

My Dulcimer Journey: A Story By a Kid

“What’s this?” a dimple-kneed, seven year old asked her dad as he handed a cloth-covered object down to her.

“I believe it’s dulcimer,” dad said as he wrinkled his brow over the strange word. “Pappaw built it, but he never strung it, Sarah,” he explained.

Sarah scanned the crudely built dulcimer with a puzzled air. “How do you play it ?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” her dad said. “Let’s bring it to Clayton Johnson and maybe he will string it for you.”

About a week later Sarah and her dad, Bill, were driving up the rocky driveway to Mr. Johnson’s workshop. Mr. Johnson was a first-class fiddle player and builder in our rural farm community.

Yes, that little girl was me! Little did I know that when we opened the door to Mr. Johnson’s workshop we also opened the door to a whole new world for me.

Before I was born my grandfather bought a dulcimer kit. At this time he was retired and dabbled in many areas of interest . . . painting, golfing, harmonica playing, and some woodcraft. When he put the kits together, a crude, but playable dulcimer emerged. When I was about 8, several years after my grandfather had passed away, my dad discovered a dusty, stringless dulcimer in the attic. When we brought it to Mr. Johnson he confirmed that it was indeed a dulcimer! However, it was missing a few frets. He strung it for us and showed me how to fret and strum.

My first dulcimer teacher actually was not a dulcimer player. We heard about a fiddle and guitar player nearby, Buster Turner. He ran a music shop and a radio station. He taught me how to strum, fret, and tune my dulcimer. At that time I played in DAA and I strummed like I was beating cake batter and I fretted with my thumb, noter-styled. Neither of us knew anything about dulcimer tab and didn’t know it existed. We came up with our own tab-system. It consisted of dots and dashes and looked more like a secret code than “Go Tell Aunt Rhody!” Awhile after I started taking lessons from him I attended a dulcimer playout at the Cumberland Gap Visitor’s Center. I basically sat in the back and strummed. They played songs I didn’t know and in DAD. I only knew DAA. I also noticed that people looked at my dulcimer with a strange expression on their face. That’s when I discovered my dear dulcimer had a special charm all her own – she was built backwards! She was playable, but the tuning pegs were at the wrong end. At the playout, the host, Rudy Ryan, told my dad about the Knoxville Area Dulcimer Club and about a lady that eventually became my dulcimer teacher, June Goforth.

We went to Mrs. Goforth's house when I was 9. Her first task was to break me from fretting with my thumb and strumming like I was beating a bowl of eggs. And as they say, the "rest is history".

Ms. Goforth is still my teacher four years later. She has taken me all the way from "Boil Then Cabbage Down" to "Canon in D". Her passion for teaching and music has influenced me greatly and I am not only a better player, but a better person for having been her student. I now own a beautiful McSpadden hour-glass dulcimer and I am proud to say I use all of my fingers to play, not just my thumb! My old 'backwards' dulcimer retired long ago. She lays peacefully in her plush case and sleeps most of the time.

I am the youngest active member of KADC. I also belong to the NGFDA and the Wilderness Road Dulcimer Club started by Terry Lewis. I feel very blessed with all the wonderful teachers who have helped me through the past years. Dave Haas, Susan Trump, Maureen Sellers, Terry Lewis, Tull Glazener, Larry Conger, and most of all June Goforth, my dulcimer teacher, have helped me become a better player and to understand the instrument. I am currently writing a harmony part to "Katie's Song" by Lee Rowe and I am putting the finishing touches on my original song, "Midnight Rain". I am also tutoring a boy in my community who has some interest in the dulcimer. Ms. Goforth is in the middle of teaching me music theory. I have been to the Smoky Mountain Dulcimer Retreat, NGFDA Fall Festival, and the Ohio Valley Gathering. I would like to apply for a youth scholarship to attend Mountain Dulcimer Week in North Carolina. Eventually, I would like to share what so many great teachers have taught me and be able to teach others. But most of all I want to bring glory to God through my music and teaching – He who gave me the gift of music.

Sarah Morgan