

Autoharp Clearinghouse - Judy Pagter - December 1992/January 1993

It is with the utmost pride and pleasure that *AC* dedicates this issue to our good friend, and kindred spirit, Judie Cox Pagter. A shared love of horses and other animals, gospel music, quilting, cooking and baking "from scratch", as well as a mutual German heritage, would most likely have been more than sufficient basis for a lasting friendship. I guess you could say that the autoharp and our respective backgrounds in bluegrass and traditional country music provided the icing on the cake or the gravy on the biscuits.

I first heard Judie's music (with the band Country Ham) on WAMU/88.5 FM, a Washington, DC public radio station that has always been supportive of traditional music. At that time, I was dancing with a clogging team and suggested to our leader that we use Country Ham's music for our routines. Later, I wrote a profile about Judie for *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine, and also recommended her to that publication as an *Interaction Lesson* instructor.

It was on one of the earliest Bluegrass at Sea cruises that Judie and I finally met, after having corresponded for a number of years. Brian Symonds was also on that cruise and the three of us, along with Little Roy Lewis, would sit out on the deck and play our 'harps. Until that time, none of them had ever seen or heard an Orthey autoharp. As it happened, I had chosen to take one of mine on this particular trip and, after playing it, both Judie and Brian were sufficiently impressed to go home and order one. (Little Roy has since acquired one as well.) Now that you're filled in on my relationship to Judie, let's go back to the beginning and hear the story behind this multi-talented performer who has surely played the autoharp on more recordings than anyone this side of The Original Carter Family.

When Judie was six years of age, her paternal grandfather bought her a guitar (GIT-tar in Judie's language) with a crack in the top for \$4.00. Being a southpaw, Judie taught herself to play the instrument left-handed. She recalls going to square dances with her family where she would sit on the side of the stage and watch the various guitar players' hands in order to learn how they made their chords. Her first performances were in the living room, for an audience of obliging aunts, uncles and cousins. By and by, Judie acquired an accordion from a sister who had decided that she preferred the fiddle. Another sister took piano (PIE-ano) lessons, and Judie was able to learn to play solely in the key of "C" by watching her practice. Along with sister Joyce, Judie sang and played for the Golden Age Club, for family reunions and for revivals at the Conemaugh Evangelical United Brethren Church.

Growing up in the Johnstown, Pennsylvania area, Judie was exposed to a lot of polka music (hence the accordion). However, every Saturday night, she and her Granddad would sit together in an old hickory rocking chair and listen to WWVA from Wheeling, West Virginia on the radio. When The Stanley Brothers or The Osborne Brothers would come on, Judie would tell her grandfather, "That's the kind of music that I like"...not knowing at the time that what she was hearing was bluegrass music.

When she was about twelve, her father took Judie, on Christmas Eve, and bought her an arch-top, F-hole guitar. With the gift, though, came the stipulation that she must take weekly lessons and learn to play in right-handed fashion. To this day, the only thing that Judie does with

her right hand is play her stringed instruments. And, she says that she's still more comfortable playing the acoustic bass as a "leftie".

Judie was in the choir and chorus as a schoolgirl, as well as being a member of the school orchestra. In the latter, she says she was forced to learn some of those "augminished" chords. Hungry to absorb anything and everything about music, Judie memorized all the songs in the Golden Songbook. She recalls borrowing a dress from one of her sisters so that she might take part in a school talent show.

After high school, Judie married and moved to Connellsville, Pennsylvania, a veritable hot bed of bluegrass music. Although she was to make her living playing country music for four years, her heart remained in bluegrass. At that point in time, bluegrass music was almost exclusively a man's field. Judie began attending festivals, and was often the only woman participating in jam sessions. She recalls being asked to leave a jam at the Gettysburg Camporee because they "didn't allow no women". At other times, she played...only to have the spouses or girlfriends of the male pickers give her a hard time. During this period, Judie was playing the guitar and singing. One shudders to think what the reaction might have been to a female playing an AUTOHARP? However, that instrument was soon to enter Judie's life.

An acquaintance had loaned her some bluegrass records and tapes so that she might familiarize herself with more of the repertoire of that genre of music. One album, in particular, caught Judie's attention. It was Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs with Mother Maybelle Carter. She played the recording over and over, wondering, "What is that pretty instrument?". Looking on the album jacket, she discovered that it was an autoharp. It didn't take Judie long to locate one in the Sears Roebuck catalog, and she told her husband-at-that-time, Bob, that she wanted it for Christmas. One day, a long, flat box was delivered to their house. Judie figured out how to open and then re-seal the box, and tuned the autoharp and practiced on it while her husband was at work. When he finally gave it to her on Christmas Eve, Judie opened the gift and commenced to play Wildwood Flower. Being a banjo player, Bob knew that Judie had been up to some pre-holiday mischief. The next day, she entertained all of her relatives at the family Christmas dinner and they were amazed at how quickly she had mastered the autoharp!

It has since become Judie's signature instrument and, as of the present time, she has been playing it for eighteen years. Until a few years ago, Judie had always played the black Oscar Schmidt A-Model Autoharps because she preferred their old-timey twang. She admits that she had to wean herself away from the familiarity of those 'harps gradually. Finally, traveling with two autoharps and trying to keep them tuned became a nuisance, and she retired the black autoharps in favor of the increased volume that she got from her new Orthey 'harp. In the interim, Judie had tried an Oscar Schmidt Wildwood Flower diatonic 'harp. But, in order to make herself heard in a string band setting, Judie says that she has to put some "elbow grease" into her playing. Also, on the Wildwood Flower, she broke strings "like I was Little Roy Lewis".

Judie's first marriage had ended in divorce. Later, at a festival in Berryville, Virginia in 1972, she met Carl Pagter. Standing in a field with a group of musicians, Carl was playing a long-necked Vega banjo and singing *Are You Washed In The Blood?* They played music together all the next day, but weren't to see one another again until the following year at that same event. This went on until 1975, when Carl invited Judie to join his band Country Ham. In December of 1975 and

January of 1976, they spent two weeks in Virginia recording the band's first album *Old Time Mountain Music*. In order to do it, farm girl Judie remembers having to get someone to tend her animals and keep her coal stove burning so the pipes wouldn't freeze at her Pennsylvania residence.

A year later, Judie and Carl were married and moved to the west coast when Carl, an attorney, was transferred to California. At first, Judie played more guitar than autoharp, with the latter-mentioned instrument eventually becoming synonymous with the name Judie Pagter.

Now in its eighteenth year, Country Ham still has Carl and Judie as its nucleus. Bob White has been the band's bass player for most of that time. Rounding out the group are Joe Meadows on fiddle and M.D. Mallory playing guitar. A number of other instrumental heavyweights have passed through the ranks of this organization, including fifth generation Galax fiddler Jerry Lundy. Country Ham has been described as "striking a completely unique middle ground somewhere between old-time music and bluegrass". They are known for their authoritative style and almost flawless execution. Their harmony vocals blend not only well, but correctly. And, they possess a genuine love and feel for their music that is easily communicated to the listener.

When not with Country Ham, Judie often performs old-time gospel music, so dear to her heart, at a lot of churches and revivals in the vicinity of her current home in Barboursville, Virginia. She recently shared with me a couple of stories regarding her experiences on the music-ministry circuit.

Once, at the Pillar Of Fire Church, she was in a choir seat waiting to sing and play while a faith healer was speaking (and speaking and speaking). At one point, he turned around to Judie and shouted, "You should use your talent for the Lord, and not for the Devil".

At another small country church, Judie went down into the basement to use the restroom before the service began. While she was sitting on the commode, a small snake came slithering by. The only weapon at hand was Judie's shoe, which she removed and used to bop the snake on the head and kill it. There was no trash container available, so she put the snake in her purse and went back upstairs to rejoin her musical partner at that time, Joe Boucher (Boo-shay). Judie reached into her purse and pulled that snake out to show Joe, and he screamed and accused her of being a witch!

Judie really knows how to belt out a tune and has been compared to Wilma Lee Cooper and Rose Maddox because of her vocal power and clarity. But, she says that she won't sing a song if she doesn't like its lyrics. An introspective songwriter, Judie embodies her influences, ideals and imagination into her compositions. *Where The Mountain Laurel Blooms*, a song Judie wrote about her native Pennsylvania, has been adopted as the theme song of the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering.

Jerry Gray of WAMU/88.5 FM says of Judie, "She has lived the life of which she sings". To that, Ben Eldridge (Seldom Scene) added, "Judie's distinctive and haunting voice has that grass roots authenticity seldom heard today". And, Charlie Waller (Country Gentlemen) said of Judie, "Hearing her is like a breath of fresh air in the spring".

As an instrumentalist, necessity has dictated that she either be an assertive autoharp player, or not be heard. What this diminutive lady lacks in stature, she makes up for in effervescence, talent and dedication to her craft. Whether performing solo, with a duet partner, or as a member of Country Ham, Judie Pagter has proven that she can hold her own on any stage regardless of the gender of the other participants!

Aside from music, the other great love of Judie's life has always been horses. Among her earliest recollections is one of lying in bed at night and dreaming of owning a pony. But, Judie's Dad was a chicken farmer and he maintained that ponies ate too much. So, Judie and her sister had to settle for a couple of stick horses, which they named Hank and Thunder. Several of their relatives had work horses, and Judie remembers the thrill of getting to hop on one of them now and then to run the cows in.

Having left home at a fairly early age to get married, Judie almost immediately fulfilled her childhood fantasy by buying a horse from a riding stable for \$20.00 per month. That animal was to live thirty-four years, and was the inspiration for Judie's song *My Old Paint Mare*. Then, there was Ruth, the Belgian draft mule shown with Judie on the cover of this issue. Ruth pulled a wagon, dragged logs, cleared brush and helped Judie blaze a road through part of her property. But, she would never consent to being ridden. Even a mule has to draw the line somewhere! Judie and Ruth were inseparable pals until the mule's untimely death in August of 1992. Having lost my own beloved Appaloosa horse prematurely in 1989, I can relate to the depth of Judie's sorrow.

Judie sometimes tends to think of herself as a human anachronism because of an insatiable yearning for "the way things used to be". Living in a 200 year old farmhouse where she still cooks on a woodstove, Judie keeps chickens, ducks and geese, and gathers her own eggs. She also has two German Shepherd Dogs and a number of cats, plus several riding horses and one draft horse. Judie says that she really misses the lifestyle of her childhood, which included quilting bees, apple butter and sorghum parties, pie suppers, the preacher coming for dinner and other such social events. "People just don't seem to take the time to be neighborly anymore", says Judie. "I like the old-time ways and, after I've been out on the road, I can hardly wait to get back to my farm and my country way of life. I just want to go sit under a tree and play my autoharp."

Most folks don't know that Judie restores antiques, and she paints traditional hex signs. In fact, she is always eager to share her knowledge and appreciation of Pennsylvania Dutch language and lore. She also teaches guitar and autoharp, and has been giving lessons for more than five years at Picker's Supply in Fredericksburg, Virginia. In addition, Judie has assembled quite a collection of handmade quilts. She is also well-known for her flat-foot dancing, a sample of which may be heard on Country Ham's most-recent album *I'll Be Leaving*. Judie is a staff member of *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine, where she writes reviews of recordings.

Don't miss Judie and Carl Pagter and Country Ham when they play a festival in your neck of the woods. Meanwhile, you can enjoy their music on their numerous recordings. I've been a fan for so long that most of my Country Ham albums are on LP records!

After this was written, Judie called in to say that she had found another mule up in Cabbage Hollow in Stanley, Virginia. The name of Judie's new equine friend is Pearl. ***ER***

October 2008 Update:

Judie and Carl Pagter and the Country Ham band presently have seventeen albums available. For details, contact:

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