

Curator's Choice

Fourth of July for the Harmonica!

By: Virginie Ternisien, Conservator, MAC Lab

The harmonica is a free reed wind instrument. Its history goes back to Asia thousand years ago from the Chinese sheng (Figure 1). The harmonica, as we know it today, first became prominent in the early nineteenth century in Trossingen, Germany. In 1857, a German clock maker Matthias Hohner started mass production and then, supplied North America. It propelled the Hohner Company as world leader by 1887 with the production of more than one million harmonicas annually. It has become an iconic instrument in the United States, featured in American folk music, played by soldiers at the front lines during the Civil War (1861–1865) and even by Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States.

Every type of harmonica consists of three essential components (Figure 2): one body or comb, two reed plates and two cover plates, held together with nails or screws. Historical examples can be made from wood or metal, or a combination of these materials.

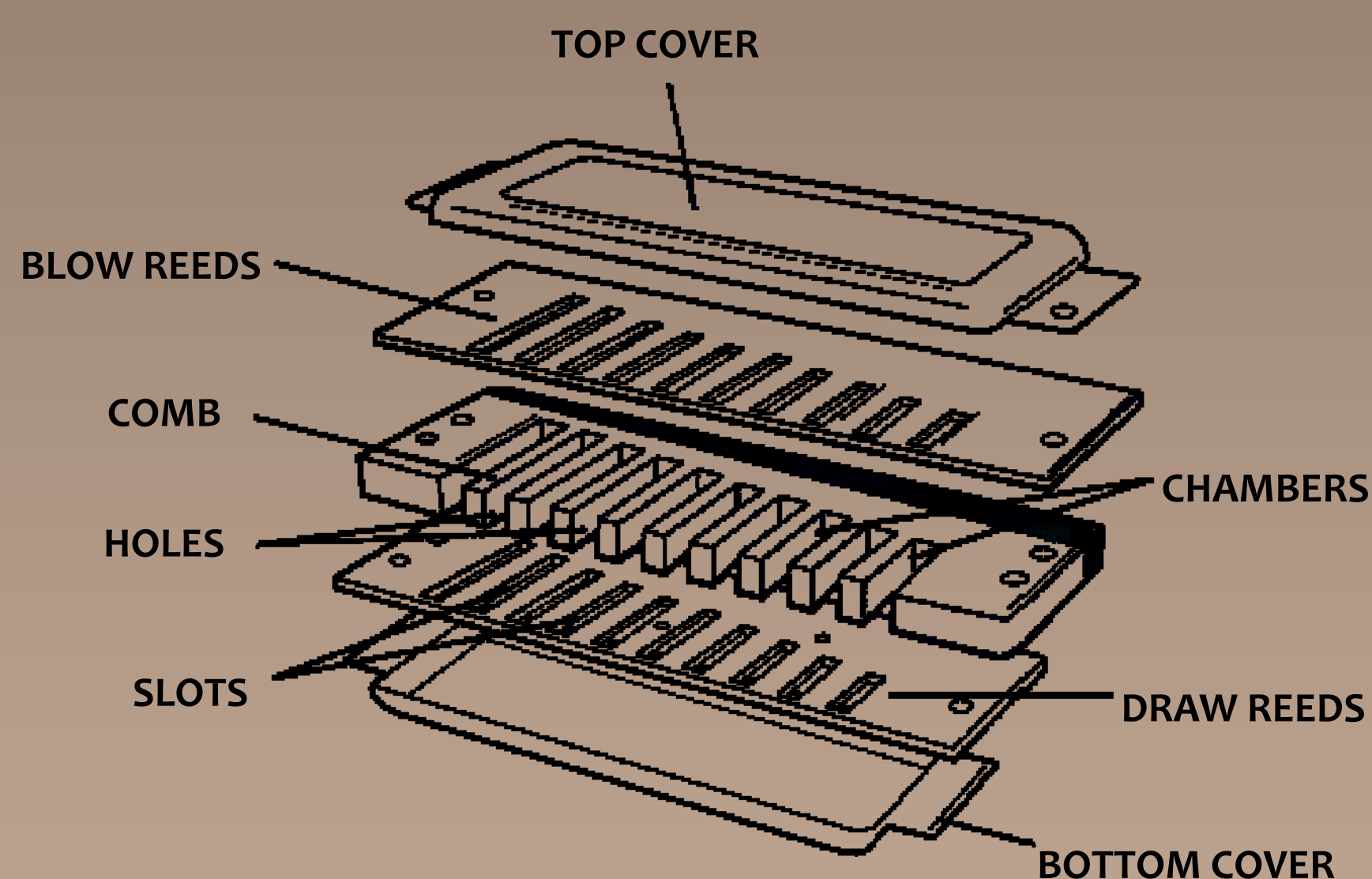


Figure 2: Basic construction of a harmonica, © <http://www.netplaces.com/harmonica/the-basics/>.

When found in excavation (Figure 3), evidence of harmonicas often consists of corroded copper alloy parts, fragmented and deformed. The original surface appearance may be lost, transformed into green-colored patinas or crusts. Inscriptions revealing the manufacturer may be preserved. Wooden parts are more subject to deterioration (Cronyn, 1990), their structure has often distorted in response to environmental conditions. However, sources such as American warehouse catalogues [*The Montgomery Ward & Company* (1872–2000); *The Sears, Roebuck & Company* (1888–1993)] and ancient harmonicas gathered by collectors (Peter Kassan, Alan G. Bates, Figure 4) provide precious information for archaeologists confronted to harmonicas disfigured by aging in their burial environment.

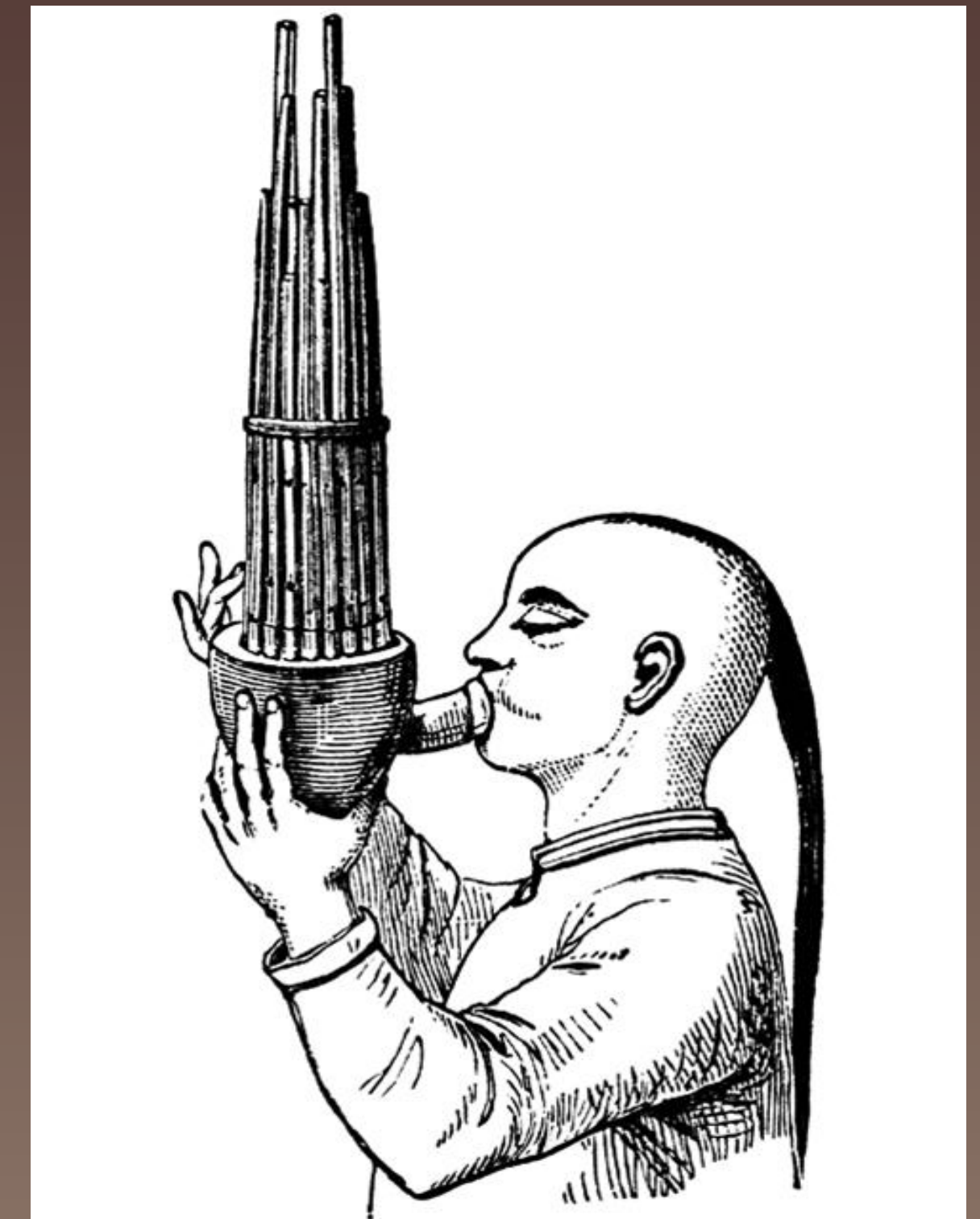


Figure 1: Chinese musician playing the sheng instrument (3000 BC). © http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/56400/56475/56475_sheng.htm.



Figure 3: Archaeological harmonicas parts in different conditions: copper reed plates and wooden comb still adhered with a nail, its top surface shows remains of yellow painting. Recovered from Jackson Homestead, ca. 1820-1916, © JPPM.

With a great variety of types, harmonicas allow the player freedom of expression in all forms of music (classical, blues, country, rock, etc.), deeply in harmony with the spirit of the American Independence Day, celebrated on July 4th. So, “Please, love me do...”

Harmonica history and construction:

<http://www.patmissin.com/history/history.html>
<http://www.ksanti.net/free-reed/essays/mouthful.html>
<http://www.bluzkat.com/harphist.htm>



Figure 4: Aero Band Zeppelin Harmonica by M. Hohner, Trossingen, ca. 1909-1924, © National Music Museum, South Dakota.

References Cited

- Cronyn, J. M.
1990 *The Elements of Archaeological Conservation*. Routledge. London.
- Harter, J.
1980 *Music, a pictorial archive of woodcuts & engravings: 841 copyright-free illustrations for artists & designers*. Dover Publications. New York.
- Montgomery Ward
1969 *Montgomery Ward & Company catalogue and buyers' guide 1895*. Dover Publications. New York.
- Sears, Roebuck and Company
1970 *The 1927 edition of the Sears Roebuck catalogue*. Bounty Books. New York.
1986 *The 1902 edition of the Sears Roebuck catalogue*. Bounty Books. New York.

Recommended Museums:

- National Music Museum, South Dakota, Alan G. Bates Harmonica Collection. <http://orgs.usd.edu/nmm/>
- National Museum of American History, Washington D.C.
Peter Kassan Harmonica Collection.
- The Music Man Square, Meredith Willson Museum, Iowa.
Alan G. Bates Harmonica Collection. <http://www.themusicmansquare.org/>
- The Deutsches Harmonika Museum,
Trossingen, Germany <http://www.harmonika-museum.de/>



10515 Mackall Road
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685
410-586-8501 www.jefpat.org

Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum is part of the Maryland Historical Trust, and agency of the Maryland Department of Planning, Baltimore.

