

“The spark that turned into a bonfire”

## **History of the Iowa Happy Ukulele Guild**

Around the year 2001 I made my first journey to Hawaii, and on that trip bought a beautiful little ukulele. Although it was a musical instrument and not just a souvenir look-alike, it sat in my closet until 2022. Then as I was downsizing all my “stuff” and sending it away to relatives I re-discovered that ukulele. At that same time I had been preparing various programs using Power Point. While researching material for one of my presentations I encountered a video by the Austin Ukulele Society. That was the spark that said to me “I need to learn to play that instrument” and it inspired me to want to bring that experience to Washington, Iowa.

So a Power Point presentation was prepared on the ukulele; its history, construction and videos of talented players. This Power Point program was then presented the first week of February at the Washington Public library and two days later at the Halcyon House Senior Center. I did not yet play the instrument, but that began the journey to learning how. That first presentation was immediately followed by an invitation to participate in a ukulele concert on February 3<sup>rd</sup> at the library that had been arranged by two library pages, Claire and Rita. Both were experienced ukulele musicians who presented inspiring music for the guests. This was soon followed with a performance by a university music professor and professional musician Tom Nothnagle, of Iowa City who performed on several kinds of ukulele at Halcyon House on February 25<sup>th</sup>.

All of this activity spawned the first sessions of what has become the Iowa Happy Ukulele Guild groups in early March. There were nine attendees at the first session on March 8, 2022, held at the Washington County Public Library. Since March there have been three separate groups meeting once a month at different dates and times. After six sessions participants could play 18 songs on the ukulele. These tunes included several by The Beatles, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Led Zeppelin, Neil Diamond, Leonard Cohen and others. They have begun finger picking style playing which adds variety, and have played with other instrumentalists.

On July 10, 2022 we had our first Campfire Ukulele Play along at Marr Park, near Washington. This was attended by 14 participants with food, prizes, music and, of course, a campfire. A second campfire play-along/sing-along was scheduled for October but had to be scrubbed due to COVID. Although our numbers are small compared to the awesome 220 in the Austin Ukulele Society, we were successful. Given that the population of Austin, Texas is 2,200,000 their group represents one ukulele player for each 10,000 population. Washington does not even have a population of 10,000 so we are statistically several times more successful than the Austin group!

We had another Play-along/sing-along event December 12<sup>th</sup> at the library that focused on traditional and secular Christmas songs. That group was larger than the first. So we ended 2022 on a positive note. March 2023 will be the anniversary month of our first year of meeting. A library calendar has already scheduled several events for 2023 up through December. These events include a return to Marr Park and a Christmas program, as in 2022.