

Home Built Harps



This feature of the Folk Harp Journal is intended to celebrate and encourage the craft of harp-making by home hobbyists around the world. The goal is to publicize the excellent, and sometimes surprising, results of one these adventurous woodworkers in each issue of the Journal. We will focus on amateur builders, those who build harps as a hobby rather than as a business. We will share some of their experiences, woodworking tips, customizing ideas, etc. for the benefit and encouragement of other amateur builders.

Our featured home harp builder for this issue is Lee Gayman, from Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. He brought his latest home-built harp to the Somerset Harp Festival in July, 2004. We say his "latest" harp because he has been building harps from scratch as a hobby since 1991. That was 33 harps ago. Not bad for a hobbyist! We think Lee deserves public recognition for his excellent work. The following is an interview conducted for the Folk Harp Journal by Jerry Brown of Musicmaker's Kits.

Folk Harp Journal: Lee, what is your woodworking background?

Lee Gayman: I am now 64 years old and have been doing woodworking of some sort beginning in high school where, as a farm kid, I built myself a bookcase headboard for my bed using pine boards. I did not do woodworking to any great extent for the next 10-12 years, but began gathering tools in 1970 when my wife and I purchased our home. Since then I have attended a few woodworking workshops in West Virginia and have managed to collect a fairly complete shop of tools. For the most part, I have been a self-taught woodworker.

FHJ: How and when did you start making harps?

LG: Around 1990 I happened to see a magazine advertisement for plans for a "hurdy-gurdy". I had no idea what a "hurdy-gurdy" was, but thought it was a neat word and decided to purchase the plans to see if I could build one. I had been fascinated by musical instruments since birth, I think, and always assumed that building a musical instrument was something limited to just a few experts who had received formal training by the masters.

The catalog that was sent with the hurdy-gurdy plans also showed other instruments -- namely hammered dulcimers, harps, etc. After a time, I ordered a set of harp plans and built my first harp. I was smitten by the project, and the rest is history.

FHJ: How many harps have you made, and what have you done with them all?

LG: To date, I have built 34 harps, no two of which were the same. I describe my harp-building as being the height of arrogance -- I neither take orders nor do I advertise harps for sale. A number of my harps are on loan to friends while I have sold quite a few others, when people ask to buy them. I am not really interested in the business of harp sales. My interest lies in the mechanics of harp construction and trying to arrive at the perfect

balance between structural integrity and tonal excellence. I'm still striving to build the PERFECT harp!

FHJ: Aren't we all? Obviously, you must enjoy this hobby. What are some of the rewarding experiences you've had?

LG: The most enjoyment I derive from harp building is to know that the players of my harps are finding great enjoyment in owning and playing my harps. The ultimate pleasure comes from hearing a player draw lovely music from one of my instruments.

FHJ: You entered this latest harp in the "Large Harp Tasting" event at Somerset Harp Festival in July. I was in the audience myself and picked your harp as one of my two favorites. What kind of feedback did you get from others in the audience?

LG: I was most gratified by the responses, both from yourself and from others. Many people praised the harp as being one of the better sounding instruments in the lineup. Music to a builders' ears!!

FHJ: You mentioned at Somerset that this harp was designed after the Musicmaker's Regency blueprint, but I see no resemblance at all. What, exactly, did you take from the plan, and what did you design on your own?

LG: Basically, I used the string specifications and soundboard dimensions from your Regency harp. I plotted out the string lengths on the harp design worksheet that you supply with your harp-making book and then drew the shape of the neck to suit my taste, within the parameters of the string lengths, of course.

The biggest variation from your plan is the curved back on the body of the harp. I had a couple of rounded "shells" left over from some previous harp projects, and I wanted to use one of them for this new design.

The challenge was to attach a wider soundboard to one of those narrow shells. I had to fashion some extra molding to the outer edge of the curved shell to receive the "extended" soundboard, and then I brought the width back to meet the shell at the bottom. That's what gives the harp such a rounded look from the front view.

FHJ: You just "happened" to have some round-back shells in your workshop? Where did they come from?

LG: I had devised a vacuum-bag system of making rounded harp backs to fit the Robinson's "Tara" harp design, in anticipation of there being a market for these shells for other builders. I made the shells with bending plywood, affectionately called "Wiggle Wood" or "Wacky wood". This is plywood that has all layers with the same grain direction, so it flexes very easily across the grain. I used that material for the core, and put cherry veneer on the outside face as I glued the layers together in my vacuum form. I did sell a few of them, but the demand ended and I had two remaining shells cluttering up my workspace for several years.

FHJ: What kind of wood did you use for the soundboard?

LG: For most of my harps I've used, almost exclusively, aircraft birch laminate for my soundboards. At the urging of a harp-building friend, however, I decided to attempt using

solid Sitka spruce for my "Regency"-style harp. I am extremely happy with the tonal results, but I've since had some structural problems with it.

FHJ: Would you do anything differently on your next harp?

LG: I am currently working on another variation of the Regency design, utilizing the last remaining "Tara" shell with applied extension "wings", this time incorporating into the soundboard the top-to-bottom curve characteristic of the Heartland harps. I'm interested in seeing what effect this soundboard curve might have on tone quality. All other aspects of this harp will, once again, mimic the Regency, but due to the soundboard curve, it is necessary to redraw the entire instrument to retain Regency string lengths with a curved soundboard.

FHJ: Sounds like an interesting challenge! What advice would you give other people who are interested in making their own harp?

LG: Over the years, I have built harps using a number of available harp plans from various sources. If a person has woodworking tools, experience and a sense of adventure, go for the blueprints. If one has only a few tools and minimal experience, purchase a kit -- it will yield a nice instrument, and the knowledge learned in assembling it will help the builder determine whether he/she could tackle building a subsequent harp from scratch.

FHJ: If someone wanted to contact you with further questions, would you permit my sharing your email address?

LG: Sure, I'd be happy to hear from would-be builders, provided it wouldn't become too numerous. My email address is LeeZzzz@mac.com.



Jerry Brown is owner and founder of Musicmaker's Kits, Inc., in Minnesota, and author of *Folk Harp Design and Construction*, a 150-page manual on harp making. An admitted kit-monger, plywood soundboard pusher, and incurable do-it-yourselfer, he corresponds regularly with hobbyists who build their own musical instruments.

If you know of an amateur harp maker who should be featured in this series, please contact Jerry Brown, of Musicmaker's Kits, Inc. (800) 432-5487, jerryb@musikit.com. Yes, he says he is happy to interview people who build from other supplier's kits and plans too!



Lee Gayman stands with his new 34-string harp at Somerset Harp Festival.



Lee used a round-back shell for his harp body, with extra molding on each side to receive the extended soundboard.



Notice the hand-carved wheat pattern at the back of the neck. This is Lee's "signature" that he puts on every harp he makes.



Note how the extend soundboard returns to meet the body at the bottom of the instrument. This close-up shows the inlay banding and router grooves that Lee added to enhance the appearance of the side molding.