



GETTING TO KNOW YOU . . . Walt Jablonski

When you see Walt Jablonski in the back of a jam with his harmonicas and his wife Pat, you wouldn't guess he has seen and done some amazing things. Walt was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1920, the seventh of 12 children. Being one of so many children has its trials, but he remembers the good things. "As you grow older, there is always someone to do things with."

When he was around 8 years old, he begged for an accordion. His mother couldn't manage that, but she did find a way to get a piano. Although Walt never played it, his sister did, and the family would get together almost every week to play and sing together.

Soon after, a school friend acquired a harmonica. Walt was hooked. As they traded it back and forth, Walt quickly matched his friend in playing songs and learning music. His resourceful mom was able to get a harmonica for the budding musician. (They were about 40 cents in 1928.)

After his dad was injured, Walt quit school at 15 (grade 9) so he could support his family. He went to work at the saw mill, and moved through a series of jobs. When World War II began, he had a deferment from service because he was supporting his family. But, eventually, he joined the military. He was sent to France as a staff sergeant in the Battle of the Bulge. Walt was an engineer in charge of 53 trucks. When the war ended, he thought he would be sent home. Instead, he was sent to France, Belgium and Germany, and spent 43 days on a ship! He saw Panama, the Philippines, and many islands before he finally went to Korea for six months. There, he spent his time mapping out an incomplete water distribution system left behind by the Japanese. While in Korea, he spent much of his free time exploring the country, including lots of small towns and Buddhist temples.

When his 3-½ years in the service were over, Walt went back to work at the job he had before the war. A few years later, a friend who was an Air Force fighter pilot during the war, invited him to come to a local airport for a small air show. While he was there, Walt saw a young lady holding a clipboard and escorting 8 or 9 little girl scouts. As Walt puts it, nearly 60 years later, "I was nailed!" He simply had to find out who that gorgeous girl was, and when he learned she was taking flying lessons every Sunday, he signed up on the spot! So, every Sunday Walt and the gorgeous Pat took flying lessons together. When Walt, always a considerate gentleman, offered (to Pat's dad) to bring Pat home after the lessons, and save him the trip, Pat's dad was very grateful. And so a long series of delightful Sunday flying adventures followed. Walt and Pat were married about a year later. Eventually, Walt did get his pilot's license. Pat, who was learning on an open cockpit "very fussy" plane, eventually decided to give it up.

When Walt and Pat married, he decided he needed a better paying job, so he hired in at Sunoco. He started as a truck driver, but didn't like pulling all that fuel behind him. He worked through a series of jobs on pipelines, barges, in the yard, on the tank farm, and finally in the lab, blending oils and checking everything that came in. Over time, the lab process became automated. While it was easier, "It wasn't nearly as interesting".

Walt and Pat had five children and now have eight grandchildren. Family time was the center of their lives. In 1968, Pat learned about travel trailers. She told him, "They're selling trailers really cheap right now. We should buy one". Walt remembers telling her he had his fill of camping in the army, and if she wanted to camp in a trailer, she could go without him. "Two hours later, we drove home with a trailer," he laughs. "It was the best thing we ever did." The family traveled all states east of the Mississippi (except Florida) and into southeast Canada. The kids were pulled out of school to travel the country, keeping a journal so they could relate their adventures to classmates who were not so lucky.

Three pop-ups, two trailers, and a motor home later, they still travel to Evert to camp each year. "I'm not sure if we will make it this year," relates Walt. "Pat doesn't like to drive it, and I can't drive on freeways or after dark anymore." Still, Evert pulls them to attend. They first came to Evert in 1990. As they wandered the festival, they were drawn to one particular group of players, and were delighted to learn that the Silver Strings Dulcimer Society met only a mile or so from their home. They've been coming ever since.

Walt's desire for an accordion lay dormant but not forgotten. A year ago, he found a used accordion. But he prefers his harmonica, so the accordion gathers dust. He also tried the ukulele, but to no avail. The harmonica remains his main musical love.

Other hobbies Walt has followed are gardening (crossing plant species to see what he could come up with), woodworking (the wooden rocking horses for his family generated orders from an interior designer in Birmingham).

Walt has three briefcases of harmonicas... some for playing, and some just for looking at. Now he leads a new Harmonica group, which meets twice each month in Garden City. Walt will give a harmonica to any child who shows an interest in the instrument. He will never forget how his encounter with a harmonica so many years ago has changed his own life.