

Remembering Mom: Accordian-playing Goody (Westby) Backlund

By Janet Marie (Backlund) Heglund
HTF Contributor

I'd like to tell you about a very talented musician, one whom I admired and respected very much. This person was my mom – Gudrun (Goody) Petra Backlund. Mom was born on May 18, 1915, in the hospital in Virginia, MN. She was the daughter of John and Marie Westby and the fourth child of nine. Their home was located in Brittmount and she lived there until she graduated from Virginia High School. Mom was the only one of the nine children who played an instrument. Then, to top it all off, she played by ear. (I understand many musicians during this time also learned to play that way.)

Mom lived in a home where she was exposed to music at an early age. My grandma had an organ which she used to sit at and play. I was told the type of music that she played was mostly religious. Then too, Grandma and Grandpa used to love to dance, so you see, mom was exposed to different types of music early on. Dancing was a big part of people's entertainment during this time. What was a Saturday night if you couldn't go out dancing?

Mom told me the story of how and when she started her musical career. One day my grandma was singing or humming (I don't remember which) a tune and my mom went over to the organ and before long was playing the notes to accompany Grandma. Can't you just imagine the show it was to Grandma, because you see, at the time my mom was only around four years old. That day was the beginning for mom and she played right up until a month before she passed away. Mom started playing on an organ and then eventually went to an accordion. She did have a few lessons but she didn't have a real interest in playing that way. It was just easier for her to play by ear. She could still read notes though if she had to.

I have a picture of Mom when she was just 17 and already playing the accordion at area dances. Music just seemed to run through her veins. From other pictures that I have, it looks like Mom had had four accordions. The one with her name on she bought out in Comstock, MN where she worked cooking at her grandparents' farm. Two relatives from there loaned her the money to buy this beautiful instrument. I'm sure many of you have seen it at one time or another. Did any of you every try to stump my mom on a song? Well, it was pretty hard to do. If she didn't know it, all you had to do was hum or sing a few lines and before long she was playing right along with you and in any key you wanted. No song seemed to be too big a challenge for her.

From her teens into her twenties she continued to entertain at dances or wherever special music was wanted. Mom and Dad were married in 1938 and she kept on playing for dances until we moved out to Britt in the early fifties. I can remember as a child living in Virginia how I used to live it when Mom and the band she played with would come to the house and practice. I'd sit there and take it all in and to this day I think that's one of the reason I love music so much. I eventually learned to play the piano, but only by reading notes. No, I never did receive here talent of playing by ear, but that's okay.

Mom continued playing at different functions after we moved out to Britt but it wasn't until 1981 when my dad passed away that she really became more involved. Piano or accordion, it didn't make any difference. Mom especially loved playing for her family. She'd sit and play for you until you had enough. It seemed like she could play on forever. Area nursing homes, senior centers and various other places she entertained at. Shortly before my mom died, a gal who attended the Laurentian Senior Citizen's Club came to the house and told Mom how much that had missed her being at the meetings and playing for them. Mom turned to me and said, "It is your turn now, Babe." What an honor this was for me to hear her say this.

Young and old always enjoyed Mom's music. Today there is no more – only what memories we have of her. We tried to get her to make a tape of her music but she never did. I guess I should have taken the bull by the horns and sat some day and just listened to her play and tape it at the same time. Too late! That's okay though because I'll always carry her music in my head and heart.

Mom died in 2000, and so now her accordion (the one with her name on it) sits in one of my closets – silent – because no one in my family ever learned to play an accordion. Sad! When Mom passed away, I found she had a large mouth organ and a ukulele too. Can you believe it? I had never heard her play either one but I'm sure she did.

The days of Mom's playing are over but her music will live on forever with those who heard and enjoyed her style of playing.

Janet (Backlund) Heglund lives in Britt, MN. This article was previously printed in the 2008-2009 winter edition of the Britt Community Historical Society newsletter.



"Goody" Backlund with her accordion in 1937.
Submitted photo



"Goody" Backlund still playing the accordion in 1983.
Submitted photo

