

Autoharp Clearinghouse – May 1997 – Melva Gass

Melva Gass is yet another of the countless friends-in-music with whom I have corresponded for a number of years before our trails actually crossed. If I'm not mistaken, it was the late Beverly Pratton who initially introduced us. As time went on, I became further familiar with Melva and her music through the part she played on the recording *Horse & Buggy Harps* with band mates Carl Loll, Carol Johnson and the aforementioned Ms. Pratton. The group calls Galt, California home and, in its present configuration, continues to work regularly from that base.

Let's dispel the notion that all of the folks who do autoharp repairs and modifications are men--because Melva has built up quite a thriving little business for herself doing just that. She also sells new and used autoharps, >harp-related parts and accessories, and gives lessons as well. In addition to those exploits, Melva serves as the leader and main source of inspiration for a very active autoharp club.

Most of you have probably long since come to the realization that I have a penchant for seeking out and presenting profiles of some lesser-known-but-significant members of the autoharp community. Loyal to a fault about this instrument, Melva Gass is, in my estimation, worthy indeed of having an issue dedicated in her honor. The autobiographical sketch that follows is delivered fairly close to the manner in which it was submitted. **ER**

I was born in the small town of Milton-Freewater, Oregon as the only girl in a household that included three brothers. We were a hard-working farm family. From earliest childhood, I was exposed to music. Dad played the fiddle for the local Saturday night square dances. The walls would almost shake in the little community hall in nearby Umapine. Many times I remember waking up on the floor of the bandstand, behind a piano, to the bowing of the fiddle and the strumming of a guitar. Although my father never read a note of music, he could play almost any song strictly by ear. Mother played the piano and was a music reader--which was an asset to me later on. She also played the accordion a bit.

In 1934, we moved to an area in California that is not ten miles from where I presently reside. My family spent our first nine months there living in a tent until we were able to find a house to rent. During that time, my dad laid aside his fiddle, as he was just too tired after his long workdays to have any energy left to put into his music.

About three years later, my brother Leonard decided that he would like to begin playing the accordion. He got a little 12-bass to start. When Leonard brought home his weekly lesson, he would show me what he had been taught. Our parents couldn't afford to give us both lessons, so that was how I learned. My brother lost interest after a year or so--and then it became my turn to actually go to the lessons. I was thirteen at the time, as I recall, and I guess you could say that was the real beginning of my musical career. My first accordion was a 48-bass but, within four years, I had graduated to a 140-bass instrument, which had been handmade in Italy.

During my high school days, I sang in the Glee Club for four years. I was often asked to play my accordion for school dances and proms, as well as for farewell parties for the boys leaving to go into the service during World War II. And, whenever I was able to coax Dad to bring out his fiddle, the two of us would make music together.

Following graduation, it was not long before I decided to marry. My accordion was sold to pay some bills, bringing a temporary end to my active participation in music. Then, one day, a lady came to our church's Sunday School to tell the children about her autoharp. It impressed me as being a really neat instrument, and I knew I just had to have one. Actually, the instrument that I acquired was a ChromAharp by Rhythm Band.

Another of my brothers, Lyle, was a guitar player and had taught me basic chord progressions, which I was now able to transfer to the autoharp. Knowledge from my past music lessons also came into play as I embarked upon learning this new instrument. Eventually, I was able to pick out simple melodies by ear--even though I had never heard anyone play the >harp as a lead instrument. In fact, it was not until I met Bev and Carl in 1991 that I became aware that there was a very active worldwide network of autoharpers.

Along with a friend, I was invited to attend the gathering of a fledgling autoharp group that Bev had founded about a year earlier. It is said that the Lord works in mysterious ways, and I am convinced that He led me to the club meeting that night. From that time on, I was a faithful member--only missing two meetings (due to dense fog) over the next three years. Not a bad attendance record considering the fact that the **Horse & Buggy Harpers** meet WEEKLY!

During that time, I became much more adept at melody playing. Bev and I formed a close friendship, and she taught me a whole lot about autoharp Amechanics.≡ Although we were not equipped to do structural repairs, we began to offer our services for changing strings, refelting and de-rattling chord bars, installing fine tuners and most other minor >harp repairs and modifications. Bev showed me her method of doing diatonic conversions as well as how to stain and install the wooden chord bar assemblies that we purchased from luthier Mark Fackeldey. On a number of occasions, we refinished entire >harp bodies. All of this took place at **Horse & Buggy Music**, a business co-owned by Bev and Carl. Its name carried over to their performing duo, the autoharp club, and even a recording on which I was privileged to participate.

Bev and Carl both suffered from breathing problems, which made it difficult for them to sing for long periods of time. To help alleviate that situation, gospel singer/autoharper Carol Johnson was recruited as a lead vocalist in 1992, with my >harp and I also coming aboard at that time to make it a quartet. Carl's harmonica and Jews= harp blended nicely with our autoharps. We entertained at numerous venues in addition to recording the previously-mentioned cassette album.

During the summer of 1993, Bev, Carol and I realized our dream of attending the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering, and took great pleasure in being allotted a little stage time at the event. The Pennsylvania countryside really impressed us with its rural beauty. We were very happy to finally meet so many of the autoharp personalities that we had previously known only from the periodicals or through their recorded works, and also to hear the vast variety of

autoharp playing styles.

Unfortunately, Carol was unable to continue as a member of the group due to the demands of raising a family and her involvement at church. (An artist in her own right, she has recorded two sacred albums.) Carl, Bev and I went on performing as a trio. One of the events where we entertained was the Willamette Valley Autoharp Gathering near Corvallis, Oregon. Again, we made the acquaintance of many fellow >harpers, in addition to becoming more aware of the rapidly-expanding selection of custom made autoharps. Among the many other events where we took our music was a talent contest at which we represented the Sacramento State Grange. Our efforts were rewarded with a nice trophy for winning first prize in the music category. We all loved festivals, and attended as many as possible. Meanwhile, the autoharp club members began sharing their talents with residents of nursing homes and other extended-care facilities. As the group grew, we started wearing performance outfits of black skirts/pants and white shirts with red bola ties for the men and red bandanas for the ladies.

Beverly Pratton passed away very suddenly in 1995 following an acute asthma attack. At the time, we honestly did not know whether we would be able to carry on without her? At her memorial service (which was followed by a musical celebration of Bev=s life), Carl proposed that Horse & Buggy Music would continue as long as I would stick with him. We both sincerely thought that was what Bev would have wanted. Likewise, about twenty members of the autoharp club got together and elected me as their new leader. Although I know I can never fill Bev=s shoes, I am doing my best to carry on in her memory.

Eileen requested that I go into a little detail in respect to my autoharp preferences, so I will do that before winding up this story of my association with our instrument. Although I own a couple of chromatic >harps for those occasions when nothing else will suffice (such as a jam session), I am a true disciple of the sound that can only be brought forth from a diatonic autoharp. My collection includes an OS *Wildwood Flower* in its original key of D, a second *Wildwood Flower* that has been converted to play in C, G and D, and a pair of two-key diatonic instruments tuned to C-G and D-A respectively. The three-key >harp belonged to Bev, and I would never part with it for reasons of sentiment. It is the instrument that I most often use when Carl and I play together--so that I won=t have to keep switching >harps. All of my diatonic autoharps have Mark Fackeldey chord bar sets on them.

I love all of my >harps, and never go away overnight without taking at least one of them along. We have a family vacation cabin where I often just sit out in the yard and play for whoever might be listening. The sound carries up through the trees and, at times, seems to echo back to me. I have also found autoharp music to be very therapeutic. Time and time again, my >harp has been my refuge in time of need. The years since Beverly Pratton entered my life have been a blessing to me, even though her untimely death was a terrible loss. With God=s help, I will do my absolute best to carry on her legacy. **Melva Gass**

Editor=s notes: Melva and the Horse & Buggy Harpers were the subject of an in-depth feature story in the *Lodi News Sentinel* newspaper, which was appropriately entitled *Harping On Tradition*.

The following vocal and instrumental cuts are on the cassette tape ***Horse & Buggy Harps:*** *Turkey In The Straw* ∃ *Spanish Two Step* ∃ *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* ∃ *Rollin= In My Sweet Baby= Arms* ∃ *The Wreck Of Old >97* ∃ *Bill Bailey* ∃ *Welcome To My World* ∃ *Ring Of Fire* ∃ *Mountain Music* ∃ *Leavin= Train* ∃ *Just Because* ∃ *Roll Out The Barrel* ∃ *There Is A Fountain* ∃ *The Old Rocking Chair* ∃ *The Church In The Wildwood* ∃ *I= n So Lonesome I Could Cry*. A limited number of copies are available for \$10 postpaid from: Melva Gass, Horse & Buggy Music, 223 Joseph Road, Manteca, CA 95336 - (209) 239-1589.

November 2007 Note: With this article being almost eleven years old, I would wager a guess that the recording mentioned above is no longer available. **ER**