



## George Gruhn The Vintage Catalogue Larson Guitars

## EXPERTS CORNER

**A**LTHOUGH THE collectors' market for prewar guitars is dominated by the instruments of Martin, Gibson, and Epiphone, the greatest quantity of American guitars came not from Nazareth, Pennsylvania (Martin); Kalamazoo, Michigan (Gibson), or New York City (Epiphone). They came from Chicago.

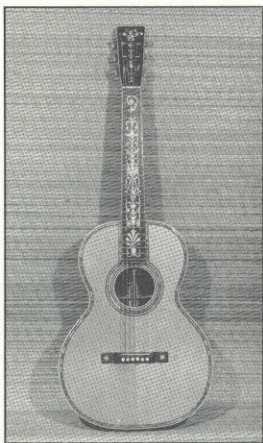
Initially, they came from Chicago's Lyon & Healy — the first American company to mass-manufacture guitars. While the claims of Lyon & Healy catalogs from the mid-1800s (boasting of figures in excess of 100,000 instruments per year) may have been exaggerated, the firm clearly was geared to produce in great quantities. The period of the company's greatest output was from 1890 to 1910, a time when instruments were not designed to use modern steel strings. In the late 1920s, Lyon & Healy sold its manufacturing facilities, but Chicago continued to be a major guitar-making center.

During the 1930s, manufacturers such as Kay, Regal, and Harmony turned out hundreds of thousands of guitars. Since these makers specialized in the quantity production of student-grade instruments, the surviving guitars command little attention from collectors today, although the total dollar volume of their businesses probably exceeded that of the more famous makers.

The Larson brothers of Chicago were in marked contrast to other Chicago makers. Their shop, located in a barn-like building on Elm Street near the downtown Chicago Loop, produced some of the finest flat-top guitars produced by any prewar American maker. Considering that the Larsons' business was a two-man operation, the variety, quality, and total quantity of instruments built was indeed remarkable.

Carl and August Larson emigrated to the United States from Sweden during the 1880s. By the late 1890s they were producing instruments for Robert Maurer, a Chicago music teacher and publisher of instruction books. At the turn of the century, Maurer sold his company to the Larsons, and they continued to produce instruments under the Maurer name. In 1906, they moved to the Elm Street location, and from that time until about 1940, when Carl retired, they produced a steady stream of instruments. Carl was the main builder, while August handled bookkeeping, finishing, and most of the business transactions. Carl died in 1946, and August died in 1947.

The Larsons made instruments under



*A Prairie State style 450 with "tree-of-life" inlays, a variety of names. The most common were Maurer, Prairie State, and Euphophon [see my Feb. '82 column]. They also made instruments for distribution by others, most notably Stahl in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Dyer in St. Paul, Minnesota. Though the Stahl instruments are stamped "Stahl — Maker Milwaukee, Wisconsin," they are clearly Larsons, as are the Dyers, which bear paper labels claiming Dyer as the manufacturer. (Truth in advertising was not an important issue at the time.)*

Most Stahl guitars are virtually identical in appearance to standard Maurer models. The Dyer line consists of harp-guitars, with sub-bass strings and large, horn-like body extensions; and harp-mandolins, with no extra strings, but with similar body extensions.

In general, those instruments stamped "Maurer" were produced early in the Larsons' career, while the Prairie State brand was used for a long period of time, probably from before 1920, until the end of the Larsons' production.

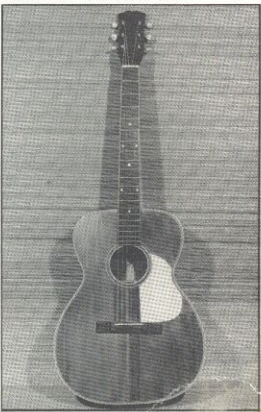
The Euphophon instruments, which appear to be more modern, were produced during the mid- and late-1930s. As a general rule, Maurer-brand guitars had slot-head, 12-fret necks; a body width from 12" to 15", and a body depth of under 4". The better models were X-braced in a distinctive Larson pattern: The laminated top

braces were made from spruce with a rose-wood center strip.

The early Prairie State guitars were virtually identical to those branded "Maurer," except that they were fitted with a patented system of two metal rods, which ran through the center of the body. The larger rod, running from the neck block to the heel block, was designed to relieve stress on the top, and to prevent the body from warping. The smaller rods, which looped around the heel of the neck and ran to an adjustable end pin, regulated the neck angle.

The later Prairie State guitars retained the system of metal rods, but were made in a wide variety of body styles, ranging in size from small to giant-size (as much as 21" wide). Most of the late-model Prairie States had 14-fret necks with solid headstocks. Some of the late Prairie State guitars were made with f-hole tops, although these tops were not carved (arched).

The better-quality Euphophon guitars retained the same type of laminated braces featured on the Maurer and Prairie State brands, but usually did not have the metal rods. Generally, Euphophon instruments were large bodied. They ranged in body width from 15" to 27", and had 14-fret necks with solid headstocks.



*This Euphophon's pickguard is inlaid into the top, a characteristic feature of Larson building styles.*

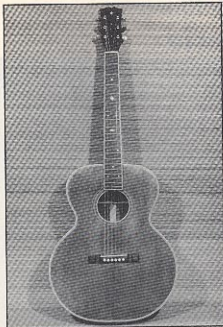
The instruments illustrated in this article are typical examples of the Larsons' work. The "tree-of-life" inlaid Prairie State

guitar is described in the catalog as a style 450. This appears to be the same as the style 593 Maurer, except for the metal rods. The catalog descriptions of the two models are exactly the same, and the illustrations appear to be identical.

According to the catalog, the bracing pattern was patented in 1904. This would make the Larsons possibly the earliest American builders of flat-top steel-string guitars. Martin guitars were not routinely braced for steel strings until late 1928, and Gibson did not make flat-top guitars until about 1927. With their laminated braces and strong laminated necks, the Larson guitars were clearly intended for steel strings.

The Prairie State guitar was designed to offer a light-weight, responsive top with a very rigid body and neck. There is little question that these guitars had a distinctive sound. Maurer and Euphonon guitars have great sustain and a very even tonal balance, which is probably in large part due to their bracing pattern. The Prairie State guitar seems to carry this trend to the extreme, with a sound that is qualitatively different from that of any other guitar. Prairie States are very fine instruments, but they are not readily compared to other brands.

The Euphonon guitars illustrated demonstrate the considerable variety in the late Larson models. The body size and



*This 16"-wide Euphonon has a bound fretboard.*

shape of the smaller guitar are the same as that of the Martin 000. The smaller Euphonon is made from wood that is the same size and type as that of the Martin 000-18. It has a spruce top and mahogany sides and back, but the sound is distinctively Larson — probably due to the bracing.

Although this is a relatively unorna-

mented guitar, it is well made and has the laminated braces typical of the better Larson instruments. The white pickguard is original and is inlaid into the top, as is typical of Larsons' work. The top is stained a uniform, mahogany brown. Early Larson instruments I have encountered were always finished in clear lacquer. The majority of the later models have a natural finish, although I have seen some sunburst finishes, and a few with a mahogany stain.

The second Euphonon guitar illustrated in this article features the body size and shape I have probably encountered most frequently. The instrument is 16" wide, 3-3/4" deep at the end pin, 3-7/8" deep at the center, and 3-3/8" deep at the heel of the neck. Most flat-top guitars, by contrast, are tapered to be deepest at the end pin. This instrument has a rosewood back and sides. The spruce top features the same uniform mahogany stain as the 000-size Euphonon.

During the early period, most cheaper Larson instruments had oak backs and sides, while the better models featured rosewood. In the later period, mahogany was used on lesser grades, while the more deluxe instruments used rosewood or curly maple. Although I have not encountered any Euphonon brand guitars with the tree-of-life inlay, many of the later Larson instruments were pearl trimmed and well ornamented.