiting with neighbors or playing music and singing. I recall that the first song I ever learned was *Maple on the Hill*. My father could play both the banjo and the fiddle, and he and my mother sang all of the old songs together. Our home was a gathering place for neighbors and friends who played musical instruments and/or sang.

Since there were never enough instruments to go around the circle, I just sang. At an early age, I learned harmony vocals by singing along with the radio and, later, with phonograph records. Music was an important part of my life right on up through high school, although I had very little formal musical training.

My father read music from the hymnals when he wanted to learn a new song. I was also fascinated by those shaped notes in the hymn books. At the age of ten, I attended a singing school at our church which was taught by my uncle. It was there that I learned to read the shapes and transferred to do-re-mi scale to the keys on the piano. Eventually, I could play all four parts from the hymnal. Even now, I am able to read the shaped notes faster than the round ones.

I sang in a gospel quartet from the age of eleven years through high school. While still a student, I also participated in other musical functions such as a Trio and the Glee Club as well as taking part in all types of church functions. I even teamed up with a friend who played guitar for two fifteen minute programs each Saturday on radio station KTTR in Rolla, Missouri. In addition, I appeared as a guest on the *Hit Parade* broadcast over station KWTD in Springfield.

After finishing my education, I taught in a one-room rural school for two years before marrying a young man who was a teacher in an adjoining district. At that time, he was playing rhythm guitar and singing in a country dance band. However, shortly after our marriage, he gave up being in the band because it was not in keeping with our lifestyle.

My husband served in the United States Air Force from 1951 through 1955. We spent six months of that time in Texas, and the remaining years in Pleasanton, California. It was during our stay on the west coast that I first became acquainted with the autoharp. A traveling music teacher brought one into my classroom to accompany the student’s songs for our school’s Spring Festival. He played the instrument lap style, and I still remember how much I loved the sound of that ‘harp.

Upon our return to Missouri, we settled on a farm, became involved in community affairs, raised three children and finished college. I continued teaching (31 years total), but Howard left that profession for a position with the U.S. Postal Service as a rural mail carrier. The years passed and, before we knew it, we found ourselves retired in 1985. Two of our children and our four grandchildren live in Seattle, Washington, with our youngest residing in Las Vegas.

During all those years, I never forgot the lovely sound of the autoharp. Once I even borrowed one to accompany the youth choir at our church. Then, in the late 1970s, I saw Bryan Bowers on the television program ***Real People***. He was holding his 'harp in an upright position and was playing melodies! I knew immediately that I wanted to try and learn to play in that manner.

My husband gave me my first autoharp for Christmas in 1980. It was an Oscar Schmidt 21-chord *Classic*. I could strum chords, but could not get the tunes to sound right. At that time, I didn't realize that the melody notes were not always contained in the backup chords...which were all that most of the songbooks included. A few years later, I heard about the Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View, Arkansas and attended the summer workshop there in 1986. Being able to absorb only so much in one weekend, I came away with mixed feelings of frustration and enthusiasm. After about two weeks, I finally figured out the pinch-strum pattern and was able to begin playing some tunes at last. From that point on, I was hooked and would play two and three hours every day. Since I had never 'mastered' an instrument before, it was very exciting to me.

Through it all, Howard was always very supportive, and encouraged me to play my 'harp for Music Night at our church. He also urged me to take part in the autoharp contest at the Ozark Folk Center in 1987. Very reluctantly, I DID enter and, much to my surprise, was chosen as one of the finalists. Needless to say, that did a lot for my self confidence. Not long after that, I began to be asked to play at various events in our community. About that same time, I purchased A *Centurion* model Oscar Schmidt 21-chord 'harp, which has been my main instrument to date. I have since acquired a *Wildwood Flower* diatonic autoharp, but find that I don't use it much due to the fact that it is limited solely to the key of D.

A few years back, I decided that I would like to try playing the banjo. I found an excellent teacher who encouraged me to develop my own style of old-time playing. Today, I enjoy banjo almost as much as playing the autoharp. In the meantime, I purchased a mountain dulcimer to add more variety to my performances. My latest challenge has been learning to play the hammered dulcimer. In about a year's time, I have learned and memorized around a dozen tunes.

I had no idea that retirement would be so full of enjoyment. Certainly one of its biggest rewards has been all of the wonderful people I have come to know through my music. A couple of years ago, Howard and I traveled to Iowa for the Avoca Festival. I entered both the autoharp and the banjo competitions and placed third (behind Drew Smith) in autoharp and fourth in the frailing banjo category. I feel honored to also have been a finalist for four years in the Southern Regional Autoharp Contest.

In 1989, I made a cassette recording which has received a number of positive reviews in various music trade journals. It was entitled ***Echoes from the Past*** and included both vocal and

instrumental tracks. Songs and tunes included are: *My Wild Irish Rose – I'll Be All Smiles Tonight – Lorena – Faded Coat of Blue – Shamus O'Brian – Silver Bell – Bury Me Beneath the Willow – Snow Deer – In the Garden – Under the Double Eagle*. The tape is available for \$8.00 postpaid from me at P.O. Box 271, Rosebud, MO 63091. I am now in the process of gathering material for an all-gospel recording.

Sharing my music has become the most important part of my life. I have performed at Silver Dollar City in Branson for three years, at Six Flags Over Mid-America the last two years, and at numerous other festivals throughout Missouri and Illinois.

I had really never given much thought to putting together a performing group; it more or less just evolved. Singing those old songs in three-part harmony is so much fun. Howard sometimes adds the bass line on gospel songs, and plays guitar with us on a regular basis now. He was a bit hesitant at first, but is feeling more a part of the group since we stopped billing ourselves as an all-girl band! We call our ensemble **This 'n' That...Here 'n' There**. Our title name came as a result of the two questions we are most frequently asked: What do you play? Where do you play?

Joining Howard and I in this group is Betty Thorlakson, who is a retired classroom teacher and accomplished church organist. With our band, she plays autoharp and sings harmony. Our fourth member is Shirley Dunne, who also provides harmony vocals as well as playing accordion, washboard, jawbone and turtle sticks (a turtle shell played as a rhythm instrument with wooden knitting needles). After we had been playing together for just a short time, we came to the realization that the reason we all knew so many of the same songs and tunes was because ALL of our fathers had been fiddle players.

We sincerely appreciate being given the opportunity to play our old-time music before such receptive audiences wherever we go and we are doubly glad to have Howard's help in loading and unloading and setting up our sound system. Most of all, we are grateful that God restored Howard's health following an October 1992 heart attach. We trust in the Lord to bless us all with good health, enabling us to continue with our music for many years to come." **IB**

Note: I have tried unsuccessfully to contact Idabel via both telephone and snail mail to see if she had anything to add to the above. I mention this because people sometimes read these articles without taking into consideration when they were written (fourteen years ago in this instance) and sent money to order recordings. If any of the Cyberpluckers or Autoharp Enthusiasts in Missouri can provide me with updated info regarding Idabel, it would be sincerely appreciated.

Meanwhile, those of you who have Becky Blackley's series of *Care and Feeding of the Autoharp* books will find a profile about Idabel in Volume 8, Page 29. **ER**