

A World of Accordions Museum Newsletter

Harrington ARTS Center, 1401 Belknap St., Superior, WI 54880

August September, 2015

By Helmi Strahl Harrington, Ph.D.

NOTICE

Our new web name:

www.worldofaccordions.org

Please find us there in future.

There are times when the rewards of repairing accordions and outfitting museum displays is so great as to completely overshadow the difficulties of operating such an institution. This newsletter is about both.

The Joys:

I was touched to tears when Jerry and Katherine Hoffman (Lancaster, VA) visited the museum to see the displayed *Marca D'Oro* piano accordion they left with me two years ago. The instrument belonged to Terry's uncle, a beloved and honored family member who gave Jerry the accordion during his last days on earth. Because the couple felt it was their obligation to restore the well-loved instrument and to provide for its best placement, they donated it to the museum along with the promise to pay for its restoration. Considering the thousands of instruments in my care over the years, this was the first such offer I ever received. I restored internal reed and machine workings right away, then finally began keyboard replacement. By the time the couple announced their intended visit, the instrument was completed and a three-page flier on the company's models (found in our museum files) was displayed alongside the donor plaque. They could not believe their eyes when again seeing the accordion. Their eyes filled with tears in fond memory of their beloved uncle and in gratitude for the accordion's new status. And my eyes moistened in response to their emotions.



Jerry and Kathrine Hoffman, September 21, 2015

We were blessed again this summer by efforts of *YouthWorks* volunteers. This group is regionally based and serves individuals and non-profits with everyday tasks of various types through families that work together for altruistic purposes. While we had only one day of their help, we cherish the helping hands and advice of folks whose experiences offer new solutions. We especially thank this year's leader Julie and the *YouthWorks* organization that sponsors humanitarian community cooperation.

On August 15, and September 19, we hosted ethnic music evenings focusing on “French and Musette” and “Latin and Tango” music respectively. As before, they were free, open to the community and accompanied by specialty foods, sweets, (sometimes even wines) provided by volunteers Robin Floyd, Marian Syrjamaki-Kuchta, Royal Miller, Ann Velasco and others. Helmi gave brief musicological summaries of styles, demonstrated them in performance and through recordings by artists of exceptional quality. We even convinced ballroom dancers to demonstrate two tango styles while Carolyn Carver (violinist) and Helmi played. Jam sessions followed.

Burnsville student and museum friend John Bispala recovered a long-neglected string instrument while clearing out his storage building. It was unfamiliar to my eye, but not to Bill Palmer's. He recognized it as a Mando-Dobro, now relatively rare. The instrument needs restoration, but promises to be a fine asset in future programs. John has donated several other items including a Viola Turpeinen postcard, many years of *Hanuri* (Finnish accordion) magazines, years of “Finnish American Reporter” newspapers, the *Titano* accordion he played as a youth, and he was instrumental in supplying Finnish music books and recordings for our libraries.



Months ago Michael Dane asked me for a telephone interview during work on his book entitled [Stuck In My Head: An Offbeat Look At Music and Mental Health](#). As a courtesy he sent me “Learning to Love the Accordion” which included our conversation. I found the segment to be affectionately humorous—funny in the very best meaning of the word.

In his email responding to my “thank you” note he mentioned the following about himself: “After years of doing standup comedy, I am ‘reinventing’ myself as a writer, but with this being only my second book, I have not been ‘discovered’ by a publisher yet.” The book was self-published this September and is currently available only as a digital e-book through *Kindle*, *iTunes*, and *Barnes and Noble*.

With the kind permission of Mr. Dane, I have excerpted the following paragraphs from his five-page article as a teaser incentive for your investigation of the entire book.

I don't play the accordion. I've never thought, “How cool would it be to play the accordion?” For that matter, I'm not entirely sure I could hold an accordion. Despite these seeming obstacles to accordion fandom, I have become surprisingly informed on the subject.

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Before interviewing anyone, I needed to arm myself with some relevant facts. I wasn't raised in an accordion-friendly home (other than watching Myron Floren with my parents on the Lawrence Welk Show), but I had a feeling there was more to the accordion than wheezy renditions of “Lady of Spain.”

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While this was all fascinating, I needed to talk to someone who had more hands-on experience with my newfound favorite instrument, someone who is in the bellows of the beast, as it were. Then I learned about a magical place near the shores of Lake Superior.

If you only visit one accordion museum this year, make it [A] World of Accordions Museum in Superior, Wisconsin. I did a little detective work (okay, I just called the museum) and had the chance to speak with the lovely woman in charge of the museum, Helmi Strahl Harrington.

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I was worried early on in our chat, when Helmi told me she didn't want me to write anything "pejorative" about accordions, or the people who play them. Being a comedian, I was conflicted, since mocking is a big part of what I do. But by the time we finished talking, I was ready to get out of the satire business and sign up for accordion lessons.

The museum houses more instruments than all other accordion museums combined. ... Helmi Harrington explained why it makes sense . . .

It's appropriate that America, the melting pot of the world, has the finest accordion collection. Many would have been brought over from other countries by immigrants who cherished their homeland traditions through the music expressed (by) accordions, from one generation to another. [NB Instruments that would have been replaced by updated models in their native lands, were retained as treasures in the New World, and then brought to our museum. HH]

About two thousand tourists visit every year, in addition to specialty scholars and researchers from all over the world who come to experiment with instruments. When I asked her if she had fielded any unusual requests, she said,

Oh yeah, all the time. At least twice a year, we get somebody who calls in who wants a nude accordion player.

In the past, if I thought of accordions at all, I would have thought 'wholesome,' and not 'saucy.' As it happens, though, Helmi gets a kick out of subverting the stereotypes:

One of the things I like best is showing tourists our collection of naked ladies."

To clarify, those would be accordions with pictures of naked ladies. To my knowledge, the museum does not have a room filled with actual naked ladies.

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A top-quality, custom-designed accordion can cost as much as fifty to sixty-five thousand dollars. When I asked what went into a sixty-five thousand dollar accordion, she answered, "Guess what it wouldn't have—bells, whistles, rhinestones and electronics."

When Helmi talks about the accordion, she has an obvious respect for the instrument, and her family history gives a glimpse at why:

"The accordion saved my mother's life in World War II. The fact that she could repair, play and entertain made all the difference in her being able to immigrate to the United States. Then, founding a successful business, (which led to) my education, and everything that has resulted from the work that I do."

Which also explains why she's not keen on some of the common nicknames for the instrument:

"Belly box" or "squeeze box" is really not giving the appropriate dignity to the technology, the science, the artistry . . . In other countries, the accordion is still treated as seriously as any other concert instrument.

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If a museum filled with hundreds of years of musical history isn't enough, there's the school. The only accordion repair school in the country is here at the museum. It's a nine month curriculum. I didn't ask whether they taught the painting of naked ladies.

Helmi Harrington also teaches privately, and she's had students ranging from a three-year-old to someone who "only admits to being ninety-one."

"Most of the people I teach are high-tension professionals, and what we do together is meaningful to them not only for relaxing, and entertaining, but also for mental development.

So according to an authority on the subject, accordions help you unwind, make other people happy, and make you smarter. I need an accordion! Or at least, a recommendation of some accordion music I should explore . . .

'Planet Squeezebox'— it's a terrible title, but it's a three CD set that is absolutely wonderful in describing varying ethnic types of accordion music, as well as degrees of seriousness, from the concert stage.

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The reality is, the accordion has made a lot of people happy around the world for a couple of centuries. Therefore, I resolve to find a different instrument to mock in my future writings. Piccolo players are just begging to be ridiculed.

A Fond Farewell:

Our faithful friends and donors, Emil and Audrey Meitzner, were moved from their home of ca. 50 years in Solon Springs, WI, to a residence in a care center in Wausau, WI. There they will be attended with love, close to son Andrew, daughters Ann, Jane, and their families. I know this was a sensible step in their best interests. When Jane drove Audrey to the museum for a personal fare-well, Audrey was very sad and confused. Alzheimer's has taken its toll. We both wept.



Last Christmas, I compiled for them a photo-journal from which the following is excerpted.

In the mid-1990s a lovely lady named Audrey Meitzner came into my Duluth studio with a twelve-bass piano accordion and the desire to learn to play it. Thus she came into my life and my heart as well.

She showed herself to be serious about her studies and progressed exceptionally quickly. Her talent and intelligence were obvious, but what impressed me the most was her ability to concentrate. I thought that if I were studying a new discipline, I would present just the same way.

One day she brought her husband Emil Meitzner along so that we could meet. Soon, he was intrigued by the idea of making music and tried on his own to play a few pieces. So Audrey said—just take a few lessons. This he did with similar excellence, for several years! Audrey progressed to a 120-bass Scandalli, and then to a Titano free-bass. Emil progressed to a Panitalia "Lightweight." Both played with ease and obvious joy.

One day, when our music session had been interrupted several times, she said she'd volunteer her time in order to make my days easier. I had never had such a generous offer, but immediately put her to work identifying accordions in the museum collection, an important task that had been long neglected. Her next momentous project was typing the Charles Magnante autobiography, lists of his compositions and discography. Then she helped compile book after book that brought international recognition to the museum. This first book established "Harrington ARTS Publications." Less-memorable activities also interrupted her days, but no chore was too much or beneath her willingness. What was really unique about her was the ingenious practicality with which she accomplished tasks through imaginative solutions only she could so easily invent.

We talked together endlessly. We shared life experiences and outlooks and found great commonality. We enjoyed our companionship. She liked my dogs, the original Knute, Hannah, Onyx, and my cats. And they loved her. Later, when Cookie and Knute II joined my family, she cared for them as I would, and for the cats when I was away.

In Duluth, the museum was filling with accordions which, after Duane's death, had no new display shelves. Dozens sat on the pews giving an unprofessional appearance to the museum. One day I revved up the courage to ask if Emil might construct some six or seven racks to accommodate the acquired instruments. This he did—time and time again.

In the ensuing years, Audrey drove the 45-mile stretch from her Solon Springs, WI, home to the museum three or more days each week. Often she was called upon to open for me or to take my place when I was otherwise busy. She offered excellent tours of the museum for thousands of visitors. I heard only praises for her knowledge and friendliness. Her days were often ten hours long without any meaningless moments. She handled office matters with grace, managed our finances, made appointments, dealt with phone inquiries, and was present in the audience for each concert. When photographs of museum instruments became important, she was always involved in the set-ups. She also photographed important visitors and events so that I could be in the pictures. In addition to items she devised for sale in the museum gift shop, Audrey designed and purchased the museum tee-shirts so many people admire and buy. Additionally she took care of me. She made the most delicious meals out of virtually nothing.

When we moved the museum to the Superior location, she was helpful with even more daily activities. Audrey saw what was needed and used her own good judgment in pulling things together. For example, she participated in every event and meeting, usually prepared refreshments, contributed items, took care of everyone and everything, and cleaned up afterwards. Her actions were inconspicuously accomplished without regard for acknowledgement or reward.

"When I volunteer, my whole family volunteers," Audrey said. She engaged her sons (especially Leonard) when we had moving and electrical needs. Leonard hauled hundreds of accordion cases from Duluth to Superior and rewired the workshop to meet safety codes. Andrew became our official videographer. Daughter Ann wrote biographical accounts about me and applied for grants.

Emil remained quietly in the background despite his monumental work efforts in shaping HARTS. However, his modest nature and consistent good humor inspired mutually good times with stimulating conversations. Repeatedly, Emil solved computer issues and even provided the programs and machines that updated our resources. The "Finale" program Emil and Audrey gave me as a Christmas present some years ago resulted in 80+ inventory books of methodology and repertory that enlighten players and provide income. Both Audrey and Emil learned accordion repair, helping when the jobs overran my abilities and time. Audrey serviced and beautified more accordions than can be counted. Emil engineered tools and devices that reach beyond our locale in serving technicians in accordion repairs.

When we got the offer of 53 accordions from Peter Schultz, I borrowed Emil's trailer and drove with Audrey to pick them up in Loreto, WI. Then we carried them into HARTS and found places to stow them all—just like the numerous other donations and purchases that found in HARTS a new home--on more new shelves. Eventually Emil made 100 display racks, cut and hung protective plastic sheets, and used his engineering and woodworking skills in other ways too. Emil hand-carved innumerable inventively shaped accordions for figurines displays and Audrey painted them decorously. He donated items from his workshop, brought things we needed, and more often than not, refused reimbursements.

Our adventures included travels—to national festivals when I presented workshops and even to Moscow when I performed at the *Mirek Russian Accordion Museum*.

In recent years when her Titano seemed too big for her to handle, Audrey added Bohemian button diatonic accordion to her portfolio of skills. She is one of the best diatonic players I ever mentored. Although she soloed in a recital only once, she has been a reliable member of the band performances.

Audrey and Emil were part of every decision concerning the museum. Both served on the HARTS Board of Directors for years. Their generous donations saved the institution on several occasions and earn them "Patron" status. Nothing about HARTS and AWAM would be the same without their support.

The absence of these precious friends will remain bittersweet in memory. An era in my life—and for all of us—has ended but the influences of their works continue. And they are honored with a plaque on our *Wall of Fame*.

A Look Ahead:

Mike Middleton was a teenager in the 1970s when he studied accordion with my mother and later with me in Austin, Texas. Mike was a wonderful student, an ambitious member of the *Strahl Music Ensemble*, and, on occasion, my duet partner. Mike won the *Texas Accordion Championship* the year after I had. It was a certainty even then that he would do great things with his life: he became a doctor, then head of nuclear medicine, and now a board member at Scott and White Medical Center in Temple, Texas.

Mike has maintained his musical skills despite demands by profession and family life with wife and three children. Further, he does not fail to acknowledge his teachers Tony Rozance and me in write-ups on his CDs, now numbering three. As a birthday present he sent me a large, beautiful, Texas-influenced print designed and drawn by his brother to be used on the next CD cover. It hangs at the Belknap Street entrance. With each new CD he sends extras for the museum library and gift shop.

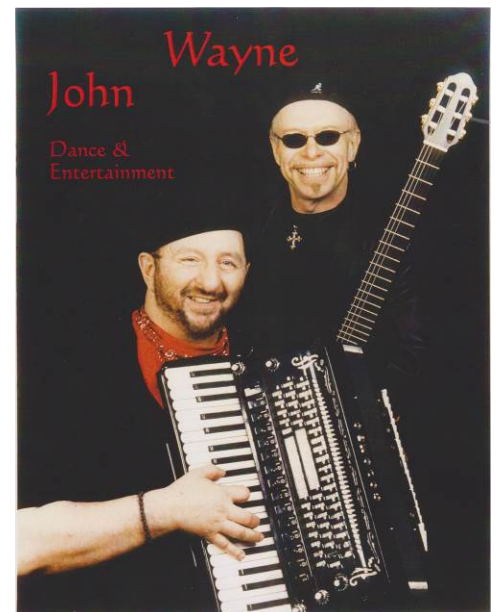
Mike and his band will be our featured artists on July 3, 2016. I can't wait—wonder if he can still play “The Jolly Caballero.”

During the years that Senator Florian Chmielewski organized annual *Ironworld Polkafests* at *Ironworld USA Discovery Center* in Chisholm, many thousands of visitors enjoyed the three-day attractions that featured some of the nation's finest entertainers. I was allowed to show museum accordions and to present programs in the air-conditioned theater, a popular area for hot, tired dancers and foot-sore wanderers of the immense grounds. It was also an important yearly event for me and my students. They “put us on the map” when the accordion-concertina repair technicians' school (ARTS) plus its then-subsiary instruments museum was just beginning, and I was new to Minnesota. One year a gentleman named John Scaffeo of Thunder Bay, Canada, introduced himself. I recognized his skills and invited him to perform with my ensemble even though he had never seen our complex scores before. He sight-read effortlessly and never missed a note.

In subsequent years we maintained only occasional contact, but I tracked his musical career with great joy. John has accumulated credits that many others envy despite the loss of all but one finger in his left hand. I never asked what had happened to that hand because when he plays there is nothing absent in the sound and nothing wrong with the hand. He is an incredible musician!

John has played at many different venues and is one of the busiest area musicians on any instrument. Besides performing at weddings and banquets, he has played with the Thunder Bay Symphony Orchestra as “guest performer” and as “featured artist” in two sold-out evenings. He has also performed at *Magnus Theatre* in Thunder Bay and with the *Lakehead Choral Group* in such renowned plays as “Edith Piaf” and “Fiddler on the Roof”. He is also a repeated guest artist in the “Elvis” Tribute band that plays at the *Thunder Bay Community Auditorium*. In 2002, he was the only Canadian entered into a *North American Accordion Association Contest* where he walked away with first place. John also finished in the top three in an all-Canada *Roland V Accordion Competition*.

John performs often with Wayne Faulconer on guitar and Enzo Riccio on drums. Their entertaining styles will leave you wanting more.



John Scaffeo and Friends will perform in our concert hall November 8, at 4:00 PM. This is a program of not-to-be-missed status.

Next Events:	November 8, 4:00 PM,	John Scaffeo Concert (\$20 per person)
	November 15, 2:00 PM,	ACM Student Recital (Free admission)

Watch for 2016 Events:	April 3, 2016,	Stas Venglevski Concert
	July 3, 2016,	Dr. Mike Middleton and the Middletones Concert