

Autoharp Clearinghouse - August/September 1998 – Leone Peterson

Following every autoharp class at Augusta over the years, it has been my practice to drop a note to each of my classmates expressing my pleasure in having made their acquaintance, and inviting them to keep in touch. This seemingly simple gesture has resulted in scores of treasured friendships--including that of this issue's cover personality **Leone Peterson**. For a number of years, Leone and I were fellow members of the Capital 'Harpers Autoharp Club, and also participated in the Memorial Day and Labor Day "Campouts" jointly sponsored by the Dulcimer Disorganization of Greater Washington (DC) and the Hammers And Noters Dulcimer Society. Since Leone and her husband, Bob, relocated to the Pacific Northwest, our association has continued via the written word and an occasional phone call.

A multi-instrumentalist extraordinaire, in addition to the autoharp, Leone is accomplished on the piano, organ, banjo, zither, mandolin, lap dulcimer, fiddle and ukelele as well as an assortment of limbertones. As if that weren't enough, she also sings beautifully. In addition to being much in demand as a substitute teacher of school music classes, Leone regularly presents programs for extended-care facilities, churches, various conventions and seminars, senior centers, libraries, quilting groups, bookstores, civic associations, retirement parties, wedding receptions and memorial services--tailoring her presentations to fit each occasion or event. As an avid admirer of her varied musical talents, I am honored to dedicate this issue to Leone and to provide her with a forum through which to share her story with *AC's* readership. **ER**

What a pleasure to write to such a large group of music lovers. It's quite a wonderful network we have of autoharp friends. I know that, when I'm playing, I think of you and am grateful that we all have our individual styles and interests in tunes.

After fifteen years in the Northern Virginia community of Burke, my husband and I moved to Spokane, Washington. He retired fully, but I have remained employed as a substitute school teacher in the field of music. I do almost exclusively choral music and classes for stringed instruments. Rarely do I leave the house on a music assignment without either my autoharp or banjo. Considering the fact that I see an average of eight classes of approximately thirty students each day, these instruments receive a lot of exposure.

My affair with the autoharp began about sixteen years ago when I purchased a 12-bar Oscar Schmidt 'harp at a music store. As an elementary school teacher, I had seen autoharps used in the classroom and always loved their sound. However, at that time, I had only heard the instrument strummed to accompany singing, and was to learn that there was so much more.

Perhaps many of you recall Stevie Beck, to whom Garrison Keillor always referred as the *Queen of the Autoharp* on his *Prairie Home Companion* program on public radio? I would stop whatever I was doing in order to fully concentrate on her crisp melody picking. We all owe Garrison a debt of gratitude for giving our instrument such a boost.

Following that introduction to melody picking, I wrote to the Oscar Schmidt company requesting information regarding players in or near my area. Yvonne Dickerson responded with a personal

reply suggesting that I contact Woody Padgett. As most of you know, Woody is the autoharp player with the Mill Run Dulcimer Band. At the first opportunity, I attended one of their regular concerts at the Colvin Run Mill, which is located just a couple of miles from Tyson's Corner, Virginia. What an experience it was to sit under the trees on the lawn of the Mill and hear the dulcet sounds of stringed instruments and voices raised in harmony floating on the breeze. I have since become a diehard fan of the MRDB, own every one of their recordings, and still get a thrill from listening to their music.

After becoming somewhat accomplished on the autoharp, I decided that I would like to teach adults to play the instrument and found a venue through the Fairfax County Department of Recreation. For several years, I taught an on-going series of eight-week courses that would have an average of six to eight students each. That was before electronic chromatic tuners were readily available, so I always requested a classroom with a piano in order that we might get all of the autoharps into compatible tuning. For one session, I invited Woody Padgett to come in and demonstrate his playing for the class. I taped Woody's visit, and still refer back to that recording from time to time.

Believe it or not, none other than Alan Mager was at one time a student of mine and later took over teaching those classes when I moved out of the area. Even more unbelievable is the fact that Alan was once actually shy and had to be coaxed to play before the class! I knew from the beginning that he had the potential to become one of the leading practitioners of the autoharp because those lush color chords were already present in his wide-ranging repertoire. Alan's rendition of *Ain't Misbehavin'* has always been one of my favorites.

About the same time that my classes were taking place, I was hired as the organist at the Sleepy Hollow United Methodist Church in Annandale, Virginia. I am a pianist and studied organ in college but, at my interview for that position, I also played my autoharp. While serving at that church, I was encouraged to incorporate the autoharp into the worship services.

A paid position was also created for me at the Leewood Nursing Home in Annandale. I had already been accompanying sing-along sessions at the facility as well as providing background music for special celebrations there when I approached the Activities Director regarding the possibility of going in two mornings a week to entertain. She called me their Music Therapist, which I guess I really was--but without a degree in that field. In addition to playing the piano, organ and autoharp for group functions at the facility, I was also frequently invited to take my 'harp into the rooms of those residents who were bedridden or otherwise incapacitated.

While still in Virginia, I began collecting antique stringed instruments--the first of which was a wooden banjo in a coffin-type case. It had all the original strings and a dulcimer-like quality to its sound. I started by teaching myself three chords, and soon found that I was able to coax music from the ancient instrument. I have since acquired zithers, a mandolin, a *Favorite* model autoharp, a mando-guitarophone, two ukelins and a violin made by the Hopf family in Germany. Because I prefer old-timey music, I am learning to play the violin as a fiddle.

Along with the antique music makers, I am especially proud of my two custom-made instruments. Keith Young (also of Mill Run Dulcimer Band fame) is the luthier who created my lap dulcimer, and I have a D diatonic *Timbreharp* crafted by Mitch Pingel. It would seem that I have eclectic tastes when it comes to the selection of songs and tunes I think of when sitting down to play a newly-acquired instrument. With my circa 1883 chorded zither, I plunked out *Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White*. *Maria Elena* was one I tried on my very first autoharp and, when my *Timbreharp* arrived, I christened it by working up an arrangement of *Fly Me to the Moon*.

As Eileen mentioned in her introduction, I take my autoharps to many venues, and hope to continue expanding my areas of entertaining. One very meaningful recent autoharp experience was when I was asked to play for the ordination of a deacon in my church. In addition, I would enjoy doing more receptions, reunions and convention groups with background music on the piano. As a member of the American Guild of Organists, I am frequently called upon to substitute at area places of worship.

One of my favorite ways to celebrate the Christmas season is to play piano or organ at holiday parties held in private homes. At some point during the affair, the guests gather around the piano to sing carols. I put an ad in the newspaper an adequate time ahead of the holidays announcing my availability for such festivities. Should you wish to act upon this idea, I would caution you to insist that the instrument you will be playing has been recently tuned!

My friend, Jane Higuera, and I play twin autoharps for a sing-along each week at the Riverview Nursing Home. Jane is an accomplished autoharpist and singer, and our voices blend well in harmony. At Jane's urging, I went with her to a Northwest Leadership Lab, the purpose of which is to share and try out leadership skills. While there, I conducted a workshop on getting acquainted with the autoharp.

On two occasions, I have attended the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops in Elkins, West Virginia, where I took classes coordinated by Becky Blackley. In the summer of 1996, I participated in a week-long autoharp class taught by Evo Bluestein as part of the Swannannoa

Gathering at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. I'm a firm believer in continuing education, and some other instructors under whom I have studied are Ivan Stiles, Charles Whitmer, Drew Smith, Harvey Reid, Neal Walters, Karen Mueller, Woody Padgett, David Morris, Bryan Bowers and Les Gustafson-Zook.

Our son and his family live in Jackson, Michigan and, last year, I visited them at the time the Southern Michigan Dulcimer Festival was taking place in Parma. A friend from one of my Augusta classes, Kathy Wieland, was teaching an autoharp workshop, and I was asked to do one as well. Also, for two years, I taught autoharp workshops at the Pinesong Folk Festival held on the campus of Spokane Falls Community College.

My enthusiasm for this instrument led me to organize the Spokane Falls Autoharp Club in 1991. The organization met at a local community college for a while, and later at a nearby community room. *Raggedy Jam* was a performing group within the club that entertained at a number of places including a Christmas Tree Fantasy, the Silverwood Theme Park, and church functions. In addition to Jane and me, the ensemble was made up of two more autoharps, a guitar and a recorder. The club has since disbanded, but the possibility exists of resurrecting it at some point in the future.

I belong to the Spokane Folklore Society, as well, and recently had the opportunity to arrange for the group to sponsor a concert with Bill & Laurie Sky. It pleases me to say that they drew a large and appreciative crowd.

In closing, I would like to say that I have been privileged in that my career as a teacher allowed me time to indulge in music as a hobby. An additional blessing is that I have always had the support and encouragement of my family. It has been my extreme pleasure to meet so many talented people and to make so many lasting friendships in the autoharp community. **LP**

February 2008 Update:

Since the above article was published, Leone has recorded a CD album entitled *New River Train*. Cuts on the recording include: *A Little Road and a Stone to Roll* . *Amelia Earhardt's Last Flight* . *Delta Dawn* . *Aragon Mill* . *Old Joe Clark* . *Red River Valley* . *Will the Circle be Unbroken* . *All I Have to Do Is Dream* . *New River Train* . *The Water Is Wide* . *Lay Down the Burden of Your Heart* . *When You and I Were Young, Maggie* . *Shall We Gather at the River* . *I Know a Little Bit About a Lot of Things* . *When the Fiddler Has Played His Last Tune*. Available under Recordings from the Market Place at *Autoharp Quarterly*. www.autoharpquarterly.com