

The Larson Brothers' Legacy

By Robert Hartman

By now a fair number of guitar buffs are familiar with or have heard of the Larson brothers of Chicago who built hand-made guitars and mandolins using the Maurer & Co. name for their business. They produced instruments under the brand names of Maurer, Prairie State, Euphonon, Wm. C. Stahl, W.J. Dyer & Bros., Stetson, assorted names such as H.F. Meyers and Kaai, and others who put their names on the Larsons' products.

Carl Larson left Sweden at the age of 18. On April 16, 1886, he boarded a steamship at Gothenburg bound for Hull, Great Britain. From there he traveled by train to Liverpool and sailed for America destined for Chicago. On April 22 of the following year August, along with his parents and two sisters, made the same journey. In those early years, Carl, and probably August, worked for E. J. Cubley of Evanston, Illinois which likely was their apprenticeship in the business of lutherie. His company produced guitars for Lyon & Healy from 1882 to 1885 and mandolins until 1886. Cubley was unable to meet the growing demands of Lyon & Healy, so they started producing their own under the Washburn name. In 1893 Cubley's factory burned down, and it is likely that the Larsons started working for Maurer at that time. August and some investors bought out Robert Maurer's guitar and mandolin factory at 29-39 Erie in Chicago in 1900 and retained the Maurer name.



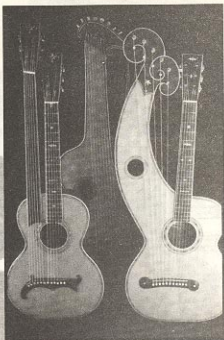
A small, thin-bodied guitar built by Carl and given to his son Alden in 1917. The guitar measures 27 1/4" deep.



Muriel Anderson with the thin-bodied guitar seen at left during the recording session for the CD that accompanies the Larson Brothers book.



Left: W.J. Dyer Style #8 Harp Guitar with treble of 14 fingerboard. This same fingerboard design was used on the top-of-the-line Maurers and Prairie State guitars. Right: Early double-neck harp guitar (left); center shows variations of 1912 patent of harp guitar with internal chamber forming 12" body inside larger one. On right, Style #7 Dyer Harp Guitar. The Larsons also made other styles and variations of harp guitars.



From the start of the century to the retirement of Carl in 1940 and the death of August and the company in 1944, the Larsons produced quite an impressive number of high quality instruments. The variety of types, shapes and sizes seems to be endless because new samples of their inventiveness and ingenuity frequently are revealed in the next Larson creation that surfaces from the realm of obscurity. Their inventiveness began within the first few years of this century when they were among the very few builders making flat-top guitars for steel strings.

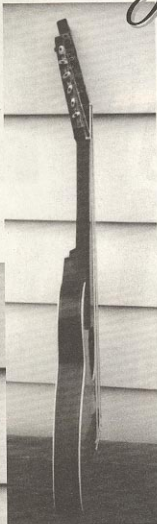
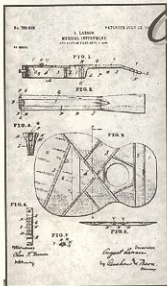
In 1904 August was awarded a U.S. patent for his guitar top bracing pattern which included a thin strip of harder wood sandwiched between the otherwise normal spruce braces. The X-braces as well as the remaining three main braces were laminated in this fashion usually with ebony or rosewood for the center strip. This bracing along with the practice of mounting tops and backs by bending them over slightly arched braces produced a very rigid body that projected the vibrations of the strings throughout the instrument via the top in a most profound fashion. The result was a very quick response to the plucked string that also has brilliance and lots of sustain. This type of arching the top and back is called built under tension which I believe makes for a stronger body than the conventional flat-top design. The Larsons used the laminated braces only on the higher priced guitars, but they were all built for steel strings. Some of the early small body models had straight braces instead of the X pattern.

The Larsons' guitar bodies for the first 35 years ranged from 12 1/2" parlor guitars to the 15" size common to the rest of the makers. The difference in the Larsons of this period was that the bodies being built under tension allowed the Larsons to reduce the depth of the body. These thinner bodies have less bass resonance but retain a pleasant balanced tone. In general the Maurer guitars were built thinner than other makers of that era, and the Prairie State guitars that were initiated in the mid-1920s were about 1/2" thinner than the same style Maurers. The use of the patented steel rod system used to strengthen the body (attached at end block and neck block) was the other factor in making the Prairie State brand guitar different from the Maurers. The larger steel tube (closest to the soundhole) was usually non-adjustable, but the smaller rod below the tube had one of the several types of patented neck adjustment. Even though the Maurer guitars were somewhat thinner than the competitors' models, the bass projection, balance and tone were at least comparable and

Carl Larson after retirement c. 1944



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Top left: August Larson's 1904 patent showing laminated bracing on X and three other main braces. Also shows neck insert under fingerboard, dovetail and bridge design. Left: Larson-built H.G. Meyers thin body (2") harp guitar. (photo/Dave Portman). Top right: Side view of the H.G. Meyers harp guitar.

usually highly exceeded the other brands. The Prairie State guitars being of the thinner body had a bit less bass projection but both brands are considered to be excellent fingerpicking guitars and have a great sound which records superbly. This idea led to some guitar depths as thin as 2" as evidenced by the customer order 12 1/2" guitar handed down to me by my family and also a 16 1/2" H.F. Meyers brand harp guitar which was also made by the Larson brothers. Being somewhat of a custom shop, the Larsons would build to accommodate the whims of the customer. This practice led to variations of the standard line and quite often one-of-a-kind instruments. These often were larger than the norm and occasionally reached the enormous width of a 21" body. These special order instruments were without brand names. The Larsons were also pioneers in the use of laminated necks on guitars and patented ideas for adjustable neck angles.

The mandolins produced by the Larsons in this early period started with the bowl-back variety in various grades from rather plain to the highly decorative presentation grade beauties. By 1913 the flat-back mandolin was taking over in popularity because of its ease in handling in the playing position. These also were made from the plain to presentation grade.

Throughout this early period the Larsons built guitars and mandolins for the Milwaukee based operation of Wm. C. Stahl who was a music teacher and publisher of guitar, mandolin and banjo method books and arrangements. The Larsons provided some of Stahl's guitars and mandolin orchestra instruments from the early years of this century up till approximately 1940. Regal and Washburn and possibly others also sold to Stahl whose label stated that Stahl was the manufacturer.

Approximately 1910 the Larsons also began business with W.J. Dyer & Bro. of St. Paul. This agency also attached their label which stated W. J. Dyer & Bro. as the makers of the Larson-built J.F. Stetson brand of guitars and the series of "Symphony" harp guitars and harp mandolins, mandolas and mando-cellos. These mandolin orchestra instruments were in vogue during the 1920s and declined in popularity in the early 1930s.

The style numbers of the Dyer harp guitars started with the earliest possibly being Style 1 in the experimental models leading to the more common Styles 5 through 8 in the later years. The Style 5 being very plain and the Style 8 the fanciest having abalone trim around edges and soundhole along with the gorgeous tree-of-life fingerboard comprised of pearl and abalone blended artistically in a beautiful design. This same fancy fingerboard design was used on the top-of-the-line Maurers and Prairie State guitars until the introduction of the larger body Euphonon brand that was offered in approximately 1935 to meet the public's demand for a guitar with more volume. These bigger guitars also sported the longer, narrower neck that is much like the style used on today's modern guitars.

Although any of the Larson-built products are of high quality and are sought by players and collectors alike, the guitars made in the 1930s (which was the height of the Larsons' craft) are considered to be some of the best flat-top guitars ever made.

Next month: Euphonon and the larger Prairie State.

Robert Hartman is the author of *The Larsons Creations - Guitars and Mandolins*. All photos courtesy Robert Hartman.