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John

by Patsy Montana

CLASSY LADY/ FAMOUS EUPHONON

BY ROBERT HARTMAN

Patsy Montana was one of those people you meet and who becomes your friend on the spot. That's how it was in 1981 when my wife, Carol, and I went to see her perform at Nashville North, a country-style night club just outside Chicago. Since that meeting we learned a great deal about this grand lady. She was a performer on early country radio shows across the west and mid-west. She was a rodeo rider, actress, songwriter, singer/yodeler, fiddler and guitarist. In 1947, a "WLS Family Album" stated, "Patsy Montana, one of the gayest, cheeriest little persons who ever sang a 'cowgirl' song." From my experiences in knowing her and to all whom I speak, the consensus is the same.

She was born Ruby Blevins in 1908 in Hot Springs, Arkansas. At the age of six, she and the Blevins family moved to Hope, Arkansas. After high school, Patsy, still known as Ruby, attended the University of the West at Los Angeles where she studied violin for a year. About that time, hillbilly fever came to the left shore and she got a guitar and taught herself how to play. Soon she entered an amateur contest and won a handsome first prize of \$10. A talent scout was there and asked her to appear on a Hollywood radio KMTR show named the Breakfast Club where she played for three months.

She then joined up with two Montana cowgirls and started on another station. The trio was known as "The Montana Cowgirls" (what else?). Singing not being enough, the three ambitious gals rode in the great roundup at Pendleton, Oregon and sang from their horses into the microphones of a local station covering the rodeo. They rode in several rodeos put on by Hoot Gibson on his ranch at Sangus, California. They performed as cowgirls in the film "Lightnin' Express" and several movie shorts. The trio worked with Al Pearce and his gang on KFI.

In 1933, Patsy auditioned at WLS in Chicago for the famous Saturday night show called the National Barn Dance. She was accepted and joined the Prairie Ramblers, a group formed in 1932 by Chick Hurt and Jack Taylor. In 1934, the Ramblers with Patsy ramblered over to WOR in New York for ten months after which time they returned to WLS. By this time, the group consisted of Patsy, who sang

and played guitar and fiddle, Chick Hurt on mandolin and banjo, Jack Taylor, guitar and bass fiddle, Floyd (Salty) Holms who played anything unusual and had a trick voice and Tex Atchison, who was a popular singer and played fiddle (one of the very few left-handed fiddlers). Comedy was a main part of their down-home country routine and contributed to their popularity.

Patsy met her true love, Paul Rose, at WLS. They married July 3, 1934 and had two lovely daughters, Beverly and Judy.

In 1934, Patsy's song writing and performing skills won her recognition as the first female country singer to have a record in the million sales elite group. Her big hit, "I Want To Be A Cowboy's Sweetheart" became forever her theme song.

In 1938, The Prairie Ramblers were selected by listeners as one of the top three popular acts on WLS. In 1939, the group was noted as "one of the best all around acts ever organized." Patsy left WLS in 1941 to do a stint of solo work on the "Louisiana Hayride" from Shreveport and also performed on radio from St. Louis and other mid-west stations. The Rose family lived on an Arkansas farm, returned briefly to Chicago and the National Barn Dance and then moved to California at the end of the 1940s where they remained.

She earned the Governor's Award from NAEAS, the Cowgirl Hall of Fame and the prestigious Pioneer Award from the Academy of Country Music. She was one of the first "Southern Songbirds, The Women of Early Country Music," a



Patsy Montana



Patsy with the Prairie Ramblers in 1937

1991 public radio series from Appalshop and was in the Hall of Fame in the states of Colorado, Nebraska and Arkansas. In 1992, she performed with Chicago's Sundowners band in downtown Grant Park at the Bluegrass Festival outdoor concert. She has been honored on many TC shows giving tribute to the early country and western star performers. Patsy worked with Gene Autry and Smiley Burnette in the 1939 movie *Colorado Sunset*, where she sang "I Want To Be A Cowboy's Sweetheart." Last January while Carol and I were on vacation, we heard her song performed three times. What a thrill to have known its creator!

The history of Patsy's Euphonon guitar began in 1937 when she and Paul brought a Martin to the Maurer & Co. shop on Elm Street in Chicago and asked the Larson Brothers to build one similar to it. Patsy grew to love this Euphonon. It was her traveling guitar as evidenced by the wear it now shows and the decals from Europe and the States which decorate the well-worn and patched case.

It has been played and lauded by other famous performers among whom are Hank Williams, Sr. and Roy Clark. Patsy related a story to me that one time in England while waiting backstage, she started talking to local band members. She told them she was thinking that with the wear and the scars on the guitar she might get a new one. But then she said no, she would keep it because Hank Williams, Sr. had played it. (He borrowed it to play a spot on Louisiana Hayride.) The band members she was talking to asked her if they could touch the guitar that Hank had played. She thought they were kidding until they, "Took it like it was a piece of gold. They looked at it and rubbed it all over admiring it even with the scars." Roy Clark also played it while waiting his turn to go on stage. Hank and Roy both commented about how good the tone was.

The guitar was retired when the peghead was broken off by an airline baggage mishap. The end of the peghead was glued back on but Patsy didn't think it would hold the pressure of the strings, so from then on she played Martin guitars.

After meeting Patsy and getting to know her for a few years, I felt more comfortable about asking her if I might acquire her famous guitar. Sometime later she replied that Martin had just presented her a new guitar and she could now part with her old friend, the Euphonon, if she would be able to visit it from time to time. I was overjoyed when, in December 1991, it arrived and I found myself like the guitarists in the band who ran their fingers over the dings and worn finish of the guitar not only played by Patsy but by Hank Williams, Sr. and others. It was a chilling experience. What a Christmas present!



Patsy with her husband Paul in 1946

and apprehensively strung it up to see if the peghead glue job would hold. There was so much glue on the broken joint that it had to hold. Every time I pick it up, it wants me to play "Your Cheatin' Heart" or "Ridin' Down The Canyon."

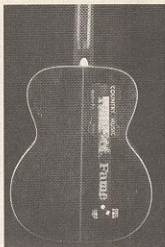
The guitar is featured in my book, *The Larsons' Creations: Guitars and Mandolins* (Centerstream Publishing) and on the accompanying CD this great guitar is played by Muriel Anderson who does a medley of songs that Patsy did on one of her albums.

The guitar is one of the less-expensive 15"-wide rosewood models that was quite popular in the later 1930s. Similar ones were sold by the Larsons for \$25. The guitar doesn't look like much these days but it still plays beautifully and has a great, warm sound which is attributed to the guitar itself and the added benefit of being aged and played so much for so many years. This sound is rarely accomplished. What a guitar!

I recently spoke to Nancy Ferrigo, the daughter of Chick Hurt of the Prairie Ramblers. She related that many times when Patsy came to Chicago she would stay with Nancy's folks. Patsy was invited to appear at the Chicago Museum of Broadcast Communication seminar on July 7, 1994. On this occasion Patsy stayed at Nancy's house where they went through some of the old sheet music of the Prairie Ramblers and reminisced. On the way to the airport for Patsy's return to California, she coaxed Nancy to sing a yodeling tune. Nancy said she finally got her to yodel again after about twenty years of silence. She said they then yodeled all the way to the airport. Patsy was such a happy person and joy for us to be with on the occasions when we met. She performed until a year before her death on May 3, 1996. She was inducted into the Country Music Hall of fame in Nashville October 2, 1996. What a classy lady, "cowgirl" that is! ■



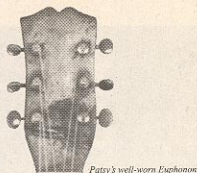
Patsy (center) with the Hartmans July 7, 1994



The back of Patsy's Euphonon with the country Music Hall of Fame sticker.



The case of the well-traveled guitar with stickers from around the world.



Patsy's well-worn Euphonon



The repaired headstock of the Euphonon

