

Chicago reigned for decades as one of America's chief musical instrument manufacturing centers. Among the city's most interesting makers were the Larson Brothers, builders of instruments carrying such brands as Euphonon (Vintage Catalogue, Feb. '82) and Prairie State.

The Larson brothers—Carl and August—immigrated to the United States from Sweden during the 1880s. During the 1890s, they went to work for Robert Maurer, a music teacher and importer of musical instruments. (An 1898 Chicago directory lists Maurer as a manufacturer.) By 1901, the brothers apparently had purchased the firm, retaining the Maurer name.

According to family accounts, Carl Larson specialized in manufacturing guitars. August Larson made mandolin-family instruments, and some ukuleles. In 1940, Carl retired after he broke his leg in an auto accident. August Larson died in June 1944, at which time the company disbanded.

Larson instruments were made under a variety of brand names. Some can be found today that bear no maker's stamp, but are clearly Larson work. The Maurer brand appears on the earliest instruments, and was used on at least some later instruments. Prairie State instruments have a unique system of one or two metal support rods that run through the body. While the Maurer brand was used on mandolin-family instruments as well as on guitars, the Prairie State brand appeared only on guitars. The Euphonon brand appeared on mandolins and solid (non-slotted) peghead guitars from the mid-1930s onward.

During the '30s, the Larsons made many instruments for the Wack Salles Company of Milwaukee. Many of these, and numerous custom-order instruments, were shipped without a maker's stamp. In addition, the Larsons produced a line of harp guitars and mandolins for the Dyer company of St. Paul. These instruments were labeled "W.J. Dyer & Bro.—manufacturer—St. Paul, Minn." However, they clearly were not manufactured by Dyer. In those days, little attention was paid to the fine points of "truth in labeling."

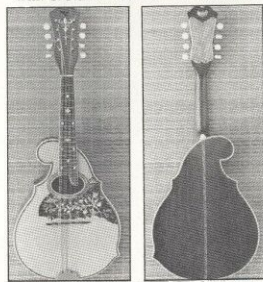
Fortunately for instrument historians, Robert Hartman—the grandson of Carl Larson—took an interest in the family's lutherie heritage, and not long ago published a small book entitled *Guitars And Mandolins In America Featuring The Larsons' Creations* [Maurer And Co.



A LARSON BY ANY OTHER NAME...

Printing and Publishing, Box 67843, Schaumburg, IL 60168]. In his research, Hartman found ads dating from 1912 to 1918 for Larson-made Dyer instruments. However, the exact dates for the beginning and end of the Larsons' production for Dyer have yet to be established.

Our specimen instrument this month is an artist-model mandolin branded "Wm. C. Stahl—maker—Milwaukee."



This Stahl mandolin features a spruce top, mabogany neck, and rosewood back and sides.

Stahl was a music teacher, dealer, and distributor based in Milwaukee. In fact, the mandolin was made by the Larsons for Stahl's distribution. It exhibits many features typical of the Larsons' work, but is quite unusual in body shape.

(The "Wm. C. Stahl" brand appeared on a number of mandolin-family instruments and guitars that the Larsons supplied for Stahl. Over the years, I also have come across a number of Stahl-label mandolins that appear to be the work of the Regal Company in Chicago, rather than that of the Larsons. The earliest ad Hartman has found showing Larson-made Stahl instruments dates

from 1912, although it is quite possible that the Larsons were manufacturing for him well before that time. Unfortunately, any accurate records of the Larsons' production have long since been lost. Hartman's book includes some illustrations of Stahl-brand instruments, and it dates them through 1930; however, it is unclear exactly how late the association with Stahl continued.)

Hartman features a similarly-shaped mandolin in his history of the Larsons' work, but it doesn't bear the Stahl brand. "Normally when a Larson instrument is stamped with a brand name," wrote Hartman, "it is part of a regular line. In the case of the [illustrated] instrument, it is stamped 'Maurer'; however, it may be an exception, because it is the only one of this shape that I have found."

Well, then, since the body shape of our Stahl mandolin this month matches that of Hartman's Maurer, it is clear that not only did the Larsons make more than one mandolin in this body style, but they made them under at least two brand names—and in at least two quality grades. The mandolin illustrated in Hartman's book is considerably less ornate. Hartman dated the Maurer mandolin as having been made in 1938. However, since this instrument bears no serial number—and accurate production records do not exist—it is difficult to date these instruments with precision.

Judging from the hardware and the case of our sample Stahl, I would estimate that this mandolin could have been made at any time from 1920 to the mid-1930s. The body shape, while it differs considerably from that of a Gibson artist model, probably was inspired by the Gibson.

Interestingly, the Regal company of Chicago produced a line of mandolins with virtually the same body style. Since I do not have an accurate date on the manufacture of this Stahl, nor do I have a reliable date on the first appearance of this body style on Regal instruments, I can only speculate on who copied whom. The resemblance is too close to be coincidental. It is certain that the Larsons made very few mandolins of this shape, while Regal made many. In general, the Larsons made designs that, while they might have been inspired by another manufacturer's work, seldom were outright copies. On the other hand,

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Regal often made commercial-grade, lower-priced copies of other makers' work.

The materials and workmanship of this Stahl mandolin are typical of the Larsons' products. The ornate abalone inlay on the pickguard is of the same design that appears on mandolins and guitars branded "Maurer" and "Prairie State." It also shares the same type of neck inlay as many Maurer, Prairie State, and Euphonon instruments. The pickguard is inlaid such that its surface is flush with the level of the top, in typical Larson fashion. Apparently the Larsons did not cut their own abalone and pearl inlay, but bought it cut to their specifications—possibly from a source in Germany.

The peghead shape is typical of the better-grade Larson mandolins, and quite typical of several Italian makers, most notably Vinaccia. It also was used on the better-grade C.F. Martin mandolins. The tuners are typical of those used on bowl-back style mandolins dating from the 1890s onward to the 1930s.

The fine-grained spruce top, mahogany neck, ebony fretboard and bridge, and Brazilian rosewood back and sides

are representative of the Larsons' work. However, the brothers did produce instruments that variously used other woods for the back and sides, including mahogany, maple, and even oak. The finish is a shellac-based French polish that is acoustically very fine, as well as physically beautiful.

Larson instruments most often were built with an arching of the top and back. This contouring puts the thickest part of the instrument at the bridge. While the top is not carved, as on an arch-top guitar, it is not perfectly flat. This arching is especially evident when the instrument is viewed from the side. A typical Larson instrument is thinner at the neck block than at the center. This pattern is obvious on the Stahl mandolin illustrated here. The arching places the top and back under tension, apart from the tension or "loading" exerted by the pull of the strings. Larson instruments seem to combine some tonal characteristics of both flat-top and carved-top instruments.

This Stahl mandolin is in fine structural condition and plays very well, though clearly it has had no maintenance since it was new. In general, Larson instruments are remarkably durable, which is a tribute to the design and workmanship of the builders. The quality of materials and finishing is first-rate,

although by modern standards the detail work of binding and purfling looks somewhat crude. The mitre joints on the purfling do not match perfectly at the corners, and in two places the purfling is spliced in a way that suggests the builder used two short strips, rather than one long one.

Cosmetic frills don't seem to have been a big concern for the Larsons, though their structural work and designs are superb. Larson instruments cost less money new than did equivalently ornamented Martins or Gibsons. In all respects that relate to structural stability, sound, and playability, Larson products are on par with the best instruments of any manufacturer. If these instruments appear less than perfect upon close inspection of cosmetic details, it is probably a reflection of the makers' sense of priorities, rather than of any lack of ability.

Larson instruments are quite rare today, and have not been copied extensively by modern builders. In my opinion, these instruments are among the finest vintage American string instruments, and deserve more attention. The Larson design concepts are acoustically just as valid now as they were when these instruments were first produced.