

The  
family  
of guitars  
by the

# LARSON BROTHERS

The Larson brothers of Chicago, Carl and August Larson, were natives of Sweden who came to America bringing with them the knowledge of woodworking. Carl (born 1867) came first and established himself in Chicago around 1885. He then helped August (born 1873) and later their three sisters make the big move during the 1880s, while their parents stayed behind.

Carl's first known job in this country was building parts of instruments for Edwin J. Cubley, an early supplier of guitars and banjos to Lyon & Healy until 1885. Cubley's factory burned down in 1893, and it is believed he did not resume the business. Carl and August then worked for Robert Maurer, a former music teacher and instrument salesman who had become a manufacturer and interstate distributor of

guitars and mandolins. In 1900, when Robert Maurer's health deteriorated, he retired to the better climate out West. August, along with a group of investors, bought Maurer's business and August soon became the sole owner.

At some point between 1900 and 1940 Carl was a partner in the company. The Larsons maintained the Maurer & Co. name for their guitar and mandolin business. They began production of guitars and mandolin-family instruments for Wm. C. Stahl of Milwaukee about 1905 and for W. J. Dyer & Bro. of St. Paul about 1912.

Stahl was a music teacher and publisher of music and method books. He had his own staff of music writers who also arranged music for the popular mandolin orchestras, one of





which he directed. He did extensive advertising and produced catalogs for guitars, mandolins, and banjos under his own label which claimed him to be the manufacturer. The

Larsons built a substantial percentage of his guitars and mandolins. The rest were supplied by the Washburn and Regal companies, also located in Chicago. The banjos were supplied by still another maker.

W.J. Dyer & Bro. operated a large music retail store in St. Paul and also sold Larson instruments under their label. The Dyer store sold all types of musical instru-

ments, but their main item was the reed organ. They commissioned the Larsons to build a line of mandolin orchestra pieces titled the Symphony: Harp Guitar, Harp Mandolin, Harp Mandola, and Harp Mando-cello. Each had



**Previous pages:** Euphonon Guitar, c. 1939.

This is a 19" maple body guitar in near mint, all original condition. The bridge, fingerboard, and peghead have abalone and pearl inlays with rhinestones dotting the edges. The matching engraved clear plastic pickguards are elevated from the soundboard.

Above: 1939 Prairie State top. About 1939, the

Larsons started building these unique Prairie State jazz guitars. The arch of the top and back was formed by the braces instead of the traditional carving method from thicker woods. Ebony or rosewood was used for the center strip of the laminated braces. This particular top was cut from one of the extremely rare 19" cutaway Prairie State guitars.



a horn-shaped extension to the body that connected to the regular peghead. Five or six sub-bass strings were installed above the bass side of the Harp Guitar, but no additional strings were used on the other instruments.

Although no records of Maurer & Co. have survived, I have resurrected five U.S. patents for guitar design filed by August dating from 1904 to 1932. The most significant of these patents was awarded in 1904 relating to a new bracing pattern implementing laminated braces composed of an ebony or rosewood strip sandwiched between otherwise conventional-looking spruce braces. These braces were used to form the X and for the main lateral braces, but only on the more expensive models. The additional strength obtained by the Larsons' bracing ideas enabled them to produce steel string flat-top guitars that would last, putting them many years ahead of major manufacturers such as Martin and Gibson. Their inventive minds led them to adopt other ideas such

as building guitar tops and backs under tension. That is to say, they raised the middle areas by using braces and drew the edges down to meet the sides. This technique enabled a thinner body instrument to produce the sound for which they were striving.

Not only were Carl and August inventive with interior design and building under tension, but they also produced an extensive array of body types in many different sizes and shapes as well as custom orders for whatever the customer could imagine. The sizes of guitars ranged from a 12" parlor guitar only 2 1/4" deep to super-duper jumbos 21" wide and 6" deep and, of course, everything in between. They used nothing but wood 20 years old or older and even made less costly guitars by using oak timbers from old barns. The Larsons would tune a guitar top and build in the sound requested by the customer. The instruments were beautifully finished, especially those built during the 1930s, the peak of their careers.

The Larsons added the Prairie State brand of guitars to their





line in 1926 or 1927. The early Prairie States had slotted peg-heads and body widths of 14" or 15" and were like their counterpart Maurers, except for the addition of August's patented ideas using a steel tube running the length of the body and incorporating a smaller steel rod devised to adjust the neck angle and fingerboard height. The larger tube strengthened the body and added brilliance of tone and sustain in abundance. These guitars were built so well that the adjustments are rarely used.

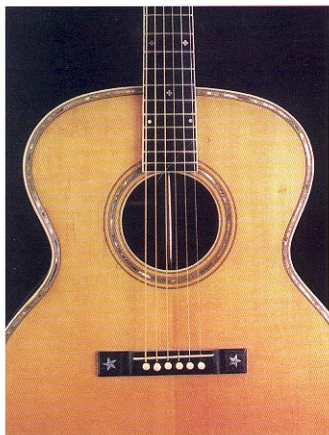
In the 1930s, the trend in the industry was to build larger instruments that would produce more volume. The Larsons accom-

**Previous spread: The Symphony Harp Guitar, W.J. Dyer label. Made by the Larson Brothers of Chicago, c. 1916. This is a model #7 harp guitar which is a step down from the abalone trimmed model #8 that sports the elaborate tree-of-life fingerboard (see Prairie State guitar). This harp guitar has five sub-bass strings, although each model was available with six sub-bass strings. All of the Dyer Symphony-line instruments (harp guitar, harp mandolin, harp mandola, and harp mando-cello) have mahogany bodies which, along with the body extension and extra soundhole, create a powerful but sweet sound. The bass strings are set at an angle and far enough apart for easy picking, which makes the Dyer the favorite for many of the new breed of people who have found playing one of these a rare treat.**

**Opposite page: The Prairie State Brand. This group of guitars represents the basic types of Prairie State guitars produced between 1927 and 1944.**

The two in front are 12-fret (clear of the body), 15" wide rosewood guitars. Each of them has the tone bar visible through the soundhole and a smaller rod below it, which also runs the length of the body and provides neck adjustment. These guitars represent two different patented ideas for that adjustment. The floral inlaid pickguard design in the front guitar is very rare.

The larger 17" jumbo guitars in back represent the powerful, long sustaining sound of these beauties. The necks are not adjustable, thus only the large tone bar was used. The f-hole maple body guitar has a thin top and back. The guitar has a unique sound that blends beautifully with the piano. Only a few were made in 17", 19", and 21" size body widths.





modated with the new Euphonon line of guitars and mandolins about 1936-37. The changes included a solid peghead instead of the previously slotted one, the addition of pickguards, and a new look in the purfling designs and inlays. The Prairie State guitars were also changed to the larger sizes and, along with the Euphonons, adopted the 14 fret-to-the-body motif common to the industry.

Many famous performers, past and present, have used the Larsons' products. The most historic was a guitar commissioned by Les Paul during his early experiments in the development of the solidbody guitar. Les had Carl put a solid  $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick maple top on an otherwise standard Euphonon body. Les then added his own pick-

ups and used this guitar on some of his early recordings.

Carl retired in 1940, and August continued a limited production until his death in 1944. The true test of their success is seeing and hearing about the many instruments they built that have survived the wrath of time and players and still look great, and produce the unique variation of typical Larson sounds. All Larson instruments were handmade from start to finish, which resulted in unique instruments—no two were exactly the same in size or in any other way. Some were not branded and some had no serial number, but I look upon each as a memorable "Larson Creation."

*Robert Hartman*

**Below Left: A 1938 16" dreadnought.  
Below: A 12" wide and 2¼" deep parlour guitar with rosewood back and mahogany sides. This little beauty was built by Carl and given to his son Abner.**

