

PEAR BLOSSOMS, SIDE ZIPPERS, AND MARCHING ACCORDION BANDS

By Nick Gier

Accordionists of the world unite!
All you have to lose are your bellows!
--Anonymous

When springtime arrives, I sometimes think of pear blossoms. Not only the ones on my winter pear tree in Moscow, but those my youth on 10,000 acres in the Rogue River Valley of Southern Oregon. On a sunny day with Mt. McLaughlin in the background, the valley was a sight to behold.

During the summers of 1958-61, I picked pears at the various orchards and placed most of my wages in a savings account. My best day was 150 boxes, and at 15 cents a box that was a good day's pay.

One day my crew boss came by and asked me if I was going to use my savings to buy a jalopy. When I answered that I was saving it for college, he gave me a very puzzled look, as if he realized that an alien being was working for him.

Growing up in Medford, I learned a rule of thumb about a child's choice of musical instruments. Those on the East Side studied piano or violin, but those across the railroad tracks learned to play the accordion.

All my life I have suffered the indignity of accordion jokes, and not a month goes by that someone doesn't send me a new one. The all-time worst is a *Far Side* cartoon with two panels: in Heaven St. Peter is handing out harps, but in Hell the damned are lined up for their accordions.

I never did like Donald Rumsfeld, but when he said that going to war with the French was like taking an accordion band on a hunting trip, that was the last reed for me.

I now pause for a moment of silence for my two accordion teachers. My first was Eve "Mammy" Prentice, whose husband "Pappy" never said a word and quietly fixed all the broken instruments, which were many because Mammy insisted on double fortissimo for all songs.

Freud had a name for Mammy Prentice, but it cannot be printed in a family journal. Some of you may be thinking this, but no, Mammy was not black. She was Caucasian and indomitable.

All my life I've been in a slow recovery from the following psychological injury. When Mammy ordered uniforms for our accordion marching band, she chose girls' pants with a zipper on the side for everyone. What a blow to tender young boy egos! Freud's phrase occurs to me once again.

I have a distinct memory of the annual Pear Blossom Parade. Our prettiest girl was excused from playing and became our festival princesses enthroned on a float decorated with pear blossoms. Two by two (side zippers on the right) we marched on each side of the float, pumping out some spring-like tune.

All that I can say is that at least it was not as silly and awkward as Woody Allen playing his cello in the marching band in *Take the Money and Run*. But with those heavy 120-bass instruments (mine weighs 37 pounds), many of us small folk would have enjoyed sitting down just for a moment.

I will never forget having to go to see Mammy just before she died. She was dividing up the band fund among all its members. What she said to me is burned in my memory: "Nicky, you didn't go on many band trips, did you?" Do I need to tell you what I do to people who ever call me "Nicky"?

My second accordion teacher was Caesar Mussioli (I'm not making this up!), who came all the way out from Boston with his Cuban wife to take over the studio when Mammy retired at age at the ripe age of 94.

Caesar was a great musician, and he could, unlike Mammy, actually play the accordion. Every Monday night we learned music theory from him, and for the first time we played harmonies so beautiful that we could sooth a terrorist's heart. Take that, Rumsfeld!

The Cuban wife, not used to our quaint ways, left town early on in Caesar's Southern Oregon career. Boy, did she have a temper! Every Monday night we would arrive for band practice and we could hear them fighting upstairs. Caesar would come down all red-faced but always with a big smile from ear to ear.

My vision of the entry into Heaven is not the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing in the background, but my concert accordion band (300 strong frozen in time) playing the same note of some medley of Italian favorites. Eve Prentice would be standing in front urging us to squeeze out the notes as loud as we possibly could.

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