

Autoharp Clearinghouse – May 1994 – Tom Fladmark

I first met **Tom Fladmark** in July of 1985 at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia. We were among the thirty or more students in what was, at that time, an "all-levels" autoharp class coordinated by Becky Blackley--and also taught by her with the assistance of Ivan Stiles and Charles Whitmer.

With a group that large, the week was nearly over before we had a chance to get more than just casually acquainted with all of our classmates. For the record, two thirds of the students in that class are still active today in autoharp circles and are among the readership of this publication. I think that says a lot about those three instructors and the musical foundation that they provided for us.

The thing that I recall most vividly about Tom Fladmark was that he performed one of his original songs at the Friday Student Showcase--a humorous ditty about smoking called *The Cigarette Song*. He stole the show! Another year, Tom sang what has perhaps become his trademark song, *Charlie Musser's General Store*. (When Charlie Musser passed away, his family honored Tom by inviting him to perform the song at Charlie's funeral.)

Along with Tom, I was also present at the get-together in November of 1986 that was to eventually become the Dulci Harp Gathering and then the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering--hosted annually by George and Mary Lou Orthey in Newport, Pennsylvania. Who would have thought that what began as a one-day reunion of friends-in-music would have evolved into the largest all-autoharp event to be held anywhere?

In the article that follows, Tom has been extremely modest in respect to his talents as an instrumentalist, singer, songwriter and performer. He also fails to mention that he has taught both autoharp and songwriting workshops at various venues as well as performing on public radio in the Scranton/ Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania area.

More than anything else, Tom Fladmark is a really nice guy, and I feel fortunate to count him among my friends. The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* wishes Tom every success in his instrument building enterprise, and is more than pleased to dedicate this issue to him. **ER**

Note: An arrangement of "Charlie Musser's General Store: may be found in the April 1989 issue of *Autoharp Quarterly*. Contact info is: P.O. Box 336, New Manchester, WV 26056 - www.autoharpquarterly.com

Tom Fladmark's Story

My association with the autoharp began shortly after my college days, about 1978. I was living in a small cabin in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. Being somewhat isolated from a convenient social scene, and without proper television reception, I found myself desperate for some sort of evening entertainment. I decided to borrow my mother's old Oscar Schmidt to fill up the time. Mom never really played the autoharp, but used it occasionally as a diversion while teaching our church's youth choir. Young choir members would strum the strings while my mother pressed the buttons.

It was a good tool for learning rhythm.

My musical training at that time was practically none. I had a stint on the French horn in junior high school and several attempts at piano lessons that never lasted more than a few sessions. My only knowledge of the autoharp was through an acquaintance, John McPhillemy, whom I saw occasionally playing Irish music at parties. I was also aware of The Carter Family, but I did not have an appreciation of them at that time.

I practiced on my mother's autoharp for about a year, either playing folk songs that I knew or accompanying my John Prine records. I thought I had become a better player than both John McPhillemy and Sara Carter, and I was proud of my self-perceived mastery of the autoharp. Then it happened.

Now, many of you know exactly what I am going to say next. I have talked to numerous people who have had the same experience as I, one that was pivotal in our development on the autoharp. I heard Bryan Bowers play. Of course, Bryan made me realize that I was just a beginner on the autoharp, but it was also inspirational to know what could be achieved on the 'harp. Most importantly, Bryan made me realize that the autoharp was a real instrument and enabled me to come out of the closet so to speak with my autoharp playing. In the next few years, I began playing with friends and, later, in several bands performing at clubs and events in my region. Also at this time, I began writing music and, although many of my songs have since been forgotten, several of them have become somewhat popular. I have received great satisfaction hearing other musicians record or perform one of my songs.

With my background in woodworking, I had always been interested in the construction of the autoharp. However, I had never seen anything but an Oscar Schmidt Autoharp and I was held back from the pursuit of instrument building by the misconception that luthiers were somehow mystic--enduring decades of monastic type training to achieve their skills. I remember a day in the early 1980s, at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, staring in wonder through my binoculars at the (Mike) Autorino 'harp being played by Drew Smith as part of the band, *Roger Sprung and the Progressive BLuegrassers*. That was the first custom autoharp that I had ever seen and I realized that, if others were building autoharps, then I could too. I had the woodworking skills and just needed the know how.

I attended the Augusta Heritage Workshops for several years in the early and mid-1980s, taking classes led by Bryan Bowers and Becky Blackley. In addition to the enjoyable times that I had there, I met many autoharp players that have become good friends. Among the friendships that I treasure are the ones with Mike Herr, Kathy Ferguson, Ivan Stiles, Eileen Roys and Helen Miller. I also met Mary Lou Orthey at Augusta in 1985. I was very intrigued by the autoharp that she had. It had been made by her husband, Dr. George Orthey--a long time dulcimer maker who had just recently started building autoharps. I also discovered that the Ortheys lived only 45 minutes from my home, which made it convenient for the many visits I was to make to them in the years to come.

After having known the Ortheys for several years, I asked Dr. Orthey if he would be interested in having me as an apprentice. He declined my offer at that time, but around 1990, offered me a job in his shop. My situation at the time made it possible for me to accept a part-time position with Orthey Instruments. I had just completed managing a housing rehabilitation project for the county and was not punching a time clock. Also, I had recently been married, and my wife LuAnn and I were rebuilding an old house in the country. So remodeling the house, working for Dr. Orthey, and an occasional contracting or cabinet-making job filled up my time nicely.

It was a very exciting time to be working for George Orthey. George's LIBERTY model harp was very popular and the newly-developed MARY LOU model was considered the finest available by many. Mary Lou Orthey and co-editor Ivan Stiles were in their third year of publishing the successful *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine. Planning for the first Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering was going on at this time also. In the midst of all this, it was not hard to become enthusiastic about the autoharp, and I decided that some day I would try to make a full-time business of it.

Working in Dr. Orthey's shop was very rewarding and an essential part of my development as an autoharp builder. I had been warned that Dr. Orthey was a demanding "workaholic," and he was, but he allowed me to work at my own pace and gave me the space to learn by my mistakes as well as by my successes. Much of autoharp building involves long, tedious, manual labor. While engaged in one of these operations, George, knowing my admiration for Bryan Bowers, would tell me, "Make every part as though it were going to be on a Bryan Bowers' autoharp." I never forgot that advice and later on, to my great pleasure, I got the chance to help construct several of the Orthey 'harps that Bryan uses today. I have benefited greatly by Dr. Orthey's technical experience on the autoharp. He has spent years working on improvements to the autoharp, much of which goes unappreciated. I know of no one who has a better working knowledge of the autoharp, and I believe that Dr. Orthey must be credited, along with a few others, in bringing this parlor instrument to a new level of sophistication and appreciation.

After several years under Dr. Orthey's wing, I decided it was time to leave the nest and go into the autoharp business on my own. (The Ortheys were aware of my intent, were very supportive of my new venture and, to this day, share their knowledge and continue to make me feel like part of the family.) In the summer of 1992, with all my savings and some of my two year old daughter's college fund, I built a large addition to my shop and equipped it for autoharp building. I spent the next eight months designing, experimenting and building autoharps, as well as preparing for a sustainable autoharp business. This involved finding sources for materials, legal and tax work, insurance, advertising, shipping and packaging, art work and a hundred other little things that are necessary in order to do business. This was all hard work, but exciting too. After building ten harps, I finally had a design that I was pleased with. I built several of these and took them to the 1993 Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering as an autoharp vendor. I sold my first

'harp at that time.

Also that weekend, I met Ron Wall who, for those of you who may not be familiar with the name, pioneered the open-chord method of playing diatonic autoharps--as well as doing some autoharp building for his own use. Ron and I discussed autoharp design and I was intrigued by some of his ideas. But, having just spent eight months developing my new harp, I was not prepared either emotionally or financially to work on more experiments. However, we did continue to communicate over the months following our meeting and, with Ron Wall's inspiration, I modified some of his design ideas and developed the GOSPEL model Fladmark Autoharp. I sent one of the early models to friend Les Gustafson-Zook in Portland, Oregon for his evaluation. Les wrote back to me saying, "The tone quality of the new GOSPEL autoharp is superb! It has an even, rich sound over the whole range of the instrument with enough volume to project adequately for any acoustical use. It is truly a wonderful-sounding instrument." A few other players that have tried the GOSPEL harp have agreed with Les' opinion and I am very pleased and excited about the response.

I am now busy building autoharps in anticipation of the 1994 festival season, as well as filling orders from as far away as Switzerland. I will be presenting a GOSPEL model Fladmark Autoharp as a contest prize at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering and at the Walnut Valley Festival this summer. I am looking forward to getting out and seeing old friends and meeting new ones in the autoharp community. **TF**

June 2008 Update from Tom:

Since that article appeared in the *Autoharp Clearinghouse*, I have continued the Fladmark Autoharp business and have made about 400 instruments. I have slowed down the autoharp production somewhat in the past few years because much of my time is now devoted to making autoharp strings. I make strings not only for my own instruments, but many of the other autoharp luthiers and technicians as well. I also get requests for strings for old autoharps and zithers that may have no other source for strings.

I do not play the autoharp very much anymore, too busy building them. But I have made many good friends in the autoharp community and I wouldn't want to be doing anything else.

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