

A Brief History of Ron Akers and His Bluegrass Band
By Ron Akers, with Ken Tunnell

The Bluegrass Band started playing at the Annual Meetings in 1993. At the meetings in 1992, Dave Hawkins, who was on the Minority Fellowship Committee at the time, asked if I could produce a bluegrass/country band to play on Friday night at ASC the next year to help raise money for the minority fellowship fund. Ken Tunnell and I, and a few others, had for years been jamming in my room or in some other location in the convention hotel. In addition to the “pickers” at these jams, we almost always were joined by “grinners” who came to listen (such as Charles Tittle who I believe missed no jam and has been present at all of the shows). Also, at the 1988 meeting in Chicago during the reception on the occasion of my having received the Sutherland Award that year, Ken and I recruited some of our jamming friends to give a bluegrass performance at the reception. Dave knew all about this and often joined us in the jams, and that was the background for his approaching me to put on a bluegrass show. I told him I would be happy to do it. I talked to Ken about it. He immediately agreed to take part and helped to form a band with some of those who had been participating in the jam sessions to play the minority fellowship fundraising event the next year. Dave also approached Larry Sherman about putting together a rock band for the same purpose of raising funds for the minority fellowships, and Larry agreed.

Consequently, beginning in 1993, at the meetings in Phoenix, both groups started appearing on Friday nights at ASC with the Bluegrass group starting, and the rock group, Larry and the Hot Spots, finishing the evening providing good rock dance music. To make the transition from the bluegrass to the rock show, we would have the Hot Spots join us on stage to finish our set with everyone in both band and members of the audience singing “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.” The Bluegrass band continues to the present time to end each of our shows with all singing that song.

Over the years the shows raised a considerable amount of funds for the minority fellowships. For many years, all donations for the fund were taken by members of the minority fellowship committee and others assisting them at the door to the ballroom. I still have fond memories of asking Julius Debro how good the donations were, and he would answer by showing large wads of cash collected that night. As I recall, the donations for the fellowship fund for the evening typically totaled around \$3,000 to \$4,000.

We actually did not have a name for our bluegrass group in the beginning, but it appeared in the 1993 program as Ron Akers and His Bluegrass Band, and that name has stuck with us through the years. To the best of my recollection that first band consisted of myself (dobro), Ken Tunnell (guitar), Ben Crouch (guitar), and Neal Shover (singing); we were joined that same year or the next by Jeff Ferrell (guitar), and that remained the core group for many years. From the beginning we would invite others we knew who sang or played instruments to join on stage for one or more songs, starting the first year with Bill Chambliss singing “Wabash Cannon Ball,” and through the years we have had a number of them singing or playing instruments with us. Dave Hawkins and Kevin Stenson often joined us with their harmonicas. And some of those guests quickly became regular members of the band. For a period of years we had Bud Fogerty (mandolin) and Ed Denver (banjo) as members of the group. For the past several years the core regular members of the group have been Ken and I, Terry Cox (guitar), Jeff Ferrell (guitar),

Mark Hamm (harmonica) Eddy Green (guitar), Tasha Youstin (with her fantastic yodeling), and Chris Eskridge joining us on stage to sing a couple of songs. The ASC leadership began to experiment a bit with the Friday night fund raiser bringing in hip hop and other music, moving both the Bluegrass Band and the Hot Spots shows to Wednesday evening for the opening reception. Eventually, the Hot Spots moved back to Friday night. The Bluegrass Band stayed with a show on Wednesday evening, and we are there still.

These bluegrass shows at ASC are the only times that we play together as a band. Each year we get together at the ASC meetings the day before or the afternoon of the day we are to perform that night, usually meeting in my room and creating a play list and order of songs, going over new songs and rehearsing old songs. I am fond of saying that we don't need to "practice" but only to "rehearse."

We have all thoroughly enjoyed doing these shows for so many years and trust that those in attendance have enjoyed listening. We plan to keep going as long as we are invited to do so. See you there.

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