

The Appalachian Bow Harp

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The Appalachian Bow Harp is not a common musical instrument today, but it may be the nation's oldest, according to Cumberland resident, Mark Middleton, who has played one for more than 30 years. Variations of bow harps are found throughout the United States and world; however, basic principles in producing and playing them remain similar. Simple in design, it is constructed from a slender wood strip fitted with a violin key at one end. An acoustical guitar string is wound through the violin key and then fastened to the other end of the bow. Turning the violin key produces tension on the string and forces a gentle bend to develop in the wood, thereby creating the bow shape. The instrument is generally played by gently strumming the string, while the top end of the bow is held against the musician's cheek. Playing the string may also include using guitar picks, fingernails, and even a wooden baton. The mouth serves as a resonator and variances in the mouth cavity accent harmonics. Typically, the musician has a more complete awareness of musical sounds than nearby listeners because the harmonics are so soft. Pitch changes also occur by flexing the bow.

According to Mr. Middleton, the bow harp was common to rural Appalachian communities during the 19th century. While it is a rural, traditional instrument, the unique sound can be heard on recordings of popular artists. Jimmy Driftwood used one in the 1959 hit, "The Battle of New Orleans," and in more recent times, Buffy Sainte-Marie and the Ozark Mountain Daredevils, have appeared with them.

Mr. Middleton acquired his first bow harp from a mail order catalog in 1970, before enrolling at Berea College in Kentucky. While at Berea, he experienced a variety of Appalachian musical instruments and constructed a few bow harps. While continuing to play them occasionally, his interest in woodcraft faded for three decades. Prompted by the desire to provide a unique Christmas gift, Mr. Middleton purchased sufficient wood to produce two bow harps, one as a gift, and the other for him. Upon completion of the instruments, extra wood remained for a third one. Acting on impulse, Mr. Middleton listed it on the popular Internet auction site, eBay®, and successfully sold it. Following the initial sale, over 300 Middleton Appalachian Bow Harps have been shipped from Cumberland to all parts of the globe in the past year. His first export was to India. A cottage industry has developed at the Middleton residence, as wood strips are cut, sanded, and crafted into musical instruments. Mr. Middleton has added a unique touch to his bows, an enlarged end piece to better support the violin key. Shipping two to three instruments per day indicates an even more successful sales year for 2004. In addition to eBay® sales, Middleton Appalachian Bow Harps are available for sale at local craft shops. Inquiries may be directed to:

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510 Cumberland St.,
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*Mark Middleton,
demonstrating the
bow harp.*

