

The Sweet Sound of Family History

On a visit to my daughter in Kentucky, USA, I discovered an old Appalachian musical instrument called the mountain dulcimer. I was teaching some of my grandchildren to play music and found it is easy to learn to play simple melodies on the dulcimer. This portable and easy-to-store stringed instrument makes for fun family music while we sit around the campfire or at home.

One afternoon my daughter and I went to see if we could find someone who built dulcimers. We found an elderly man who lived in a little cabin on a country road. He built mountain dulcimers and had the perfect one for me.

Over the next few years, I learned to play and taught several of my grandchildren to play as well. I wanted to give each grandchild a dulcimer, but buying 17 of them would be expensive. So I decided to learn to build them myself.

I began by researching the history of this uniquely American instrument. I found that an instrument similar to the dulcimer, called a

scheitholt, was probably brought to the United States in the 1700s by German or Scandinavian immigrants. At about the same time, Scotch-Irish immigrants also played the scheitholt. As time went on, people began to create modified versions of the scheitholt, which eventually became the mountain dulcimer. I also found that the name dulcimer is derived from the Latin *dolce melos*, or “sweet sound.”

Imagine my surprise when later, as I was preparing family history stories, I discovered that some of my mother’s mostly German ancestors and my father’s Scotch-Irish ancestors had played the mountain dulcimer! I was amazed that, generations later, I had discovered the instrument and had been teaching my grandchildren how to play it! What a wonderful musical connection between me and my ancestors and descendants! I am grateful for family history work, which has helped me appreciate my ancestors and feel a connection with them through the sweet sound of the mountain dulcimer. ■

Gary McCallister, Colorado, USA

The mountain dulcimer is a wonderful musical connection between me and my ancestors and descendants.

