

*Four-stringed dulcimer from Surry County,  
North Carolina. Photo: Scott Odell.*

## THE APPALACHIAN DULCIMER

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Two entirely different instruments, one plucked, the other struck with small hammers, bear the name "dulcimer," and the resulting confusion often makes it difficult or impossible to determine to which instrument one is being referred. Here, we are concerned with the plucked variety, although hammered dulcimers have a history as old or older and were quite common in this country during the nineteenth century. Hammered dulcimers are still encountered today among both urban and country musicians, and represent varied traditions of great interest.

The plucked "mountain" or "Appalachian" dulcimer is rather variable as to size, shape, and stringing, but all those which I have seen share common features, two of which are most important.

First, they have a series of frets which are spaced to give a diatonic scale. A string pressed against frets arranged in this manner can sound notes equivalent to those playable using only the white keys of a piano. The other essential dulcimer characteristic is the use of one or more strings which are played simultaneously with the melody strings, but are not fretted. These strings are tuned to provide a drone accompaniment to the melody. This can

be compared with the use of drone notes in bagpipe and five-string banjo playing.

Although there is much variation in playing techniques, the typical player holds the instrument on his lap, frets the melody string(s) with a short stick or "noter" held in the left hand, and strikes across the strings near the bridge with a flexible plectrum made of a goose or turkey quill, or even a piece of watch spring. Dulcimers are sometimes bowed, but this is very uncommon.

A good dulcimer player can make the drones sound continuously so that the listener is aware of a constant drone harmony against which the melody is always changing, and individual strokes of the plectrum against the drone strings do not stand out prominently. One Carroll County Virginia family of dulcimer players aptly calls this technique "fiddling," as the drone sounds like a long drawn out note on a fiddle. The more proficient dulcimer players do not content themselves with merely playing the melody, but, like a fiddler, will add many ornaments.

Although the earliest history of the dulcimer in this country remains unclear, there are several closely allied instruments traditional to northern Europe which are very similar to the Appalachian dulcimer. These include the Swedish "hummel," the German "sheitholt," the French "epinette des Vosges," and others. Interestingly, there is no similar instrument traditional to the British Isles, and thus it seems clear that the dulcimer was introduced by settlers from northern Europe. The exact date of its introduction cannot be determined today, but it is probable that it was not common until the nineteenth century. The oldest which I have

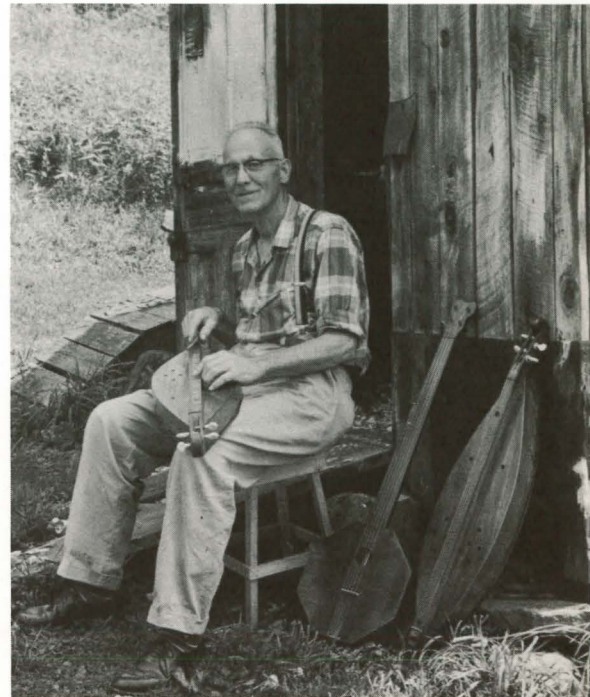
been able to date with any degree of certainty are no earlier than about 1875.

Two dulcimers in the Smithsonian's collection, one a nineteenth-century instrument from Kentucky and the other from North Carolina, dated 1934, are quite similar to both modern German "sheitholts" and an early one pictured in Michael Praetorius's *Syntagma Musicum*, printed at Wolfenbüttel in 1620. These instruments are in the form of an elongated, straight-sided, tapering box, with the frets applied directly to the right side of the soundboard. The presence of such instruments is hardly surprising in view of the large numbers of Germans who settled in Pennsylvania and, later, throughout the southern mountains.

The "sheitholt" type of dulcimer is fairly easily distinguished from the other popular dulcimer type, which has a raised fretboard running down the center of the soundboard and does not have straight sides. Such dulcimers are very similar to Scandinavian instruments, of which the Swedish "hummel" is typical.

There is great variation from dulcimer to dulcimer and no shape or string arrangement can safely be called typical. Four-stringed teardrop-shaped instruments seem to be as traditional and common as the three-stringed instrument with a body shaped somewhat like a slender elongated guitar, which has become popular among urban performers in recent years.

Judging from conversations with traditional musicians, the instrument has declined greatly in popularity in its natural habitat during the last thirty or forty years, perhaps because of the introduction of the guitar and a decreased reliance on homemade



Jacob Melton of Carroll County, Virginia, in front of his workshop with some newly made instruments. Photo: Scott Odell.

articles. Even so, traditional dulcimer making and playing is far from dead, as I have been able to visit eight dulcimer makers and ten traditional players in just five counties of North Carolina and Virginia. One of the most productive makers, Jacob Melton, died just last year, but his brother, Raymond, an outstanding player, and other relatives, are still upholding the family's musical tradition. It is also interesting to point out that despite folk-revival interest in the dulcimer dating back at least to the 1930s, most of these makers and players were largely unaware of urban interest in the dulcimer and had only a very local reputation, often limited almost entirely to family and friends.

"Sheitholt" from Michael Praetorius's *Syntagma Musicum*.