

Colby musician wears two hats

By Marian Ballard

Colby Free Press
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One of the originators of Pickin' On the Plains, Larry Booth, has been a professional musician for a lot of years, but that's not all he's done.

Booth grew up in Kansas City, Kansas, in a close extended family that came out of the Ozarks in Missouri. Everybody in the family got involved in music, both at home and at the church a block away — everybody from grandpa playing the fiddle for dancing with the rugs rolled up to almost anyone getting up from the dining table and stepping over to the piano in the evening (A good way to get out of dishwashing, he said.).

A vocal-music major in college, he went on to become a full-time pastor. Only when he was 30-something did he start learning to play the guitar, after a time venturing to try his hand at performing.

"I was in Pittsburg on a business trip," he remembers, "and I asked the bartender to let me sing just two songs."

He said he promised to put his guitar back in the case and close it up. Only if someone asked him to play more would he get it out again.

Before he could get the guitar back in its case, he said, someone came up to him with a request. He kept his promise, put the guitar away and closed the case, and the fellow asked again. He wound up playing two or three hours that night.

That proved to be just the beginning of a career as a musician that put him on the road for about 20 years.

In recent years, Booth said, he's about half musician and half pastor and consultant — laughingly admitting that there's no such thing as pastoring half time. He currently serves as "half-time" pastor at the Congregational church in Grant, Neb.

During the festival, he'll be filling that pastoral role as well, bringing a message of faith on Sunday morning as part of the "Bluegrass Gospel Homecoming."

"I don't get to perform a lot — mostly for fun," he said, "but it's the most enjoyable thing I do in my life."

Though he's usually performed alone, Booth said he tried to start out with a group in Hays. They had trouble getting together to practice, he said, so in about 1975 he bought his own sound system and went on the road as a soloist.

That's not to say he only plays by himself. In fact, the origins of Pickin' On the Plains were rooted in the jam sessions he used to have with the McLemore family of Colby. They got their heads together, he said, and out of those sessions grew the idea of putting together a weekend festival with both local and outside groups, though some events preceded the festival as it eventually came to be structured.

He said he still enjoys the opportunity to play with old friends and new at the festival.

Booth will be on stage from noon to 12:30 p.m. Saturday and again Sunday morning.

Sappa Strings a festival favorite

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Sappa Strings, the musical duo of Wayne and Millie Lauritsen, has a history with the Pickin' On the Plains Bluegrass and Folk Festival which goes back to the very first year. But their history of singing together goes back a lot further.

Asked how long ago they started singing together, Millie said, "When we were going together..." It seems that at a long-ago dinner, visiting in someone's home, Wayne played the guitar and the couple sang a song together.

While that may have been a big step in their courtship, however, it didn't immediately turn them into performers. That came when Picnic in the Park in downtown Colby got underway a few years ago, and they started singing there and at church.

Millie said that they really got involved with music after their family was grown and away from home. Then, they made it their pastime.

"It's something we can do together," she added.

Their musical style is easy-going, featuring "the good old gospel and bluegrass people love." Wayne plays the guitar and Millie plays the dobro, which she said she took up in place of the autoharp after she had carpal tunnel



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Millie and Wayne Lauritsen bring some old-time favorites people love to their musical performances.

surgery. She said she enjoys it so much she seldom plays the autoharp now. She said the dobro, a forerunner of the electric steel guitar, has undergone a revival in recent years.

Wayne hurt his shoulder, so he can't play the guitar. Millie says they'll adapt, but the results will be different when the couple plays at 6 p.m. Friday and 9:30 a.m. Sunday.

That's not to say the former Colby couple, now living in Divide, Colo., have been taking it easy. They had an active 3-year-old grandson visiting with them for three months this spring, she said, and he kept them hopping.



EVAN BARNUM/Colby Free Press

Singer Larry Booth has been active both as a performer and organizer, since Pickin' On the Plains began.

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