



## Luthier Profile: Dwain Wilder

### Bear Meadow Dulcimers

by Dwain Wilder

#### **Night Song 1106**

*Sometimes the winter wind  
Regales the pine tops with its somber hymns,  
And the tree trunks rub their own woody song,  
Fluting and bassooning at one another  
Up the hillside behind our house,  
Like whales serenading  
In the snowy gray ocean of night.*

*As Dwain Wilder finishes building a mountain dulcimer he puts a poem inside it. This poem resides inside Bear Meadow dulcimer no. 1106. His dulcimers, known for their exquisite workmanship, playability and tone, are just as lovely as his poems. He is one of the builders who has helped bring about the mountain dulcimer's "coming of age" as a beautifully engineered and crafted musical instrument. We asked Dwain how he became a builder...*



I entered the world of the dulcimer through the work of my old friend, Walt Martin, of Sunhearth Dulcimers. I'd gone through the Navy with his son Mike, and after we were discharged at the same time I came home with him. I promptly fell in love with the whole family. Walt was soon calling me "Number Two Son." I married his grand-niece, and Mike and I became godfathers of each other's children.

In 1970 Walt Martin heard a dulcimer at a festival in State College, Pennsylvania, and felt an immediate attraction to it and its music. He had to have one, so he made it himself out of his grandmother's walnut bedstead and some redwood siding he had lying around. It sounded so good he decided to make one for every member of the family. By then he just couldn't let it go. He did some serious design research, and started taking the improved models around to craft fairs. By 1980 Walt made a thousand dulcimers. He had sold them around the world and established a reputation as a very good luthier. The Sunhearth design produced a uniquely full-bodied voice, and his instruments were widely sought after. But after a thousand, he was ready to retire. When I got wind of that, I told him I wanted to study with him and buy the business. He grinned and gave me an offer nobody could have refused. So I studied a couple of weeks with him to get the details down of what his building techniques were, and went home with his sanding machine, building forms, jigs, many tools, and a lot of his supply of wood. But we decided that the Sunhearth name should stay with the Martins. I would create my own brand – Bear Meadow.

It was an amazing experience for me to inherit Walter's mantle in the dulcimer world. I had instant acceptance in dulcimer circles. Walt had published an advertisement in Dulcimer Players News declaring me his successor, so most people knew what to expect of me. But I still had to earn my spurs! I made a few errors, produced a few dulcimers with buzzes all over the place. And got a neighborly hand from builders Carl Dietrichs at Bucks County Folk Music, Janita Baker, and Jerry Rockwell. I was amazed at the



openhandedness among dulcimer builders. I remember in particular being taken aback by Janita's generous advice, thanking her wonderingly and profusely. She just laughed and said, "Dwain, the world needs all the dulcimers it can get!"

After a few years I began to make discoveries about how to improve on Walt's techniques. Adding a shellac primer under his oil varnish brought the voice much more clarity and volume, since the wood surface wasn't soaked in oil. I also discovered a method for judging wood for the top and back, making it possible to shape and predict the voice of the instrument specifically for individual commissions – as well as enabling me to exactly reproduce the voice of any instrument I had ever made. And I started building a little lighter than Walt did. His tops, backs and sides were on the order of a tenth of an inch thick. Mine are about three-quarters of that. I lightened the bracing, and added a shellac primer inside to help keep the instrument insulated from rapid changes of humidity and temperature. One of the most important steps I took was to adopt the raised fretboard, which connects to the top with a series of feet, chosen to shape the voice. All these changes brought more volume, projection

and punch to the instrument, as well as giving a richer, more complex tone in the voice.

I also found the value of having all the members of the dulcimer under tension. The sides are cold-formed rather than steamed or heat-bent, so they retain a certain tension. Likewise, the back and top are also sprung into a slight dome. The effect on the instrument is that when it is played it immediately springs to life, much like asking a choir to stand on the balls of their feet while singing – all that tension is expressed in readiness. This makes for a quality that is often remarked about in Bear Meadow dulcimers: they are responsive to the lightest touch.



Bear Meadow dulcimer with raised fretboard and Flexifrets.

The most fun I've had with an innovation has been FlexiFrets. This is my invention to allow a fretboard to have removable frets, so chromatic frets such as the 1-1/2 can be inserted when needed, then taken out so it won't trip you up when you glissando up the fretboard in a diatonic scale. I took a chance and patented FlexiFrets and registered it as a trademark, hoping it would make a fortune for me. But, alas, I've learned that no one makes a fortune making – or playing – dulcimers. But it has been fun to sell them and install them.

Looking back, I can say that my goal has always been to build the very best dulcimers, and to stand behind them with a solid guarantee, and customer service even beyond guarantee. I want anyone who owns a Bear Meadow dulcimer to be delighted with it. I've told a lot of the story of how I do that on my website, <http://www.bearmeadow.com>. It has many photos and short articles about details of how I build, data about string tension and choice, finishes etc., and what my various models look like and are designed to accomplish. The website is also an important way for me to establish contact with the aspirations of people looking for high-quality dulcimers. Although selling at dulcimer festivals is vital to me in many ways, the majority of my sales are made through the website, from people all over the world who have heard nothing of my instruments except the mp3 files I have there.

The website is my way of declaring what my intentions are as a builder, but also of giving something back to the dulcimer community, to other builders. Budding young builders often write for information, or asking to study in one of my classes, or just to show off their work. I've even had Afghanis and Pakistanis write for information on how to work with hide glue. I make sure each letter is answered; it is part of being in the community of the Appalachian mountain dulcimer.

Some details of Bear Meadow Dulcimers:







Bear Meadow Dulcimer with integrated saddle element piezo-electric acoustic pick-up with optional MIDI interface by RMC.