

## Autoharp Clearinghouse - October 1992 - Les Gustafson-Zook

It is with joy and delight that the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* dedicates this issue to Les Gustafson-Zook. One of the more-accomplished players on the scene today, Les is always a strong contender at the various autoharp competitions around the country. He submitted such a detailed autobiographical sketch for this cover story that there's really very little that I could add to it, other than to refer you to a Profile in Volume 10 of *The Care And Feeding of the Autoharp*. Les also did an Interaction Lesson for the July 1991 issue of *Autoharp Quarterly*. Without further adieu, I now turn you over to Les G-Z. **ER**

I grew up in Denver, Colorado, son of a printer and a homemaker. My family was very involved in the Mennonite church, so most of our family activities revolved around the church and its activities. The Mennonites are known for their a cappella singing (among other things). My family often sang around the house and, in fact, my parents tell me that I could sing before I could talk. There is still a tape floating around somewhere of me grunting the melody of *While Riding in my Cadillac*. I did the typical piano lessons trial for a year in third grade, but didn't like my teacher so I quit. I took up the French horn in fourth grade and stuck with it through high school. I never got particularly good at it and found it to be of generally limited value, as opportunities for using it outside of school tended to be fairly slim.

I did quite a bit of singing in church children's choirs and in elementary school, but it wasn't until high school that I was able to join a choir that I was really excited about. I had my final two years of high school at a Mennonite school in Harrisonburg, Virginia and was able to sing in a touring chorus that was an exciting and stretching musical experience. I was the vocalist for a rock and roll band my senior year, singing Doobie Brothers hits. I was given the senior school music award and directed my class in singing the class song at graduation.

When I returned home to Denver, I found work in a sheet metal factory, but got involved with music at my home church, leading the choir and being the primary chorister for the congregation for two years. During that time, I began tinkering with the electric bass, since I wanted to have something in my hands if I were to join another band sometime.

Going to college in 1978 at Hesston, Kansas provided the opportunity to join a band again. A bunch of Colorado friends and I got together to form the Putney Gulch Pickers. I played electric bass and we did songs from the Ozark Mountain Daredevils and other country rock bands of the late 1970s. We also did a Fifties concert singing songs from that era. I fulfilled my choral needs by singing and touring with the college choir.

My career interests began to shift, and I took another year off from college to work at a shelter for homeless men in Columbus, Ohio. That was an important year for me, to discover that I took for granted the many gifts that had been given to me. Many of the men who came through the shelter had mental problems, dependency problems, or just hard luck...things I had never had to deal with. It became clear to me that I was very fortunate to have been given the stable upbringing I had. I also realized that gifts are not given to be hoarded, but to be shared. It became increasingly important to me to find a career where I could relate with folks less fortunate than myself.

The musical side of my time in Columbus was singing in the Columbus Symphony Chorus and forming a band with two friends to become the Lost Attic Ramblers. We didn't perform much, but had a good time working up a number of soft rock and bluesy type songs.

After spending two years in Goshen, Indiana finishing a degree in Social Work, I moved to Atlanta, Georgia to work with the Mennonite Central Committee. My work there was to set up an alternative sentencing program through the criminal court system. The program failed to take hold, but my music grew by leaps and by bounds. I sang for a year with the Atlanta Symphony Chorus, under Robert Shaw, but gave it up after getting involved with the Atlanta Area Friends of Folk Music. If anything or anyone got me interested in folk music and fiddle tunes, it was that group.

They had a neat thing going in that they had monthly get-togethers where 50-100 people would come to someone's house and split up into the types of music they liked. The old Gospel songs would be in the living room, country music in the family room, fiddle tunes in one bedroom, folk songs in another room, et cetera. It was a great crowd, and everyone was welcome to either participate or just listen. For awhile, I took my electric bass, but folkies can be pretty snooty about electrical instruments. About that time, a buddy sold me a stand-up bass so I took it to these gatherings and was welcomed with open arms. My favorite room was the fiddle room. I would spend three or four hours there and leave with my head full of fiddle tunes. Before long, I decided I wanted to play a lead instrument, since playing bass by oneself is rather boring. Also, I needed an outlet for all the tunes running through my head. I talked a friend into buying a mandolin, bought *The Fiddler's Fakebook* with chords for mandolin, and started learning fiddle tunes. It was great fun, but it drove my house mates crazy.

The friend who owned the mandolin became a closer friend and eventually we got married. Gwen Gustafson and I were married on August 18, 1985 at a camp behind Pikes Peak in Colorado. We spent a whole weekend together with all our friends and families who had come from across the country. On Sunday morning, the whole crowd walked up a hill playing songs and singing as we walked. As we got to the hillside where the ceremony was to take place, we began playing a mandolin duet (with our friends backing us up on guitars and banjo) of *Haste To The Wedding* (what else!). After the ceremony, for the recessional, we played a tune called *Folding Down the Sheets*...an appropriate song for the occasion.

We received a mountain dulcimer for a wedding gift, so I got temporarily sidetracked from the mandolin with the dulcimer. It is such a nice instrument. We also got an autoharp from Gwen's sister. It had been the family's instrument and had landed in her sister's possession. Since she needed something for a gift, she thought we might be interested in this autoharp (she noticed we seemed to be collecting instruments).

The 'harp stayed in the background for about a year, until Winfield in the fall of 1986. I had discovered the Walnut Valley Festival back in 1977, but never was free to go until the fall of 1982. One time there hooked me on the friendly family environment of the festival as well as the high quality and diverse music that one finds there. I've been making it a priority to go ever since 1982, so this fall will be my eleventh year and I still love it.

I don't remember how I happened onto the International Autoharp Championship there, but I think it was after getting the autoharp for our wedding. I decided that I should hear someone play it who knew what they were doing, so I figured the contest would be a good place to do that. Of course I had heard Bryan Bowers playing, but the contest showed me that others were doing this too. After getting inspired by the contest and other various workshops I decided that I would like to explore the instrument more and play like the folks I was hearing at the contests.

That set the stage for the following Christmas when I took my harp out and discovered in the case a copy of Francis Hall's Christmas Songs for the Autoharp. I was so burned out on all the materialism and commercialism of Christmas that I just wanted it to go away. So, instead of going on the shopping trips, I stayed home and played these Christmas carols. I began playing Name That Tune with family members and came to realize that this was a game made for autoharp players. When folks can recognize the tune you are playing immediately, then you are beginning to get somewhere. I credit the autoharp and Christmas carols for saving the spirit of Christmas for me. After spending time with these carols. I realized that the incredible beauty of these songs had the power to transcend all the Christmas hype of our culture.

(It was in part because of the role the autoharp has played in my relationship with Christmas that I wanted to make the Christmas recording, *Cascade Noel*. I was fortunate to meet a great guitarist here in Corvallis, Oregon by the name of Jon ten Broek. He and I spent a morning a week last spring working up arrangements of carols for autoharp and guitar, and then spent two weeks in a home studio recording the album. I am quite pleased with the way it turned out. There are some fun songs as well as nice reflective songs of the season. I would welcome folks checking it out. (Note: See a review of this recording in the September 1992 issue of *AC*.)

By that time, we were living in Denver, Colorado and running an urban work camp program for the Mennonite Central Committee. This involved facilitating the experience of church groups coming to the city to volunteer their labor and learn more about urban problems. It was an exciting program. After achieving moderate success with the Christmas music, I discovered a group of autoharp players meeting regularly at a small music store in Denver, and began joining them. It was fun to meet other players and to swap songs. The Swallow Hill Music organization also had workshops on the autoharp occasionally, so I was able to meet Bonnie Phipps at one of those and was very inspired by her playing style.

Bryan Bowers was running a one-week workshop at Cannon Beach, Oregon with the Haystack Arts Series and it happened to coincide with Gwen's family's beach week there, so I registered and joined the group. That was an interesting and insightful time. While it was geared toward beginners, Bryan was able to give help to those who were more advanced as well. By then, I had decided to compete at Winfield that fall, so I began working up my pieces for that competition. Bryan was able to give some good advice toward working on those arrangements.

I did compete at Winfield and was one of the many who got overlooked when the finalists were chosen. I didn't expect to do very well, but one always keeps up the faith and hope. That was to have been the last time I would be at the Walnut Valley Festival for three years since Gwen and I were leaving the following week to go to Kingston, Jamaica on an assignment for MCC. That

venture ended early, however, and we were back at Winfield the following year, although I wasn't prepared to compete in 1988. I hadn't played much in Jamaica, since the walls of our dwelling were pretty thin and I could hear doors closing whenever I began playing. I guess the autoharp will have to wait to become popular in Jamaica. I did play a lot of mandolin and bass there, however, and learned some great Jamaican songs from a Catholic priest with whom we were working.

We moved to Elkhart, Indiana after leaving Jamaica so Gwen could complete her Masters of Divinity at a Mennonite seminary there. While Gwen was going to school, I was working with an electrician wiring houses. That has been the most traditional job I have had since working in the factory after high school. I found myself with less energy to play the 'harp after a full day of working, but still managed to find friends to play with now and then. I had decided that I needed a serious diatonic autoharp by then, so I took the wedding harp and made it into a G-D diatonic. I have never been sorry, and had been playing it exclusively up until last year when I got my first Orthey instrument.

Over Labor Day weekend of 1989, I went to a festival in Avoca, Iowa and entered my second contest ever. This festival holds claim to the title of National Autoharp Championship, although it was more of a regional festival. I had been working up some songs through the spring and this gave me a chance to try them out. Right before I was supposed to play, I had tuned up, but one of my strings sounded terrible and I panicked. I had previously had some problems with my felts falling off, so I thought I must have lost a felt. I went up to the MC and explained my problem and that I needed to run out to my car and quickly fix it. When I got to my car and popped the bar out, nothing was missing. Here, I had accidentally tuned one of my strings half a step off! I tuned it, ran back and got there just as my name was called. The songs went well, and I won first place.

That fall, I was psyched for Winfield. We cut classes and drove all night, pulling into the fairgrounds several hours before the contest. Somehow, what I played impressed the judges enough to give me third place. Placing in the contest helped make links with other autoharp players and I discovered the fun of playing with others. I had been hearing about late night jam sessions for a number of years, but this was the first year I experienced the fun. After that first jam, I decided that the jams were as much fun as winning the contest, so I would have a great time at this festival either way.

I was taking some classes at the seminary that year, too, so I had some flexibility to play more autoharp. I played for various Christmas parties and Gwen and I began performing together more often. We were asked to give a concert for a young adult retreat, so we worked up enough songs to perform for an hour. That opened the door for us to perform several other times for coffee houses and special occasions. We joined the staff at a summer camp in Michigan to provide music leadership and give concerts once a week for the summer of 1990. It was really interesting to realize that the camp songs that were popular when I was a kid are still popular today. It was a demanding, but enjoyable, summer.

Following the summer at camp, we moved out to Albany, Oregon to set up a household of young adults who were volunteering for social service agencies in the community. For the past two

years, we have been living with four to five 18-22 year old young people, providing some structure to their volunteering experience. Doing voluntary service is something which many Mennonites do, since there is a strong emphasis in the church on working for others who are less fortunate than us.

At Winfield in the fall of 1990, I was a finalist, but didn't place. I played Christmas music on weekends during December for a local restaurant back in Oregon, and began to make connections with some of the local musicians in the Corvallis Folklore Society. This organization is one of the most active in the country, with several concerts a month, a summer Folklife festival, two monthly coffee houses, a monthly song circle, and a fall retreat weekend. It's been great living in such a musically rich area.

In the spring of 1991, a connection that had been made while living in Indiana turned into the opportunity to record my tape, *Great Hymns on the Autoharp, Vol. I*. I spent two days in a basement studio to record the project. It had initially been planned for someone else to promote but, when that deal fell through, it became available to me. I really like the tape, but might have arranged some of the tunes differently had I done it for myself. What did become obvious to me was, like the Christmas carols, spending time with the hymns was a very refreshing and empowering experience.

As we looked around our house and saw all our instruments, we decided we needed a way to put them to use. Since Gwen has an education degree and made some links into the schools through substitute teaching, we decided to put together an assembly to introduce school children to folk music and folk instruments. We have been performing these assemblies the past two years. It's been really fun to show school children the instruments and to use them to sing and introduce folk songs.

The fall of 1991 brought another Winfield festival and, that year, I placed second. I'd altered my playing style, using my fingernails more and picks less. Since my nails are naturally hard, I can use them to either pick lightly or play vigorously with more control than with picks. Playing without picks for three of my four songs produced a variation that the judges liked, and they rewarded me with second place for my efforts.

Gwen and I have been looking for as many places to perform as we can find. We've played at several festivals here on the west coast and play regularly in churches and coffee houses. Over the past two years in December, I have been a strolling musician on the streets of Albany. I put on a top hat, dress in Victorian attire and play Christmas carols to folks on the streets and in businesses. It has been especially effective since getting the Orthey harp, which stays in tune even while coming in and out of the cold weather. It is a really bright instrument, so projects well when outside.

Much of my story seems to focus around contests, and rightly so. My playing, practicing and performing finds motivation and focus in the preparation for these competitions. The drive to attend the festivals is for the fun of being with other musicians, but also to seek the challenge of performing in the tense environment of a contest. I find myself challenged when watching the Olympics, because I realize that those people train for years to perform for those few minutes.

The same is true with these contests. While I am playing for the prizes, I also recognize that I am playing as a challenge to myself to perform a song as well as I possibly can. If I feel good about my performance, then the judges choosing me to place is icing on the cake. I have been in enough of these contests to know that there are times when one performs well and isn't chosen. Those times are frustrating, but frequent enough that one needs to be mentally prepared for those disappointments.

As I discovered with the first jam session that really clicked, the joy of playing with other musicians is something that is every bit as exciting as performing by myself. The communal aspect of folk music is as important for me as the individual performance. The performers who I appreciate the most are those who make the performance a participatory event by connecting and involving the audience.

### 2008 Update

Much has happened musically since 1992. After competing at Winfield for 14 years and placing 2nd and 3<sup>rd</sup> 4 times each, I finally won the International Autoharp Championships in 2001. Along the way, I taught autoharp for 5 years at Linn Benton Community College in Corvallis, OR, and helped organize Willamette Valley Autoharp Gathering. Thanks to a number of friends, we've been able to keep it going for 15 years now. I've also taught and performed at many wonderful festivals and folk schools all across the country including Walnut Valley Festival, Augusta, Mtn. Laurel, Kentucky Music Week and John C Campbell Folk School. It's been a delight to meet and play with many wonderful people over the past 20 years.

After moving back to Indiana in 1997, I was a full time self-employed musician, playing in elementary schools and teaching autoharp privately and at festivals. A number of those years saw me visiting over 60 schools doing my Songs of the Pioneers presentation. The past two years I've been working part-time with Mennonite Central Committee again and doing music part-time – private lessons, school concerts and festivals.

I now have 6 CDs available. Cascade Noel is a recording of instrumental Christmas carols on autoharp accompanied by the late guitarist, Jon ten Broek. Gather at the River is a CD of instrumental hymns also with Jon. I recorded two CDs with my wife Gwen, Long Time Traveling and Home. I also recorded a CD of fiddle tunes and waltzes with another wonderful friend and guitarist, Ray Frank. Finally, I have a CD of the music from my Songs of the Pioneers school program, called Skip to my Lou. It has a variety of instruments and traditional American folk songs. Any of these can be mailed in the US to you for \$16. I've also put together intermediate level arrangements of 30 hymns called the Autoharp Hymnal. It's available for \$20 + \$5 postage. I'd also invite you to my website at [www.gustafsonzook.com](http://www.gustafsonzook.com) to see my calendar.

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