

THE 1915 CLARK IRISH HARP RESTORATION

The Harp's Provenance

The above grainy, grandfathered photo is most likely a picture of the harp's original owner. We don't



know her name. The harp stayed with her until she died in the 1980s, and it was then purchased by another family during an estate sale. (The photo came with the harp.) The harp was made in Syracuse, New York. It somehow got to Florida. Then it spent time in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee, had a short stint in Atlanta, Georgia during the 1990s, and eventually made it to Seal Rock, Oregon circa 2007. After being with the original owner for decades, it stayed with the second family—unplayed—for two generations. Then it came to Charlene and me in Yachats, Oregon in 2021, after I promised to restore it.

Clark Irish Harp History

The Clark Irish harps were designed by a man named Melville Clark during the first decade of the 20th century. This was before TV, when even radio was a luxury. So, people learned to play musical instruments for recreation. These harps became extremely popular, and over a period of years, Clark worked to improve the original design, taking out a new patent each time. The last patent was in March of 1915, and at that point the numbering system for each harp changed from a three-digit number to a four-digit number, starting with #1000. This harp is #1211. According to the Clark Company's own records, the company was making about 35 harps a month. This harp, then, would have been made sometime around December of 1915, making it about 107-years-old at this writing—January 2022.

Judging both from the competent hand positions of the young player in the photo above—which strongly suggest that she's had plenty of lessons—and the "flapper era" influence of her clothing, it seems probable that this picture was taken toward the end of the second decade of the 20th Century, maybe circa 1918.

These Clark harps were designed for use by either children or adults. You could remove the instrument from its accompanying stand, or you could leave it on the stand and tilt it back on a hinged mechanism, which is what this young lady has done. If you look closely, you can see that the harp's front feet are lifted slightly above the stand, and she's resting the harp on her shoulder.



Here's Melville Clark, circa 1909, with an earlier version of his Irish harp. When one reads his story, it becomes clear that he was an impressive inventor and designer of many things, mostly musical instruments!

The restoration is soon underway

Due to demand, these harps were made in a hurry. The wood was not properly seasoned, and the glue joints were faulty. For that reason, the harp simply fell apart after I took the tuning pins out. According to the Clark Company, these harps have in excess of 165 different parts. In this photo, you see many of those parts spread out over my bench.



The stand that the harp sits on was equally in bad shape. I told Charlene the only thing holding it together was force of habit.



Soon, the reassembly began. It consisted of carefully re-working the glue joints—and in one case, pouring a plaster cast—then building odd structures to accommodate clamps without marring the harp's wood. In the photo below, the harp's "shoulder" is being reglued.



Next, the harp's "crown" was repaired.



Many of the holes originally drilled to hold the harp's tuning pins were no longer serviceable, so the holes were filled (bushed) and redrilled. Getting the mostly-reassembled harp safely up onto the drill press was an adventure!



Throughout the restoration, the varnish-retouch brush was ever-ready. In any restoration work, the philosophical question is, "How much do you improve, and how much do you let the item show the signs of its century on the planet?" My own bias is to that the object will show its age under any circumstances and need not bear the visual signs of 100+ years of inevitable abuse.



For me, one of the most interesting parts of the restoration came toward the end. Many of the strings of this harp are held in place courtesy of a clever system of little white pins, one of which I am holding in the picture below. Sometime in the past, one of the pins went missing, and I needed to make a replacement. The problem was that these pins are made of ivory. And while there were no restrictions on the use of elephant tusk in 1915, for obvious and ethical reasons, buying, selling and working with ivory is no longer legal. So, what to do? The answer is in the next photo.



In this photo, I'm holding a cow bone—a femur to be precise. Cow bones are legal; they're from sustainable sources; and they're readily available, both from your local meat department...and even from Amazon.com! They are sold as treats for St. Bernards, mastiffs and other enormous canine creatures. As for this harp, we will memorialize the generous bovine donor by having her join us as part of the eternal musicmaking!



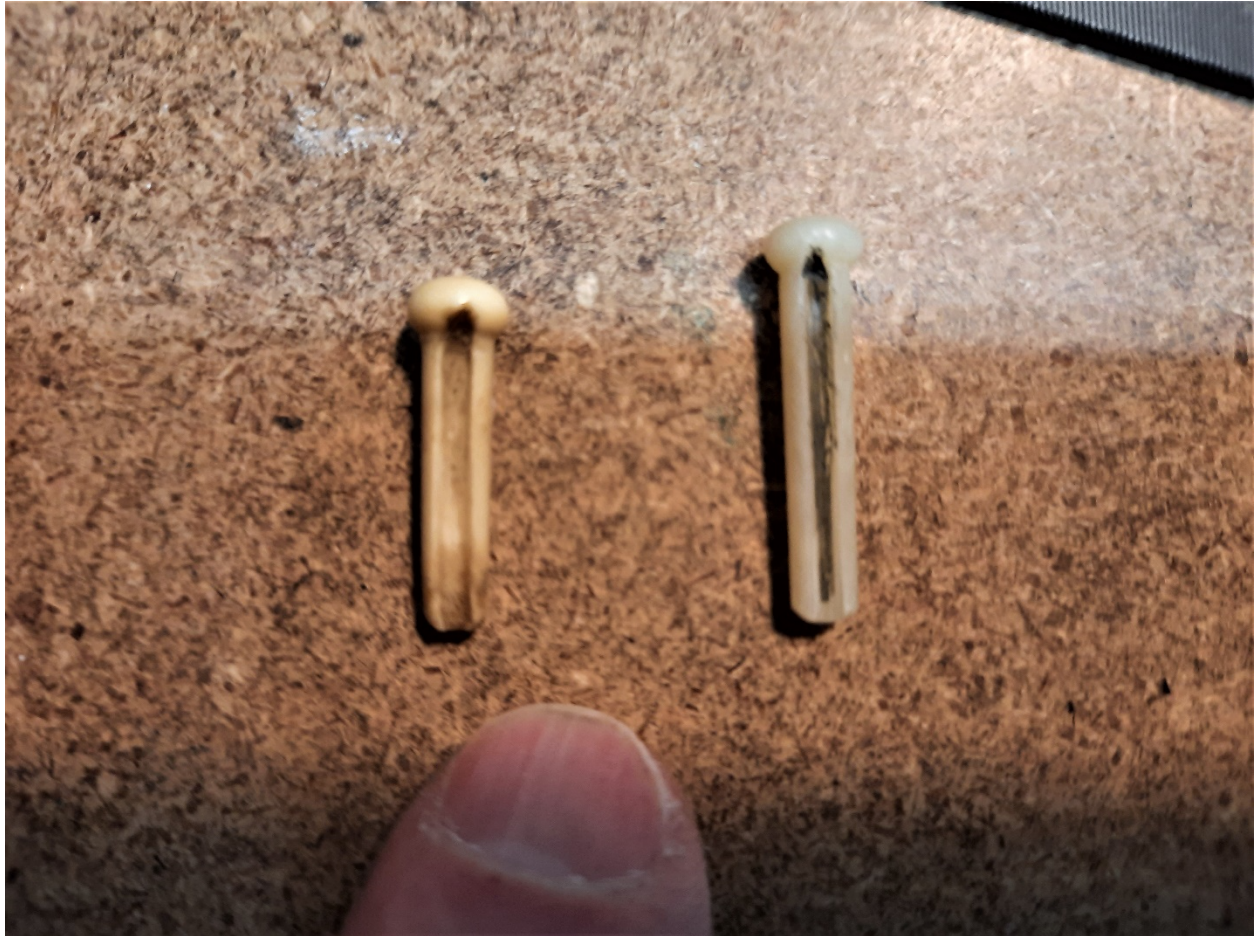
First, I had to find a part of the bone that would be serviceable. And, for a while, it smelled pretty much like a butcher shop near my bandsaw!



Then came the fun part (despite the aroma). This next photo was taken from directly overhead, looking down at my miniature machinist's lathe. This lathe is the perfect size for turning small items.



And here's the result. The cow bone is on the right. The ivory has yellowed in 100+ years, but some of the original pins are still white, so the cow bone matches well on the harp. The cow bone pin is longer because it sits further down on the harp, with the deeper strings. The purpose of the grooves is to accommodate the strings, and the black discoloration in the grooves is graphite which acts as a lubricant.





And here we are at last, giving these angelic music-making contraptions a test drive. Charlene has owned the smaller Celtic harp for years. Our original idea was to work up a few **SIMPLE** Christmas carols, since I have nearly non-existent harp playing technique. But I didn't finish the project in time. Then we thought maybe **Auld Lange Sine** might be in order, but I still wasn't done at New Year's. So, for Valentine's Day, Charlene had the brilliant suggestion of playing **Heart and Soul**—emphasis on "heart" of course.

The harp will stay with us until we find a worthy player (possibly a child?). For sure, it would be fun to hear it in the hands of a competent performer! ***

