

Autoharp Clearinghouse – March 1999 – Linda Huber

This month's cover personality, **Linda Huber**, refers to herself as **The Pigeon Hills 'Harper** when she entertains at either paying gigs or for the fifty or so public service commitments she fills annually. Linda also released her debut recording this past year (see review in the November 1998 issue of AC). However, I would venture to say that she is most visible before the autoharp community through her *Simply Classic* feature in *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine. Over the last couple of years, Linda has shared her arrangements of such time-honored pieces of music as *Träumera*, *The William Tell Overture*, *Intermezzo*, *The Bridal Chorus*, *Barcarolle from Tales of Hoffman*, *Theme from Tschaikovsky's Concerto No. 1*, *Pachelbel's Cannon in D* and the *Grand March from Aida*. She is also the founder of the **Angel Strings** autoharp club, gives private lessons and conducts workshops, teaches music on a part-time basis at a private school in her area, and has been driving a school bus for the past nine years. Enjoy with me now the rest of her story. **ER**

I was born in Philadelphia on 12 January 1937, and have lived almost all of my life in Pennsylvania. My father was a doctor, so my sister and I were privileged to have piano and other music lessons during our childhood years. I sang in the church choir and played the ukulele when I was growing up. An interest in the school band led me to the snare drum, which I play to this day.

Among other interests that I developed was a love of sewing. When it came time to choose a course of study in college, I was torn between Home Economics and Music Education. The latter ultimately won out, and I graduated in 1959 from Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pennsylvania. My first job was in Nazareth, where I worked as an itinerant elementary music teacher.

Now for my first experience with the autoharp. I initially saw and experimented with one in college, although I don't remember much about it. When I became a teacher, the school system within which I worked had two autoharps. I tuned one of them and carried it on my rounds to accompany myself and the children. There were two good reasons for my doing that. First of all, I wasn't a very accomplished piano player and, secondly, the available pianos were seldom in good tune.

After interrupting my teaching career in order to raise a family, I found that I missed having an autoharp. At some point during the late nineteen sixties, I purchased a 15-bar Oscar Schmidt instrument. Something else that I should mention is that, after many years' exposure to classical music, I still felt drawn to country music--or "hillbilly" as it was called then. I could never understand where this came from, nor could anyone else. And then one day it dawned on me. While we were living in Louisville, Kentucky during World War II, my mother had hired a local farm girl to come and help with the household chores. The young lady brought her Okeh records with her and played them while she worked--thereby exposing me to that genre of music. It just goes to show how impressionable one is during those early years.

Allow me to tell you a little bit about my family. I have two grown children, both of whom are professional musicians. Daughter Bonnie plays the trumpet, is married and the mother of a little

boy and is expecting a second child this month. My son Gary is single, attending graduate school at Arizona State in Phoenix, and plays the trombone. Tragedy hit us when my first husband died when the children were only five and nine years old. Later, I married Robert, and we have been partners for twenty-five years.

Over the years I had been listening to folk music on the radio from time to time, and would occasionally hear what I identified as an autoharp. However, the musicians were playing melody on the instrument, and I had no idea as to how that was accomplished? All I had ever done was strum rhythm chords. About eight years ago, either my mother or my sister sent me an ad or article they had come across which mentioned the *Autoharp Clearinghouse*. I wrote to Eileen, asking her where I might go to learn how to play melodically? She responded, telling me about the classes offered annually at the Augusta Heritage Center and also the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. I attended both Augusta and MLAG for the first time during the summer of 1993 and, shortly thereafter, took delivery on a custom made autoharp from George Orthey. It was a chromatic model, soon to be joined by my first diatonic 'harp. I was hooked!

I have played many instruments in my lifetime, but none of them have ever given me the degree of satisfaction that I derive from the autoharp. The instruments just seem to “play themselves,” particularly the diatonic 'harps. It is a magical and almost spiritual experience at times. I feel as though God has given me both a gift and a blessing by making it possible for me to own and play such wonderful instruments. Although I DO spend a good bit of time practicing, I don't allow it to become drudgery. Having spent too many hours in practice rooms in my younger days, I decided that, at this stage of my life, playing the autoharp would be enjoyable above all else. While I like to experiment with new techniques that I see in the periodicals or learn at workshops, if they don't work well for me I forget them and get the music played the easiest way I can and still get a pleasing result.

In addition to the classes I've taken at Augusta, I have also been a student at the Swannanoa Gathering in North Carolina and the Common Ground event in Westminster, Maryland as well as participating in numerous mini-workshops at places like MLAG. I was going to mention instructors and players that have influenced me, but decided against it for fear of omitting someone due to forgetfulness. I have also acquired a lot of knowledge from articles in both this publication and *Autoharp Quarterly*.

Early on, I decided that I wanted to share this lovely music with others. I started out by going to retirement communities, nursing homes and other extended-care facilities to play and sing for the residents. At the present time, I “play out” an average of once a week at numerous venues and for a great variety of occasions. I've contributed my music to church services, open houses, weddings, coffeehouses, banquets, craft shows, etc. I once even played a gospel tune in a bar room! While I don't really consider myself a singer, I enjoy singing and find my voice perhaps best suited to the performance of old-time music. About half of my programs consist of vocal numbers, unless I have been hired to provide background music.

At some point, I came to the realization that I had the ability to pass along the many things I have learned regarding the autoharp. Once a teacher, always a teacher, I suppose. The opportunity to teach autoharp has come about in a number of ways. First of all, I have been asked to lead workshops twice at Mountain Laurel. Then, several years ago, I organized an autoharp club that is based here in Hanover. We started with three Charter Members, and now have six to eight

“regulars” plus a number of other folks who attend sporadically. Another autoharp-related endeavor has been the teaching of group classes through our community’s Continuing Education programs.

Through necessity, I have learned to do simple autoharp maintenance work such as replacing strings and refelting. Likewise, I have done diatonic conversions on a number of chromatic ’harps, as well as having installed 21-bar assemblies on 15-bar Oscar Schmidt instruments. I am also qualified in respect to improving the action on and eliminating the “rattles” from factory-made instruments.

One of the highlights of my autoharp “career” to date was a recital I gave two years ago at the Hanover Public Library. By the time this issue is mailed, I will have given a benefit concert at the Eichelberger Performing Arts Center. At that time, I expect to be joined for a portion of the performance by a second ’harper and a guitarist. The possibility also exists that there will be a Grand Finale with at least a dozen fellow autoharpers.

I love to jam with all types of stringed instruments, either in a group situation or a one-on-one basis. Flag me down at one of this year’s events and we’ll share some tunes. **LH**

Note: Linda is on the Cyberpluckers and may wish to post updated info.
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