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## The Appalachian Dulcimer: Its Origins and History

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THE APPALACHIAN DULCIMER:  
ITS ORIGINS AND HISTORY

by

Doris Arlene Herndon

BME, in Music, Indiana University, 1953

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty  
of the  
University of North Dakota  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota  
August, 1967

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This thesis submitted by Doris Arlene Herndon in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the University of North Dakota, is hereby approved by the Committee under whom the work has been done.

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the valuable assistance and support of my committee members, Dr. William Boehle, Miss Tamar Read and Dr. Abram Friesen, this paper would not have been possible. I would also like to acknowledge the encouragement and help given to me by my husband, James, and my son, David.

Additionally, Mr. Playford Thorson and Mr. Roger Welsch are appreciated as generous friends in this project as is my excellent typist, Mrs. Dian Leiferman. Others, too, for their warmth and interest are deserving of thanks.

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## ABSTRACT

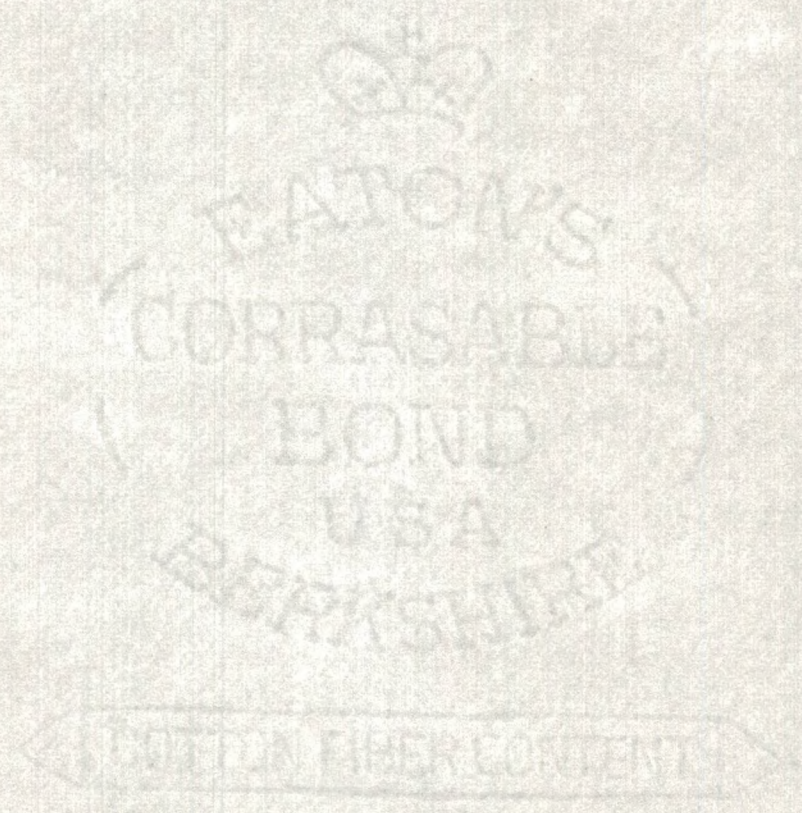
The attempt is made in this paper to show that the Appalachian dulcimer is a variant, transplanted form of similar folk instruments which are to be found in northern Europe and that the dulcimer is neither a native American instrument nor English in origin.

The procedure followed is to note the place in which the Appalachian dulcimer fits into the Sachs-von Hornbostel classification of musical instruments and to describe the northern European instruments which also belong there. The northern European instruments and the Appalachian dulcimer are then compared.

Attention is drawn to the lack of evidence supporting a popular belief that the dulcimer is English in origin. An examination of immigration history from Norway and Sweden to the United States is presented in order to permit speculation on possible connections, through actual instruments or by means of folk oral tradition, between the northern European instruments and the Appalachian dulcimer.

There is no evidence to support theories of English origin for the Appalachian dulcimer. The basic similarity between the dulcimer and northern European instruments makes the likelihood of a native American dulcimer appearance unsupported. Immigration history does show that contact between

the Appalachian highlanders and northern Europeans might have occurred at a time when dulcimers appeared. This contact might have been an actual instrument or orally transmitted directions resulting in a form for the Appalachian dulcimer varying from the similar northern European types. Therefore, without being able to verify it, the writer concludes that northern European origin for the dulcimer is the only supportable hypothesis.



## INTRODUCTION

Prior to 1940 the Appalachian dulcimer was little known outside Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia and Ohio and was considered by some to be a native American musical instrument. Recent investigations indicate that its history is long and at points obscure. The history of the Appalachian dulcimer becomes important as well as interesting when the wider values of tracing instrumental diffusion and development are considered. Sometimes musical instruments are the most complex technological achievement of a culture. Often they are objects of art as well. Archeologists, anthropologists, students of comparative cultural, technological and visual art history as well as ethnomusicologists have a justifiable interest in the construction, playing, function and geographical diffusion of musical instruments.

The thesis to be developed in this paper is that the dulcimer is a variant, transplanted form of some northern European folk instrument. It cannot be considered a native instrument; neither can it be considered English in origin since no support can be offered for English provenience, in spite of the fact that this view has been frequently offered. In order to develop the thesis, consideration will be given to the possibility of a direct instrumental link between northern Europe and the United States.



In Chapter I a summary of a standard classification of musical instruments is presented. Since the Appalachian dulcimer is a stringed instrument, special attention is given to the chordophone, or string, class of instruments and, within that class, to the zither type of chordophone. Prehistoric times and antiquity are discussed. More emphasis is given to the development of northern European folk instruments which in their variety and simplicity seem to be closely related to the Appalachian dulcimer.

In order to be able to compare the Appalachian dulcimer with similar European instruments, a close description of the dulcimer is presented in Chapter II. Since there has been a tendency to consider the dulcimer an English instrument, Chapter III is a consideration of the theories which might support this view. An analysis of two variants of Barbara Allen is included to substantiate the writer's negative view of this hypothesis.

Chapter IV deals with immigration from some Scandinavian countries to the United States and contains speculations as to whether or not Norwegian or Swedish settlers might have been responsible for the construction of the first dulcimer. Consideration is also given to German or French dulcimer ancestry. Some conclusions are presented in Chapter V.

Except for the work of Charles Seegar, Charles F. Bryan, and Jean Ritchie nothing of any scholarly value has been published concerning the Appalachian dulcimer. Several popular articles about the dulcimer have appeared, but they offer little or nothing to persons seriously interested in dulcimer history

and development.

In 1917 Josephine McGill published an article describing the quaint and memorable sound of the "Kentucky" dulcimer.<sup>1</sup> Josiah Combs, himself an Appalachian highlander, briefly discussed the Appalachian dulcimer in 1925 in an unused chapter of his doctoral thesis, Folksongs du Midi des Etats-Unis.<sup>2</sup> His observations on the dulcimer were not published until 1960 and do not substantially add to our information about the history and development of the dulcimer. Maude Karples<sup>3</sup> and Cecil Sharp<sup>4</sup> remarked in English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians that the dulcimer was usually found in schools and only rarely in homes; singing was unaccompanied. Both Mr. Combs and Miss Karples suggest that the Appalachian dulcimer may have been introduced by the Pennsylvania "Dutch" into the Appalachian region. However, they offer no evidence for their view.

References to the Appalachian dulcimer are infrequent from about 1925 to about 1950. Charles F. Bryan in 1952<sup>5</sup> and

<sup>1</sup>Josephine McGill, "The Kentucky Dulcimer," The Musician, Vol. XXII (January, 1917) p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Josiah H. Combs, "The Highlander's Music," unused chapter of the doctoral thesis, Folksongs du Midi des Etats-Unis. First published in Vient de Paritre (January, 1926). Reprinted in Kentucky Folklore Record, Vol. VI, No. 4 (December, 1960) pp. 120-121.

<sup>3</sup>Cecil Sharp, "Preface," English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians, ed. Maude Karples (London: Oxford University Press, 1932) p. XVIII.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., "Introduction," p. XXVII.

<sup>5</sup>Charles F. Bryan, "The Appalachian Dulcimer," Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin, Vol. XVIII (March, 1952) pp. 1-5.

again in 1954<sup>6</sup> called attention to the instrument. He accurately described several dulcimer types and set out the most common manner of playing and tuning it. He raised the following questions about the dulcimer: Why are Appalachian dulcimers limited to such a small region? Could the dulcimer have come to the Appalachian area from the colonial states? Was it British in origin? What are the ancestors of the dulcimer? Are there missing links connecting it with earlier foreign instruments? Could the dulcimer be a native instrument?

Although it must be admitted that popular articles perform no scholarly function, the value of such writings is not negligible. The widespread interest and activity within the folk music boom in the United States produces a shallow, unthinking view of the "folk" and this view is commercially and ruthlessly exploited by managing agents, record companies and folk-style performers. At the same time, however, some popular folk magazines are genuinely dedicated to the proper understanding of folk art. Practical information of interest to folk musicians is passed along by interested and knowledgeable people in some of these publications. In some respects these publications serve the same purposes as the older oral tradition.

A study of the dulcimer takes on deeper significance when it is viewed as an important part of a particular culture. Suzanne Langer says, "A culture is the symbolic expression of developed habitual ways of feeling. By 'feeling' I do not mean

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<sup>6</sup>Charles F. Bryan, "The Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer Enigma," Ibid., Vol. XX (December, 1954) pp. 86-90.

particularly pleasure and displeasure. . . or just emotion and sensation, but everything that can be felt. . . Culture is the entire treasure of achievement in a society."<sup>7</sup> Her definition of civilization is that "It is a product of a high culture, but instead of being the symbolic aspect of behavior, it is the pattern of the practical implementation of life."<sup>8</sup>

Certainly the dulcimer became a meaningful element of the Appalachian highlanders' culture. The soft, intimate, refined sound of the dulcimer fits perfectly with the songs and ballads known by whole families of these isolated and lonely people to be enjoyed together or individually as meaningful musical art. The values implicit in learning a song informally from an older relative or friend can never be duplicated by learning the same song from a recording or in a school, although this mode of transmission is better than none.

The younger generation is geared to accepting rapid change, increasing complexity, and more and more abstraction, in a word-civilization. Civilization is now a way of life and the young people seem exuberant about it. One might ask what is the price being paid for civilization. An answer is that we pay the price of the extermination of valuable cultures which will be lost forever when civilization develops too fast (as in the United States where the culture was not strong enough to offset properly the onslaught of civilization). In

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<sup>7</sup>Suzanne Langer, Philosophical Sketches (New York: Mentor Books, The New American Library, 1964) p. 87.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

"backward" areas (like our Indian reservations and some African and Asian countries) that are highly cultured, the grafting on of civilization means complete destruction of a life-sustaining culture and the people in it.

It seems shameful that we encourage our young people to forget last week's song, last month's singing group, last year's clothing styles, last generation's culture (if any) because whatever is new, gadgety, fast and technologically improved is considered better than anything old. With all kinds of "explosions" around us--bombs, populations, knowledge, science, technology--we do have to be as young, as flexible and as able to accept change as possible. There is, however, danger for our society as a whole, culturally, when we are unable or unwilling to control the effects of civilization. Our additional concern should be for the possible bad effects of our civilization, which we share so freely, on other cultures of the world.

It was gratifying to read Jack Combs<sup>9</sup> popular article about the Kentucky highlands. This was one of the first places in which the value of the highland culture was recognized and preserved. It was done for the sake of the highlanders and the outside world as well. In such vicinities as Viper, Berea, Knott County, Hindman Settlement School and many other places, the folk traditions are being preserved. Among these are

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<sup>9</sup>Jack Combs "The Folk Singers of the Kentucky Highlands. . . A Trip to Hindman" Spectrum Vol. 1, No. 2, (Spring, 1963), pp. 31-38.

dulcimer construction and dulcimer playing which a few people transmit to younger people who can partake of civilization and also appreciate a worthwhile, genuine folk culture as part of their heritage. I wonder if they are not one step ahead of us in their ability to adapt and to preserve themselves at the same time.

## CHAPTER I

### CLASSIFICATION AND HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF THE APPALACHIAN DULCIMER

The classifying of musical instruments is an important area of research in ethnomusicology. Without simple accurate descriptions for instruments, comparative work with instruments is almost impossible. Name differences and lack of standardized construction in different eras and different cultures has produced an almost unbelievable variety of instruments.

Instruments have been classified in several ways. The most useful classifications seem to proceed according to the material of which the instrument is made or the manner in which the sound is produced. The way the instrument is played and the musical style of the playing are of great importance, but these are difficult schemes of classification.

In this paper I have drawn on the standard classification of Curt Sachs and E. M. von Hornbostel which divides instruments into four main classes based on acoustical principles. These are idiophones, aerophones, membranophones and chordophones. Sachs added a fifth class, electrophones, in his The History of Musical Instruments.<sup>1</sup>

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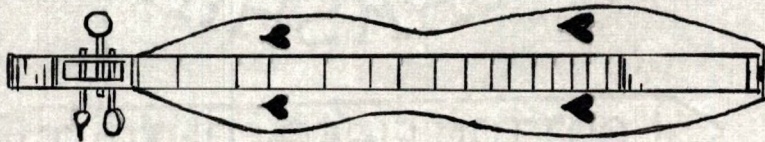
<sup>1</sup>Curt Sachs, The History of Musical Instruments (New York: W. N. Norton and Co., 1940) pp. 455-467.

Idiophones are instruments made of naturally sonorous materials not needing any additional tension. They are set into vibration by friction or by being struck together, being struck with some device, being stamped on, being stamped with, being scraped, being plucked or being rubbed. Aerophones are usually wind instruments, which possess two factors: a tube enclosing a column of air and a device for setting that air into vibration. Membranophones produce sound by means of a membrane stretched over an opening. Usually membranophones are drums. Chordophones are instruments with strings. A closer description of chordophones will follow. Electrophones may be either electromechanical or radioelectric instruments.

Curt Sachs lists four basic types in the chordophone class of musical instruments: lutes, lyres, harp and zithers. A lute is composed of a body (a sound box or resonator) and of a neck (an elongated organic part of the instrument) which serves both as a handle and as a means of stretching the strings beyond the body. Usually the strings are stopped. Lutes may or may not be bowed. Our present day guitar and violin belong to this type of chordophone. A lyre has a body with a yoke in place of a neck. Two arms project upward and are connected by a crossbar at the top. Lyres may be either plucked or bowed. A harp is a plucked instrument in which the plane of the strings is vertical rather than parallel to the soundboard. The strings, attached to the soundboard but running vertically from it, are usually numerous and open.



A zither has no neck or yoke. The strings are stretched between the two ends of a body which may be a resonator itself or require an attached resonator. This definition of a zither is of interest and value to the Appalachian dulcimer investigator for the Appalachian dulcimer has no neck and has its three or four strings stretched over a fretboard attached to an elongated resonating body. It belongs then to the zither type of chordophones. See drawing below.



The many shapes of zithers and their varying numbers of strings and bridges as well as the addition of frets cause much confusion for the researcher. The term Appalachian "dulcimer" adds to the confusion for it is basically a plucked zither, or psaltery, rather than a hammered zither, or dulcimer. Many attempts to look up "dulcimer" lead to a description of the hammered dulcimer found in the United States as well as in eastern Europe and the Near East.

"Dulcimer" is formed from the Latin dulce and the Greek melos meaning sweet song. This is not helpful information since in any case the term is a misnomer when applied to the Appalachian dulcimer. Close etymological study of the words Scheitholt, Epinette des Vosges, Noordsche Balk, Humle, Hommel, Hummel and Langeleik might be rewarding, but this writer has found only that Scheitholt refers to a slice of wood, and that

Epinette des Vosges is a reference to a kind of evergreen tree of the Vosges Mountains. Balk is a term meaning boat or bark which is perhaps a description of the shape of the Noordsche Balk. Humle, Hommel, Hummel are derived from verbs meaning to hum and seem to be reference to the sound of the drone of these instruments. Langeleik implies long board and is, like Scheitholt and Epinette, a term describing the material and form of the instrument.

The neolithic form of the zither is the ground zither which appears in excavations on several continents.<sup>2</sup> The Annamese form of the ground zither has a resonating pit dug into the ground with a piece of bark as a soundboard. A string is stretched horizontally between two posts on either side of the pit; another string tied to the middle of the first and acting as a bridge runs vertically to the bark lid.<sup>3</sup>

The gap between the ground zither observable in pre-literate societies today and the philological and archeological evidence of zither types in societies of antiquity seems impossible to bridge. However the trough zither, the raft zither and the tube zither shown in photographs by Sybil Marcuse<sup>4</sup> are examples of instruments which fit into that gap. All three of these instruments come from West Africa, although a raft zither

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<sup>2</sup>Sybil Marcuse, Musical Instruments: A Comprehensive Dictionary, (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1964).

<sup>3</sup>Sachs, The History of Musical Instruments, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup>Marcuse, Musical Instruments: A Comprehensive Dictionary, Plates 6, 7, 11.

type is listed as also appearing in the Chittagong district of East Pakistan. The trough zither is made from a hollowed-out split log which forms a shell. The seven strings are stretched across the open top. The raft zither is composed of canes tied together. The "strings" are narrow strips of the cane fiber which have been cut loose from the cane tubes yet remain attached at both ends. The tube zither has strings vertically attached around a tube of bamboo which acts as a resonator.

Chinese zithers, the oldest stringed instruments of China, are mentioned in poetry written about 1100 B.C. according to Sachs.<sup>5</sup> These are thought to be the ch'in and the she which exist today. The ch'in and the she both have strings stretched longitudinally over a soundbox formed by a narrow convex board top and a flat bottom. Both are played on the ground, knees or a table. The she has twenty-five unfretted strings. Japan and Korea have similar zither forms. Sachs<sup>6</sup> states that Phoenician rectangular zither specimens with ten strings dating from the 8th century B.C. are in the British Museum and also says that probably the Israeli asor mentioned in the Psalms is a zither. Possibly there were Greek and Roman zithers. Greek literary passages (Juba, d. 24 A.D.) and Roman sarcophagi suggest this to Sachs.

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<sup>5</sup>Sachs, The History of Musical Instruments, pp. 185-188.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 117-118, 137.

Perhaps the ch'in and the she as well as the instruments of the Near East came from some central Asian source in antiquity. In any case a diffusion both to the west and east from the Near East is discernible in the Middle Ages. The Chinese still call a ch'in-type instrument the "foreign zither".<sup>7</sup> Most medieval European instruments before 1000 A.D. are believed to have come from Asia through Byzantium or along the Baltic coast or from the Islamic empire through North Africa. Two early and basic zither types in the Near East, the psaltery (a plucked zither) and the dulcimer (a hammered dulcimer), can be identified: the Persian trapezoidal zither, the quanam (a psaltery) and the Persian-Iraqi trapezoidal zither, the santir, (a dulcimer). These instruments had up to thirty-two tones produced by strings in unison ranks of three or four strings each.<sup>8</sup> They are the forerunners of European zithers.

The psaltery and dulcimer followed an evolutionary by-path in spite of their popularity through the centuries. They were passed over when the instrumental art music, which required more flexible instruments, was developed in the Renaissance. With the addition of more strings and keyboards to the psaltery and the dulcimer, the harpsichord (a plucked instrument) and the clavichord (a hammered instrument) were developed. These new instruments were capable of producing the chords and providing the independence from the voice

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 257-259.

demanded by the Renaissance music. The dulcimer and psaltery became folk instruments.

We don't know much about the fate of these folk instruments. This is perhaps because the historians and artists reported and depicted the lives and life styles of the wealthier classes; the humbler people and their instruments were largely ignored. The folk forms of the dulcimer and psaltery have remained fairly simple but have varied greatly from place to place. A melody string with frets often appeared while the total number of strings decreased. The East European cimbal, the Hungarian cimbalom (a highly developed form), the German hackbrett are examples of dulcimer variation. The German Scheitholt, the Noord'sche Balk, the French Epinette des Vosges, the Norwegian Langeleik, the Icelandic Langspil, and the Swedish Humle are psaltery variations found in northern Europe. They are in the folk oral tradition and this tradition would seem to account for much of the variety that is noticeable.

The following description of these psaltery type instruments is based on material in the following sources: Michael Praetorius, Syntagma musicum;<sup>9</sup> Hortense Panum, Stringed Instruments of the Middle Ages;<sup>10</sup> Curt Sachs Real-Lexicon der

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<sup>9</sup>Michael Praetorius, "Theatrum Instrumentorum," Syntagma musicum, Band II, (Basel: Barenreiter Kassel, 1963) Plate XXI.

<sup>10</sup>Hortense Panum, Stringed Instruments of the Middle Ages. Jeffrey Pulver, Eng. Ed. and Rev. (London: Reeves 1937), pp. 263-291.

Musikinstrumente,<sup>11</sup> Sybil Marcuse, Musical Instruments: A Comprehensive Dictionary;<sup>12</sup> Jean Ritchie, The Dulcimer Book.<sup>13</sup>

The Scheitholt was first described in 1618 by Praetorius. It is a small monochord made of three or four boards, equipped with three or four lateral pegs for tuning the brass strings. Three of the four strings are tuned to the same tone and the fourth string (optional) is an octave higher. One of the unison strings is pressed down by a little metal hook so that the pitch is raised a fifth. The instrument is sounded by the thumb of the right hand crossing all the strings. The left hand makes the melody by drawing a smooth rod backwards and forwards over the foremost string. Brass frets are used. Marcuse states that there may be as many as four melody strings and several drones and says the instrument was in use up to the early nineteenth century. A rosette sound hold can be seen in the Praetorius drawing. A kind of rosette soundhold as well as what looks like a heart shaped soundhole can be seen in the drawing of the Scheitholt owned by Sachs. The photograph of a "box zither" included by Marcuse appears to be a four stringed Scheitholt and has two heart shaped soundholes.

The Noord'sche Balk was identified in the Netherlands in 1699 by Klaus Douwes, a teacher and organist. It is two or

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<sup>11</sup>Curt Sachs, Real-Lexicon der Musikinstrumente (New York: Dover Publications 1964) pp. 131, 192, 238, 273, 337.

<sup>12</sup>Sybil Marcuse, Musical Instruments: A Comprehensive Dictionary, pp. 174, 250, 306, 367, 462, Plate 8.

<sup>13</sup>Jean Ritchie, The Dulcimer Book (New York: Oak Publications, 1964), pp. 11-14.

three feet long, is hollow and four sided, has three or four strings stretched over a bridge, and has copper frets arranged to produce a diatonic scale. The melody is played on one string and the other strings are a unison drone. Sometimes the instrument is played with two plectra, one to move over the frets and one to strum the strings. An alternate way of playing is to fret with a thumb nail and bow the strings with a violin bow.

The Epinette des Vosges (Buche) was played until very recently. It has two steel melody strings over a diatonically fretted fingerboard and three brass drone strings tuned g'g'c'. The player strums with a goose quill plectrum in his right hand and uses a rod on the two melody strings in unison or uses his fingers in order to provide an accompaniment (in thirds) for the melody. Jean Ritchie provides photographs of two Epinettes des Vosges from her collection of instruments. One has five strings and is strikingly like the Scheitholt with its nearly rectangular sound box, wooden pegs, and two soundholes, one heartshaped and the other flowershaped. The other Epinette is more elaborate. It has seven strings, three melody strings over a fret board and four drone strings. The basic outline for this instrument is a stretched out violin shape. There are two shapes of soundholes, a kind of rosette and an adjacent circle shape.

The Langeleik is like the Scheitholt in that it has a slender rectangular body and a device to raise the melody string a fifth. It is more advanced in construction than any

instrument mentioned so far. Three different tunings for the Langeleik are given by Panum. Wedges in addition to the lateral pegs are used to alter the tones. There may be from four to fourteen steel strings and two peg boxes, one at each end. The frets are arranged to produce the diatonic scale. A long plectrum is used back and forth and fretting is done with the three middle fingers of the left hand. Considerable variety in rhythm, dynamics and expressive melody execution are possible with the Langeleik. It has never entirely disappeared from use and since about 1916 it has grown again in popularity.

The Langspil is a long, narrow Scheitholt type instrument with lateral wooden pegs. It is widened to a bulge at the lower end of one side. It usually has three metal strings. The foremost string is the melody string over a fretboard. The drone strings provide the tonic and dominant of the melody string. Usually the instruments are reported as being bowed, but sometimes it seems to have been plucked. Panum gives reasons for believing that the Langspil is closely derived from the Langeleik. It is practically unknown now.

The Humle (also Hummel in Denmark and Hommel in the Netherlands) is believed to be Dutch in origin and has various forms. Sometimes it is long, narrow and rectangular and sometimes there is a single or double bulge on one or both sides. Triangular Humles are mentioned by Panum. The pegs are often iron and are inserted from above. The number of strings is variable, but ten is the average number. There are two to four



melody strings over a fretboard; the rest are pairs of tonic and dominant drones. The player is sometimes reported to use a noting bar and at other times to use his fingers to fret the strings. The melody is accompanied in thirds and is sometimes ornamented. The right hand strumming proceeds in one direction, rather than back and forth as on the Langeleik. The Humle is a favorite instrument in Sweden and playing technique there is more advanced than in other countries. It was played there until about 1921.

That these European instruments existed and were part of the folk culture there can not be denied. To declare that any one of them is a direct ancestor of the Appalachian dulcimer is questionable. As yet no one has uncovered any evidence of a direct link between these instruments and the Appalachian dulcimer. However, from certain evidence and from the lack of certain other kinds of evidence such a link can be inferred.

## CHAPTER II

### THE APPALACHIAN DULCIMER: A DESCRIPTION AND METHODS OF PLAYING IT

Even so famous a scholar as Charles Seegar has addressed himself to an investigation of the dulcimer in his article, "The Appalachian Dulcimer". Seegar states, the dulcimer

is usually a little less than a meter long, from 120-200 mm. at its widest, from eighty to 100 mm. in depth.<sup>1</sup>

It is made from many local woods--maple, birch, redwood, chestnut, butternut, cherry, sassafras, cedar, oak, lynn, sumac, yellow pine, white pine, poplar and black walnut.

Seegar sketches six basic shapes and gives the following description of the instrument's construction:

The instrument is constructed in two sections. . . In many specimens this (the first section) consists of a single piece of wood running the full length of the instrument, serving at once as peg-stock and scroll, finger or fretboard, tailpiece with or without the occasional handle, and, often as not, as endblocks within the second section over which the first is shaped to fit and be glued. Sometimes section one is made in two, three or more separate pieces, glued, nailed or even pegged together. Section two consists of a shallow soundbox that protrudes symmetrically on each side below section one. The front and back of the soundbox are flat and of single boards. The two

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Seegar, "The Appalachian Dulcimer," Journal of American Folklore, LXXI, No. 279 (January, March, 1958), p. 40.

sides are single boards bent or shaped in one of the several outlines shown. On some instruments there are small buttons, usually three, on the back to hold the sound box five to ten mm. clear of a table.

One common type of construction is especially interesting. The part of section one that serves as a fretboard is hollowed out so as to form, in end cross-section, an inverted square U, to each of whose edges a side of the front is glued, the part of the front under the hollowed out fretboard being cut out. The fretboard serves, thus, not only as a bridge by which the vibration of the strings are transmitted to the soundbox, but also as an integral part of the soundbox itself. As on all dulcimers I have seen, so on this type of construction, there is, therefore, no separate bridge. The strings pass over two nuts, an upper and a lower, consisting each of a piece of hardwood, bone or metal set into slots in the fretboard, with notches so that the strings run parallel to one another.<sup>2</sup>

Most Appalachian dulcimers have three or four strings, although Putnam<sup>3</sup> reports as many as eight. Either second and fourth banjo strings or E and G guitar strings may be used. Each instrument seems to have an individual tuning where it sounds best. Often the first string, or chanterelle, nearest the player, and the second string are tuned to e' and the third string is tuned to a, but these tunings may vary considerably in either direction. When a fourth string is present, the first three strings are tuned to "sol" and the fourth string to "do". Retuning is necessary for a change of mode or key.

The 14-15 frets are usually arranged diatonically to produce a major scale beginning with the tonic at the third fret. Sometimes the frets are placed under all the strings

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 40-41.

<sup>3</sup>John Putnam, The Plucked Dulcimer and How to Play It. (Berea: The Council of the Southern Mountains, Inc., 1964) p. 8.

allowing the player to sound chords; other instruments are only partially fretted.

A large amount of variation within the framework of a simple entity is often a characteristic of elements in a folk oral tradition. This variation can be seen in the Appalachian dulcimer. As has been noted, the length, width, depth and shape of the instrument vary without changing the character of the instrument greatly. Many local woods seem to be suitable for constructing dulcimers. The two to four sound holes may be hearts, circles, diamonds or f-holes. The number of strings may be one to eight. Tuning must be suitable for the voice and the instrument, and therefore varies from the most traditional fiddle notes a and e', but the tonic drone relationship in the tuning must be preserved. As was also noted, all or only part of the strings may be fretted. Oral tradition demands that what is being transmitted must be remembered and reproduced without written plans or instructions. In this manner basic form remains while detail may vary according to the skill and imagination and memory of the craftsman or performer.

Until recently the Appalachian dulcimer was strictly in the folk oral tradition. Modifications or improvements were unselfconscious. Now, however, Ake Tugel, a New York dulcimer maker, makes and sells three string dulcimers which have chromatically placed frets under the first and second

strings.<sup>4</sup> There is a kit available from the George Kelischek Workshop in Atlanta which allows one to assemble his own instrument. This teardrop shaped dulcimer has movable nylon frets and a "floating" fretboard which permits the board to be moved closer to or farther from the strings. Since the fret board does not run the full length of the instrument, a separate bridge is required. Metal tuning pegs are mounted vertically in the neck block and a tuning key is included. Three sizes are available; a soprano, an alto and a tenor. The suggested tuning is for the first and second string to sound a fifth higher than the third string.<sup>5</sup>

These careful improvements and the detailed dulcimer construction plans to be found in Science and Mechanics<sup>6</sup> January, 1964, take the instrument far from its oral folk tradition. Likewise, the carefully casual article "Build a Dulcimer" by Red Bell<sup>7</sup> in Stray Notes is a departure from the oral tradition.

Although there are reports of the Appalachian dulcimer's being bowed and of its being propped endwise from lap to table,

<sup>4</sup>The information came from an advertising letter sent out by Ake Tugel from 12 Boulevard, Sea Cliff, New York.

<sup>5</sup>This information was gathered from examination of the photographs and assembly instructions for a teardrop dulcimer kit copyrighted in 1963 and obtainable from the George Kelischek Workshop for Historical Instruments, 2725 Knox Street, N.E., Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>6</sup>Philip L. Hamer, "If You Like Mountain Music. . .," Science and Mechanics Vol. XXXV, No. 1, (January, 1964), pp. 101-103, 114-115.

<sup>7</sup>Red Bell, "Build a Dulcimer," Stray Notes, Vol. I, No. 6, (November, 1965), p. 13.

the most common way of playing is for the player to hold the dulcimer across his knees or to place it on a table in front of him with the peg stock to his left. Strumming (back and forth sweeping) is traditionally done by the right hand with a goose or turkey feather quill, a plectrum or the thumb. Flexible plastic, leather and felt plectrums are also possible choices. The strings are pressed against the frets by means of a "noter" which may be a quill, a smooth round stick (like bamboo), a piece of bone or a fingernail. The sliding of the noter from fret to fret produces the glissando effect so characteristic of the instrument. The thin, soft, harpsichord-like timbre, the drone, and the rhythmic possibilities of the strumming are other predominant qualities in the sound of the dulcimer.

Chording and playing countermelodies to accompany the singing voice are often done, but this is not most traditional. Simple strumming with the melody played in unison or octave with the voice or alternating with the voice is most common.

The simplicity of construction, of playing technique, and the beautiful sound have been the qualities which make the Appalachian dulcimer appealing to a musically illiterate population and furnish appeal to sophisticated players and listeners alike. The gaps between poet, composer, singer, instrumentalist and listener are at a minimum and a special musical event can, and often does, take place.

The elongated basic zither shape, the melody string with a tonic drone, the manner and means of strumming, and the

way fretting is done make the dulcimer noticeably like the northern European instruments, the Humle, the Langeleik, the Epinette des Vosges and the Scheitholt. When one considers the similarities between the Appalachian dulcimer and the northern European instruments, along with the fact of Scandinavian immigration (which will be discussed in Chapter IV), the possibility that the dulcimer is of native origin is remote.

### CHAPTER III

#### A CONSIDERATION OF ENGLISH ORIGINS FOR THE APPALACHIAN DULCIMER

Since the dulcimer is used to accompany the English folk songs traditionally sung in the Appalachian region, it is easy to see that a first explanation of dulcimer ancestry would place its origin in the British Isles. John Jacob Niles, who has done so much for the cause of folk music in the United States, says in a footnote in The Ballad Book that the dulcimer is related to the English rebec.<sup>1</sup> Others have held this opinion as well.

However, Maude Karples and Cecil Sharp while collecting songs in the Appalachians in 1916-18 found most singing to be unaccompanied. Though the dulcimer is mentioned in the Preface and Introduction to Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians, attention is directed to the supposedly German dulcimer No. 988 in the Crosby Brown Instrument Collection of the New York Metropolitan Museum.<sup>2</sup> Josiah Combs in 1926 stated that the dulcimer was probably indigenous to the Appalachian highlands,

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<sup>1</sup>John Jacob Niles, The Ballad Book, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

<sup>2</sup>Cecil Sharp, English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians, ed. Maude Karples (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), XVIII.



but in 1932 he was of the opinion that the dulcimer was Pennsylvania Dutch in origin.<sup>3</sup>

Charles Faulkner Bryan searched through the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Royal Scottish Museum among others in 1954 and could find no instrument which he could connect with the dulcimer. Nothing there led him to expect to find dulcimer origins in the British Isles. In the Hague Museum, however, he found the Langspil, the Noord' sche Balk and the Langeleik. These instruments caused him to speculate on Scandinavian origins for the dulcimer.<sup>4</sup> In 1957 Vernon H. Taylor reported to the Tennessee Folklore Society further evidence directing attention to the Langeleik.<sup>5</sup>

Jean Ritchie began her Fulbright investigations for folk songs in 1952-53 in the British Isles and found that no information relevant to the dulcimer was to be found there. She, like Charles Bryan, was led to the thought that the dulcimer possibly had Scandinavian origins.<sup>6</sup>

From the efforts of these people, it seems fair to conclude that the British Isles have no musical instruments which can be considered the ancestor of the Appalachian dulcimer. How, then, does it happen that the dulcimer is known only

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<sup>3</sup>Combs, "The Highlander's Music," p. 121.

<sup>4</sup>Bryan, "The Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer Enigma," pp. 87-90.

<sup>5</sup>Vernon H. Taylor, "From Fact to Fancy in Dulcimer Discoveries," Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin, (December, 1957), pp. 109-113.

<sup>6</sup>Ritchie, The Dulcimer Book, p. 14.

in the isolated Appalachian regions which were settled primarily by immigrants from the British Isles? Josiah Combs remarked in 1925 that some of the English folk songs and ballads sung in the Appalachian highlands are of fifteenth and sixteenth century origin.<sup>7</sup> At any rate, the Highlanders were well settled in the Appalachian region singing their unaccompanied tunes before Appalachian dulcimers were reported. James Edward Thomas, one of the first dulcimer makers, was born in 1850 and began making dulcimers only in 1871.<sup>8</sup> Before that time dulcimer making was unknown. There are at least no evidences to the contrary.<sup>9</sup> What happened then can possibly be best explained by the knowledge that some elements of a musical culture can be easily assimilated by a second culture.

If we pursue this line of thought, we may conclude that the Appalachian dulcimer found favor in Appalachia because its elegant restrained sound, tonic drone and diatonic frets made it very suitable for accompanying the already existing repertory of simple songs formed from gapped scales and modes as well as the major and minor scales so familiar to us.

Gapped scales, according to Cecil Sharp, are "scales containing only five, or sometimes six, notes to the octave, instead of the seven with which we are familiar, a 'hiatus' or

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<sup>7</sup>Combs, "The Highlanders Music," pp. 113-114.

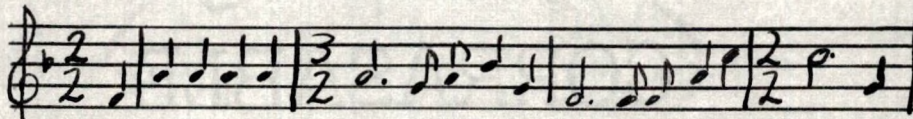
<sup>8</sup>Allen Easton, Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1937), pp. 199, quoted in Jean Ritchie, The Dulcimer Book, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup>See Appendix A.

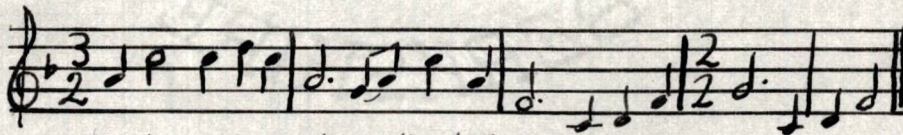


Example B<sup>12</sup> is a variant of Barbara Allen formed from a hexatonic scale which uses a fourth scale step. The tonic is f'. The fourth scale step, b'flat, is used. If a seventh scale step were used, then the scale would be heptatonic and could be classified as one of the modes in our major-minor system.

## EXAMPLE B



One cold and cloud-y day in the month of May, When the ros-es was a-



Dud-ling, A young man lay on his death-bed In love with Bar-bra El-len.

The dulcimer with its tonic-dominant drone could easily fit with either variant of this ballad for the first and fifth scale steps are not the ones which are gapped or weak. Also tunes in the modes are easily accomodated by the simple tuning of the dulcimer. It is only when tunes modulate or use chro-

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

matic tones or become complex otherwise that the dulcimer is not suitable.

This appears to be a clear case of intersection of cultures--an English ballad and an unidentifiable, but not English, instrumental accompaniment. The songs are English, the culture is English, the people are English. But the dulcimer is not. Where did the dulcimer come from then? How did it find its way into the Appalachian region?

## CHAPTER IV

### A CONSIDERATION OF POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTAL LINES IN THE UNITED STATES FOR THE APPALACHIAN DULCIMER

One can assemble few hard facts from which can be inferred the precise origins and development of the Appalachian dulcimer. The most crucial of these facts are the following.

Dulcimers are to be found in any numbers at all only in the Appalachian region. Within this region, until lately, the dulcimer was not played except as part of that folk culture. (Cultivated musicians and outsiders were practically unaware of the existence of the dulcimer.) The Appalachian culture is basically English. There is no evidence of any similar instrument in the British Isles, but similar instruments do appear in several northwestern European countries and the lineage of these European instruments is obscure but certainly very ancient indeed.

A first hypothesis, that the dulcimer, like the culture, is English cannot be supported. As was shown in Chapter III, English origin for the dulcimer is unlikely. Several capable people have worked exploring this idea and have searched through the museums. They have had contact with informants, scholars and curators, and have had no success in their endeavors to find information or evidence of any similar English or Scottish instrument. In addition, the folk singing tradition in both the

British Isles and the United States is that of performing the English ballads and songs unaccompanied. Surely this kind of information rules out English ancestry for the dulcimer.

The second hypothesis, that the dulcimer is indigenous to the United States, is equally untenable. In Chapter I an attempt was made to describe the several European instruments similar to the Appalachian dulcimer and to give a reasonable account of their involved and still uncertain histories. The fact that there are so many instruments possessing at least some characteristics like those of the dulcimer seems to rule out the likelihood that an instrument so similar to the northern European ones would be independently created by British immigrants as late as the 1870's in the Appalachian highlands, especially when their traditional singing was unaccompanied.

The third hypothesis connecting the dulcimer with northern European instruments seems to offer the most fertile ground for convincing speculation. Perhaps one day someone will discover an instrument very much like the dulcimer in Europe. Charles Seegar, who reported on Stig Walin's monograph, Die Schwedische Hummel, which describes forty Swedish instruments as well as forty-five other northern European instruments, comments that on the basis of "verbal description it (the dulcimer) would seem to have no feature distinguishing it from its European prototypes."<sup>1</sup> However, this writer has not found any statement or photograph which clearly describes a European

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<sup>1</sup>Seegar, "The Appalachian Dulcimer," p. 43.

instrument like the Appalachian dulcimer. The possibility remains that one day someone will find an instrument in the United States which arrived at the proper time and place to have been a model for the Appalachian dulcimer. The German zither, CBC No. 988, in the New York Metropolitan Museum is, according to Seegar, a "full-fledged specimen of what I have been designating as the Appalachian dulcimer."<sup>2</sup> But this instrument has not been authenticated as being German or European, or even from the United States.

For lack of a tangible connecting link, we shall try to construct a reasonable hypothetical explanation for the appearance of the dulcimer in its particular form in the Appalachian region. In order to do this it is necessary to draw on our understanding of the heritage of the immigrants into the Appalachian area around the time of the making of the first dulcimers, 1871, and also on our understanding of the simplicity of both the Appalachian dulcimer and its European counterparts and the nature of the folk oral tradition.

The first Scandinavians in the United States were Swedish people who settled along the Delaware River between 1638-1664. Their settlements were taken over by the Dutch and later by the English.<sup>3</sup> Although this is an early date for information contributing to the construction of the Appalachian

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>Amandus Johnson, The Swedish Settlements on the Delaware: Their History and Relation to the Indians, Dutch and English. 1638-1664, Vol. II (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1911) p. 670.



dulcimer to have arrived, if we place dulcimer beginnings in 1871, it is not an impossibility. This area retained its Swedish element for many years and probably at least a few new immigrants settled there. John Horton<sup>4</sup> reports that G. Stiernhielm stated in his De Hyperboreis that one could not enter the poorest cottage in Sweden without finding that nearly everyone played a stringed instrument. Horton feels that Stiernhielm seems to be thinking of three types of instruments, one of which is a bowed or plucked instrument of the Langeleik family. From the date, 1685, of the posthumous publication of De Hyperboreis it would seem safe to conclude that the Swedish people along the Delaware might have had the proper kind of knowledge, even if only in an oral tradition, which could be transplanted to the Appalachian region by peddlers or travelers or by movement of Swedish people into the highlands. In this way knowledge of simple Swedish stringed instruments might have been spread and, in turn, might have led to the construction of a dulcimer. Hortense Panum states that the Swedish Humle was still to be found in Sweden in the eighteenth century and ascribes it to dutch origins.

Though in general the Swedish people did not settle in the Appalachian region in the nineteenth century, after the Civil War when the plantation owners were in need of agricultural workers, both the states of Virginia and West Virginia established immigrant commissions in order to attract Norwegian and

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<sup>4</sup> John Horton, Scandinavian Music: A Short History (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) p. 95.

Swedish people to those states as agricultural laborers.<sup>5</sup> This post war period was the time of the mass Norwegian and Swedish immigration around 1870. In Virginia two communities were established, one called Norge<sup>6</sup> and the other, Stockholm.<sup>7</sup> Few, if any, Scandinavians found life as agricultural workers a happy situation, but it must be remembered that even one person straying into the highlands with a dulcimer-like instrument, or able to give oral instruction for the construction of one, might have furnished the impetus for the first dulcimer.

Norwegian immigration to the United States began when a peasant group from Norway arrived in 1825 in New York on the "Restoration".<sup>8</sup> Most Norwegians went from New York to Illinois and then to Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa or the Dakotas. Or they went to New Orleans and then to Texas. Some also went to California in 1849. However, Ole Bull's utopia, Oleana, brought some Norwegians to Pennsylvania in 1852-1853.<sup>9</sup> As gradual disillusionment overtook the community, it would have been possible that some people, carrying the crucial information

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<sup>5</sup>Florence Edith Janson, The Background of Swedish Immigration 1840-1930 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1931) p. 253.

<sup>6</sup>Theodore C. Blegen, Norwegian Migration to America: The American Transition (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian American Historical Association, 1940) p. 515.

<sup>7</sup>Janson, The Background of Swedish Immigration 1840-1930, p. 253.

<sup>8</sup>Theodore C. Blegen, Norwegian Migration to America: 1825-1960. (Northfield, Minnesota: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1931) p. 50.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

information or instruments, drifted southward into Appalachia. The movement away from Oleana took place during a general flow of settlers from Pennsylvania southward along the valleys.

The Norwegians who finally reached the Minnesota-Dakota area had Langeleiks. Dr. Marion John Nelson, professor of Scandinavian Art History at the University of Minnesota and curator of the Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa, has reported to me in a conversation<sup>10</sup> that Langeleiks are in the museum. A few of these can be given dates in the 1870's. Dr. Nelson thinks that surely Langeleik playing was an activity of the immigrants though he has never heard one played in the area. Apparently the Langeleik lost favor with the immigrants sooner than the Hardanger fiddle and the psalmodikon. (In Norway, of course, the Langeleik has never been given up entirely and is being revived at present.) From this evidence one might suggest that if the Langeleik was to be found in the upper Midwest in the 1870's, it might also have made brief appearances in New York and Pennsylvania and even Virginia if the settlement, Norge, was even partly of Norwegian population.

A. W. Jeffreys, a dulcimer maker in Staunton, Virginia, has collected both instruments and information about instruments in the Shenandoah region.<sup>11</sup> As yet, his findings have not been

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<sup>10</sup>Dr. Nelson lectured for the Scandinavian American Foundation in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in May, 1967, and was kind enough to answer my questions.

<sup>11</sup>A. W. Jeffreys, Jr., Tuning and Playing the Appalachian Dulcimer (Staunton, Virginia: A. W. Jeffreys, Jr., 1964) p. 1.

published. When they are we will have, perhaps, more tangible evidence for a link between Scandinavian dulcimer-like instruments and the Appalachian dulcimer.

The first investigators to speculate about the origin of the Appalachian dulcimer advanced the notion that the instrument was of Pennsylvania German ancestry. This theory is still a good possibility in spite of recent interest in Scandinavian origins. Certainly the proximity of the Pennsylvania Dutch, the extended length of time that they have been near the Appalachian area, their interest and skill in constructing all kinds of tools and household items, the possibility that the Scheitholt is the ancestor of all the Scandinavian instruments discussed, and the fact that they had a type of zither lends credence to this kind of speculation.

In considering playing styles, the evidence presently available about the construction, tuning, and manner of playing the Pennsylvania Dutch zitter does not allow speculation as to how closely it corresponds to the Appalachian dulcimer. The characteristic Appalachian dulcimer slide, or glissando, between tones caused by movement of the noter over the frets is absent in recordings of the Langeleik.<sup>12</sup> This is because the fretting on a Langeleik is done with the three middle fingers of the left hand rather than with a noting rod. The manner of strumming sounds less complex and full than some of the dulcimer

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<sup>12</sup>Songs and Dances of Norway, Ethnic Folkways Library, 1008.

selections to be heard on recordings by Jean Ritchie.<sup>13</sup> Possibly this difference in sound is due to the fact that Langeleik players for the most part sweep the strings in a slower, more stylized pattern while the dulcimer player often uses a complicated and quick back and forth free, syncopated sounding strum for faster pieces and dance tunes.

These differences in sound and style of playing seems to separate the relatively advanced Langeleik from the Appalachian dulcimer as far as the extremely simple (I think) Pennsylvania Dutch zither is removed from the dulcimer in the other direction. If one recalls the theory that change is most frequently a move from the simple toward the more complex,<sup>14</sup> then the Pennsylvania Dutch zither would be a more likely ancestor than the Langeleik.

No answers can actually be proposed for the question of dulcimer origin as yet. More work needs to be done. Lives and contacts of the early dulcimer makers need to be explored. The possible appearance of European instruments in Appalachian areas needs further attention.

The plausibility of French settlers with Epinettes des Vosges in or near the region at the proper time should also be considered. There is a striking difference between the Epinettes

<sup>13</sup>Jean Ritchie, Kentucky Mountain Songs Sung by Jean Ritchie, Elektra- 25 and The Best of Jean Ritchie, Prestige Folklore - 14009.

<sup>14</sup>Bruno Nettl, Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology, (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964) p. 233.

in Jean Ritchie's photographs<sup>15</sup> of the two instruments in her collection. One, with seven strings, has the double symmetrical bulge similar to many dulcimers. Seegar<sup>16</sup> has not seen any Epinettes with bulges at the time he wrote his article, "The Appalachian Dulcimer". This bulge on the one instrument might possibly mark an intermediate step from rectangular Scheitholt through Epinette to dulcimer. The other, simpler, has a nearly rectangular form, heart shaped sound hole and only five strings. The manner of tuning and playing, as Jean Ritchie notes, is exactly what was customary in Kentucky for the dulcimer.

For the most part in this paper consideration has been given to Scandinavian immigration patterns which would have placed the instruments or people in the Appalachian vicinity at the right time. It must be noted, however, that the Epinette, at least structurally and in manner of playing, seems to be as close to the dulcimer as the Langeleik and Humle which have been considered more intently. The Epinette is the only one of the possible ancestors considered here which has the fretboard on a raised block of wood as the dulcimer has.

The Epinette has two melody strings which may be fretted together with a noter or which may produce the melody with some harmony if fretted with the fingers. This last method of playing is more complicated than the traditional Appalachian dulcimer style, but so is the style of playing the Humle with its

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<sup>15</sup>Ritchie, The Dulcimer Book, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup>Seegar, "The Appalachian Dulcimer," p. 44.

several strings and two melody strings over a distinct fret-board. Langeleik playing, as I have already noted, differs considerably from dulcimer playing also.

So we are left with more possibilities to consider than we are able to cope with at the present time. Leaving the complexity and diversity of elements in these European instruments aside, let us emphasize what is simple and common to them all. It can be fairly said that all these instruments have an elongated resonating body, strings which perform two functions--to produce a simple melody and accompany it with a tonic-dominant drone. Strumming is done with a plectrum of some kind held in the right hand. Fretting is done with the fingers or a noting rod of some sort. What is basic and common to the Humle, Langeleik and Epinette de Vosges is also basic to the Appalachian dulcimer.

"Folk oral tradition" is a term designating the process of oral transmission of customs, tales, ballads, artifacts, attitudes--folk wisdom and information of various sorts--within a non-literate culture or between non-literate cultures. This process operates also in literate cultures. Peasant folk moving their entire households across the Atlantic Ocean to a new land would be compelled to remember and carry and possibly to transmit much of their information and knowledge in this way. How far and in what direction such information (like instructions for making a simple musical instrument) would travel is difficult to determine. Change and variation from the original objects is to be expected in the construction of new objects.

That this kind of process was operative in the appearance of the American Appalachian dulcimer appears to be quite likely. At present it is the only explanation for the dulcimer which seems plausible.



## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper an attempt has been made to set the consideration of the Appalachian dulcimer in a broad context. The dulcimer as one element in a general study of gradual world-wide diffusion of musical instruments was mentioned in the introduction. By means of the Sachs and von Hornbostel classification of musical instruments the focus of this paper was narrowed by placing the dulcimer into the chordophone class, zither type of instruments. It was shown that zither-type instruments have prehistoric origins and wide geographic distribution. The possible route from the Near East to northern Europe of the simple plucked folk zither, or psaltery, was described and the variations of this kind of instrument in northern Europe, the Scheitholt, the Noord'sche Balk, the Langeleik, the Humle, and the Epinette des Vosges were described.

After the description of these instruments, as complete a discussion as possible of the traditional construction and playing of the Appalachian dulcimer was presented. This was done in order to be able to note similarities and differences between the northern European instruments and the dulcimer and to give support to the thesis that the dulcimer must surely be a variant, transplanted form of a foreign instrument.

Because the dulcimer is used in a basically English culture with English folk songs, several people have believed that the dulcimer was English. Examination of any supporting evidence for this hypothesis was necessary before attention could be given to a consideration of how and by whom the dulcimer might have been brought to the Appalachian region from northern Europe.

In spite of the care exercised in approaching the problem of dulcimer origins, the Appalachian dulcimer remains a mystery and most of Charles F. Bryan's questions mentioned in the introduction to this paper are not adequately answered. He asked whether or not the dulcimer was British in origin. The fact that several people have searched diligently in Scotland and England (Wales and Ireland have not been investigated so thoroughly) and have found no affirmative evidence seems to be a basis for stating that the dulcimer is not of British origin. This negative answer is made stronger by the unaccompanied British singing tradition and by the abundant numbers of dulcimer-like instruments elsewhere in Europe.

Bryan's question as to whether or not the dulcimer is a native American instrument also seems to require a negative answer. Jean Ritchie's Epinette with double symmetrical bulges and a high fretboard seems to be one reason for considering the dulcimer as a transplanted and varied, but not native, instrumental form. Awareness of the large numbers of people with German, Dutch and Swedish ancestry continuously in the area from very early times, and awareness of equally early forms of

Scheitholts, Noord' sche Balks or Hommels and Humles also adds force to a negative answer for the question of the dulcimer's being a native American instrument. If dulcimer making began in the 1870's, as is thought, then heavy Norwegian and Swedish immigration in the late nineteenth century seem to be additional support for a negative answer.

What are the ancestors of the dulcimer? Could the instrument have come to the Appalachian area from the colonial states? Are there missing links connecting it with earlier foreign instruments? These three questions of Bryan's are still very puzzling ones. In Chapter IV some of the many reasonable, but as yet unverifiable, possibilities for answering these questions were shown. But more research needs to be done, particularly in Pennsylvania and Delaware. Some basis for establishing early German, French, Dutch, or Swedish ancestry may yet be found. Perhaps in the extended Appalachian region Langeleiks or Humles or even Epinettes will be discovered. More research needs to be done on the zitter as well.

Virginia and West Virginia, North and South Carolina, and perhaps Ohio communities need to be considered as possible areas which might have contributed nineteenth century Norwegian or Swedish instruments or informants. Neither the possibility of a transitional instrument of some kind nor the possibility of oral transmission should be overlooked. The biographies of the early dulcimer makers should be researched for additional information. Where did they get their ideas and directions? Are the traditional heart shaped sound holes accidental? Or

could they be clues pointing toward Pennsylvania Dutch or Norwegian or Swedish motifs?

Bryan's question as to why the dulcimer is limited to such a small region is a worthy one and is unanswered. One may also question why the dulcimer was so late in making its appearance. And, why did it appear where there were already guitars, fiddles, and banjos for dance tunes and where singing was unaccompanied? Most of the supposedly necessary information was available long before 1870. Perhaps the remoteness and isolation of the mountain valleys answers the small region question. In such circumstances the idea, imagination and skill of one person in producing a variant instrument might have important but not widespread effect. It is to be hoped that some answer to this question can be found. Again, the lives of early dulcimer makers need to be given attention.

Given an understanding of the centuries-old spread of, and variation in, folk instruments, mostly by means of oral transmission, one can only conclude that the Appalachian dulcimer is a simple instrument with a melody string and a tonic drone strummed with a plectrum and that it must be related to other simple instruments with melody strings and tonic drones that are strummed with plectra. Viewing the psaltery-type instruments as an important cultural element, able to be moved from one society to another, and valuable enough to be moved from one society to another even in the nineteenth century, emphasizes the deep, as well as broad, context in which the

writer wished to set this study. A link connecting the dulcimer with the northern European instruments is still missing and may be missing always, but that the relationship exists seems undeniable.

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## APPENDIX A

Two reports of dulcimers "over a hundred years old" came to the attention of the writer in reading material concerning the Appalachian dulcimer. Ray Lawless in Folksingers and Folksongs in America (see bibliography) on page 260 mentions that Mrs. I. G. Greer plays one she thinks is over a hundred years old and that it was made in Watauga County, North Carolina. He also mentions Archie Lee of Kentucky as playing a dulcimer which he says has been in the family at least 140 years. Since the maker, date and place were not mentioned as appearing on the dulcimer, it seemed inadvisable to accept these dulcimers as serious evidence.

Very recently, however, a phone call was made to Arne Larson, a professor at Vermillion, South Dakota, whose name was given to me by Roger Welsch, a folklorist and professor at Nebraska Wesleyan University. During the course of the telephone conversation, which was made to learn information about possible Langeleiks in his collection of over twelve hundred instruments, inquiry was made about Appalachian dulcimers. Unexpectedly he has perhaps six dulcimers. Being well acquainted with his collection, Mr. Larson was able to say that his earliest dulcimer is dated 1810, Gainsboro, North Carolina and that the maker's name is Ashbury. Another dulcimer in his collection is dated 1840, Asheville, North Carolina

and the maker is Browne. He has dulcimers dated 1850 and 1870 and owns an Ed Thomas 1915 dulcimer as well.

Since Mr. Larson's whole collection is in crates awaiting unpacking and display in new quarters, the writer was unable to view these instruments and to verify the information given so generously by the owner. The instruments will not be available to the public until August, 1967.

## APPENDIX B

Three worthwhile practical books giving help in understanding playing and tuning the dulcimer have come to the writer's attention and should be mentioned. They are The Dulcimer Book by Jean Ritchie, The Appalachian Dulcimer by A. W. Jeffries and The Plucked Dulcimer and How to Play It by John F. Putnam (see bibliography).

Putnam lists Jethro Amburgey, Appalachian Dulcimer Co., Arthur Dixson, Clifford Glenn, Leonard Glenn, George Kelischek Workshop, Homer Ledford, Michael Marcus, Edsel H. Martin, George Pickow, Edd Presnell, Frank Profitt, Henry Steele and Clark Vorhees along with their addresses as current dulcimer makers. Ake Tugel should be added to this list.

For a glimpse of contemporary singers and performers on the dulcimer, a listing of dulcimer players, most of whom are included in Lawless' Folksingers and Folksongs in America is given here. They are Jean Ritchie, Andrew Rowan Summers, John Jacob Niles, Marie Boette, I. G. Greer, Ann Grimes, Martha King, Barry Kornfeld, Archie Lee, Harry Oster, Jared Reed, Winifred Smith, Paul Clayton and Edna Ritchie.

Often if a person is interested in dulcimers he considers more than one aspect of it. For example, Ann Grimes has been investigating the appearance of dulcimers (dulcerines) in Ohio in addition to her singing. John Jacob Niles makes



dulcimers as well as plays them. Jean Ritchie does research and assists her husband and his uncle in making dulcimers. A. W. Jeffries makes dulcimers and is interested in dulcimer research.

The University of North Dakota  
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

# Lecture-Recital

## *"The Appalachian Dulcimer"*

By

**Arlene Herndon**

(B.M.E., 1953, Indiana University)

**Monday, July 10, 1967**

Education Auditorium

8:15 p.m.



### PROGRAM

*The lecture is based on a thesis written by the candidate entitled  
"The Appalachian Dulcimer: Its Origins and History."*

Solo Vocal Selections To Be Employed As Illustrations

I. THE APPALACHIAN DULCIMER AND  
AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC

Three Play Party Tunes  
'Tis the Gift to be Simple  
Pretty Saro  
Shady Grove  
Bachelor's Hall  
Over the River Charlie  
Nottamun Town

II. THE APPALACHIAN DULCIMER AND  
ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH BALLADS

Barbr'y Ellen  
Mary Hamilton



*Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts*

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