

Music on Main Street

"All I had was a balloon guy and a jug band... the idea being in my little old brain, we can do this in Orange." Al Packard was attending a county fair and event trade show in Pennsylvania. On one side of him was the Sadie Green Sales jug band and across from him was Dennie Huber, a magician and a...well...balloon guy. And from that, Al Packard hatched Music on Main Street, a First Night-style, alcohol-free New Year's Eve celebration right here in little ol' Orange.

It seems that to use the copyrighted name "First Night," they would have to pay \$1,800 and attend a three-day seminar on just how to do that. Well, Al already has some experience in organizing musical events, most notably the Picnic in the Park Independence Day celebration. So, he and the Celebrate Orange Committee are doing it on their own.

With any luck, Music on Main Street should become an enduring Orange County tradition. Besides, who wants to drive all the way to Charlottesville or Fredericksburg, when you can get everything you need right here in Orange? And it's a bargain too. A badge to attend the various events costs \$5 a head if purchased in advance from the Orange Visitors Bureau in the Train Station. On the night of the event, it goes up to \$7.



Dennie Huber will bring his mix of magic, music and humor to the Music on Main Street celebration New Year's Eve in Orange.

Here's what you get:

Orange County native and five CD recording artist Terri Allard trades 40-minute sets with the Gordonsville-based Americana acoustic string trio, Odd Legged Jenny in the Orange Baptist Church sanctuary.

The two-man multi-instrumental Sadie Green Sales Jug Band, which in addition to conventional guitar, banjo, clarinet, saxophone and vocals, plays the musical saw, washboard, jugs, washtub and more at the Methodist Church Sanctuary.

Magician and balloon artist, Dennie Huber, "has a different colored coat for every day of the week. He's pretty funny," says Al Packard. Dennie, all 350 pounds of him, has a busy schedule at the Orange Methodist Church Fellowship Hall.

The Sauerkraut Oompah Band, complete with guys in Lederhosen and girls in blond braids at the Presbyterian Church Main Sanctuary.

The Performing Arts Dancers perform at their home venue on Main Street where the old Firehouse Café used to

be.

Orange Jam- John Keifer's band of local teenagers do their rock and roll thing on guitar, bass, keyboards, drums and vocals on the second floor of the Arts Center in Orange.



The Sergeant Family Bluegrass Band appears at the Orange Train Station.

An organ recital by Bob Brockman will happen at St. Thomas Episcopal Church.

And of course...The Community Band and Chorus, with Al Packard at the controls, will perform at the Presbyterian Church Main Sanctuary.

And it's not just about music....a food court will be set up in Taylor Park, and kids will find plenty to do at the various "Creation Stations" and "Childs Activities Areas" in the Baptist Church lower level, the first floor of the Arts Center in Orange and Presbyterian Church Fellowship Hall.

Also, Frank Walker will present historical programs at St. Thomas Episcopal Church and the Historical Society, and Duff Green will have a display of Orange's History in Pictures, also at the Historical Society on Caroline Street.

And then of course there's this thing called New Year's. Shortly before midnight, everyone should gather within sight of the courthouse to count-down and watch the big orange ball slide down the pole. "We haven't made it yet," said Al Packard in late November, "but it's going to work. It's going to slide down the pole and when it reaches the bottom the fireworks are going to start."

the hardest part in funeral service is a baby, or a youth, or a high school kid who's been killed in a crash."

It also involves a measure of delicate diplomacy. "Dealing with the families.... It's a stressful time for them and sometimes they don't understand regulations, they don't understand why they can't have things exactly as they want them." He remembers once in South Hill, "we had a death and two sisters got into a knock-down, drag-out in the funeral home because they didn't agree on something. They were throwing punches." He softens and adds, "If you can offer them any comfort or consolation, then that's when you've done your job."

Throughout all these late-in-life moves...Boston, Cape Cod, South Hill, Barb was always able to find work because she's a nurse. "The best thing I did was marry a woman who was a nurse and could make money," Al jokes. Not only that, she can also play music. "She's more musical than I am," he readily admits. "She's my instrumentalist. She plays the organ. She's the organist here. She accompanies all my choruses. She plays clarinet in the band."

And so, in 2000, a friend and former resident of South Hill who had moved to Orange called with the news that Orange Presbyterian Church had lost its

organist of 35 years. "You ought to come up. We need an organist and a choir director," he said. They did, and before they even saw the church Barb had landed a job with Orange Family Physicians. The rest is history.

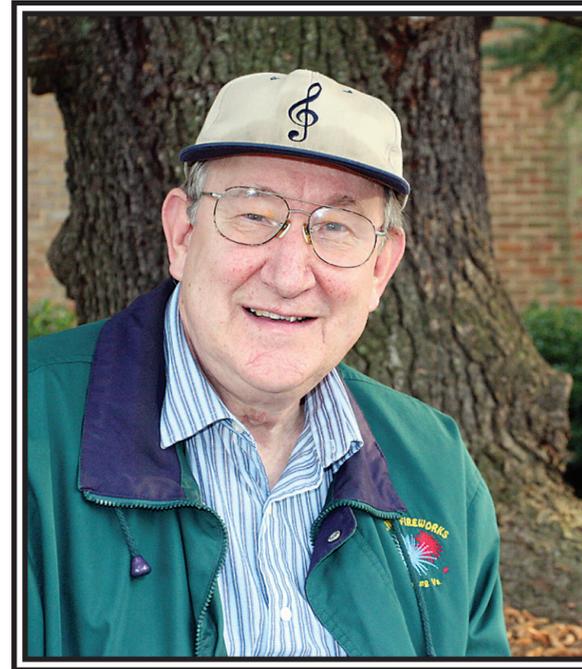
Together they accompany and direct ("Barb plays, and I direct.") the adult, youth and hand-bell choirs and instrumental ensemble at Orange Presbyterian Church. In addition to that, Al created and directs the Orange Community Band. And if that's not enough, he's chairman of the Orange Downtown Alliance's Celebrate Orange Committee that organizes

Picnic in the Park for July 4th and now, Music on Main Street, New Year's Eve.

And so, when that six-foot-diameter Orange ball slides down the pole at the courthouse at midnight on New Year's Eve, you might give Al some thanks and say a small prayer as you consider this: Al Packard will now turn his attention to something more pressing than Celebrate Orange and Music on Main Street and the Picnic in the Park and all the other things he has given this community... he will focus on helping his lifemate and helpmate, Barb, win her battle against cancer. With a 50-50 chance, he's banking 100 percent on victory.

The treble clef on his cap tells the story that Al Packard has been involved in either performing or directing choral music since he was in the fifth grade.

Photo by Phil Audibert



Despite all of his jobs, **the one thing that Al has consistently done all his life is music.**

Remember the nursery rhyme/counting game Tinker, Tailor? Let's reword it, particularly because this guy is not a thief. How about this instead:

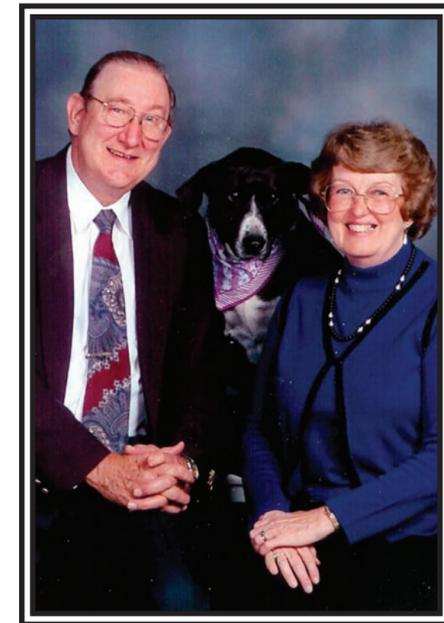
Fisherman, music man, hand-bell ringer. Actor, director, mortician, singer...and insurance salesman...and apple orchard manager...and lumberman...and mason's assistant...and public school music teacher, ...and pyrotechnician. Pyrotechnician???

"I can count on fingers and toes the number of jobs I've had," says Al Packard a tad sheepishly. "I've done many, many things, and I've liked most everything I've done."

Al Packard, Orange's beloved adopted "Down-Easter," a gentle giant of a fellow...his choir members, instrumentalists,

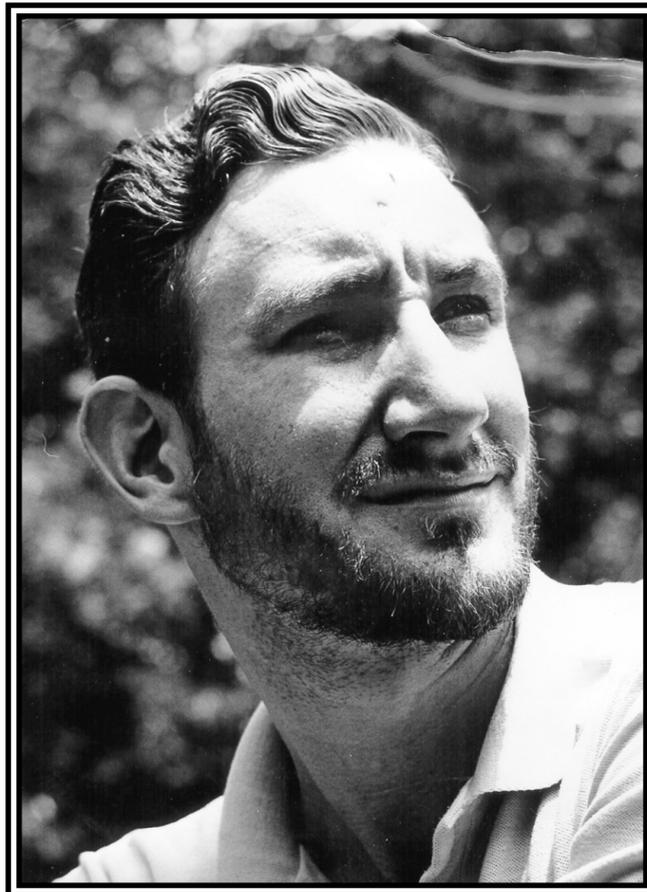
hand-bell ringers, and fellow Celebrate Orange board members are awed by his uncanny knack to make things happen. It is because of Al that Picnic in the Park, Orange's Independence Day celebration, has grown in a few short years into a major musical production and fireworks display. And it is because of him that Orange will ring in this New Year with a "First Night" style celebration up and down Main Street. Yet he refuses to crow. Al Packard is modest, crediting his fellow board members, for doing the leg work and raising the money to make his dreams come true.

Why does he do this? Simple. He loves Orange. "I'm an outsider and I'm new, but we love it," he confirms. "Orange is a great place to live. I don't know why people move away." A relative newcomer to the area, his Maine accent gives him away.



A fairly recent picture of Al and Barb Packard and their faithful dog, Shadow. Al directs the adult, youth and hand-bell choirs at Orange Presbyterian Church as well as the Community Chorus. Barb plays the organ, accompanies the choirs, plays clarinet in the Community Band and rings four hand bells at once in the hand-bell choir.

**Tinker,
Tailor,
Soldier,
Sailor,
Rich man,
Poor man,
Beggar man,
Thief**



A publicity photo from a summer stock theatre in Brunswick, Maine gives us a different glimpse of "song and dance man," Al Packard.

"They say, 'you're not from here are you,' he chuckles as he, "pahks the cah" behind the Orange Presbyterian Church where he inhabits the basement as the church's director of music. "My dungeon," he calls it.

Despite all of his jobs, the one thing that Al has consistently done all his life is music. "I started singing in youth choir when I was in fifth grade and I've been in a choir as either a singer or director since then." CDs sitting on the dash of his car run the gamut from the Beach Boys to Brahms. But most of all, "I love orchestral music."

Born and raised in Maine, Al Packard majored in "voice" at the University of Maine and wound up spending 18 years in Brunswick. "Part of that time I was teaching, part of that time I was fishing and all of that time, I was director of music at the First Parish Church."

Fishing...that's another thing Al did for a long time...35 years. But we're not talking about throwing a worm on a hook and watching the cork bob on a mill pond. No... Al was a commercial lobster (lobstah) fisherman. He

started out as a teenager rowing a dory out from the point on the family farm into the harbor (hahbuh) to check 150 traps a day. That grew to a full-size, 36-foot eastern rig side trawler, that "I lost in a storm...it snapped the mooring line and came ashore and I couldn't get to it...it broke the keel." He replaced it with another lobster boat. During his peak, Al was checking 450 traps, 150 per day.

He sums up commercial fishing. "I loved fishing, but it's a very iffy proposition. If you catch fish, the price is down. When you can't catch fish, the price goes up. It's a wonderful free-spirit job. You can go if you want to and if you don't want to you don't have to. But if you don't go, you won't make any money. There are no benefits."

He would even go out in the Maine winter! "Ice in the riggin.' I winter fished for over four years on a dragger. We dragged for ground fish, flat fish, shrimp, scallops. It's cold! I lost a finger hauling back a bag of scallops." He looks down at his short-by-one-knuckle left index finger. "My glove caught in the cable." He remembers the captain turning the dragger around. "We were 45 minutes off shore, and he took the end of my finger and put it in a jar." Al, with a handkerchief over the injured digit, kept on sorting scallops with his right hand until they reached port. "It wasn't too bad until the nurse came in and she grabbed a pad of iodine and put it on the end of this thing and I thought I was going to go through the roof!" Al pauses a moment and adds resignedly, "That sort of limited my piano playing and my violin playing."

But not his singing...nor his acting. "I was 18 years as a song and dance man in a professional summer stock theatre," he blurts unexpectedly. He even remembers coming into rehearsals "smelling like bait," adding, "I was always the character actor. I was never the leading man."

He nostalgically leafs through a photo album of his acting career. Al singing first tenor in the barber-shop quartet in "Music Man," Al as a Buddhist Monk in the "King and I," as Officer Krupke in "West Side Story," ...60 Broadway musical productions in all. A theatre publicity photo shows a muscular Al Packard with a beard and a rakish, faraway look to his eye.

It was in Brunswick that Al met a pretty nurse named Barbara at the First Parish Church. She had joined the choir he directed. Both coming off of divorces, they married, and to this day, Al says, "It was the best thing I ever did."

In those days Al was teaching music in public school. "I gave up teaching in the early 80s after it got to be you couldn't discipline a child. You couldn't control your classroom because you couldn't discipline a child. I said I don't need this."

So here it is, the mid 1980s, Al has given up teaching in public school and has taken "a no place job" with a lumber company. A friend sug-



Al Packard played the part of the lawyer in the musical adaptation of Gigi. Al was involved with summer stock theatre for 18 years and performed in 60 Broadway-style musicals.

gests that he look into funeral service as a possible career. On a lark, Al and Barb drove to Boston where he interviewed with the Dean of the New England Institute. "The term has begun," he remembers the dean saying. "If you wait two weeks, you'll be so far behind, you'll never catch up. If you want to do this, be here Monday morning." So Al went home and talked to his boss. "I gave him three days notice and Sunday I packed up and went to Boston to go to school in funeral service. I didn't know anything about it and my first class was anatomy dissection at Harvard Medical School." (We don't know if Al actually did pahk the cah in Hahvuhd Yahd.)

"I walked into the class and there were about 20 of us there and the instructor came in with his little white coat and said, 'Alright... there's three bodies in the cooler, get those out here and we'll start working.' And I'm saying, 'Wellllllll...let's see.'" Al pauses and adds, "But after about two minutes it was so interesting that I never had a squeamish thought and from there we went on and I graduated and got a job with a very nice company on Cape Cod."

That job lasted five years until a corporation bought the funeral home. Al came back from vacation and was summoned to the general manager's office. "Your job has been terminated. You need to get your stuff and thank you very much." Seems the GM had a son who had just graduated and needed work. Al, who was last hired, was now first fired.

And that's how he came to Virginia...South Hill to be exact, right on the Virginia-North Carolina border. Al worked with a funeral home there for six years. Of funeral service he says, there are two things that are tough: "One is a late-night call, because you're on call 24-7, and



Al Packard figures he was about 10 years old when this family photo was taken. Note the piano in the background. Al first started singing when he was in the fifth grade.

Al Packard is a licensed and bonded pyrotechnician. He works for Dominion Fireworks Inc., of Petersburg. At the Picnic in the Park Independence Day celebration this past summer, when he finished directing the Orange Community Chorus, he ran around back, changed hats and shot fireworks. It was his third show in almost as many days. "I love hand-fired shows. It's a real rush," he says animatedly.

At press time, Al and the Orange Downtown Alliance were seeking

permission to shoot what are known as "close-proximity" fireworks New Year's Eve from the courthouse roof. Al guarantees it will be safe and the courthouse will not catch fire or blow up. People need to "understand the difference between aerial fireworks and close-proximity," he explains patiently. Aerial fireworks, such as we saw at Booster's Park this past summer is "the big stuff...you light them and there's fire falling." For every inch in shell diameter, the crowd must stand back another 100 feet.

the ultimate test of teamwork. "If somebody is missing, you have a real hole," observes Al. "Everybody has to show up."

Anyway, back in the mid 1980s, Al was the chairman of the American Guild of English Hand Bell Ringers...yes...such an organization does indeed exist. It was 1984 and the New England chapter was hosting the national convention over the Fourth of July weekend. Al contacted a fireworks company. They'd be happy to supply the fireworks; they just couldn't spare anyone to shoot them. So Al volunteered. He took the test, attended the required three shoots, passed with flying colors, and shot the show.

Here it is, 22 years later, and he is in charge of inventory control for Dominion Fireworks Inc. "I have to account for every shell that comes in and I pack every show that goes out." Al is licensed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. He also has a commercial driver's license (fingerprint, background check) so he can transport fireworks. Although he will not personally shoot the Music on Main Street show (it will be done by certified Dominion employees) he guarantees it will go without a hitch. "We know what we're doing and we know how to do it right," he says confidently.

show" of aerial fireworks from Porterfield Park. "I don't want to do that because it means we have to move everybody from Main Street to the football field," says Al wearily.

For Al, this fireworks thing all started with hand-bells. Currently, he conducts the Orange Presbyterian Church's three-octave hand-bell choir. His wife, Barb can play four bells simultaneously; most people can only play two, covering just two notes in a 12-note scale. Do the math. A three-octave choir requires as much as 18 ringers. It is

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"Close-proximity fireworks, when they burn, they burn cold," continues Al. "There is no residue. There is no fall-out from them. Close-proximity are all done electronically. They are all pre-wired," adding that close-proximity fireworks are even used indoors at rock concerts and other events. He has photographs of shows his company has done off courthouse roofs in Harrisonburg, Chesterfield, King William.

He holds up a five-inch long narrow tube. "This is called a waterfall. It will run for 15 seconds and it will go 15 feet...It will make a stream of silver that looks like water," he explains patiently. "There is absolutely no way that anything is going to happen up there."

If permission is not granted, they will do what's known as a "cake



Above, choir director, Al Packard demonstrates two hand bells. In the mid 1980s he was the chairman of the American Society of English Hand Bell Ringers. Below, Packard shows what "close-proximity" fireworks look like. This one is called a "waterfall." It is electronically triggered and sprays a stream of silver that looks like water for 15 feet for 15 seconds. It has no burning residue or fallout. Packard hopes to be able to set off these safe fireworks from the courthouse roof, New Years Eve.

Photos by Phil Audibert

