



TOM WHEELER

RARE BIRD

Maurer, et al, II

LAST MONTH'S COLUMN presented an historical sketch of the Larson Brothers, Chicago guitar builders who in the first half of this century built unusual and fine steel-strings under several brand names, including Maurer, Euphonon, Stahl, Larson, WLS, and Prairie State. In this article we'll examine some of the guitars' construction details.

According to George Gruhn [Gruhn Guitars, 410 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37203], "These were the first honest-to-goodness steel-strings with heavy braces, clearly not intended for nylon strings." Distinctive hallmarks on many of the better models (under the various brand names) are laminated "sandwich" braces with side pieces of spruce and a center piece of rosewood. Mr. Gruhn comments, "This is very unusual; I don't know anyone else who's done laminated bracing. Another thing—Prairie States have a really weird system of metal rods inside the body that attach to the tailblock and neckblock. These rods float free of the top and back, and one of them could be used to adjust the neck, although I wouldn't touch it myself on an old guitar."

In Mr. Gruhn's experience, among the Maurer/Larson instruments the Maurers are the most common, Prairie States and Euphonons are very rare, and Larsons are extremely rare. Also, the Euphonons are the latest guitars in the group, made through the late '30s and right up till the early '40s, recent enough that some are, very generally speaking, Martin-type dreadnoughts, though a little smaller—about 15" across. Others resemble 14-fret Gibson J-185 flat-tops. (In discussions like these, "12-fret" or "14-fret" almost always refers to the number of frets clear of the body, not the total.)

Jon Lundberg [Lundberg's, 2126 Dwight Way, Berkeley, CA 94704] is an experienced and particularly knowledgeable vintage instrument dealer. According to him, the earliest guitars of the Maurer/Larson family bear the Maurer name. "They go back further than the others," he says. "The other names seem to be from the '20s and later." Concurring with George Gruhn, he adds, "Euphonon in particular is later; in fact, I've never seen a 12-fret Euphonon. Prairie States I've seen both ways—the earlier and smaller 12-fret models, and the huge, 14-fret flat-tops from the later period." Jim Beach [Wooden Music, 3824 N. Lincoln Ave., Chicago, IL 60613] adds that Maurers span the greatest time period, and that their earliest models often sport very fancy abalone inlays and extremely meticulous detail work.

The vast majority of high-quality f-hole guitars have carved, arched tops. However,



Compare this Maurer's fretboard, peghead, and body trim to the Prairie State on page 14.

the Larsons' f-hole models have almost a cross between an arched top and a flat top—not carved, but slightly bent upwards, or bowed, toward the center. (Some of their round-hole flat-tops also have high-belly profiles.) Living in Chicago, Jim Beach has had more of an opportunity than most dealers to observe the guitars of the Chicago-based Maurer organization. He says, "Some of those bodies are really huge—21" across—although the biggest one I ever saw that sounded good was a 19" Prairie State. Also, that uncarved, essentially flat top with the f-holes sounds really neat, just like you'd think it would—sort of a cross between a flat-top tone and an f-hole tone."

Jon Lundberg, among others, has replaced several Maurer/Larson f-hole tops with more conventional, round-hole flat tops, with good results. "We'll use standard spruce Martin-type bracings rather than

Continued

RARE BIRD

laminated braces," he reports, "and on a number of Prairie States and Euphonons we've graduated the braces—scalloped them—like the early Martins. Before scalloping they just don't have much bass depth, especially the bodies that are both very wide and shallow."

One of the Larson Brothers' most unusual construction details was the interior tone bar that connected the headblock to the tailblock. Mr. Lundberg reports that with perhaps one exception he's seen it only on Prairie States, and Mr. Gruhn also attributed the feature to Prairie State. However, Jim Beach has seen it "on all sorts of stuff—turn-of-the-century 12-fretters and 1940s jumbos, on Maurers, Prairie States, and Euphonons." He speculates that it could be ordered as an option on any of the Maurer/Larson models.

Mr. Beach also says that he's seen the Maurer, Prairie State, and Euphonon brand names applied to a single model; one example is a Gibson J-200-shaped flat-top with a maple body and pearl binding. Maurer's WLS guitars were named after Chicago's radio station WLS, which hosted the popular and influential "National Barn Dance" program.

Another brand name used by the Larsons was Stahl. According to Jon Lundberg, Mr. Stahl was a music teacher and the writer of method books, and he lived in Milwaukee. He ordered guitars from the Maurer company with his own name on them, and their maple X braces differed from the basic Maurer-type rosewood-stripe laminated bracings. "Stahl claimed to be a manufacturer himself," Lundberg adds, "but almost everything I've seen with his name on it was made by the Maurer organization. Another company who ordered instruments from Maurer was Dyer Bros.; Maurer made harp guitars for them. Though they came in several degrees of fanciness, some with a lot of pearl work, they were always built out of mahogany [rather than the more expensive maple or rosewood that might be expected on heavily inlaid instruments]. The Dyers really believed in mahogany." Lundberg adds that he's seen at least one cutaway guitar, a Larson, that was built in the later period of the Larsons' career.

All three of the vintage dealers interviewed for this column agreed that Maurer guitars were well built. Mr. Lundberg says, "Although the interior work was real quick and dirty and not very neat, the guitars were well put together. They have very few structural problems, and they're quite stable. We've had very few problems with necks being warped or bodies cracking. C.F. Martin III [see *What's In A Name*, *GP*, Jan. '79] once told me that he'd seen Maurer instruments in the late '20s and admired their workmanship and quality, considering that they weren't Martins [laughs]—there was always that reservation. I don't think that



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The reinforcement strut of this huge rosewood Prairie State is visible through the soundhole.

scarcely anyone came into the 20th century with the 19th-century quality that Martin continued, but the Maurers were very good."

Comparing Maurers to early Washburns and Martins, George Gruhn says: "Maurers were *not* Martin copies, whereas the Washburns, when you get down to it, were very Martin-like in their size, shape, and general configuration. The Maurers are certainly better instruments to play than the Washburns, which at their best look neat but are, in my opinion, rarely if ever inspirational to play. For craftsmanship the early Martins are just impeccable, and the Maurers and Prairie States and Euphonons aren't quite as clean, but they do have a different sound; it's metallic and sustaining, wonderful for blues. In their own way they can be better blues guitars than any of the Martins. They're worth a lot, maybe \$2,500 for a very good one close to a 000 size; in general, the smaller they are, the less they bring."

Jim Beach adds, "These were basically handmade instruments, so you have to expect some variations in workmanship, perhaps in the trim, but they're very good. These guys built their stuff to last. That's why the guitars are still around. I don't think I've ever played one that I didn't like."

Both illustrated guitars are from the forthcoming *American Guitars: An Illustrated History* (Tom Wheeler, Harper & Row). The Maurer is courtesy Wooden Music, and the Prairie State is from Inter-mountain Guitar & Banjo, 370 West First South, Salt Lake City, UT 84101. 