

The legend of the Larson brothers

BY JOHN THOMAS





THE FIRST TIME I saw a Larson-brothers guitar was back in the summer of 1985,” says luthier Tony Klassen. “I’d saved up about \$600 and took the cash and my 1929 Martin 000-28 on a road trip to George Gruhn’s shop in Nashville, intending to trade both for a pearly Martin 00-45. Things didn’t end up working out like I’d planned. In fact, the guitar that I did end up buying is probably responsible for me being here today.”

“Here” is The Music Emporium in Lexington, Massachusetts — or, rather, the Ixtapa Mexican-food restaurant conveniently located two doors down, where I’m sitting with Tony, Emporium owner Stu Cohen and a few friends. Later this evening, Tony will be speaking at Stu’s shop about the design and construction of Larson guitars.

“The look of that guitar [at Gruhn’s] was so weird,” Tony continues. “You know, the back of that guitar was about [three-quarters of an inch] bigger than the top, so the sides sloped from back to front.”

“Did it have those strange, square shoulders on the upper bout jutting straight out from the heel and a rounded, J-185-ish lower bout?” I practically shout.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” he replies. “How do you know about it?”

Know about it? That guitar has served as talisman in some sort of 25-year *Brotherhood of the Traveling Larson Guitar* story. Like the pants at the center of the popular book series, this guitar has transformed everyone who has touched it. It first came to light in George Gruhn’s 1984 Rare Bird column in *Guitar Player* magazine; a few months later, Tony Klassen found himself mysteriously drawn to it.

“I really wanted to buy that Martin, but I couldn’t stop thinking about that unique-looking and -sounding guitar.” Klassen would spend four hours at Gruhn’s shop, alternating between the Martin and the Larson, before taking that strange guitar home. He owned the guitar for 18 years.

“That’s the longest I ever owned a guitar,” he says. “I don’t know why I sold it.” But sell it he did, and it wound its way from Tony’s home in Indiana to Frankie Montuoro’s shop, which was then located in California. “I remember it very well,” Montuoro recalled in a recent conversation. “What a gorgeous instrument! And, now,

an interesting story that ties us together.”

The brotherhood also includes Willi Henkes, of Tübingen, Germany, perhaps Europe’s best-known luthier. It was in Willi’s shop that I first saw and played that charmed guitar; it had stopped in for a bit of TLC on its way from its then-owner in the U.K. to its current owner in New York City. Today, Henkes, Montuoro and Klassen are the world’s leading lights in building Larson-inspired guitars.

Why the peripatetic life for this particular guitar? Well, Klassen bought it for approximately \$3,000 (including his trade-in), and over the ensuing years, the guitar’s market value would increase twentyfold. The temptation to cash in, apparently, has been irresistible. But why all the fuss over Larson guitars in the first place?

We drain our last few drops of Negro Modelo and head over to the shop to consider the question.

Artistic Unity

If you ever take possession of that pearly, Brazilian-rosewood beauty, something extraordinary will happen; you’ll find yourself wondering about the two men who built it eight decades ago. (Hold the guitar long enough, and your thoughts might turn to replicating it, as Henkes, Montuoro and Klassen each discovered.) Why are the designs of these initial steel-string proponents not as widely copied as those of Martin and Gibson?

Even a careful examination of a Larson guitar will not reveal its makers’ name; the Larson brothers never affixed their names to an instrument that they built. They sold all of their wares through retailers who applied their own names to the Larson-made instruments. Even Gibson, with Montgomery Ward and Sears, and Martin, with Paramount, Southern California Music, Foden and Bickford, occasionally allowed large retailers to swap in their trade names. But the bulk of Martin and Gibson instruments proudly displayed the company founders’ names on their headstocks.

(And the more expensive the instrument, the more obvious the display. While Martin used a subtle decal on its modest guitars, it displayed “C.F. Martin” in large, block, pearl letters on its Style 45s. On Gibson’s

OPPOSITE: A 1932 Prairie State Style 450.
WILLI HENKES

PREVIOUS SPREAD: A matched quartet of Larson instruments sport nearly identical trim: a 1917 Style 7 Dyer harp guitar; circa-1920 Maurer 451 (00-size) and 551 (000-size) guitars; and a mandola, the only Larson instrument ever discovered with the “F.N. Winters” label. The 451 is the only known Maurer-brand Larson instrument with the “cloud-shaped” pickguard.
GRACE THOMAS





STAHL ORDER

Robert Bowlin, Frankie Montuoro and the “Maybelle” guitar

Get thee to YouTube, type “Robert Bowlin” and “Maybelle” in the search bar, hook up your computer to the best set of speakers you can find, and invite the neighbors over. Your whole block is in for a treat.

For one thing, Bowlin is an extraordinary, contest-winning musician. (At the 31st Annual Uncle Dave Macon Days Festival in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, he won the flatpicking-guitar and mandolin contests — and also fared quite well in two fiddle categories!) For another, Bowlin is playing an early-1930s Stahl Style 6 OM — as fate would have it, the very first Larson-built guitar that Frankie Montuoro ever restored. A customer had brought it to Montuoro in rather battered condition.

“Its condition fell somewhere in the category of someone who just went 10 rounds with Mike Tyson — OK, maybe five rounds, but you get the point,” says Montuoro. “It had no top finish, a gigantic classical bridge and over 20 inches of cracks, some of which were so large that I had to make splint pieces for behind the bridge on the soundboard. Neck reset, frets, loose braces — you name it. No one wanted to deal with it, but there was something really powerful about that guitar for me, even in that condition. Maybe it was fate but most likely it was that I needed to make money. What luthier doesn’t, right? It really seemed special, and I wanted to put her back together.”

fancy offerings, they traded out silkscreen for pearl, sometimes inlaying that pearl in a backdrop of rosewood, surrounded by a sea of mother-of-toilet-seat.)

Not so the Larsons. One might suspect that this was, at least early in the Larsons’ career, the product of economic necessity. To make sales as unknown guitar makers, they had to yield to the requests of their dis-

tributors. Still, when they were able to affix independent names to their instruments later on, they chose not Larson, but Euphonon — likely derivative of euphony or “pleasant sounding” — and Prairie State, evocative of the wide, open spaces of the West. Egocentric the brothers were not.

What is visible on a Larson guitar is nearly as informative about its makers as what is not visible. The Larsons’ early guitars roughly emulate the Martin body sizes and shapes of 0, 00 and 000, but the aesthetic details are anything but Martin-esque. The use of a 10th-fret instead of ninth-fret fingerboard inlay suggests a familiarity with and maybe affinity for banjos, which, as we shall see, may have played a surprising role in the Larsons’ development of their craft. The elaborate marquetry used for purfling betrays the Larsons’ European beginnings.

Those European roots were in the farming lands of Sweden. In 1886, at the age of 18, Carl Larson apparently had enjoyed as much farming as he could stand and set out for a different life in the United States. His younger brother August was soon to follow. (They were not alone; by the late 19th century, Sweden had become an impoverished land, thanks to over-cultivation and farm fragmentation that resulted in deficient soil and an overall crisis in the farming culture.)

The Larsons alighted in Chicago, which by 1910 was host to 100,000 Swedish immigrants, or 10 percent of the entire Swedish-American immigrant population. At the time, only the city of Stockholm boasted more Swedish inhabitants than Chicago. Unlike other immigrant groups who heralded from farming cultures, the Swedes did not yearn to return to tilling the soil and most stayed in cities and took up manufacturing jobs.

The Larsons found employment at the Cubley Drum Factory. Cubley, a machinist by trade, was an ingenious man; he owned 11 U.S. patents, including several for banjo improvements and one (his last) for guitar tuning gears in which the gears are inlaid into the back side of the instrument’s peghead. (Only a few short years later, the Larsons’ mandolins would feature tuners nearly identical to those in the patent drawing, and the contour of the neck as it transitions to the back of the peghead looks very “Larsonesque” as well.)

Cubley’s factory burned to the ground in 1880,

and, in 1892, the flames of misfortune struck again. The Larson brothers set out from the ashes of the Cubley factory in search of work and found employment across town at Maurer Mandolin and Guitars. Robert Maurer was a music teacher and seller of guitars and other stringed instruments. The Larsons toiled as Maurer's minions until 1900, when August and two investors purchased the ailing owner's factory for \$2,500. A few years later, the brothers most likely bought out the other investors and set out as partners in Maurer & Company. Carl and August were the company's owners and its only two employees.

From the very beginning, the brothers built, in George Gruhn's words, "exceptional instruments," handmade in the truest sense of the word; neighborhoods like the Larsons' did not receive electricity until the 1910s. In 1912, William Stahl proclaimed without hyperbole in his catalog that the Larson-made guitars he distributed were built by "hammer and hand." He also accurately characterized the instruments as exhibiting an "artistic unity."

Stahl, however, strayed dramatically from the truth when he claimed to be "the only manufacturer in the world making a specialty of manufacturing instruments for professional use"; indeed, Stahl was a music teacher, not a manufacturer. False claims of manufacture were endemic to distributors of Larson instruments, but because the Larsons were apparently unconcerned with these fictitious assertions, labels and sales literature do not provide reliable information as to the instruments' origins.

What we do know today is that Maurer guitars built post-1900 and all instruments branded Euphonon, Prairie State or W. J. Dyer were created exclusively by the Larsons' hands. Those branded W. M. Stahl and Stetson were usually Larson-made, and, on occasion, the Larsons built instruments for Leland, Southern California Music Company, C. Bruno, H. F. Meyer and Regal. To this day, Larson instruments appear in places like eBay bearing the labels of previously unknown makers (F.W. Winter, anyone?).

The only contemporaneous account of the brothers' work comes from an interview that Carl Larson's grandson, Robert Carl Hartman, conducted with Les Paul in 1983. Paul describes a very small shop in which the self-effacing Larsons practiced a rough division of

labor, with August doing finish work and Carl bending sides. The brothers built three guitars for Paul, one of which had a half-inch-thick maple top without soundholes. What the Larsons thought was a "waste of time" was, of course, the precursor to the Gibson electric-guitar model that bears Les Paul's name to this day.

Carl Larson retired from guitar making in 1940, at the age of 73, when a leg injury made continuing his craft difficult. August continued to live and work at the shop until his death, in 1944, and Carl passed away two years later. Hartman estimates that the Larsons produced 2,500 instruments, but given how few find their way to the market, this may be a generous approximation. But, even if you accept that number and postulate that about half of those were in the mandolin family, the Larson brothers' total guitar production was still less than the number of prewar Martin herringbones — a rare flock!

The legacy that Larson guitars embody is unique. "A Larson doesn't sound like a Gibson or a Martin," observes guitarist extraordinaire Robert Bowlin. A national fingerpicking champion (and accomplished flatpicker as well), Bowlin has appeared with a Larson guitar on stages across the country, including in the footlights of the Grand Ole Opry. "The design gives a Larson a note-carrying boost that keeps the note sustaining, especially in the higher registers, and a Larson has a slight cushion in the midrange that sometimes carries into the upper notes. That midrange softness and warmth is what gives them a special character." Bowlin pauses.

"It's just that nothing else sounds like a Larson."

Defining Characteristics

We know the Larsons never affixed their name to their wares, but there are several telltale markers to help you identify a guitar as Larson-made. Let's start with the bridge. The classic Larson bridge is a "flattened pyramid," roughly Martinesque but with the tops of the pyramid wings ground flat. In addition, the bridge's top surface angles from the back edge of the saddle slot to the bridge's trailing edge, and the bridge pins enter



it leaning back toward the end block, ensuring a good break angle over the saddle. (This same bridge design occasionally appeared on Lyon & Healy and Washburn guitars of the era, so its presence is not a definitive indicator of Larson origin.)

Next, check out that unusually thick ebony fingerboard. Most Larson fingerboards are bound, and always in an unusual way: The brothers bound only the top half of the edge of the fingerboard, leaving a strip of ebony running lengthwise below the binding. They did the same when binding the soundhole. While many makers of the Larson era bound the soundholes of their guitars, only the Larsons bound just the top half of that edge. Peer closely at the edge of the soundhole, and you'll see that the Larsons routed out a miniscule ledge on which the binding sits, leaving a sliver of the top's edge poking out below the binding.

Now look at the inlays. If the guitar is a Larson 12-fretter (or even an early Larson 14-fretter), it will sport that banjo-inspired 10th-fret inlay. The inlays will also be a whimsical mix of dots, floral bows, clovers, slotted diamonds, snowflakes and, sometimes, stars and lyres. The premium models sport a gorgeous, Art Deco-inspired tree-of-life inlay, and many of the more expensive examples bear delicate vine inlays on the headstocks. Where the Larsons took great care in most external construction details, including finishing and inlaying the purfling, the fingerboard inlays sometimes look haphazardly slapped in, and the engravings can most charitably be characterized as folk art.

OK, sit the guitar on its side. The first thing you'll likely notice is that the guitar's sides are about half an inch shallower than a comparable Martin. In addition, you'll notice a clear radius to the top and a dramatic radius to the back. Most strikingly, the back has a considerable arch lengthwise, resulting in the greatest body depth at the soundhole. The Larsons termed this construction motif "built under tension," and it gave their guitars, in Robert Bowlin's words, a "focused tone."

To see what really makes a Larson sound "like nothing else," look inside the guitar. Oh, you can scurry for the flashlight and dentist's mirror, but you're going to want a good look at Larson innards, so perhaps an X-ray would be most effective. (I've taken a couple of Larsons down to the local image clinic for some X-rays. Really.) At first glance, you'll see what looks like con-



ventional X bracing, but since the braces cross about two inches below the soundhole, it's shifted about an eighth of an inch farther rearward than Martin's post-1937 rear-shifted pattern. The four finger braces are arranged symmetrically, and there are two tone bars — one placed in the traditional Martin or Gibson manner and a second near the end block, placed, as only the Larsons would, parallel to the bridge.

The X braces are three-ply laminations with a strip of hardwood, usually ebony or rosewood, sandwiched between strips of spruce. (If you look even more closely at the X-ray of the 000-sized Maurer 551, you'll notice the treble-side X brace has a center strip of rosewood, while the bass side has a center strip of maple. Did the Larsons believe that this difference would impact the guitar's tone? Only they would know.)

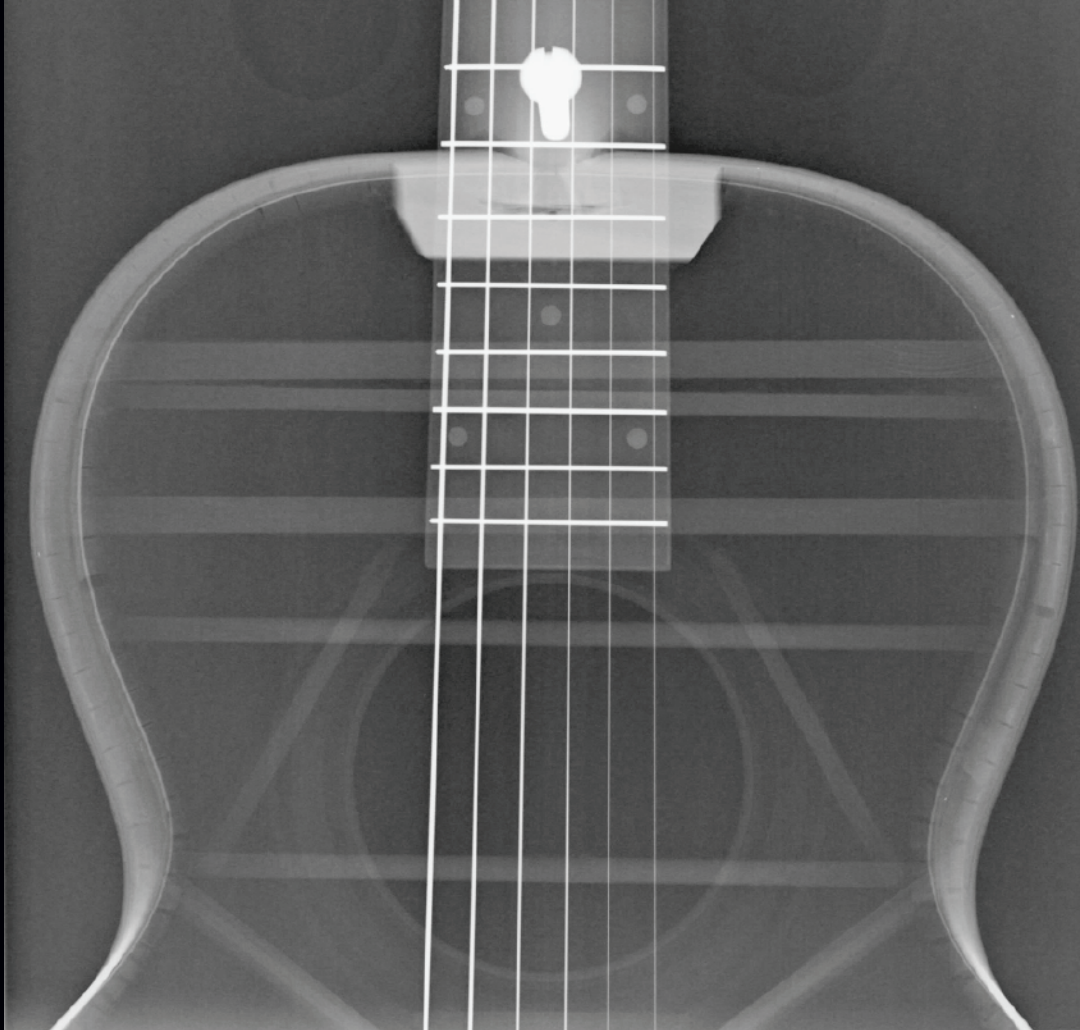
The laminated bracing allowed the Larsons to pair very thin red spruce tops, as thin as .09", with steel strings — a key to their instruments' legendary volume and sustain. The brothers began introducing steel strings to its flattops in 1904, a full two decades before C.F. Martin and Company. August Larson received a patent for a guitar design incorporating the laminated bracing and a hardwood v-bar inlaid into the neck beneath the fingerboard — "for the provision of strengthening means." Evidence suggests that even before receiving the patent the Larsons built exclusively for steel strings.

August Larson was to receive four more patents in

Close-ups of some distinctive Larson details.

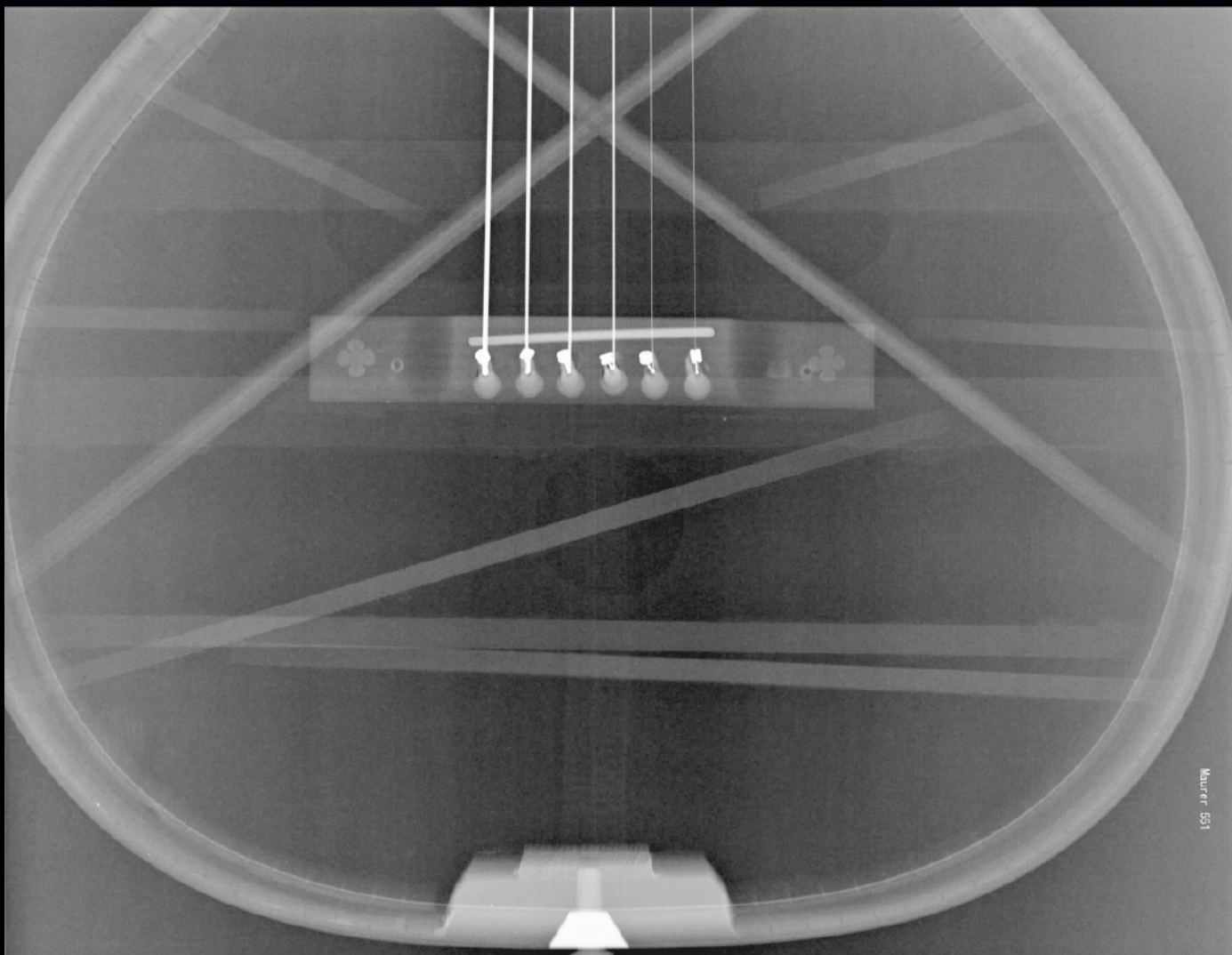
ABOVE: Inside view of a Prairie State guitar, which shows the unique rod system running from the guitar's heel down to its end block.
WILLI HENKES

OPPOSITE: Headstocks of a Larson harp guitar, with each sub-bass string having its own nut.
GRACE THOMAS



X-rays reveal that the Larson's X bracing is positioned differently than that of a Martin of the era. You can also see the large wood screw embedded in the heel of the guitar.

JOHN THOMAS



his lifetime. The most intriguing were for two versions of a Rube Goldberg-like rod system in the Prairie State brand of guitars. The design included a metal tube running from neck block to end block and, in all 12-fret and most 14-fret Prairie State guitars, a metal rod with one end wrapped around the neck heel and the other end extending through the end block. Tightening the nut protruding out of the end block allowed for adjusting the neck angle. (Instant neck reset!)

The rod system imparts a unique tonal quality to all Prairie State guitars, but may have its greatest benefit in the huge jumbos that measure 17, 18, 19 or even 21 inches across the lower bout. Whereas these behemoths might otherwise have a booming bass, the rod system gives them a brightness, balance and delicacy of tone that one would not associate with guitars of these proportions. The system also seems to enhance sustain.

One aspect of the Prairie State design that sometimes found its way into other Larson brands is the huge wood screw, roughly the length and girth of the average adult little finger, buried invisibly in the neck heel before the fingerboard is glued to the neck's top surface. When I recently circulated the Maurer X-rays illustrating that colossal metal screw, Larson collectors scampered around for magnets to test the heels of their guitars. The decidedly unscientific and non-random research revealed that about half the Larson guitars tested had them.

The Larsons coupled their innovative designs with closely grained red spruce tops and back and side woods of equal quality. Most guitars bore backs and sides of straight-grained Brazilian rosewood, although some of the plainly decorated guitars had mahogany backs and sides and occasionally possessed a non-laminated, angled, ladder-style bracing pattern. Many of the large Prairie State and Euphonon 14-fret models had maple for backs and sides.

Armed with this knowledge, you are now ready to unearth an absolutely astounding array of instruments from vintage-guitar shops, online auction houses, flea markets and neighbors' attics. You'll find guitars ranging widely in size and adornment; those guitars, all "under tension" flattops, will be of both the f-hole and round-hole varieties. You'll also find round-back and flat-back mandolins, other examples of the mando family — mandolas, mandocellos and mandobasses — plus



HEIRLOOM

The Creation of "The Larson's Creations"

"It all started in 1979," says Bob Hartman, "with vandalism." I'm having dinner with Bob, whose full name is Robert Carl Hartman and who is the grandson of Carl Larson, and his wife, Carol. They are regaling me with the story of his authorship (and her typing) of the definitive work on Larson instruments, *The Larsons' Creations*. You'll not find a more heartfelt work about musical instruments. The fact-filled, unpretentious book is more heirloom than literature, and it's all the better for it; you can sense Bob and Carol on every page.

"You see," Bob continues, "a kid broke into our house and vandalized the guitars that my father had given me." "We knew who it was, too," Carol chimes in. "Yes," says Bob, "it was a neighbor kid. Anyway, I had these old guitars that had been handed down to me and I knew nothing about them, but needed to get them appraised for insurance purposes. So we took them to a guitar shop." There, the couple got their first inkling of the place that Bob's grandfather and grand uncle have in the pantheon of guitar makers.

"The fellow we took them to said to us, 'Hey, these are Larson instruments. Did you know that?'" The Hartmans had the guitars repaired and then set out to find out more about those famous Larson brothers. A printer by trade, Hartman printed and self-published the first and second editions of his book in 1984 and 1988. In 1996, Centerstream Publishing issued an updated version, complete with a companion CD featuring tunes performed by national fingerpicking champion Muriel Anderson on a selection of Larson instruments. In 2007, Centerstream published the Centennial Edition of the book.

Although the now-expanded CD contains stunning, must-own, previously unreleased recordings of Jimi Hendrix playing the Larson guitar that he treasured (and later bestowed to Eric Clapton), the highlight is Carl Robert Hartman, Bob's son and Carl's great grandson, performing his own composition on a Euphonon dreadnought that Bob received from his mother in acknowledgment of his "interest in music." If you are not moved by this recording, you probably don't deserve to own a Larson guitar.



ukuleles, tipples and mandolinettos, too.

Finally, consider the Larsons' harp hybrids: harp mandolin, harp mandocello and harp guitar. As Tony Bacon observes in *The History of the American Guitar*, these are among the brothers' "finest achievements." The late collector Scott Chinery was fond of saying that his highly decorated Style 8 Dyer Symphony Harp Guitar was the best-sounding flattop guitar he had ever encountered. Indeed, few makers before or since have been able to match the Larsons' innovation and artistic vision.

Recreating the Magic

OK, let's be realistic; not every Larson guitar was a masterpiece in all respects. The first Larson guitar I ever saw was on the cover of one of blues fingerpicking virtuoso Stefan Grossman's early LPs. The headstock looked vaguely Gibsonsque, but the body definitely did not. It took me some time to figure out that it was a Larson Prairie State — well, only partially, because it had been re-topped by Jon Lundberg.

In the days before he abandoned lutherie to sell vintage men's clothing at Lundberg's Haberdashery, Lundberg ran a vintage-guitar shop in Berkeley, California, where he came into possession of two Prairie State f-hole guitars (though neither had the typical Prairie State rod system). Lundberg cut the tops off both and replaced them with round-hole tops and non-laminated bracing of his own design. One of the guitars ended up in Grossman's hands; the other, a rare cutaway Larson, found its way to Scott Chinery's collection.

"I loved the guitar," Grossman recently told me, "but was it a vintage guitar or a new guitar?" Whatever it was, Grossman preferred the Larson/Lundberg tone to that of an unmolested Larson. "I later had two Larsons, both 16-inch Euphonons, that had not been re-topped, and the truth is that they just didn't sound very good to me, so I sent both of them to Jon to have him work his magic on their braces."

The Lundberg magic did not always prove permanent. "The top on [Grossman's Prairie State] guitar caved in," luthier Nick Kukich told me. "Seriously caved in." Kukich pulled the back off the guitar, re-braced the top and "essentially made it flat again." When the Larson/Lundberg first collapsed, Kukich, who builds



guitars under the Franklin name, supplied Grossman with its replacement — a copy of a 17-inch Euphonon, but with an additional three quarters of an inch in body depth.

"I had wanted to make a guitar larger than the OMs I was building then," says Kukich, "and everyone was making dreadnoughts, so I liked the idea of this Larson jumbo style." Grossman liked it, too, but asked Kukich to make one with the same body depth as his Larson/Lundberg. "Man, I got lucky and got that one right on the first try," says Kukich. "I asked Stefan what he'd like me to change, and he said, 'Nothing, it's

ABOVE: Luthier and Larson aficionado Frankie Montuoro is hard at work on a new guitar. COURTESY OF FRANK MONTUORO

OPPOSITE: Luthier Tony Klassen and Larson expert (and Carl Larson's grandson) Bob Hartman. Klassen holds his reproduction of the one and only Dyer type 2 harp guitar. ERIC FUTRAN



PH BLAZER
LM HENKES
RENBALER
JA VU
1918 No. 11
1923

perfect.” To this day, the guitar remains Grossman’s favorite. “Nick’s guitars,” says Grossman, “are still the only new guitars that I have ever played that sound ‘vintage’ out of the box.”

That Franklin jumbo was the first modern recreation of a Larson, but since Kukich did not attempt to brace it like a Larson (which, as we know, suited Grossman), it didn’t quite have the singular tone and amazing sustain of a “pure Larson.” Since original Larson guitars are rare and pricey, you may be interested in a modern recreation — if that classic Larson sound is your ultimate goal.

Start your quest in Chesterton, Indiana, at the shop of Tony Klassen, the first luthier to fall under the guitar’s spell. Klassen has just announced a collaboration with Bob Hartman on the Barn Dance series, a line of guitars in tribute to the Larson-made instruments played every Saturday night on *The National Barn Dance* on Chicago’s WLS radio in the 1920s and 1930s. You can own a limited-edition guitar, complete with a label signed by Hartman, that is identical to that played by Gene Autry, Patsy Montana or even Arkie. What you’ll have in your hands will be a replica of the instruments that, in Hartman’s words, “kept the brothers busy during the depression years.”

Our next stop is with Frankie Montuoro in Chicago, just a few miles from the site of the old Larson shop. Montuoro has repaired hundreds of Larson-made instruments, meaning he has probably worked on more Larson guitars than anyone other than the Larsons themselves. Montuoro honed his craft in Los Angeles, repairing guitars for the likes of Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young and Peter Frampton. One day, he encountered a Maurer guitar, which impressed him with the “immense clarity” of its voice.

“Granted, it wasn’t as warm as a Martin or as much of a boomer as a Gibson,” Montuoro says, “but it spoke with perfect articulation, expressing every little nuance even with the lightest of touch. From that point on, I was indeed possessed.” The brotherhood had found another convert. So in the grips of Larson mania is Montuoro that he completes only about 10 hide-glue-fashioned, varnish-finished guitars per year while pursuing “the Larsons’ sense of structure, sonic identity and hand craftsmanship that set them apart from any

other guitar maker.”


Lastly, we’ll take a stroll down the medieval cobblestone streets of Tübingen, Germany, and stop at the 14th century building that houses the shop of Blazer and Henkes — where our talisman guitar was most recently spotted. Inside, the hide glue will be warming and Rudie Blazer and Willi Henkes will be engaged in the handwork that’s occupied them for nearly three decades; some of Europe’s finest acoustic musicians will likely be jamming in the corner.

These two spiritual siblings call their guitars the Déjà Vu series for good reason. Henkes, the Larson aficionado of the duo, describes the first Larson guitar that he encountered as “a design of pure beauty and of its own character,” and he is committed to building recreations that capture the essence and spirit of the originals.

(Remember that the Larson brothers never affixed their own names to their instruments, so beware of replicas bearing that moniker. There is, in fact, a European company currently branding “Larson Bros.” guitars, but these attractively priced guitars are not built like, nor do they look or sound like, the originals. One telling sign is the advertised “Larson wood purfling,” which is a rope-style marquetry, the likes of which never appeared on a Larson-built instrument.)

Now that we’ve finally arrived at The Music Emporium, grab a seat up front and watch Tony Klassen run through his slide show. After we learn how he builds his Larson recreations, we’ll all get a chance to play the three Klassen-made guitars that he’s brought, along with a trio of original Larson instruments. You’re apt to discover that the Larsons were way ahead of their time.

As Frankie Montuoro puts it, Carl and August Larson were to flattops what John D’Angelico and Jimmy D’Aquisto were to archtops. D’Angelico worked at perfecting the existing archtop design while D’Aquisto strove to take it to new places.

“The progressive nature of the Larsons’ work is so captivating to me that it has inspired me to think about and understand so many new things about guitars,” Montuoro says. “The Larsons figured out a new, interesting swing on that old-wheel idea that worked and still does. There is nothing out there that sounds like a Larson.” 

OPPOSITE: A new Larson-inspired Blazer & Henkes Milwaukee 54/45 Jumbo.
WILLI HENKES