

Discovering the Autoharp

Five-day gathering focuses on this stringed instrument

by Laurie Jean Houck

WHEN I WAS ASSIGNED TO COVER the 25th anniversary of the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in Perry County, I had to ask my husband, a musician, what an autoharp was. Ironically, a few short weeks later, my participation in a local calendar contest took me to the workshop of autoharp craftsman George Orthey. After snapping a few shots of the well-known luthier with his stringed instru-

shops, round-the-clock music and concerts from some of the best folk musicians in the world. It also features fellowship, food and a variety of vendors.

A Unique Competition

ARRIVING AT THE festival on Thursday afternoon, I hurry up the hill to the cabin area where the autoharp toss is about to begin. Making his grand entrance is “The Poo-

ning) toss by Pam Pollock of Newport reaches 46 feet.

The autoharp toss is just the first of many interesting events on the docket that day, which feature guided jams and workshops on many topics, including music theory for autoharps, playing by ear, songwriting and even how to sing better, among others.

Making Memories

ON FRIDAY, MY 15-year-old daughter, Sarah, who likes to sing and occasionally play an acoustic guitar, accompanies me. She is looking forward to a workshop on singing, songwriting and recording led by Dick Boak, a luthier, custom guitar designer and head of artist relations and publicity at C. F. Martin Guitar Company.

As we watch a group of workshop leaders perform on stage, Boak brings Sarah one of his CDs, giving my daughter an encounter with a guitar legend she will remember for a long time to come.

But, for me, the greatest memories from my visit revolve around the people who arrive here from all over the

country, such as the two ladies who share lunch with me. One is from Tampa, Fla., and the other from Winchester, Va., and they meet up in Washington, D.C., each year to travel together to the festival.

Listening to the stories and witnessing the many interactions, I notice that many of the attendees use the word “family” to describe themselves. They seem to appreciate the opportunity to trek to Pennsylvania each year to reunite and make harmony in the hills. ▼

—Laurie Jean Houck writes from Duncannon.

WHEN YOU GO

The 26th Annual **Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering** will take place June 22-26 at Little Buffalo State Park Campground just outside of Newport, Perry County. mlag.org; toll-free 844-994-9939

(top right) **Autoharp Hall of Fame Inductee Ron Wall discusses playing lead on fiddle tunes.** (bottom right) **Luthier George Orthey works on a harp in his Newport workshop.** (bottom left) **Board Member Coleen Walters of Greencastle takes her turn tossing the autoharp.** (left) **Many camp at the state park to be close to the action.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PERRY COUNTY COUNCIL OF THE ARTS



ments, I asked him if he would be at the pending gathering of musicians.

“I started that gathering,” Orthey replied before leading me to the grassy field in front of his workshop where autoharp enthusiasts had first gathered a quarter-century ago.

Today, 25 years after those humble beginnings, this gathering has become an event that attracts visitors from all over the world. Held over a five-day period at the Little Buffalo State Park Campground in Newport, the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering offers work-

shops, round-the-clock music and concerts from some of the best folk musicians in the world. It also features fellowship, food and a variety of vendors. (and game judge) Gregg Averett, who explains the game and sets the rules. The object is to toss a discarded, unstrung autoharp body (the same one has been used since the first competition in 1996) across a field as far as possible. To keep things fair, men compete against men and women against women.

As I walk across the playing field to gain a better vantage point, fellow photographer and board member Frank Baker warns me to be ready to flee if necessary. The first (and ultimately win-



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