

## Autoharp Clearinghouse Profile - July 1993 -

### Glen Jordan and Dorothy Gregory

Born in Richmond, Virginia in 1917 and 1919 respectively, Glenwood and Dorothy Jordan claim to have cut their teeth on musical instruments. Their mother had nine brothers and two sisters, all but two of whom were musically inclined. Since all of these aunts and uncles lived with them at one time or another, not only were the Jordan youngsters continually exposed to the music of their mother's siblings, they also had access to the instruments, which rested on the various beds when not in use. Dot remembers climbing up onto a bed as a toddler and trying to imitate what she had seen and heard her relatives doing. That included tinkering with the tuning pegs, for which she was repeatedly chastised. Otherwise, she and Glen were always encouraged in respect to their musical development.

Their parents were "church people," and Dot and Glen were practically raised at the Hatch Memorial Baptist Church. In Sunday School class, they would learn songs like *Jesus Loves Me* and *I'll Be A Sunbeam* and then come home and figure out how to accompany themselves on the instruments at hand. From the beginning they were told that their musical abilities were a gift from God, and promised to use them in His glory, and to always include sacred music in their repertoires. Later they came to realize that, regardless of how far apart musicians are in their secular musical preferences, they can always find a common denominator in an old gospel song.

Glen recalls the first time he actually played melody on a musical instrument. The family had attended the burial of a neighbor, and the tune of the funeral march lingered in young Glen's mind. When they got home, he ran to the house next door and was able to find that melody on the neighbor's pump organ. His mother was so impressed that she arranged for him to take piano lessons. Glen, however, memorized the pieces rather than ever learning how to read the music, and the teacher got so frustrated that Glen says the man nearly pulled his hair out. The Jordans didn't have a piano in their home, but Glen was allowed to use one at an adjacent farm house. It was a player piano and the rule was that he must practice for an hour and was only then allowed to play some of the piano rolls as a reward. While he didn't stay with the piano for too long, Glen was later able to make use of what he had learned by applying it to the accordion.

Somewhere around the age of ten, Glen also learned to play a bit of fiddle. There was an old-time fiddle player who would pass by their house hauling railroad ties on a horse-drawn wagon. The man would show Glen a technique or tune in the morning, and then stop by again on his way home in the evening to see if Glen had learned it. Glen fondly remembers how tolerant his sainted mother had been of him sawing away on that fiddle day after day.

When they were twelve and fourteen, Dot and Glen each got a guitar of their own. Southpaw Dot had always played all of the instruments upside down, not realizing that the guitar, for instance, could easily have been restrung. By the time she figured that out, her habits were too deeply ingrained to change. To this day, she plays a right-handed Gibson guitar with her left hand. All of her fretting is backwards too, and she says folks really get messed up when they try to follow her chords at a jam session!

The Jordan family moved to the Falmouth/Fredericksburg, Virginia area when Dot and Glen were just entering their teens. Dot had been wanting a banjo, so her father made one for her using a movie film canister, with the neck having been carved from a cedar post. She says that the frets were so high that they made her fingers bleed. Again, it was a right-handed instrument that she adapted to her left-handed picking.

For Christmas one year, Dot's mother made her a bathrobe out of old neckties sewn together. Later, when Dolly Parton wrote the song *Coat Of Many Colors*, Dot altered it to fit her "robe of many colors," and would bring the robe along to show the audience whenever she sang the song. It wore out from all the handling, and her mom had to make a replacement robe.

As the result of an illness when he was seventeen, Glen totally lost his voice for five years. All he could do was whisper, despite having been treated by doctor after doctor. As a last resort, it was decided that he should go to the University Of Virginia Hospital in Charlottesville for exploratory surgery. Meanwhile, Glen had gone into town one day intending to see a movie show. A lady parked by the curb called to him and asked directions to where she was trying to go. When Glen whispered his reply, the woman told him that her husband had suffered from a similar condition for years. After trying everything else, the man had followed someone's suggestion to rub Absorbine Jr. on his throat several times a day. For reasons still not understood by the medical profession, her husband got his voice back.

Glen took his movie money and went to the drugstore for a bottle of the liniment. His mother rubbed it on him faithfully, and postponed the scheduled surgery. Glen prayed persistently, promising the Lord that if He would just give him his voice back that Glen would spend the rest of his life doing good works. After about a month of this routine, Glen woke up one night coughing. It was the first audible sound he had made in over five years. Gradually, he taught himself to talk again, and then to sing.

True to his word, Glen worked at the Sylvania plant until he saved enough money to go to nursing school. Following his graduation, he worked for more than forty years on the night shift at the hospital in Fredericksburg. As if that weren't enough, he also managed a convalescent home for many years, catching a little sleep between his shifts. Somehow, he was still able to make time for his music in addition to working two demanding jobs.

Dot and Glen have almost always worked together as a duo. For a while, when they were each raising families, Dot played with two of her sons who, for twenty years, had a bluegrass band called Cabin Hill. Glen played the festival circuit for several years with his youngest son on twelve-string guitar. His mother traveled with them, and clog danced until she was ninety years old!

Early in their career, Dot and Glen played and sang at church socials, pie suppers and the like. Dances, which were held at various people's homes, were another popular form of entertainment in those days. They recall playing on more than one occasion until the sun came up. The hat would be passed to pay the musicians. For the most part, the repertoire was straight-ahead traditional country and gospel music.

Through an acquaintance of Dot's who was an officer in the Disabled American Veterans organization, they began entertaining at veteran's hospitals. One thing led to another until, in the early 1950s, they were hired to be a part of the Old Dominion Barn Dance broadcast over WRVA in Richmond. Among those sharing the stage there at that time were the Stoneman Family, Sunshine Sue, Lula Belle and Scotty, Mac Wiseman, Cowboy Copas, and Mother Maybelle Carter and her three daughters.

Right away, Glen was enthralled by Maybelle's autoharp, but thought it would be complicated to play because it had so many strings. She assured him that this was not the case and invited him to visit her and her family over in Poor Valley. Maybelle told Glen to get himself an autoharp and she would teach him to play it. But, she insisted upon the lessons taking place in the dark so that

Glen wouldn't get into the bad habit of looking at his chord bars. He remembers that they would sit out on her porch, or in the yard, and play late into the night. Maybelle would play a phrase and then have Glen play it back to her until he did it to her satisfaction. Later, both Helen and Anita Carter told Glen how much he plays like their mother. However, it has not been his intention to copy her but rather to incorporate what she taught him into his own style.

Following these visits to the Carter homeplace, and their association at the Old Dominion Barn Dance, a lasting friendship developed between Glen and the entire Carter Family. By this time, Sara was living in California but, when she came back to Virginia for visits, Glen would often be included. In fact he has, among his most-cherished possessions, an autoharp given to him by Sara. (I must admit that I felt awed just holding it.)

Through Sara, Glen became acquainted with her daughter Janette and her son Joe. Glen is proud to be one of the people who encouraged Janette to start having music shows at her father's store. And, he has attended all of the annual festivals that have been held at the Carter Fold since 1975. At the first such event, Maybelle's autoharp was somehow not put into the car when she came up from Nashville. Glen loaned her his instrument for her show that day, and he swears he has not changed the strings on it since! He is also reputed not to have washed his face for a year after Maybelle kissed him on the cheek! I suspect that one to be a slight exaggeration, but he did write a song based on an expression she frequently used, *Love Isn't Love Until You Give It Away*.

Glen fondly recalls the final time that he was able to get together with both Maybelle and Sara to make music. It was in 1976 following Maybelle's concert at the Smithsonian, and Sara was back east for the occasion. Glen and his son Barry had been on the festival circuit in Tennessee and Kentucky, and stopped by the Carter homeplace on their way back to Fredericksburg. Joe Carter set up an impromptu studio to record the event. Among those present were Maybelle and Carl B. Goff on guitars, Barry playing banjo and, at Maybelle's insistence, Glen supplied the autoharp music that day. A little-known fact is that Maybelle also played a little banjo, and she did so on Barry's instrument on that occasion. Sara was a hit under-the-weather and participated only in the capacity of song leader. Janette's son Dale operated the recording equipment and, thinking that the actual music was all that was wanted, he eliminated ALL of the accompanying conversation. Glen cherishes his copy of that tape, but has always anguished over the fact that the precious reminiscences of Maybelle and Sara were deleted.

More recently Dot and Glen, along with some friends-in-music, have performed around the Fredericksburg area as the ***Deerfield Warblers***. Two of their regular spots have been the Old Scottish Inn Motel and an eatery called Gertie's. They have also continued to be active doing benefit shows and playing in schools and at nursing homes.

It is sad but true that, in today's youth-oriented society, even performers of Dot and Glen's experience have difficulty both in finding work and in receiving recognition for their past accomplishments. With the exception of the handful of vintage entertainers who were able to get their foot into the door of the Grand Ole Opry House, Nashville has all but turned its back on the veterans and pioneers of country music. Is it any wonder that so many of them have packed up and moved to Branson, Missouri? The fact that nearly all of the tourist busses have followed them there ought to send a message to Music City, USA.

In the case of Dot and Glen (which, by the way, was their stage name in the Old Dominion Barn Dance days), they would dearly love to have folks stop by to chit chat and to play music. If you think you might be traveling on Interstate 95 through Virginia, they are just a couple of miles off

of the Falmouth exit. Contact Glenwood Jordan at 138 Ridge Way, Fredericksburg, VA 22401-2256 -(703) 898-0347.

In closing, I'd like to thank John Amon of North Miami Beach, Florida for putting me in touch with Dot and Glen. *ER*

**August 2008 Update:**

A few years ago, I was notified by Dot's son that both she and her brother Glen have gone to be with the Lord. I shall always cherish the memory of my 1993 visit with them in Fredericksburg at which time the interview for this story took place.