
HENRY JAMES

LARSON BROS.

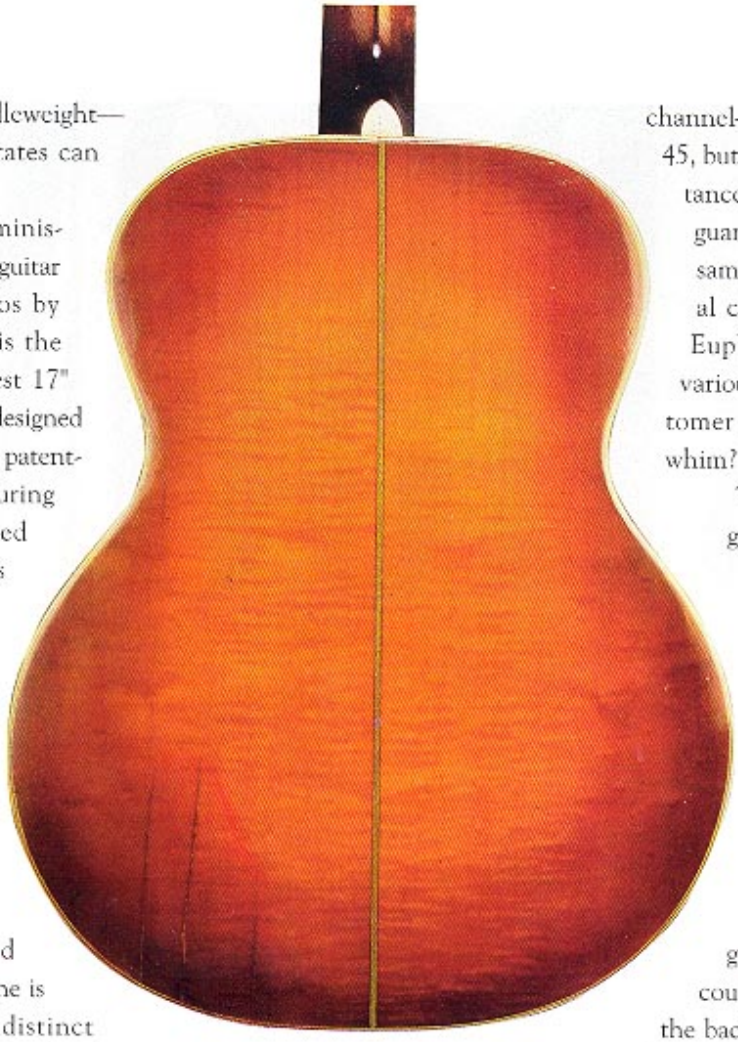
Ever look at an old guitar and wonder about the places it's been? Although the collectors' ethic prizes the "clean" ones that have never seen the light of day, an instrument "under the bed for 50 years" carries little musical history, since by definition it has hardly ever been played. The guitar featured here is in far from mint condition, but has an enormous legacy both as a testament to the maker's art and as a performer's tool that has been enjoyed by generations of players and listeners.

This Euphonon "best grade" guitar was built during the late 30s, most likely for a professional user named Millie, since the ghost of that name still haunts the headstock. Years later, the guitar came into the hands of premier American fingerstylist Stefan Grossman, who used it extensively for recording and touring in the 70s and early 80s.

While interest in and information about instruments built by the Larson brothers of Chicago has expanded considerably over the past 10 years, mostly due to the efforts of Larson descendant Robert Carl Hartman, (*VG Classics* 3 and 8), they remain relative enigmas. Unlike Martin or Gibson with their factories, sales networks and catalogs, the Larson brothers (Carl and August) ran a two-man shop and were essentially prolific handbuilders, using a variety of brand names over a period of about 40 years. Some instruments were built "to order" to be sold by other concerns, but Euphonon was a "house" brand sold primarily by the Larsons themselves. Euphonons vary considerably in detail—generally they are large high-grade flattops made during the later 1930s, the final years of the brothers' partnership. Similar guitars with the Prairie State brand feature the Larsons' patented metal support rod in the body—as a rule, Euphonons do not. While this is a large instrument for its time, with a body 16" wide and 4.5" deep, by

Larson standards it's a middleweight—Euphonons and Prairie States can run to 17", 19" and up!

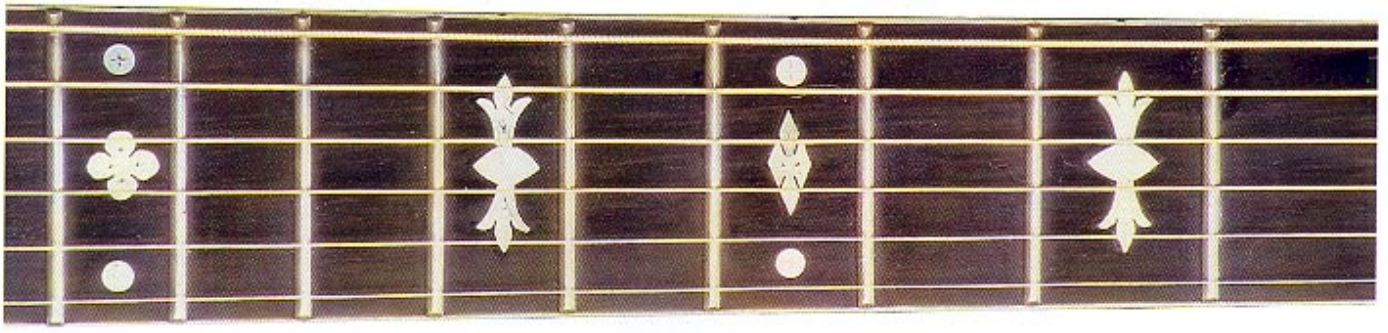
Often described as reminiscent of a Gibson J-185, this guitar predates those 16" jumbos by more than 10 years, and is the contemporary of the earliest 17" rosewood SJ-200—so who designed this still-popular body? The patented laminated bracing featuring strips of ebony sandwiched into the spruce top braces has kept the gentle arch of the top true despite very light construction, and contributes to the spectacular sound these guitars are known for. Many high-grade Euphonons were made with Brazilian rosewood back and sides—the gently sunbursted flamey maple used for this one is less common. Most have distinct individual features typical of handmade guitars. This example is missing the usual curlicue inlay in the oversize headstock, but had "MILLIE" inscribed horizontally in block capital letters. Some previous owner with no regard for history and/or a deficient sense of humor excised the pearl, and oversprayed the resulting puttied-up wound. A POX ON THEE, I say! The 25½" scale laminated maple neck is slim (1¾") and surprisingly "modern" feeling—the result of being designed for the smaller hand of a female performer?



The engraved inlay in the ebony fingerboard is the regular deluxe pattern with a less common extra doodad at the 12th fret. The abalone top inlay is made up of many small pieces somewhat randomly dropped into the edge channel—not as neat as a Martin style 45, but equally impressive from a distance! The oversized tortoise pickguard is unusual looking, but the same fitting can be seen on several contemporary Larson Jumbos. Euphonon pickguards come in various designs—the result of customer preference or the brothers' whim?

The original bridge is long gone, but would have been a rectangular affair sporting star or clover inlays on flattened pyramids. Openback Grover "butterbean" tuners were replaced by gold Grover Rotomatics during the 70s, and the nut, frets, and saddle are newer—typical of the modifications that long-serving guitars undergo during the course of their lives. An area of the back appears to have been water damaged and oversprayed in the distant past, and various hard-strumming users have left their marks in the top.

So in this mint-conscious age, is this guitar a collector's also-ran? Not to anyone who plays it! Besides the unusually powerful response, the nicest thing about a "collectible" guitar as "played in" as this is that there is not the intimidation factor of a mint piece, where each ding is worth $1,000 or so. This

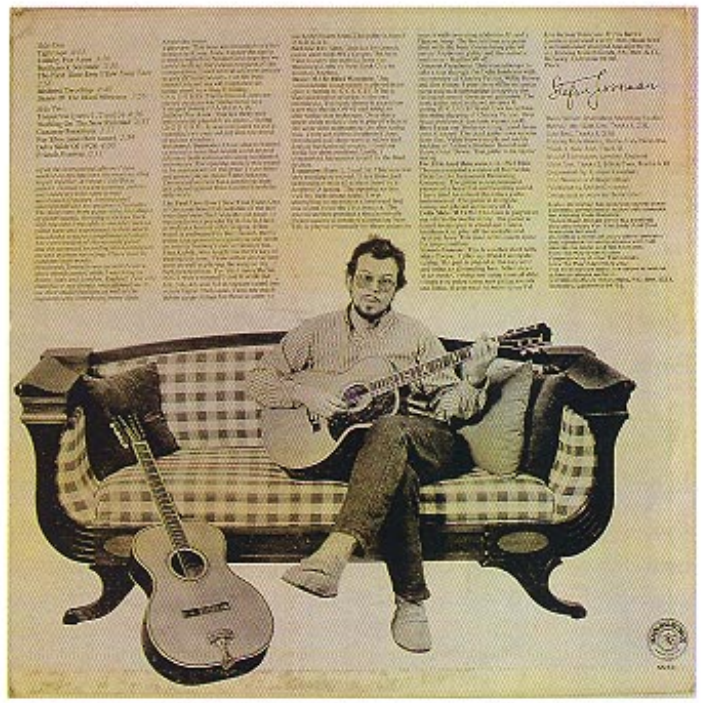


guitar is absolutely "user-friendly!" Both the feel and sound of this instrument are as close to fretted perfection as it gets, and if your tonal taste runs to the sharp crack inherent in a maple body, then "Millie" knows no equal!

The history of a guitar as unique as this spans half a century of musical and cultural change. In the late 1930s, the radio was the dominant medium, and all over the USA, thousands of entertainers plied their trade "live" on the airwaves every day. While those who recorded commercially are remembered today, many stars of the ether were just as well loved in their time for the live broadcasts that were most performers' bread and butter. This was especially true in the "Hillbilly" field. Often, larger stations such as Chicago's WLS presented weekly radio barn dances that lasted for hours, and featured a wide variety of country music talent. It is probable that the Millie who played this guitar (or the player who named his guitar "Millie," a less likely scenario) worked in this milieu. To project over the open mikes of live radio, a guitar had to have extreme power and definition, and most of these entertainers used the best available instruments, Martin Dreadnoughts and OOO's, Gibson flattops or archtops and the Larsons' Prairie States and Euphonons. What are now considered the most desirable flattop guitars of the prewar golden era were built for this market.

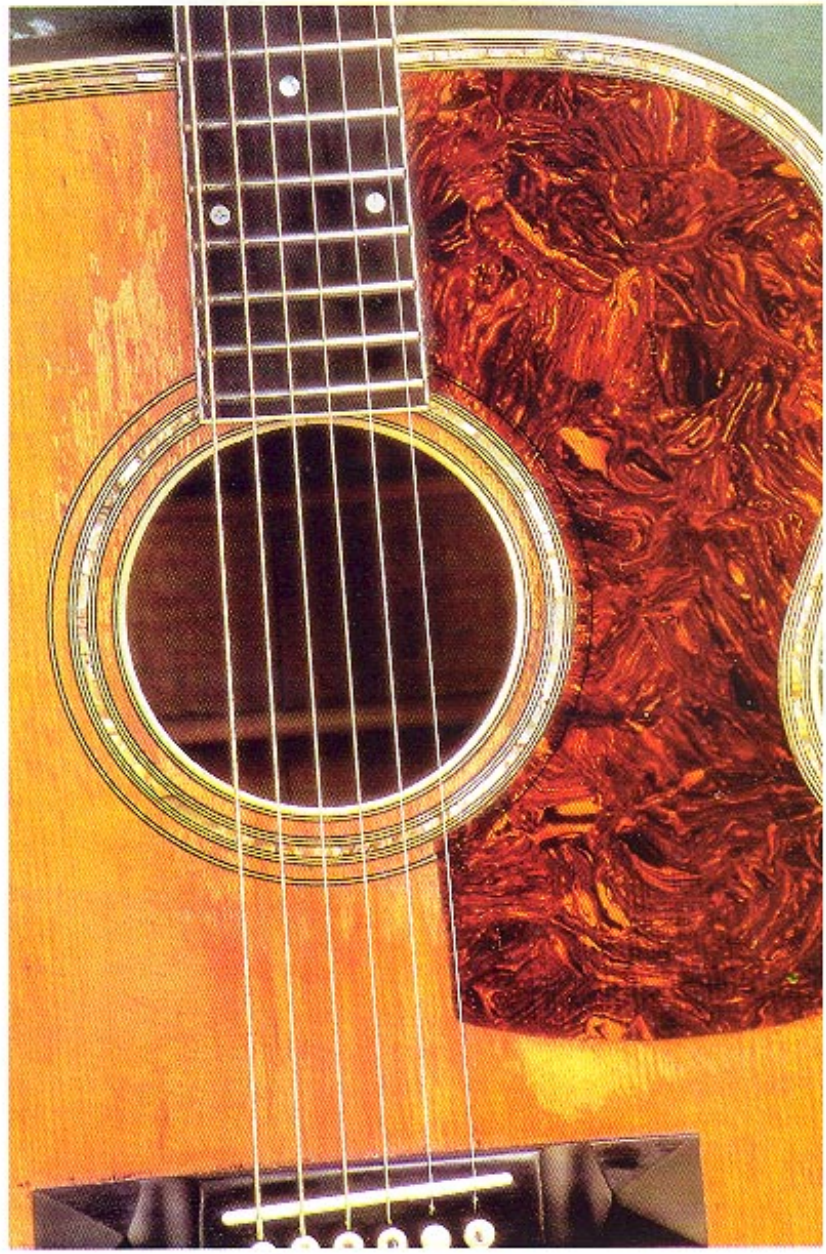
West Virginia's WWVA featured among many performers a young lady named Millie Wayne, dubbed "The Singing Rangerette." The only photographs unearthed of her show a D-18, but several of her fellow WWVA stars played Larsons, as did many WLS regulars. Millie Good of the Girls Of The Golden West, a popular yodeling duet, wasn't an onstage guitarist; her sister Dolly handled that.

So who was the Millie who got this guitar from Carl and August Larson? We may never know, or a picture might be found at this weekend's flea market—let us know if you've got a clue! By the time this guitar surfaced in the mid-70s the radio entertainer was a thing of the past, but interest in music played on



acoustic guitars was at a high point, and high-quality flattops were at a premium. The major manufacturers were turning out instruments that were more attuned to profitability than sound quality—"stage props," in the words of George Gruhn—and the interest in prewar instruments led to a flourishing trade in older rarities such as this one.

While little was known about the history of the Larson Brothers, the guitars they left behind were recognized by connoisseurs as being among the finest ever built. This Euphonon apparently surfaced in Chicago, then was brought to New York and was sold to Stefan Grossman, one of the leading lights in the 60s-70s Blues/Ragtime fingerstyle guitar movement. Grossman was/is well known not only as a performer, but also as an educator who did a great deal to promote a range of flattop guitar styles, most particularly the legacy of Reverend Gary Davis, with whom he had studied. In his July 1977 *Guitar Player* column "My Favorite Guitars," this Euphonon is actually listed as his second-favorite guitar, after a 1930 Martin OM-45. (Which is kind of like coming in second to Secretariat or Bugs Bunny—some things just can't be beat!) At that time, Grossman considered this maple Larson brothers creation the perfect "Rev. Gary" guitar, presumably since the sound is reminiscent of the J-200s Davis played, but the smaller, much lighter body gives a far more responsive tone. He describes the sound as "funky," and that is certainly borne out by the records—for example, the track "Tightrope" from the L.P. *Bottleneck Serenade*, where slippery string snaps and a driving percussive feel are the order of the day. Many of the recordings Grossman made in the mid-late 70s feature this guitar, and if you would like a soundtrack to these photos, they are certainly worth seeking. Grossman's recordings are very guitarist-friendly—besides offering booklets of tablature, he often tells you which guitar is playing what! Since that time, the guitar has changed hands twice, but each time it has gone to an owner who plays her regularly—Millie may not be a "Star Guitar" anymore, but she's not ready to retire to the glass case yet!



As this century draws to a close and the cultural relics of the past hundred years move from the status of "old stuff" to "collectibles," owning a bit of playable musical history has become a quest to many people. The true importance of an instrument like this is not in its pristine appearance, but in an appreciation of the sounds built and played into it. At nearly the close of two lifetimes spent perfecting fretted instruments, Carl and August Larson created this unique guitar not just for Millie, whoever she was, but for the generations of pickers who have followed her. With a little luck, this "Millie" will continue to provide musical pleasure for the century to come and beyond.

Peter Stuart Kohman