

How My Thomas Found Me

by Ken Backer

In early fall of this year my wife, Lin, and I spent the day wandering around our favorite flea and antique market at Aberfoyle near where we live in southern Ontario. It is open every Sunday from spring through fall and has acres of stuff with mostly permanent vendors. I have often said if you can't find it at Aberfoyle, it doesn't exist. We have picked up many "treasures" over the years, allowing ourselves a certain spending limit. With unlimited funds our house would be filled to overflowing with various oddball and interesting collectables.

On this excursion I spotted a World War Two explosives detonator that would look good in my home office along with other "what is it" objects that have been acquired. The vendor selling this detonator was near the entrance to the flea market and I decided to pick it up on my way out, if it hadn't been sold.

As it approached the time to head for home I was passing through the temporary vendor section. There was a fellow who was only there for that day and selling stuff from an estate. Amongst the goods I spotted a dulcimer, something not many people in our area would be familiar with. I slipped into a foggy reminiscence of years ago (the kind where everything around you goes fuzzy) when I played and performed on banjo, guitar, and some dulcimer. I was really into the old time tunes back then but had drifted away musically to other instruments, making my living as a sax player for awhile and introducing the world around me to the didjeridu.

As my fog lifted I thought it might be nice to go full circle back to the old time music. This dulcimer appeared very old and rustic looking, but in good shape with no cracks or pieces missing. It still had worn strings on it. But then I thought about the vintage explosives detonator I discovered earlier. The fellow wanted \$80 for the dulcimer, the explosives detonator was only \$40. Which should I go for...mmmmm. When in doubt, ask the wife.

I called Lin over and showed her the dulcimer, and asked which of the two I should buy. She replied, "I always prefer music to mayhem, get the dulcimer". The vendor saw me eyeing the instrument and said I could have it for \$60 as he needed to get rid of what he could before closing time. Money was paid and I left with it under my arm.

While looking over the dulcimer at home I noticed, through one of the heart shaped sound holes, a paper label attached to the inside of the back. It appeared to have faint handwriting on it. With the help of a small flashlight I discerned the words "J.E. Thomas, March 31, 1911, Bath, KY." Cool, I thought! I know who made this instrument and it is over 100 years old!

Now, you have to realize that I knew very little about dulcimer history and makers. To me this was just a nice old instrument. If I decided not to play it, it would look good hanging on the wall. I went to the basement and found my copy of "The Dulcimer Book"

by Jean Ritchie amongst my other old time music books that hadn't seen the light of day for years. And there inside was a picture of J.E. Thomas with a section about him and his dulcimer making. My wife encouraged me to pursue this a bit further.

I hit the internet (where else does one go) and came across the website "Friends of the Mountain Dulcimer", which I joined. After taking photos of the dulcimer and a close-up of the inside label, I sent them off to this site along with a brief description of how and where I found the instrument. (One may view the photos at the site's "Member's Photos" section). To my surprise I quickly received replies from many people with comments like, "you have struck the mother lode", "you have a national treasure", "you found this at a flea market?", etc. Thank goodness for Lisa, the founder of "Friends of the Mountain Dulcimer" for her advice and helping me sort all this out.

Amazingly, my Thomas appears to be in totally original condition and structurally sound. I have put on new strings and play it often, the sound is very bright.

It seems to me there may be other original Thomas dulcimers out there, in the hands of people who don't know what they have. Just part of stuff inherited from grandma or grandpa and tucked away, maybe even hanging on a wall as decoration. I certainly was in the right place at the right time when, as I like to think, this dulcimer found me.

"Among the trees and bushes
Where the dark green willows sway,
There hides another Thomas
That one may find someday".

Cheers
Ken Backer