

# Senior Scope

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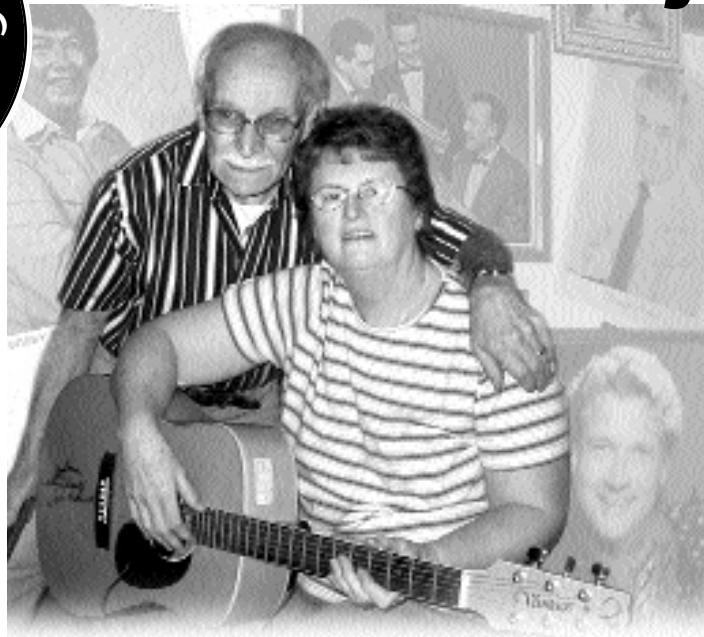
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Our Spotlights  
this issue...  
**Gail & Bennie**  
(the Polish cowboy)  
**Karman**  
Winnipeg, MB

## Love & Harmony



Meet **Bennie and Gail Karman**, if you haven't already. Chances are, you may have seen them perform in various locations throughout Winnipeg and in several rural communities with their duo comedy/music show.

Bennie has been pegged as the 'Polish Cowboy,' a name that stemmed from being Polish and working at a race track in his younger years. That has since become his stage name and he uses it with pride.

Before meeting Gail, Bennie had been performing for several years with his stand-up comedy routine and diatonic harmonica playing. Diatonic means in one key, so Bennie is equipped with several harmonicas to be able to play in the key of his choice. Later, he had joined a 17-member troupe of performers from Winnipeg, Manitoba, and "barnstormed," bringing their acts from town to town. Members of this troupe included Patty Osborne, daughter of a local war hero whom an ANAF club was named after; Don Comstock, emcee and stand-up comedian; and Ray Starr, a magician, to mention a few.

Bennie, originally from Winnipeg, met Gail in Dryden, Ontario. She lived there and Bennie was working in Red Lake, Ontario. He was in Dryden competing in a bowling tournament where Gail was a scorekeeper.

A spark ignited and they have been married now for 19 years. Bennie jokes that Gail is still keeping score.

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Gail was raised in a musical family. Her mother sang opera, but Gail favoured her father's preference of country. She also enjoyed gospel. Her father played guitar while her uncle played fiddle. Gail learned to play guitar, herself, and she and her sister would sing in front of friends and family.

## **Getting the Show on the Road**

When Gail and Bennie holidayed in Texas, they had their own place. Bennie 'jammed' at the musical gatherings in the trailer parks while Gail sat back and watched. She tired of this after a few years, and after listening to some of the other singers, Gail got brave and decided to 'get even'. With this she meant she would make the audience listen to her after all that she had to listen to. Gail was terrified that first time, but she became hooked nonetheless. Since then, the duo collaborated and formed their stage show calling themselves, "A Little Bit of Everything." Taking turns, Bennie plays harmonica covering a wide range of music styles along with some stand-up comedy, while Gail plays guitar and sings country with some gospel. They had performed up and down the Rio Grande Valley in trailer parks and at the South Texas Music Festival in Weslaco, Texas, where they shared the main stage with the likes of Kenneth Horton, the Forrest Carter Family, Stonewall Jackson, Nester Pister, plus many others. They even opened for Donnie Snead, a regular performer in Branson, Missouri. Stonewall Jackson signed both Bennie's harmonica case and Gail's guitar in 1997. He signed Bennie's case, again, in 2006 while in Winnipeg.

Bennie and Gail have travelled to many places with their show, all for fun. Jolene Bullard, host of the Oklahoma Sooner morning radio show, commented that, "The things Bennie can do with a harmonica should be classed as illegal!" She witnessed Bennie's and Gail's act at an Old-Time Country Music Festival in Avoca, Iowa, and had requested their tape that she played on air.

## **A Little Bit of Everything on CD**

*A Little Bit of Everything* is a self-titled CD in the works. It's a compilation of live comedy/music acts recorded at various locations throughout mostly Winnipeg over the past few years. This is their second CD with the first being a collection of tunes and songs performed by both Gail and Bennie.

## **What It's All About**

Bennie, 77, and Gail, 66, do almost everything together. They feel that if you have talents, you should share it with others and put smiles on their faces. That's what Bennie and Gail live for, and doing it together seems to strengthen their bond.

Gail also is a champion chili maker. She placed first in a cook-off for a United Way fundraiser, and placed 2nd internationally (1st provincially) in the 6th Annual Manitoba Championship Chili Cook-off in 1994 at Assiniboia Downs. She also enjoys painting on canvas and unique images on rocks.

Bennie won the South Texas Music Festival International Harmonica Championship in 1999 and a trophy was presented by the Mayor of Weslaco,

Texas. Besides the harmonica, Bennie plays a mean set of spoons, too!

Bennie speaks fluent Polish. His mother came from Poland at the age of 8, and married at the age of 14. She insisted that her children attend school three evenings a week after regular school to learn to read and write Polish. Bennie also speaks Ukrainian and Native Swampy Cree—languages he picked up on the go.

## **Speed Bumps Don't Mean Slow Down**

Bennie has been performing for 55 years, and Gail about 15. The dynamic duo show no signs of slowing down with their ongoing performances and CD making. Even with Bennie's pending knee replacement operation and recent heart attack in January, he looks forward to 'putting smiles on people's faces' (his highest priority) with his best friend and partner, Gail.

Bennie already had a hip replacement eight years ago. He is grateful for his knee problem in an ironic way. While he was in the hospital prepping for the surgery, nurses discovered that he was having a heart attack while they were checking his pulse.

Because Bennie's knee surgery is postponed for a year, they can keep their scheduled bookings to perform at Deer Lodge March 26 and April 30 at 7 pm, Lindenwood Manor on April 11 and Villa Cabrini on April 17, so far.

## **The Show Must Go On**

Gail and Bennie had been going to Texas for 11 years but health insurance costs sky-rocketed. They miss their friends and music down south, but they continue to delight audiences right here in Manitoba. They have been entertaining at nursing homes, senior complexes and senior centres in Winnipeg, Stonewall, Portage la Prairie, Selkirk and other smaller communities for over ten years. They performed at places in Winnipeg such as Deer Lodge Centre, Amber Meadows, Portsmouth, Donwood Manor, The Wellington, Gwen Sector Creative Living and Appleton Estates, plus others.

Gail's wit is in stride with Bennie's humour and together, they are a hit on-stage. She is gifted at getting the audience to sing along and Bennie is a master at getting them to laugh along. ■