

## Autoharp Clearinghouse - July 1995 - Jean Simmons Jennings

Once again, I must credit *The Autoharpoholic* magazine with introducing me to the subject of an AC cover story. Somewhere back in the early 1980s, I ordered several record albums from that publication by **The Simmons Family**. During the ensuing years, they have provided me with many hours of listening pleasure. Later on, Charles Whitmer called to my attention a group who called themselves **Leatherwoods** and were performing regularly at the former Grandpa Jones Family Dinner Theater in Mountain View, Arkansas. I found an address for that facility in the *Rackensack Review* newspaper and made contact. Jean (Simmons) Jennings responded to my inquiry and provided me with a number of Leatherwoods' recordings. We have kept in touch since that time, and you can imagine my delight when she agreed to share her story with the *Autoharp Clearinghouse*. Without further ado, I'll turn you over to Jean. **ER**

"I was born in Van Buren County, at Shirley, Arkansas, and grew up in a rural community. Most social occasions in those days were held either at the church or in someone's home. I always thoroughly enjoyed the time we spent singing and playing music to entertain ourselves and others. My father worked in timber all of his life. I remember what a treat it was to ride in the back of his log truck to the little town of Clinton and go to a movie.

By the time I moved the forty miles to Mountain View in 1962, I had married and become the mother of four children. My husband and I opened an auto parts store there, which we operated for the next ten years. It was also in 1962 that I acquired my first autoharp. I must say that I spent so many happy hours learning to play the instrument that a lot of my housework was left undone! In the mid nineteen sixties, I also learned to play the mountain dulcimer and upright bass.

.During that same time period, a large number of musicians gathered at the Court House Square every Friday night to jam. That is where I first played in front of an audience. Along with my family, I played my autoharp in a group comprised of fiddle players, singers and, often, other autoharpists. A number of men from Mountain View and other parts of Stone County worked tirelessly toward securing a grant/loan to build the proposed Ozark Folk Center. That vision became a reality in 1973, following many years of work to get the funds allotted to build the complex. We began performing there that same year, and still appear at the facility today.

My husband and I sold our auto parts store in 1971, and I started working at The Dulcimer Shoppe. The proprietor, Lynn McSpadden, had moved to Mountain View the previous year and opened the store at that time. For twenty years, I worked there full-time and am still in Lynn's employ on a part-time basis.

Also for two decades, I performed as part of **The Simmons Family**. We appeared at many events, including the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. A week at the Folk Life Festival in Washington, DC was one of the highlights of our musical career. We also played many concerts at colleges, and I took part in the Artist-In-Schools program for four years. As a unit, The Simmons Family made eight albums, which are all still obtainable as of this writing.

In 1981, I joined an area string band, playing autoharp, dulcimer, bass and banjo. We traveled quite a bit, as well as playing on a regular basis at the Ozark Folk Center. When we decided to make a recording in 1982, it became apparent that a name was needed for the group. Among our prospective choices was **Leatherwoods**, which was borrowed from a book entitled *Life In The Leatherwoods* by Dr. John Quincy Wolf. The volume tells about life around the Norfolk area during the war. Leatherwood trees grow in the national forest there, and it is from them that we took our name.

The Leatherwoods string band has made nine tapes to date. It has been about thirty years now that I've played the autoharp. During that time, I've helped teach workshops at the Ozark Folk Center and other places. I also have students to whom I give private lessons. My style of playing is very traditional. I love to accompany myself on autoharp while singing the old Carter Family songs.

For the past two and one half years, I have worked on a radio program called *At Home In The Country*. I am married to Leon Jennings, who makes beautiful white oak baskets. My daughter, Pam Simmons Kirby, was part of The Simmons Family musical group, and is now a member of the Leatherwoods band. She sings, plays spoons, dulcimer, guitar and bass. James Kirby, her husband, is also a member of Leatherwoods, playing dobro and bass.

Together, we operated the Leatherwoods Music Theater in Mountain View for four years. Currently, we are appearing at Bricksby's Riverboat Theater, and we invite any of you who may be traveling to our area to come and see the show." *JSJ*

### **Excerpts from an AC Review:**

Leatherwoods, as mentioned in this month's cover story, is a cross-generational musical union that includes a mother/daughter and a father/son combination as well as that of a husband and wife. Their many years of playing together, and nine albums to their credit (and counting), have resulted in a tight, highly disciplined ensemble sound. Add that to Leatherwoods' considerable collective knowledge of their field in both its generalities and particularities, and you have an almost foolproof formula for success. The group's tour de force is an energy-filled, almost aggressive style, as they expel their own particular blending of instrument and voice. Through out their numerous projects, the arrangements are tempered with balance, in addition to appropriate and effective rhythmic and dynamic variations. The one exception to that might be tempo. Almost everything is played at a speed that is lightning fast...yet never out of control. Perhaps they could have slowed down on a few more numbers and given their listeners a little bit of breathing space. I, personally, always welcome a 3/4 or 6/8 time song or tune on each side of a recording to diversify the pace.

The band has a keen ear for traditional presentations, which is underscored by their selection of songs. The group's play list represents a nice mix of sacred and secular repertoire. Likewise, their ability to perform a cappella is demonstrated on several of their gospel renditions. Jean's autoharp, while present on a number of the tracks, is out front only occasionally. Influenced by the school of the Original Carter Family, Jean's style is basic, but authentic to the idiom. There is an absence of sufficient liner notes to help unravel the mystery between names, voices and instruments. Only those listeners quite familiar with each of these vocalists and pickers will be

able to figure out who plays and sings what where? There is some fantastic flat-picking to be heard here, as well as a number of spunky clawhammer banjo romps, but I don't know which of the multi-instrumentalists to credit and compliment? A cut-by-cut breakdown really is essential to writing an accurate appraisal. However, it has absolutely nothing to do with the quality of the performance...and these tapes, like all of their predecessors, are enjoyable and well-done albums.

Recorded cleanly and precisely, these recordings will find favor among fans who like string band music that "kicks up some dust," yet is more refined and polished than hard-core old-time music. With these tunes, and their arrangements of same, Leatherwoods has once again succeeded admirably.

Based in Mountain View, Arkansas, Leatherwoods is a unique group that can perform a wide variety of music from folk to country to bluegrass to gospel. They easily switch from twin fiddle instrumentals to the sweetest Ozark harmony. The members of this versatile string band have all been playing and singing for numerous years. *ER*

#### **Personnel Update:**

ROGER FOUNTAIN (Pineville) playing any style fiddle needed.

RONNIE FOUNTAIN (Mountain View) playing rhythm and lead guitar, and also singing lead and harmony.

KATHY SUTTERFIELD (Mountain View) playing fiddle, banjo, guitar, dulcimer and singing lead and harmony.

JEAN SIMMONS JENNINGS (Mountain View) playing bass, dulcimer, autoharp and singing lead and harmony.

PAM SIMMONS KIRBY (Mountain View) playing dulcimer, guitar, bass, spoons and singing lead and harmony.

JAMES KIRBY (Mountain View) playing bass and dobro.

#### **URL for 2003 interview with Jean Jennings:**

<<http://www.lyon.edu/webdata/groups/library/rcol/jennings.htm>>

Update: Jean Jennings passed away in 2005 following a four year battle with cancer.