



CARING FOR GRANDPA GEORGE

"Careful, woman, you're maiming my manhood."

We usually shared Thanksgiving with our daughter and her family in Nashville, Tennessee, where they lived, or visited historic places together. But in 2002, George was too tired to travel any long distance so the family came to Virginia. Elated about their visit, George ordered new harmonicas and washboards for our granddaughters Claire and Lorna, who were seven and three-and-a-half years old. He was a looming figure in their lives.

They shared a lively interest in both making music and making noise. George and Claire started jamming together on the harmonica and wooden washboard before she was four. During this visit, he wanted to give them new harmonicas and steel washboards—a replica of the real wooden washboards used by women to wash clothes before modern machines. I remember as a child during the Great Depression living in foster homes how, with a bar of hand-made lye soap, we scrubbed and rubbed the dirty laundry against the ridges on the wooden washboards

placed in washtubs. Our skinned knuckles were red and sore for days. Then it was time to start again.

George had learned to play the washboard when he was stationed in Nashville for Army boot camp in 1943. Early in the 20th century, jug bands used the washboard as a percussion instrument for Zydeco and jazz. The ridges on the boards were made with metal surfaces then which gave more sound. The players used a variety of items like spoons and thimbles to tap the metal ridges. It was considered a 'poor man's' instrument created for musicians who lacked the money to purchase real instruments.

As usual, in mid-afternoon when the family arrived, there was exuberant hollering as everyone hugged, ran around the car grabbing bags of stuff they brought, dropped things in the driveway, and squealed like piglets happy to be together again. When we were settled in the family room, George gave the girls the washboards and new harmonicas. Everyone was thrilled except, perhaps, the parents, who blinked their eyes at the sight of yet more noisemakers.

During our past visits, the girls and George jammed like other musicians. They sat on the floor in the family room with their instruments, singing and playing. There was no prepared music, just the free flowing noise they were able to squeeze out of their harmonicas and whip up on the washboards. George named them the Ramage Ragtime Band.

He loved ragtime and jazz from his earliest childhood memories when his father played violin in the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. His father also played