

Peg Dope, a Pun

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"Please play for us at our next class, won't you?" invited our memoir-writing- class teacher.

I was absent from the class during my week in western North Carolina at the John Campbell Folk School (modeled on Danish folk schools for adults). It is near Brasstown and Murphy, two hamlets you've never heard of in the Blue Ridge Mountains 130 miles north of Atlanta, tucked in the mountains between the Cherokee National Forest and the Nantahala National Forest.

Thus I began to prepare for the gig by collating stanzas of the story-song, "Sir Patrick Spens." It is one of the oldest known to students of English literature, usually found near the beginning of a survey anthology. The turn-of-last-century collector Francis James Childs assigned # 48 to it, early in his arrangement of authentic Scottish-English ballads. True to immemorial experience, the lines did not type themselves accurately. Numerous typos and other unbidden glitches erupted, but I vanquished all obstacles, trimming the leaps and lingerings in the plot line of 24 stanzas to fewer than I could remember without boring the audience, I hoped.

Or so I thought, as I began to tune Dolly the dulcimer. Well, she didn't cooperate. This dulcimer is a beautiful pine, maple and walnut plucked string folk instrument made by renowned woodcraft master Homer Ledford living at the time in Lexington, KY.

To explain more background, the Northern Oakland County Girl Scout Council (Pontiac, MI) sent me to Berea College, KY, for a month in 1956 to learn how to operate their established 8-week overnight summer camp. At Camp Sherwood, aside from the usual shopping errands in Lapeer, I vividly recall what fun it was to sell the permitted daily noon candy to Brownies, Scouts and Seniors.

At Berea College, we adult Girl Scouts--professional group social workers--were entertained one evening by students performing "play-party games" (outlanders call them dances) and songs with dulcimer accompaniment. I was so enchanted by the varied sounds they obtained in melodies, counter melodies and chord harmony with the quiet, intimate instrument, that I had to have a dulcimer. I had played violin, string bass and cello before.

When we found Mr. Ledford in the married- student housing, at U. of KY, I

noticed clean diapers strung from wall to wall near the ceiling. He said he had several dulcimers near completion and intended to finish a certain one for someone else, but when I offered \$50 cash, he said he'd mail it to me in Michigan next week. And Dolly was mine.

The students told me the dulcimer is easy to learn. Yes, it is. Within 15 minutes or so, most anyone can pick out a tune and a chord or two, then enjoy singing along. Playing it better takes more practice, of course. In the last 50 years, I had neglected Dolly shamefully.

So taking her to North Carolina was a way to atone to venerable Dolly. When she was new, my brother made her a sturdy pine storage-travel box, padding it with foam and velvet. Amusingly now, I recall that the first one was too short, so he made a second, to pass a high school shop course, then recycled the first one as a gun case.

Prudently, I had always kept Dolly on the piano, never in an attic or basement, but her age was showing in dryness of the fine cracks visible on the top surface. According to my friends in the local dulcimer-playing group, that kind of crack cannot be repaired--one just plays the instrument anyway. But the worst damage was on the pegs: they would not hold position. In tuning, each time I tightened the strings by turning the pegs, I gave a slight additional inward push against the graduated holes in the maple peg box. I was told to apply peg dope (a compound of wax and resin, I think) to the pegs--wrong-- it should have been put inside those peg box holes. No, that didn't work. I spent two hours trying to be patient, but two strings broke before I admitted a hopeless situation and made arrangements to borrow a replacement before the next group rehearsal. The advice I got was to hang Dolly on the wall (and never play her). Simple cardboard dulcimer kits are available via Internet for about \$40 now.

Meanwhile, I attended a concert of the Farmington Valley Symphony Orchestra. The program carried a large ad by Randell Reid, a luthier.

Mr. Reid's shop is in his home, a large Connecticut redstone house in Hartford's nicely aging section of comfortable houses near downtown. He seems to have the tools and experience to help Dolly, perhaps with substitute black cello pegs. We were both amused by his meeting the cardboard pretender for the first time, a far cry from the costly violins and cellos the professionals bring to him. His sophisticated reaming tool outclasses the file we know Homer Ledford used, and I think he understands that I do not want to modify this little old lady with inappropriate gewgaws or gadgetry.

While waiting for him to find a special cone-measuring tool, I spied a framed collection of a dozen violin bridges, and asked, Why would anyone make a collection of those? He gently explained how they differ, including one of his, in the delicacy of their carving, especially the interior curves. I left Dolly in good hands. And if the luthier is unable to help, I can still tune Dolly to her lowest string and sing to her, just not with a group tuned to different pitch.

P.S. I did render Sir Patrick Spens to the tune of Shady Grove, for the next memoir-writing class. And a week later, M. Reid has not called, so I presume he's giving Dolly proper attention.