

## The Dulcimer

One musical instrument holds a special place in Chautauqua County history. In the 1850's our county seemed to lead the nation as a center of hammered dulcimer production.

Despite statements in all the old references, scholars no longer believe the dulcimer originated in ancient Persia or in ancient times at all. The references in the Book of Daniel in the King James Bible are faulty translations. There is a Byzantine illustration of a dulcimer from the 12th century, but nothing more until the 14th century when the dulcimer rapidly became widespread and popular. One arrived in America, Jamestown, Virginia to be specific, in 1609. The earliest known New England reference is from Salem, Mass., May 23, 1717.

Western New York was settled predominantly by New Englanders, some by way of the eastern parts of our state. A dulcimer in a Monroe County museum is thought to date from 1800 and one in Canandaigua dates from around 1830.

In 18th century New England and 19th century western New York, the dulcimer was a humble, commonplace instrument, presumably, so it was seldom mentioned and we know nothing of its history here before about 1849. It is worthy of note that it is not mentioned in the early references to dances, so if present, it may have been used mainly at home in the pioneer period. In contrast, it was a dance instrument in the late 19th century.

The dulcimer is an ancestor of the piano and it could have been a fitting substitute in the pioneer home. The first piano arrived in Jamestown in 1834. There is an undated story about one in Fredonia, probably belonging to a wife or daughter-in-law of Jonathan Sprague and probably soon after the opening of the Erie Canal (1825) which would have made import of the heavy delicate instruments possible. There is no doubt a reason that the Chautauqua County dulcimer makers directed their sales representatives to states to the west and south not served by canal transportation nor yet by railroads in the 1850's.

We know of five dulcimer makers in Chautauqua County in the 1850's. Lewis and Harrison Wade (brothers) built dulcimers in Stedman from 1854 to 1860. On the basis of the 1855 census report we find them making 500 instruments a year and employing six young men. Five were from Germany and one from Switzerland, both countries where the dulcimer was well known. In 1860 they built 1500 dulcimers. The Wades were from Vermont, but had lived in Warren County, Pa. Their Stedman shop burned, putting them out of business. A number of their instruments still survive.

**Henry Ransom** (1809-1863) and his sons, James M. (1843-1874) and Martin (1839- 1866), and Charles Riceman built dulcimers in Sherman in the late 1850's. Henry was married to Temperance Wade, older sister of Lewis and Harrison Wade. Information is not so adequate for Ransom's production, but they probably made nearly as many dulcimers as the Wades. Henry moved to Newport, Kentucky and by 1863, to Nunda, N. Y. in Livingston County. Henry was born in Herkimer County, New York, home of so many of our pioneers. His parents were both Connecticut natives.

**Hiram and Morgan Sackett** of Irving built dulcimers from about 1849 to the late 1850's. As best we can tell, they made around 250 a year. I have not been able to find a connection between these Sacketts and Judge Niram Sackett or any of the many other Sacketts of that family in that area.

**Lafayette Chelsey**, assisted by Orange Sweet and William Wolffrem, was another late 1850's Sherman dulcimer maker. Little is known about him. Jacob B. Spoo, a German immigrant, made 400 dulcimers in Sherman in 1860 with the help of one employee. We know nothing more,

including how many years he made dulcimers.

Despite the fact that numerous locally made dulcimers survive in the area; despite the fact some of the manufacturers employed demonstrator-salesmen; despite the instruction booklets available, documented and oral reports of dulcimer playing in our area are spotty. Perhaps the availability of pianos and the upheaval during and following the Civil War relegated dulcimers to past fashion.

**Floyd Darrow** in his History of North Harmony mentions Grant Baker and Melquirt "Mep" Mason as dulcimer players. When I interviewed Dorothy Ploss of Stedman, a niece of Baker, in 1977, she said the Wade dulcimer the family owned still existed. She and her father, Charles Baker, were also dulcimer players.

**Mildred Smith** ( Mrs. Myron Smith) told me her late husband, Marcus Wells, and his father, Merle Wells, were dulcimer players in the Stow area and that Merle played for dances in Busti around the turn of the century.

Mrs. Smith's mother, Mrs. Cecil Card, told me about John Gunton, an ancestor who emigrated from Chatteris, England to Watts Flats in 1857. John played dulcimer and several other instruments. His son Matthew (born Feb. 14, 1858), and Matthew's wife, Eva Hubbart, and their sons, John ( Feb. 28, 1878 - Oct. 25, 1954) and Glen ( Oct. 16, 1882 - Aug. 19, 1948) were all dulcimer players. The younger John had taken formal lessons from Adrian Bagley in Watts Flats.

The history of the instrument used in the Gunton family is known as far back as Eva Hubbart. It was played at the street dance for the Busti centennial in 1923 and many other locations in the area. Glen was the main dulcimer player, John a fiddler and caller. They were a perfectionist dance band. Their dulcimer was later owned by Vern Johnson of Busti-Sugar Grove Road and played at the first Busti Pioneer Festival in 1972. It is now owned by Vern's son, Gene. Gene is a member of the famous Diamond Rio, Nashville country band.

By far and away, Chautauqua County's most famous dulcimer player was Jesse R. Martin (June 9, 1854 - Jan. 1, 1939). Martin sprang from a family of Kiantone area pioneers and Revolutionary War veterans, but our knowledge of musical interest in the family extends back only to his older brother, Albert. Family tradition says he (Jesse) obtained a dulcimer and learned to play at age nine despite parental disapproval. He began playing for dances at age 14.

I know only one specific incident from Martin's first 50 years of public performance. In Old Time Tales of Warren County, Arch Bristow gives the story of Martin being part of a band that played a two set dance on a lumber raft that floated through Warren. It was June, 1881.

On Nov. 29, 1918 "The famous Jesse Martin Orchestra" played for a party at the home of Dr. (dentist) and Mrs. Fayette Knapp in Jamestown. There he met Harry and Laura Minkley Biers. Mrs. Biers, a Hawaiian guitarist and 1899 Edinboro State Normal graduate and music teacher, became his regular accompanist and thanks to her scrap books, his subsequent career is better known.

Henry Ford sponsored a revival of traditional music and dance in the 1920's and he promoted the dulcimer as part of this effort. Twice, 1925 and 1927, Martin was invited out to play for Ford and even audition for his recording ensemble. Ford and his wife danced to Martin's playing.

Martin's local and regional career got a boost from the Ford visits and he played the vaudeville circuit into Buffalo, Ohio, and Maryland for a while. He was active locally until his death.

With the possible exception of Ted Fox of Russell, Pa., there was almost no dulcimer playing locally after Martin's death apart from that heard at the VanArsdale annual reunions. Three of Martin's grandsons, Phillip, Paul, and Sterl played enthusiastically at these events. Phillip is now deceased. Paul lives in Tonawanda and had a phonograph album released. Sterl plays locally, but has

achieved some wider recognition, most outstandingly at the Festival of American Folklife at the mall in Washington, D. C. where he played for a week in June, 1976.

The VanArsdales' accomplishments have been part of a revival of interest in the dulcimer starting nationally in the mid 1960's. Locally, the the revival of the dulcimer can be traced to the appearance of Vern Johnson mentioned above at Busti Sept. 16, 1972; the appearance of a New England group, Fennig's All- Stars with dulcimer player Bill Spence April 10, 1975 playing a dance at JCC; Old Time Dulcimer and Fiddle Day at Stedman, Oct. 23, 1976, organized by Paul Gifford of Michigan whose great grandfather and great great uncle worked for the Wades; and the Fredonia College Folk Music Weekend, April 22-24, 1977 near Brocton where dulcimer whiz John McCutcheon was featured.

In 1970 **Dennis Dorogi** of Brocton resumed the making of dulcimers in Chautauqua County, although it was several years later that he learned the instrument has such a rich history in the area.

Today the dulcimer is again played for dances in Chautauqua County. Carmen Gilman of Fredonia often plays at contra and square dances held at the Fredonia Grange. Sterl VanArsdale occasionally makes an appearance there also.

This article owes much to the research of Paul Gifford in the 1970's and James Kimball of Geneseo State College in the 1980's.

Norman Carlson October, 1995