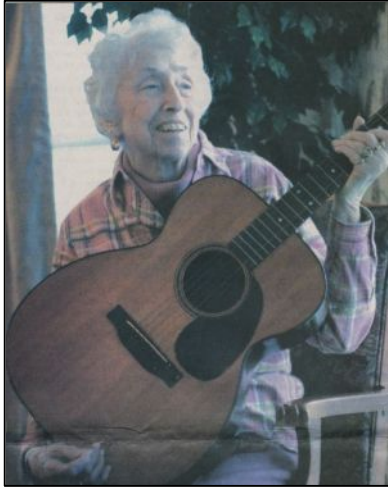


A LIFE FILLED WITH SONG

By **MARGARET SHUSTER**
Herald-Citizen Staff



COOKEVILLE -- Cooke-ville's Addine Dow has been making music for most of her life. Now 95, the retired teacher plays guitar, mandolin, piano and organ with a group of friends who call themselves "Mrs. Dow and the Boys" and perform several times a month at local nursing homes, schools and other venues.

"She's a great lady," said Almon Smith, a neighbor and bandmate who's been playing with her for 12 years. "She's 95 and I can't keep up with her. I'll say, 'You wanna go play tonight?' And she'll say, 'Yeah! Where?'"

Throughout her long life and despite many setbacks, Dow has seized every opportunity to learn about music, buy instruments and surround herself with fellow musicians. Her interest in music was sparked when she was very young by a father who played fiddle and a mother who played piano.

"I can remember at my earliest age, which is about 5 or 6, my mama taught me to play the organ," said Dow (born Addine Womack). "We didn't have a piano, but we had an organ, and I played that organ and I'd sing little songs that mama taught me."

She breaks into song recalling a tune she played at her grandparents' home in Quebeck:

I love little Willie, I do, Mama,

I love little Willie, I do, Papa,

I love little Willie, but don't tell Pa,

Cause he wouldn't like it say would he, Mama?

"I sang that and played it on the piano, not the keying, just the chording," said Dow. "That's all I've ever done. I just played the chord and the rhythm with my guitar I play. I don't lead at all."

She found additional musical encouragement during her school years in the tiny town of Doyle. Her family couldn't afford lessons because her mother was very ill, so one piano teacher wrangled a way for her to take lessons for free.

"There was a little girl in our community named Mary Alice Taylor, and she took music lessons from Mrs. Ella Green," said Dow. "Miss Ella told her mother to tell me to come with Mary Alice and she'd give me music lessons so Mary Alice wouldn't have to walk by herself back and forth."

That lasted for a year, until Green's husband died and she moved to Oklahoma. It wasn't long, though, before another teacher stepped in to help. This time it was Dow's English teacher, Mary Jones, who asked her to stay after class one day.

"She said, 'Addine, I've always wanted to do something for somebody. I've watched you now all last year and this year and I've not seen a crooked move out of you yet. You're the one I want to help. What can I do for you?' I was speechless and started crying," said Dow, who still gets teary retelling the story nearly 80 years later.

"She said 'Don't worry about the money. I've got the money.' I said, 'Well, I've always wanted to play the piano.' She said, 'Go to the basement and dry those tears. I know the best music teacher in town right down here at the City School in Sparta. We'll go and talk to her.'"

Dow spent the rest of her sophomore year, the next summer and her junior year taking lessons from a Miss Kimsey.

"I lived at Cave, that's three miles out from Doyle, and I had to ride the bus from Doyle to Sparta to take that music lesson in Sparta, but I did," said Dow. "It was a quarter to get there and a quarter to get back, and I had that."

Mrs. Jones' help extended beyond music lessons.

"When school was out that sophomore year, she wanted me to have a beautiful dress," said Dow. "She had me go down to the stores and look. I didn't find anything that I really wanted. She said 'Don't worry, I'll bring you a dress,' and she brought me one of the most gorgeous dresses that's ever been. And she gave me many dresses. She was so good to me."

After Dow graduated high school, she started taking lessons from a cousin, Lela Taylor.

"She played the organ and I followed her on the piano, not playing the tune but chording and following along with her, and I have some tapes of that," she said.

After she was married, her husband, Larry Swack, paid for her music lessons. Dow was working as a teacher in Doyle, and it wasn't long before she was sharing her love of music with students of her own.

"When Bill Jones was in the seventh grade at our school, he wasn't interested in playing ball or anything like that, but boy, when he picked up that fiddle, I mean he could make it cry," said Dow. "So when summertime came, I said, 'Bill, how would you like to have a string band at school next year?' He said, 'Oh boy!' That was his delight, you know."

Dow asked the school principal, who allowed the students to practice during a 30-minute chapel period each week.

"Whether they could play or couldn't play, it didn't matter. If they couldn't play Bill and I would teach them," said Dow.

Soon 15 students had joined her little string band, and before long they were so good they impressed a state supervisor and one of Dow's former teachers from Middle Tennessee State Teachers' College.

"You never knew when the supervisors were coming -- they just appeared," said Dow. "She appeared that morning, early, and I saw her at recess time. It just happened to be the day we were going to practice. I said, 'Miss Mary, we have a little band and we're fixing to practice. Would you like to come up and hear us play?'"

Dow still beams when she tells it: "When we were through, she said, 'That's the best band I've ever seen in any school in Tennessee yet.'"

Dow had to abandon her string band when she and her husband moved to Louisiana for his work. Not long after that her father, husband and grown son died, all within an eight-month span. Her older brother died just three years later and her younger brother three years after that.

"I couldn't have handled it if it hadn't been for the Lord," said Dow. "The Lord helped me through it."

Unfortunately, she didn't have her music to turn to for comfort.

"I was away from an instrument for all those 17 years we were down there," said Dow. "Before I came back, I did buy me a piano and an organ, but I didn't have a stringed instrument until I came back up here."

She married David Dow in 1971 and moved to Cookeville in 1974.

"I told him one day, 'David, I want a guitar,'" said Dow. "So we went looking and didn't find anything here in Cookeville, but I took the Sparta Expositor and looked at the ads in there, and we found a Martin guitar. We got it, and I've certainly enjoyed it."

It's the guitar she still plays today. Not long after she resumed playing, she was once again busy surrounding herself with fellow musicians. The first was a new neighbor, Almon Smith, who came to Dow's yard sale to buy a step ladder.

"I came down to a garage sale she had and asked if she had any instruments," said Smith. "She said, 'I have a lot of them, but they're not for sale.' I said, 'Well do you play them?' And she said, 'Yeah! So I came home and got my mandolin and went back down, and she and I have been playing together for about 12 years.'"

The two started playing in nursing homes after Dow's second husband died in 1996, and others have joined them over the past several years.

"Alfred Ashburn over here, he started playing with us about five years ago," said Dow. "He plays and sings both the banjo and the guitar. Then Tom Smith joined us about two years ago, and he's a good lead on the guitar. Buster comes and plays with us sometimes, too."

"Buster" is her nephew, Dr. Harold Downey Duncan, who comes from Dallas, Texas, to play with the group every few months.

"Several years ago, as I was visiting Aunt Addine, she and I were playing our guitars and singing some of the old songs she has been singing since she was a child," said Duncan. "I realized that many of the songs she sings, I have never heard. Then, I realized that if we did not get those on tape, some day they would be lost forever to us."

As a result, Dow made a 45-minute cassette of herself singing some of her favorite songs. She gives copies to family members and friends.

"Although she has experienced many very painful losses in her life, her attitude and outlook on life is genuinely positive and infectious," said Duncan. "She makes other people want to be better."

And well into her tenth decade, Dow seems nowhere close to stopping. Not surprisingly, music figures prominently in her formula for a long, healthy life.

"My longevity takes in a lot of different things, but I'll tell you it's good food, my supplement, my exercise, the Lord being good to me and my being good to my mama and daddy, and our music -- that helps me an awful lot," she said. "Music is life. That's what it is. It's just life for me."

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Members of "Mrs. Dow and the Boys," from left, Tom Ford, Alfred Ashburn, Almon Smith, Addine Dow and Harold Duncan, perform at a local nursing home.