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Museum squeezes in history, humor

Superior – You learn the darnedest things while looking up something else.

I was checking online for the telephone number for A World of Accordions Museum here when the Internet, as only the Internet can, jumped tracks to inform me that none other than Richard Nixon was an accordionist.

In fact, accordion to, er, according to *accordionlinks.com*, one of the most famous Watergate cartoons showed Tricky Dick with a tape recorder hanging from straps around his neck, his right hands on the keys and a shrug on his face.

“I don’t know what happened,” he said. “I was just trying to play ‘Hail to the Chief . . .”

Still, I was an hour into my visit with Helmi Harrington at her amazing museum before I dared bring up accordion humor.

Surrounded by her collection of 1,000 accordions, from the earliest and most primitive to the most jewel-bedecked squeeze box that has ever wheezed a tune, we covered the defining characteristics of the instrument, its origin and chronology, its embrace by ethnic groups the world over, how it got its gaudy look. And maybe more than anything else, we covered Harrington’s love and dedication to – no, her passion for – the accordion.

New Yorker and ‘Far Side’

Finally I said, almost afraid to bring it up, Helmi, can you ever laugh at accordion humor?

“Oh sure I do,” she said. “I can laugh about us,” she said, in the way that a man can laugh a little bit about his wife, “but you wouldn’t want somebody else to.” Then she led me to yet another little space where she has assembled a Wall of Humor, a place for accordion jokes and accordion cartoons from the likes of the New Yorker magazine and Gary Larson’s “Far Side,” where hell was depicted as a waiting room with an accordionist playing “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles.”

But she didn’t want me to miss the significance of the wall’s location, which told where accordion humor ranked next to all her other exhibits.

“It’s right next to the men’s bathroom,” she said, smiling at her own accordion joke.

It is not going overboard to call the Harrington Art Center, which houses Helmi’s museum and all of her other accordion-related ventures from concert hall to repair and technician school, the holy site of accordion music. It used to be a Presbyterian Church here in downtown Superior, where Harrington relocated a few years ago after becoming, you’ll pardon the expression, squeezed for space at her previous museum in Duluth.

At the time she never imagined she would again run out of room, not in an entire church, but she has nearly filled the new space as well while continuing to assemble what she unabashedly calls the finest accordion-specific museum in the world.

There are many museums with accordion collections – two in Germany, two in Italy, several in Russia and one at the Royal College in England – but Harrington said none reveals how accordion history flows, none contains the breadth of her collection of books, music and manuscripts and none has 1,000 – count ‘em – 1,000 accordions on display at any time.

“None of them,” she said, “have tried to bring all the elements of the accordion under one roof.”

Helmi Harrington has.

Roots in Germany

Her story begins in her native Germany with her mother’s own story. Hanni Strahl grew up poor but saved her money to buy an inexpensive accordion, which she learned to play well enough that she won a competition where first prize was a music school education.

Hanni then set up a studio in Cologne, three doors away from the Nazi secret police headquarters and all the insanity that was involved with life in Germany then. No wonder after the war she left for Texas with Helmi, who had been born in 1945.

In America, Hanni supported herself and her daughter by giving music lessons. Helmi learned from her mother how to play and repair the accordion and went on to earn a doctorate in musicology. She performed as a concert pianist for a number of years before turning to the accordion for good, and ended up in Minnesota in 1988.

In addition to running her museum and the Accordion-Concertina Repair and Technicians School here, Harrington lectures nationally on her favorite instrument – most recently in Texas and, earlier this summer, in Milwaukee at an accordion teachers convention - and arranges performances by top accordionists (Milwaukee’s Stas Venglevski, for example) at the 1,000 seat concert space she has dedicated in her mother’s memory.

The museum’s permanent exhibit space, honoring the men who changed the accordion world, is dedicated to her late husband, Duane Sellman.

“Always I perform,” she said, “(but) while I love to play it’s hard to make a living at it, so I teach and do (all the rest).”

And so after we visited and toured her museum, after she had taught me a few new things about the accordion I had never imagined, Helmi Harrington performed on one of her favorite accordions, playing two songs for an audience of one woman who had come in to buy a new accordion for herself, one wandering newspaperman and Helmi’s dog, Hannah.

She started with a light, polka-like piece and closed with a Bach fugue, if I have my classics right, and from the look of enjoyment on her face you would never know she was performing on a weekday morning for an audience of two humans and a dog, only one of whom knew much of anything about accordions.

But all three of us enjoyed it no end.

For more on A World of Accordions, at 1401 Belknap St., Superior, visit www.accordionworld.org, or call (715)395-2782. The museum is open Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Admission is charged.

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Picture included of Helmi playing the accordion in her museum, with caption: 'Helmi Harrington's A World of Accordions Museum in Superior has 1,000 accordions, along with books, tapes and manuscripts, on display'.