The Astounding Harp Guitars of the Larson Brothers

Gregg Miner





Where to begin?!

Well, I suppose we should begin with the brothers, themselves. Following is a brief snapshot.[1]

Carl Larson was born in 1867 in Kalmar, Sweden and immigrated to Chicago in 1886 at the age of 18. His younger brother August, born in 1873, soon followed, joining Carl in working at the Cubley drum factory at age 16. This was the humble beginning of their lutherie careers.





Above, the workforce of Edwin J. Cubley's musical instrument factory, c.1889.

Cubley stands on the right, while the youthful faces of the Larsons belie their future fame! Carl, about age 32, stands below August, who is about 26.

The factory predominately made drums, which led to banjos, then small quantities of the other "BMG instruments (mandolins and guitars).

[1] One can find many simple-to-lengthier overviews available on the Internet today. For example, see (accessed September 18, 2026) https://acousticmusic.org/guitar-music-research/guitar-information/large-shop-guitar-builders/the-larson-brothers/
Of course, the best source would be the books – now 7 or 8! – of Carl Larson's grandson Robert Carl Hartman. They are available on the used market, with more recent books printed on demand from Amazon.

After the factory was destroyed by fire in 1893, the brothers began working for Robert Maurer & Company, makers of guitars and mandolins.[2] When Robert Maurer retired in 1900, August bought the company with investors, whose shares brother Carl later acquired, giving the brothers full ownership of the company. The Larson brothers immediately took advantage of the larger instrument companies in Chicago and the surrounding states (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Indiana), building instruments for Wm. C. Stahl, W. J. Dyer & Bro., and many other firms.[3] They also built for themselves, selling under the Maurer name, and, inexplicably, without using any brand label or makers indication of any kind.[4] They later developed their own lines Prairie State and Euphonon.[5]

Today, Larson guitars are treasured among players and collectors as some of the best ever built in America, and that goes double for their harp guitars, especially their hollow arm models built for the Dyer firm. The Larson Brothers not only produced beautifully constructed and incredible-sounding instruments, but they were highly innovative. They were among the earliest proponents of both steel string guitars and large-bodied guitars.[6], and August held three construction patents and one design patent (seen below). The two inventions meant for better tone production were a 1904 patent for laminated X braces to strengthen the tops, and a 1930 patent for an interior steel rod to strengthen the top while allowing it to better resonate.[7]

The Larson brothers – nominally only a two-man shop for the duration - built a staggering number of guitars, mandolins, and plectrum orchestra instruments – many more than fans are aware of, I think. Harp guitars were generally a very small sideline…until we come to the "Dyers." Simple calculations reveal that somewhere between 500 and 550 were built; that's *a lot!*

In 1940, Carl Larson was struck by a car while crossing the street and retired soon after. He died in 1946. August ran the shop alone until he passed away in 1944.



[2] See more on Maurer's activities in the Appendix.

[3] Some of these many firms are known, some are guessed at, with much investigation and instrument analysis still to be done.

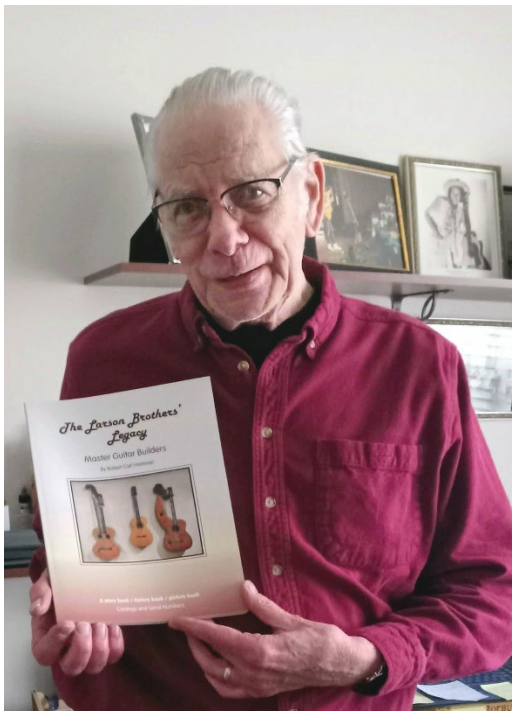
[4] Indeed, their own names never appeared on a single instrument.

[5] No harp guitars ever appeared under these later brands, as the instrument's time had come and gone.

[6] Certainly, in their many harp guitar creations, though they were well behind others in the U.S. to do that.

[7] The rod concept has been used on certain harp guitars decades before.

Since the early 1980s, Carl's grandson Bob has devoted himself to the legacy of his famous relatives.



At right, Bob with his latest book project, completed at age 90!

Along the way, he has met countless collectors and players of Larson instruments, including the late Michael Hedges. He told this story:

"I met Michael in Madison, Wisconsin in the summer of 1987 and showed him the four harps I had. He was there for a week-long master class along with top players from around the world; the program was the brilliant idea of John Stropes. Each teacher had classes and had a concert one evening. I think Michael was on that night with John Renbourn. Michael tuned each of my four harp guitars in a different tuning and played a song on each for Carol, my son, two friends and I."



L to R: Bob's son Carl Hartman with Dyer Style 8, Doug Anderson (a local college teacher) holding a Stahl, Michael with his own Dyer, Bob Hartman with a rare type 1 Dyer, and (Chicago guitarist) Kraig Kenning with a Style 7.

On to the instruments.

The information, the specimens, the sheer *scope* of the discoveries has grown by leaps and bounds since I began Harpguitars.net in 2004. Prior to that, we already had a lot of information from Bob Hartman's books. Even as late as 2026, I acquired still another previously unknown "one-off" Stahl harp guitar.[8] *What will we find next?!*

These instruments have been spread throughout the website for over two decades now; I suppose it's time to collate and try to organize them a bit, so even *I* know where to look for them! For now, I've structured them like this:

W. J. Dyer & Bro. Harp Guitars

Unlabeled Harp Guitars

Maurer "Picasso" Harp Guitars

Stahl Harp Guitars

Other Brands & Possibilities

W. J. Dyer & Bro. Harp Guitars

We begin with Dyers[9], as they are by far the most well-known, popular and numerous of the Larsons' creations (somewhere between 500 and 550 were built, which is a *lot*). This will be a fairly brief overview, as I have an extensive Dyer section on Harpguitars.net.[10] Also not to be missed are the many more recent blog articles on Dyer discoveries (66 so far!) on individual or "breaking news!" topics.[11]



For example, the one that finally proved that the Larsons started building their "Type 1" harp guitar for Dyer in 1901 (at right). *That* was cool.

[8] Bottom row, center on first page.

[9] We all shorten "W. J. Dyer & Bro." to "Dyer," it's now common name.

[10] The Dyer home page is https://www.harpguitars.net/knutsen/dyers.htm. For better or worse, all that information remains a bit of a disorganized mess, as it began long ago as part of The Knutsen Archives – a website I started well before Harpguitars.net. It remains there, and now includes several key sections and articles, all of which contain crucial information for scholars and fans alike.

[11] The Dyer Blog archive is https://www.harpguitars.net/category/historical-makers/dyer/

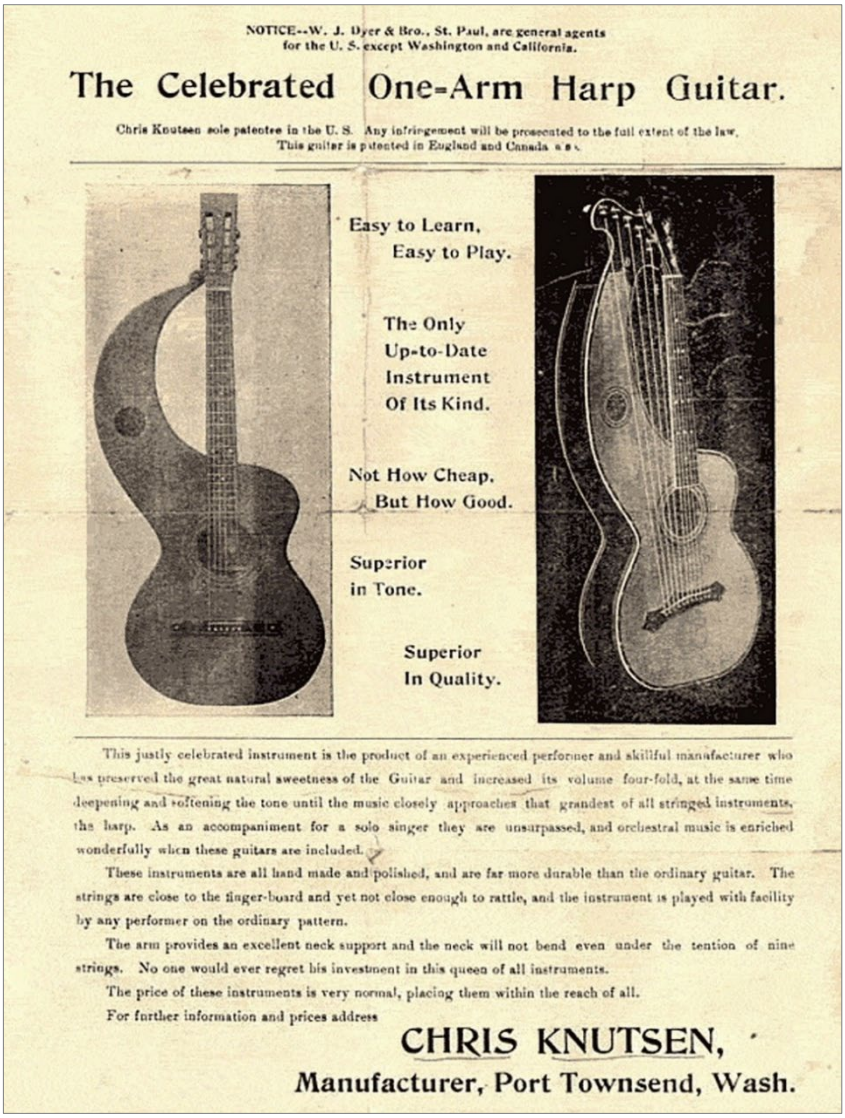
I cannot overstate the importance of the collaboration between the Larsons and W. J. Dyer & Bro. It was a perfect partnership, producing and marketing the ultimate harp guitar for both its original audience and players today. They were second only behind the Gibson harp guitar in popularity and sales,[12] with these two top brands really being "apples and oranges" in appearance, tuning, and tone.[13]

The Larsons did not invent the American hollow arm harp guitar, however. That honor goes to Norwegian Chris Knutsen, then living in Port Townsend, Washington.

As seen in the flyer at right, by 1899, his somewhat crudely built but fantastic sounding harp guitars were being sold by the Dyer firm.[14]

By mid-to-late 1901, the Dyer company had presumably had enough of Knutsen's inconsistent output – indeed, no two instruments were quite alike, and often surprisingly crude – and found the Larson brothers, then just striking out on their own in Chicago.

The Larsons may not have yet even *built* a harp guitar at this point, and certainly not the more difficult hollow arm variant with its tricky neck joint and other challenges. Dyer must have been familiar with their 6-string guitar work and gave them the shot.[15]



NOTICE--W. J. Dyer & Bro., St. Paul, are general agents for the U. S. except Washington and California.

The Celebrated One-Arm Harp Guitar.

Chris Knutsen sole patentee in the U. S. Any infringement will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. This guitar is patented in England and Canada also.

Easy to Learn, Easy to Play.

The Only Up-to-Date Instrument Of Its Kind.

Not How Cheap, But How Good.

Superior in Tone.

Superior In Quality.

This justly celebrated instrument is the product of an experienced performer and skillful manufacturer who has preserved the great natural sweetness of the Guitar and increased its volume four-fold, at the same time deepening and softening the tone until the music closely approaches that grandest of all stringed instruments, the harp. As an accompaniment for a solo singer they are unsurpassed, and orchestral music is enriched wonderfully when these guitars are included.

These instruments are all hand made and polished, and are far more durable than the ordinary guitar. The strings are close to the finger-board and yet not close enough to rattle, and the instrument is played with facility by any performer on the ordinary pattern.

The arm provides an excellent neck support and the neck will not bend even under the tention of nine strings. No one would ever regret his investment in this queen of all instruments.

The price of these instruments is very normal, placing them within the reach of all.

For further information and prices address

CHRIS KNUTSEN,

Manufacturer, Port Townsend, Wash.

[12] Figures of "around, or over, 400" total Gibson harp guitars built have remained in informal lore for decades. This cannot be accurate, as I have found them in both historical provenance and extant specimens to be found closer to *ten times* the number of Dyers, of which over 500 were built. If Gibson built 400, then I've seen every single one more than once!

[13] The Gibson was a heavy, carved-top instrument intended for either steel or gut (silk) strings of extra heaviness for higher tension to provide its volume and bass response. In either stringing configuration, it did not "sing" like the lightly built flattop Dyer harp guitars. While the Dyer would use 5, then 6 sub-basses, the Gibson would use a chromatic tuning with 12, 11, or 10 basses.

[14] Knutsen first settled in Minnesota and kept family ties there. W. J. Dyer & Bro. in St. Paul was then the largest music merchandise distributor west of Chicago.

[15] The Larsons would build some of the "Stetson" 6-string guitars for Dyer, while others would build other Dyer brands like the "Eclipse."



Typical c.1901 Knutsen | 1901 Emory Bennett instrument | Dyer #125, historical image

By this time (mid/late 1901), Knutsen had transitioned to his curious "slanted frets" and still retained his rudimentary hand-carved headstock tuner holes and simple neck butt joint (left specimen). What we believe is one of the very first Larson-built Dyers (center)[16] shows the Larsons' refinement, which they standardized during the first three years (right).



Type 1 (various "Styles") | Type 2 (Styles 4-9) | Type 3 (Style 3) | Custom, att. Larsons

By December 1904, the Larsons had redesigned Knutsen's instrument into their preferred configuration and aesthetic; this is the familiar and popular "Dyer harp guitar" that modern players discovered in the 1980s. The "Types" above are my own designations, used for the three different *body shapes*. **Type 1** (c.1901-c.1904) adhered closely to Chris Knutsen's original c.1900 "Symphony harp guitar." **Type 2** (c.1904-c.1920) is the common model everyone is familiar with.

[16] See https://www.harpguitars.net/2024/10/01/cracking-the-dyer-dna-code/

Type 3 (c.1908 only) borrowed Knutsen's pointed body flare and also the idea of a smaller short-scale instrument (22.25 inches). The fourth specimen in the Dyer line-up above is an unlabeled "one-off" believed by Bob Hartman to be a Larson creation and falls somewhere between a Knutsen and a Dyer in design features. I've placed it here rather than in the next section only because it is "in family" with the hollow-arm Dyer instruments.

The Larsons also built a trio of "Symphony harp" plectrum instruments for the Dyer firm: mandolins (many, from c.1907-c.1920), mandolas (just six or seven, c.1917-c.1918), and mandocellos (just *two*, same period as the mandolas). Similar to harp mandolins made by Knutsen, they had no extra strings; only the hollow arm with its "harp shape" led to the "Harp-_____" name.[17]

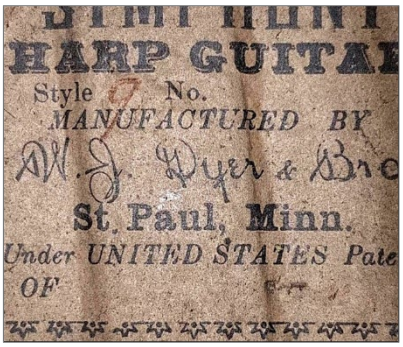


Above: Author with the only known set of the "Symphony Harp Plectral Ensemble" instruments.

Though W. J. Dyer & Bro. advertised the Type 2 harp guitar as late as 1939, it is highly doubtful that many were built after 1920.

[17] See https://www.harpguitars.net/history/dyer/Dyer-Harp-Mandolins-Gregg-Miner-web.pdf

One more unusual recent find was the discovery of a Dyer "Style 9."[18] As the Type 2 model was known to have been made only from Styles 4-through-8 (level of trim from plain to fanciest), this was both exciting and confusing. The label (at right) definitely shows the deliberate "9," but the instrument itself wasn't fancier than the "Tree-of-life" Style 8; it was actually more like a "Style 7 plus," in essence, a Style 7 with additional abalone trim on the top. Two are known – both very similar early specimens (below).[19]





Again, a *huge* amount of information on all the Dyer instruments has been published, both on my website and in the books of Robert Carl Hartman.[20]

[18] See https://www.harpguitars.net/2024/03/18/the-dyer-style-9/

[19] The specimen on the left has the label, the one on the right is missing a label, but matches in appointments.

[20] https://www.amazon.com/stores/Robert-Carl-Hartman/author/B0GRBYCKBD?ref=ap_rdr&shoppingPortalEnabled=true (accessed September 16, 2026)

Unlabeled Harp Guitars

Bob Hartman attributes these four unlabeled harp guitars to the Larson brothers and includes them in his books' Maurer or Stahl chapters. I'm not positive if the last one was indeed Larson-built, but either way, I actually consider it a Truax instrument.[21] The first three, being Larson (I think everyone agrees), but unlabeled, would indeed have come from the Larson brothers' "Maurer" shop. Why they didn't use their Maurer label on these instruments is a mystery. Custom orders or one-offs, certainly, but to let every one leave their shop unmarked?

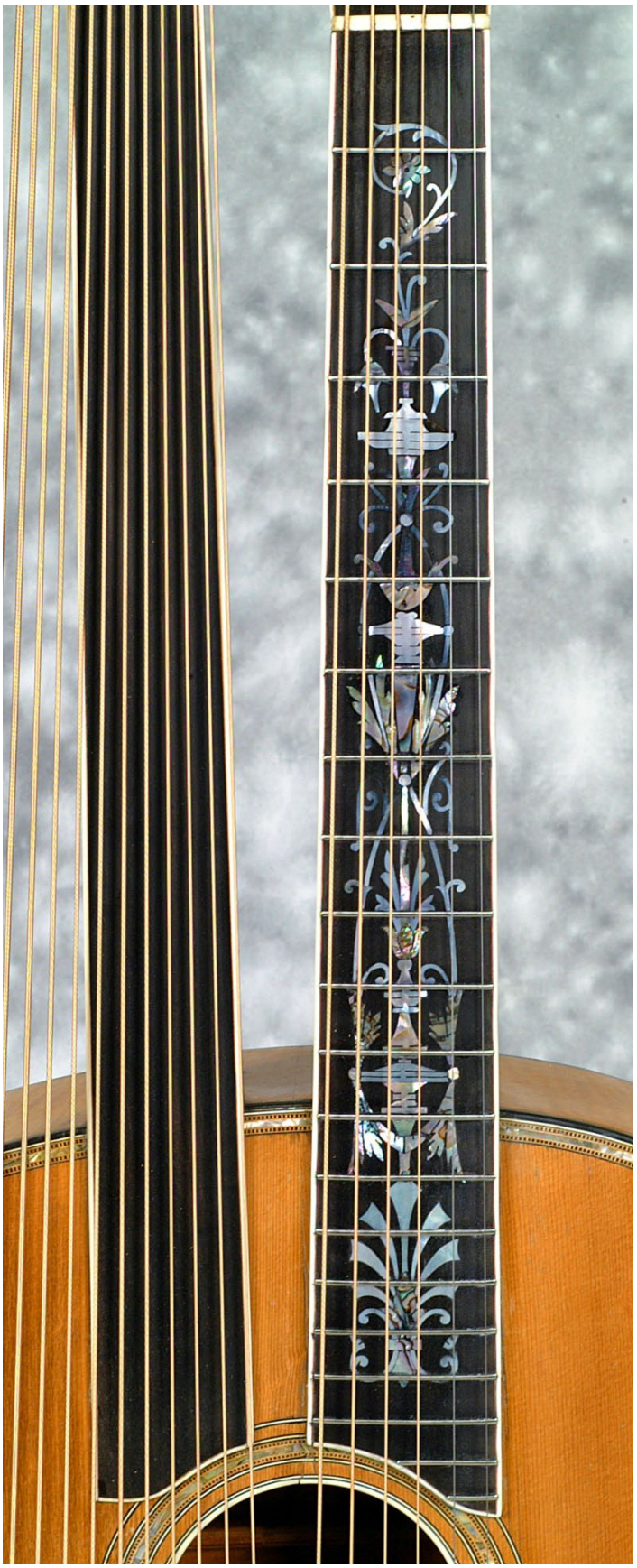


The one on the left is just spectacular, if a bit wacky, with that "cinched waist"! The lower bout is a huge 18 & 7/8" inches wide, but the waist is just under 10 inches! The body ranges from 3 & 7/8" to 4 & 1/8" at the tail end. The entire instrument reaches almost four feet in length.

Bob puts it at c.1906; note that it shares the same fancy headstock and fretboard inlay of the Dyer Style 8, introduced about 1908. Let's take a closer look:

[21] See https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/Truax_Harp_Guitars-Gregg_Miner.pdf











This one is also wild!

At left and below, the unusual, unlabeled Larson shown as found. The distinctive double soundholes was a novel idea that appeared on a surprising number of different makers' harp guitars, both before and after this instrument was built.

About the only thing it shares with the previous instrument is that distinctive and lovely bridge, fancy binding, and another thin waist (9 & 9/16"). Note its extra-long scale length!

- Scale: 27"
- Body Width: 17 & 1/2"
- Body Max Depth: 4"
- Body Length: 19 & 1/2"
- Total Length: 49 & 1/2"



Of note is one laminated brace for the top, with two on the back (!). The following images show it before and after restoration by Kerry Char.[22]

[22] A complete photo essay by Kerry appears in *American Lutherie* Number 140 / Summer 2020.

Right, Kerry Char examining the original instrument with a camera scope.





Left, the back of the curly mahogany laminated necks. The support rod may have been added later but has been seen in other Larson harp guitars.

This was a very fancy instrument with fine abalone binding on the front *and* back.

The lack of any markings, especially a July 12, 1904 patent stamp, indicates that this harp guitar was likely created before that time, c.1901-c.1904.[23]

Yet note that the instrument has *ten* sub-basses, never seen on American harp guitars before c.1906 when Walter Boehm came up with his new tuning method for Gibson.[24] Might it have been modified later?

[23] The main dating factor here is the instrument's laminated internal braces, the key feature of the 1904 patent, which was filed on September 8, 1903.

[24] The story of Walter Boehm and his tuning ideas, which Gibson adopted, is here: https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/Walter_Boehm_and_the_Gibson_Harp_Guitar-Gregg_Miner.pdf

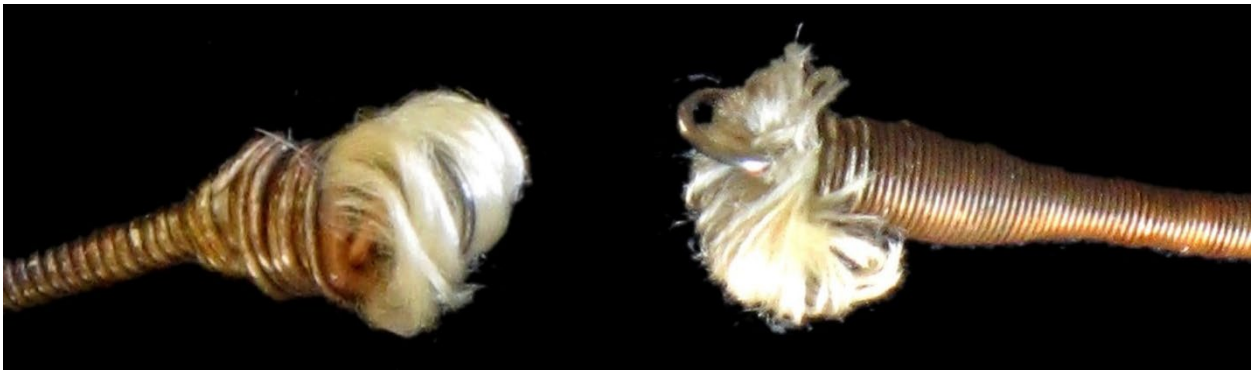


The crude sub-bass string nut was likely added as the bass strings began rattling again their support neck as warping occurred. Kerry removed it and filled the slot, putting it back to its original tuner point-of-contact stringing. The vine inlay on this “neck” and headstock are believed original. The dot fretboard was a replacement, however, so Kerry made a new one with typical Larson inlays.





That wonderful bridge, before and after restoration. Curiously, it is a bizarre *pinless* bridge, with a metal strip along the bottom for the ball end strings (though originally, these likely would have been crude twisted silk and wire "balls" (example below) that would've barely cleared each other. Has any other Larson been seen with this system? The similar bridge on the harp guitars above and below have a typical bridge pin through-the-top set-up.



This unlabeled Larson-attributed harp guitar shares a version of that same bridge with the previous two instruments.[25] It also includes typical Larson inlays on the headstocks and fretboard.[26] It is X-braced, with the following dimensions:

- Scale: 25 & 1/2”
- Body Width: 14 & 1/2”
- Body Depth: 3 & 9/16”
- Body Length: 19 & 1/2”
- Total Length: 42 & 3/4”





[25] While like that of the previous instrument, note that it is a standard bridge style with holes through the top and bone pins.
[26] Think of the fingerboard as a fancier “Style 7” of the Dyer line. In fact, this is what Steve Bissell asked to have copied for his “back-to-how-it-might-have-looked” harp guitar seen previously.





Any way you look at it, this unlabeled harp guitar is incredible. Bob believes it to be Larson-built, while I believe it to be a Truax instrument without a label. Perhaps both may be true.[27]



Can you believe how they managed to configure those twelve sub-bass tuners?!

[27] See https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/Truax_Harp_Guitars-Gregg_Miner.pdf





Maurer “Picasso” Harp Guitars



Above, the two main Maurer “patent style body shape” harp guitars, in order of appearance (“Type 1” and “Type 2”).

You’ve now now seen hollow arm and double-neck Larson harp guitars, from unusual to beautiful, sedate to fanciful.

We now come to “butt ugly.” Sorry to be crude, but that is indeed what I have heard people call these strange instruments.

I guess “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Indeed, a friend of mine owns the two above and just loves them. But then, perhaps he is enamored of their sound (we’ll get to that).

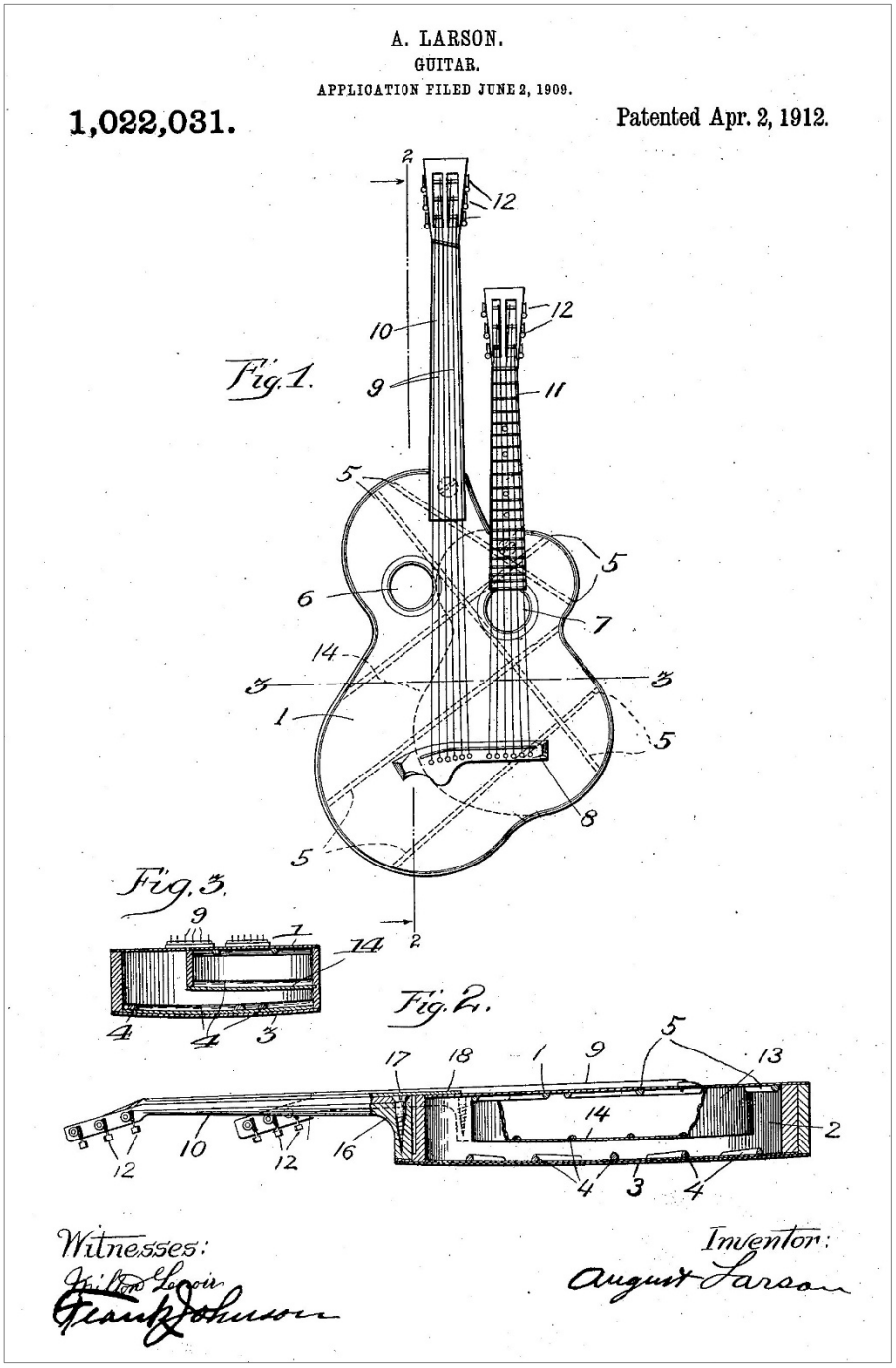
The Larson brothers began their harp guitar sojourn in 1901 with the Dyer contract, and soon, their own experiments. By 1910, they would be going gangbusters.

In the January 18, 1908, issue of *The Music Trade Review*, this cryptic announcement appeared (right). Without any image, what might the industry have *had* in their collective mind’s eye?

TREBLE AND BASS HARP GUITAR.

The Maurer Co., of Chicago, Ill., are the inventors and manufacturers of a very novel invention—a combined treble and bass harp guitar. This type of guitar has a small body within and connected with the large body. The small body co-operating especially in tone and producing when the treble notes are played, and both bodies co-operating separately and collectively when any notes are played. It is an instrument of very handsome appearance and embodies many possibilities for the performer.

It was *this*:


A. LARSON.
GUITAR.
APPLICATION FILED JUNE 2, 1908.
1,022,031. Patented Apr. 2, 1912.
Fig. 1.
Fig. 3.
Fig. 2.
Witnesses:
Inventor:
August Larson

Perhaps they next spent some time fine-tuning that early 1908 instrument, for they wouldn't even *file* for the patent until June 2nd of the following year.[28]

The patent was August Larson's alone, and is truly a remarkable – and in my opinion, successful – idea.

Its illustrations show exactly what is going on. There is a *separate 6-string guitar body* **inside and alongside** a larger *harp guitar body with sub-basses*.

The 6-string body has its own **separate back** and **side wall** while **sharing the top** and **treble side** with the harp guitar portion.

The creation of the two airspaces is what necessitated the two soundholes and what gave the instrument its unique shape. Thus, it was long ago dubbed the ""Picasso" harp guitar.[29]

[28] And it would take nearly three more years before it was granted.

[29] While I personally christened it the "Goiter Guitar."

Certainly, the Larsons must have built an instrument matching the patent closely, and from the 1908 MTR clipping, we can surmise that it was branded "Maurer Co."

So, when the first of the Maurer "patent" harp guitars began to be discovered, I think we all assumed that they obviously included the internal body. In fact, for decades there was more than one "eyewitness" account of someone knowledgeable having "seen" the internal body through the soundhole of one or another specimen. It was simply a *fact*.

Actually, it was fascinating human psychology at work. The internal body *should* have been there, so these observers *remembered seeing it*. It turns out that ***no patent-type Maurer harp guitar yet found actually has the internal body***.[30]

Wait a minute - the instrument matched the patent drawing exactly (as seen at right) – how could the Larsons *not* incorporate that feature? Why else would they build something with such an unusual shape?!



To this day, no one knows. But once I deduced that this was indeed the case, I came up with the simple theory that, for some reason, the Larsons were prevented from using the internal body for their own instruments; they were only "allowed" to use that feature in those built for William Stahl. Whether by a negotiated fee structure or by mutual agreement, this must have been the case; there can *be* no other answer, as we will see further below.[31]

Another part of this "agreement" may have been the string count. All Maurers were **double-necks** with **six** sub-basses, as seen in August's patent; no more, no less. The Stahl harp guitars, on the other hand, *never* had six, but always more – 8, 10, or 12 sub-basses, as we shall see.

Further, the Larsons quickly changed their Maurer "Picasso" design into something perhaps more "normal," if even more unattractive. Was this another appeasement to Stahl, as – other than the necks – the two brands looked so similar? The new design kept the two offset soundholes, while the body shape changed to one that wouldn't seem likely to accommodate the "implied" internal body. Interestingly, the Larsons now "stole back" the Harwood-inspired bridge that they used for Stahl's non-patent type harp guitars. What a complicated contract this must have been!

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[30] It was only in the early 2020s that I tracked down these observers while at the same time cross-referencing multiple photos of the same instruments. I could find no Maurer specimen with the internal body – only the two Stahls that appear below. There *are* two additional "Type 1" Maurers in historical photos where we obviously can't determine if they might have included the internal body.

[31] As far as we can hypothesize at present.

Here are the two different body types of the c.1908-c.1915 Larson brothers harp guitars marked "Maurer." I've added the hypothetical hidden 6-string body as an overlay.



The Type 1 on the left matches the patent illustration nearly exactly (with the parallel necks just slightly diverged) yet has no internal body; it merely has the shape.[32]

The Type 2 on the right is no less odd and unattractive, and this very specimen in the overlay image below was once rumored to have *had* the internal body. Not only does its lower bout curve not aesthetically lend itself to that, but the inner sidewall would be visible through the bass soundhole if it was present.

The current count of known specimens *built* is **8 in total** (with another possible duplicate).

While that is certainly not very many, it's more than any other Larson harp guitar "model," excluding the very numerous Dyers.

And quite a lot, actually, when you consider its odd, ungainly appearance and the fact that it omitted the very point of its patent!

Only a *single* surviving Type 1 is known. As already stated, it has no internal body. Three other Type 1s are seen in historical photos[33]

A total of *four* uniquely identifiable Type 2s survive. That leaves *one* – a curious *transitional* instrument that I only re-discovered in my decades-old Bob Hartman folder in 2026. Let's examine them.

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[32] As of this writing, this remains the only surviving specimen yet found of this first design; more specimens might provide more data.

[33] I've left one out of the lineup as it looks exactly like the surviving instrument (inasmuch as the extremely poor detail tells us).



With its very parallel necks, this specimen appears to most closely adhere to the patent drawing. It has fancy binding and head and fb inlay like a Dyer Style 7.



This one also matches the patent closely but has slightly diverged necks. It has plain dot fret markers, and the imaginary line from the bass body hits the neck in the 7th fret space.



Scaled to the one at left, we see that the bass side's upper area had been enlarged while its neck has been dramatically shortened. Its line meets the neck in the middle of the 5th fret.



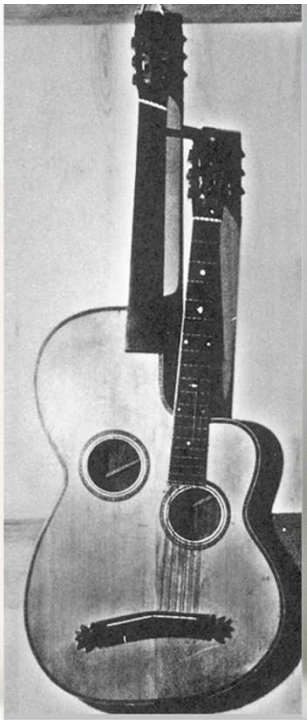
And here we see a transition, as the body is somewhere between the two types, and includes the new bridge. Perhaps realizing there was no need to adhere to the shape of the patent (or at Stahl's request?), they altered the shape.



The Type 2 design is (mostly) complete. The bottom of the instrument has become fully rounded. The upper bass air chamber remains large (its line now always meets the neck within the 5th fret). The "Harwood-style" bridge remains.



Note that camera perspective may alter the "true shape" of these instruments. On these first two examples, the roughly parallel necks actually incline towards each other. The pickguard is not original.



The necks on this one are back to being slightly diverged.



The necks are quite diverged in this example. Was the body shape also tweaked?

So, who on earth *played* these bizarre Larson brothers Maurer harp guitars?

Amateur college and community ensembles, for one. And as they proliferated, so did their harp guitars – though it was unusual to see so many different models in one group, as with this one!



copyright and courtesy Paul Ruppa

The Bonne Amie Musical Circle (BAMC) began life on December 6th of 1900 and has been in continuous existence ever since, now known as the Milwaukee Mandolin Orchestra. In 1923, they reached the zenith of harp guitar inclusion: A Gibson, two Dyers, and a Maurer![34]

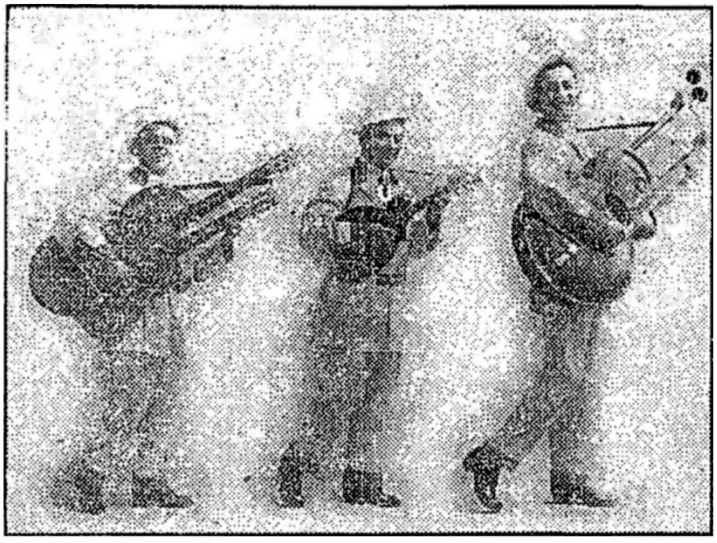


But more than any others, it was *Vaudeville players* who were always looking for loud and outrageous-looking harp guitars!

Chicago's "Three Troubadours" featured the extended body Type 1.

[34] In the early 2000s, John Stropes was briefly the sole harp guitarist on his grandfather's Gibson. I believe that is his grandfather above with the Gibson in the BAMC (he lived in Racine, Wisconsin, 40 some miles from Milwaukee).





The March 26 1912 Nashville *Tennessean* included this shot of one of the many Vardon, Perry & Wilber "copy acts." This one is "King, Bennett & Fields." Jack King is the leader and has a large-bodied Gibson. Bringing up the rear is Fields, with a Type 1 Maurer harp guitar (not in the specimen line-up above, as I can't resolve its specifics).

Stahl Harp Guitars



Now things get interesting.

As if the Larsons weren't *already* creating dramatic and unique harp guitars, William Stahl must have said, "Sure, but I want *more*."

Stahl's story is told in the Appendix along with Cubley's and Maurer's, whom I believe are all connected – with and without the Larson brothers themselves.

Interestingly, of all those mentioned here, it was teacher, composer, publisher – and where we're concerned, *dealer* – Wm. C. Stahl who first became aware of the American harp guitar. This was in 1885, when 16-year-old Stahl saw the fabled "Flinn prototype" at the Jenkins firm in Kansas City. It would be sixteen more years until the Larson brothers built their first harp guitars, and several years later for Stahl to ask for his own Larson-built instruments to sell under his Stahl brand.

It only recently occurred to me that each of those Larson designs – all seemingly unique "one-offs" – were also "Stahl exclusives." In fact, Stahl seemed to have such a hold over the brothers that they themselves were not allowed (or agreed not) to build their *own* patented design under their own name! This is not a known fact, only a theory I now believe is almost certain.

Let me clarify. As seen earlier, the Larsons *could* use the distinctive body shape for their Maurer brand, but *not the internal second body* – which frankly, was the entire point of the patent!

And so, we seem to have a case where the harp guitars that *Stahl* commissioned and that include his stamp or label, *do* have the internal body. But only those that resemble the patent with its "treble and bass" body but not its double necks. Additionally, Stahl would have the Larsons create additional harp guitars in a new style that didn't feature the internal body.

The well known "1909" Stahl harp guitar from the Hartman books may actually be their first collaboration; if not, it's still the earliest built Stahl harp guitar that survives.





While it has a Stahl label, there is no patent stamp, nor "Pat. pend."[35] Therefore it must have been built *before* the June 2 filing date in 1909. This is before Stahl began to mention harp guitars in his *Crescendo* ads, the first inclusion being in the September 1909 issue.

As you can see above, the Larsons duplicated the patent's body shape precisely in order to incorporate the internal body as designed.

[35] "555111" is handwritten upside down on the label. Listed in Hartman's books as a serial number, it doesn't match the Stahl series in any way.

As I now believe the brothers were originally allowed to use the patent type body *shape* with its two standard "necks" and six sub-basses, those built for Stahl included the internal body – what I'll call his "exclusive" – but *deviated* from and expanded upon the sub-bass string portion. This custom instrument thus incorporated a straight hollow arm extension with a fanciful headstock shape, complete with small rhinestones.[36]



The rhinestones are quite tiny; the "binding" and "inlay" have been painted on. While there are only seven slots in the bridge for the sub-basses, there are *eight* original tuning pegs. Perhaps the 6th neck string slot in the bridge may have been used for two strings at one point?[37]

The reason someone has marked the fragile celluloid tuning buttons with numbers becomes apparent when we flip the instrument over…

[36] Though rarely utilized, it is known that the Larsons' kept a drawerful of the colorful tchotchkes in their shop.

[37] Knutsen routinely did that, but only for his earlier harp guitars.



Are you *kidding* me?!

This is simply fascinating. It seems that – too late, perhaps – the customer asked for eight basses. But the Larsons must not have had any idea what they were planning to do from the beginning!

How in the world did they source or create these custom tuning machines of drastically different lengths? They then had to carefully cut the brass plates *just* so, in order to clear each other as they plotted out this incredibly complicated position pattern.

Ingenious or insane?

When complete, they must have looked from the front to see which peg turned which shaft so that they could number the basses for the owner!

When this instrument first appeared (in Bob Hartman's hands, of course) at the fourth Harp Guitar Gathering, everyone had to try it. My review, both from the players and the listeners position?

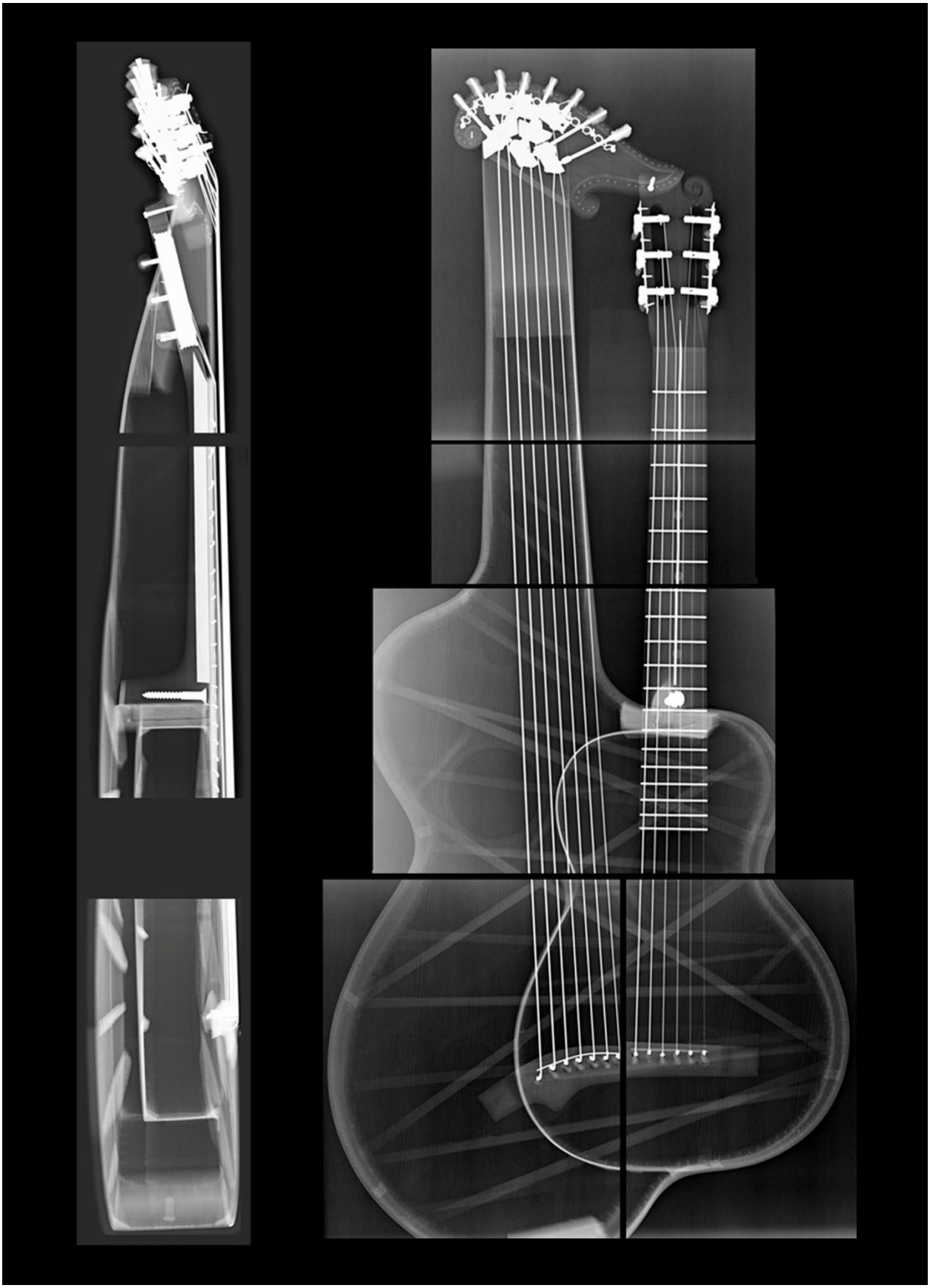
It sounded exactly as I imagined it should! The fretted portion sounded like a standard parlor guitar (a fine one), while the basses were rich, deep and close to Dyer-like.

In essence, each "section" of the harp guitar did what it was designed to do, with the two banks of strings sounding close to what they might've sounded like had they been fully separate. The top and bridge somehow created a cohesive whole, and the separate air chambers with extra wood panels didn't seem to interfere with each other.[38]



Are you ready to look inside?

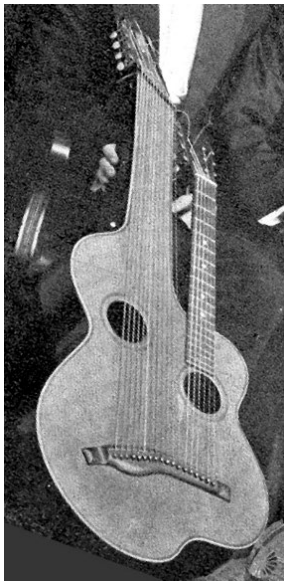
[38] The instrument can be heard on Stacy Hobb's 2017 CD "1909: Ahead of Its Time" (right).



An incredibly rare opportunity presented itself in 2011 when Quinnipiac professor John Thomas gained access to the university's X-ray machine and staff after hours. We were able to scan a variety of different instruments, including this special Stahl. These priceless images are used with John's kind permission.



This c.1910 yearbook photo of the Pennsylvania Washington & Jefferson Glee & Mandolin Clubs includes a Larson harp guitar extremely similar to the extant 1909 speciment above.[39] It's too bad we can't see the sub-bass head clearly, as I'm sure it has another crazy tuner array; somehow they managed to fit *twelve* tuners on there, as we can clearly see that it is fully strung. How did that student even *learn* of the bizarre Stahl harp guitar (and convince his rich parents to buy it for him, likely brand new)?



Because it has more than six basses and has a hollow arm rather than a neck, I am all but certain that this was another example built specifically for Stahl with the internal body.

[39] The image is not dated, but by process of elimination of others at www.e-yearbook.com (accessed September 21, 2026) it is almost certainly 1910.

The first mention I've found for Stahl offering a harp guitar is in the September 1909 *Crescendo*, where his ad includes "Harp Guitars: Any size and any amount of extra Basses." Well, *that* sure sounds like the Larson brothers! This ad was likely created after he had received the extant instrument above that included his supplied label.

Six months later in the March 1910 *Crescendo*, editor Herbert Odell wrote that Stahl has in his line "a very fine harp-guitar." Presumably, it was one Odell himself had seen, and my suspicion is that it was one with the internal body.



The first *pictured* Stahl harp guitar we know of is this one (at left) that appeared in various *Crescendo* ads, beginning in June 1912. While he could have had the Larsons building this model for a couple of years, I suspect that it didn't appear until about this time.

Surprisingly, no surviving example of this exact model – the only "Stahl harp guitar" he would ever advertise – has ever surfaced. Yet we know that at least one must have been built – both from the woodcut evidence and from other similar extant specimens. The latter were definitely built by the Larson brothers, and I'm certain that the woodcut advertisement instrument was as well.

Before we look at the extant instruments, let's take one last look at the Larson/ Stahl "standard" specimen. Here it is, from the rare c.1912 Stahl catalog:



Here, Stahl wrote, “Before placing my harp guitars on the market, I made a careful study of everything made heretofore pertaining to the harp-guitar, and also consulted harp-guitarists of note in order to eliminate all defects and include all improvements possible.” Note his next comment, that the “ordinary harp-guitar, owing to the large size of body and thick woods required for its strength, does not produce satisfactory tone on the treble or fingerboard strings.” The “ordinary harp-guitar” he was referring to was, of course, *Gibson’s*. And, he wasn’t necessarily wrong. The majority of players today, myself included, find the neck strings of a Gibson Style U rather weak, and far from “rich and singing” in tone (especially if not strung properly). By the looks of things, this Larson-built, lighter, thinner *flattop* Stahl instrument must have been stunning indeed.

Note that this harp guitar also has *ten sub-basses*. While the Larsons were building harp guitars for themselves, others, and Stahl in every possible form and number of bass strings (anywhere from six to twelve), Stahl must have eventually realized and accepted the influence Walter Boehm was having with his tuning logic and the Gibson Style U’s continuing runaway success. Stahl would still criticize everything about them, *except* their number of sub-bass strings. And so, he made the decision to have the Larsons occassionally build harp guitars with *ten* sub-bass strings, like the Boehm-conceived Gibson.

While an example of the woodcut instrument has not yet been found, *two* Larson-built Stahls with ten sub-basses – undoubtedly in Gibson’s tuning – are now known. Both may have been built about the same time – circa 1912 or later. Let’s first take a look at the one most similar to the woodcut instrument.



There is the headstock, pretty much exactly as shown in the catalog and ads. Note that they use the same wrench-tuned style friction tuners as those Gibson used.

The rod may have been added afterwards, to help with the string tension.

But when our eyes travel downwards…





Wild! Or perhaps not. I had already observed that the woodcut harp guitar's bridge had been copied from the earlier Harwood harp guitar. For this custom Stahl, the Larsons decided to try one with the Harwood double soundholes as well! They also moved the soundholes and bridge further up; the bridge quite dramatically so. You can also see that their added support rod has entered the body in the center, and sticks out – too far – out the end, tightend with a nut.



Stahl also supplied the Larsons with one of his stamps. No, "WM. C. STAHL" was not a maker, but the Larsons didn't seem to mind, any more than when W. J. Dyer & Bro. claimed that the Larsons harp guitars were "Manufacturered" by themselves in "St. Paul, Minn."



I mentioned Harwwood earlier. That harp guitar brand appeared before the mid 1890s – well before either Orville Gibson or the Larsons likely had any idea that such an instrument *existed*.

Introduced by the Jenkins firm in Kansas City, it developed over a few short years after the guitar teachers at Jenkins saw a simple but effective "invention" of J. Hopkins Flinn in 1885.[40]

Let's look at how the eventual 18-string jumbo Harwood harp guitar might have influenced the Larson brothers:

[40] Flinn, it turns out, was a telephone lineman, which is why he made the rounds in the Midwest, traveling with a 6-string guitar that he later turned into a simple harp guitar.



At left is Gibson's standard 'teens Style U. At far right is a c.1894-c.1900 J. W. Jenkins' Sons "Harwood" harp guitar. As mentioned earlier, a young William Stahl had seen the original pre-Harwood experiment and was almost certainly familiar with those that came later.

Let's start with the Stahl woodcut. From the Gibson, Stahl borrowed the standard ten sub-bass strings, and had the Larsons create a similarly gracefully carved headstock array supported by a "neck post." He also utilized the same Gibson sub-bass friction tuners rather than the Harwood's celluloid button type. He took the oval soundhole either from the Gibson or one of the Larson's earlier experiments (perhaps the Truax harp guitar, attributed to the Larsons). Its bridge was clearly adapted from the older Harwood style at far right.

The extant middle specimen is very similar to the woodcut instrument but has the unique double soundholes of the Harwood. Why the Larsons placed the bridge up so high is curious,[41] but fellow Chicago maker Joseph Bohmann often did this on his harp guitars (and also built at least one double soundhole instrument).

We have one last Stahl – incredible, as expected!

[41] Note that the Harwood bridge is placed low as their neck is moved down as well, meeting the body at the *10th* fret.



Surely, the Larsons were asked to make a patent-style flattop harp guitar, with Stahl saying "but the customer wants it to look more like a Gibson…"

At least, that's the scenario I imagine.

Yes, this one-off Larson/ Stahl has the internal body, seen through the bass soundhole.



It appeared out of the blue in 2012 and I was able to acquire it. It is only the *second* surviving Larson/Stahl harp guitar found that features the patented internal second body – *there are no others yet known.*[42]

I don't know if the "#395M" written on the outside of the internal body is a serial number of some kind or signifies something else.

The burned stamp, however ("PAT.APR.2,1912") helps us date this one to perhaps c.1912-1915 (after the patent was granted).

[42] As it turned out, in August 2026, Stacy Hobbs would sell me the other, so *both* are now a permanent part of the Miner Museum.

The striking black top was a very rare option for the Larsons (the back and sides being their typical mahogany). Unfortunately, there are inexplicably large sections of black plastic which I can only assume are giant "pickguards" – and they are *inlaid* into the top, covering much of its surface.

Why? – and is it original? There are three pieces total, with two slightly overlapping. Below, I aggressively enhanced the top image to show the pieces – two ovals below each soundhole and a large piece above the bridge all the way to the side.



It actually looks fine in person, with a good color match. Querying Bob Hartman about this curious feature, he mentioned another Stahl guitar (a 6-string) with the same black top and a large plastic piece inlaid into it. When its owner removed it, the spruce top was naturally thinner in that area and promptly imploded. I won't make the same mistake!

Indeed, I am simply stuck with the plastic-impregnated top. And so, when it came back from restoration,[43] I was rather dreading tuning it up and plucking the strings…

Remember my glowing review of the other Stahl above? Well, this one is not *getting* a review.[44]

[43] By expert Bill Fiorella.

[44] But at least it looks super cool and is one of only two with that patent body!







Other Brands & Possibilities

Besides W. J. Dyer & Bro. and Wm. C. Stahl – and of course, their own Maurer and custom instruments – the Larsons also built for others. How *many* others?

Ah, that is indeed the question; we're still debating which of the many "harp guitars with Larson features" are truly theirs. I've already shown what I believe is a Truax instrument above, *possibly* built by the Larsons. Following are those that Bob Hartman and/or others have previously said are believed to be Larson-built harp guitars. Precise provenance on these is not fully established and each one should be taken as "needs further study."[45]

H. F. Meyers



This lovely 1909 harp guitar labeled "H. F. Meyers" has been said to be a Larson-built instrument.[46] It features a shallow body of just 2 inches! We don't know if that was Meyers' idea or one of the Larsons'.

[45] And I include in such hypothetical studies the need for each to be physically inspected inside and out by a team of dedicated and experienced luthiers (Larson instrument restorers) and other experts.

[46] I have no opinion on that and have had various curious non-Larson attributes pointed out. I was able to see it in person in Norm's Guitar Store after he had acquired the after-auction unsold instruments of Hank Risan. It was really a sweet little thing, although what the photos don't capture is the extremely wavy, deformed top. While shocking to behold, the instrument still functions and plays fine.



H. F. MEYERS

Manufacturer of the

"NE PLUS ULTRA"

The greatest Harp Guitar, Concert Solo Guitar and Mandolin in the World.

The depth of these Guitars does not exceed *two* inches, and they have *three times* the *power* of tone and *carrying* quality of the best Guitar on the market. You may prove to yourself all that I say by trying them.

I make the only *practical Harp Guitar* the *world* has ever *seen.* The correct tuning of the extra six strings makes it possible to play in any key having from one flat to five flats with open basses.

All my Guitars have an extreme *loud treble* where all other Guitars are weak. I have played Guitar over thirty years, and have played all the best makes in the world. The professional players that are using my guitars will testify that these guitars have by far the *greatest power* of *tone,* without losing *sweetness* of quality, that they have ever played. If any lover of the Guitar will give them a trial I am sure he will agree with me. They will be sent to your address for ten days' trial. Write for further particulars.

Grand Auditorium size—depth of body, 2 inches; width 17 inches; length of body 18½ inches. Grand Concert size—depth of body, 2 inches; width 15½ inches, length of body 20½ inches. Concert size—depth of body, 2 inches; width 14½ inches; length of body 19½ inches. Six String Guitars, $20.00 to $50.00 Twelve String Harp Guitars, $75.00 Mandolas having no equal, $25.00.

Salesroom AUDITORIUM BUILDING, ROOM A, CHICAGO, ILL.



Meyers' November 1909 *Cadenza* ad above promises the best instruments available anywhere – all due to their depth?

Left: Meyers came out with his own orchestral bass guitar in October 1914.

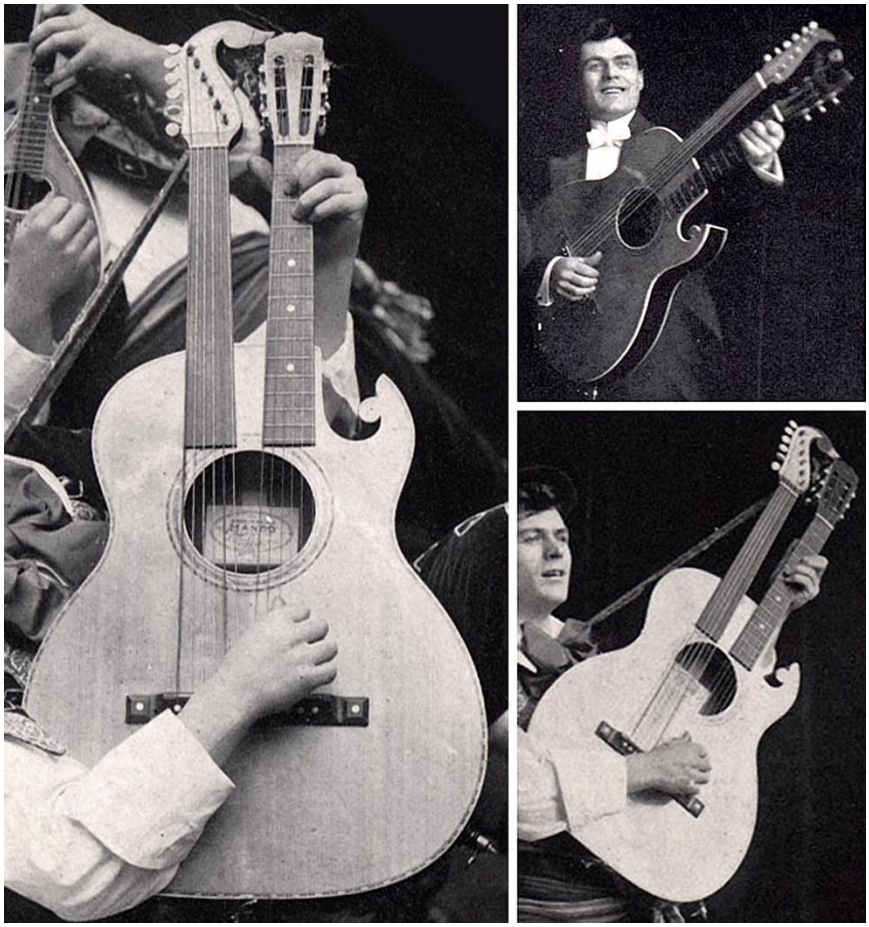
Who built it?

L. H. Leland

According to Bob Hartman, the Larsons also built similarly thin-bodied plectral orchestra instruments for Leland; however, a similar Leland guitar did not appear Larson-built.[47]

This illustrates one problem with all these brands or "manufacturers." Each seemed to have multiple suppliers (and in the case of Wulschner, seen next, also built in house).

One Leland harp guitar is known (but only from a series of vintage photographs, where we can see their classic "Brilliantone Mando" label through the soundhole). Its inclusion here is not meant to suggest Larson construction.



C. Bruno & Son

While the Larsons also built a fancy line of plectral family instruments for Bruno, they didn't appear to create a harp guitar to match, nor did they build Bruno's other well-known harp guitars.

[47] Leland's original maker was said to have been Lyon & Healy.

Wulschner & Son / “Regal” Trademark





Circa 1899/1900 Wulschner Regal harp guitar that long hung on the wall at Intermountain Guitar & Banjo. Photos showing during and after restoration by Andrew Mullane in Denver.

This undersung Indianapolis company is still poorly understood today. The company changed names, split, later sold, and it’s difficult to get to the bottom of the “Regal” brand that began there. For now, we’re only concerned with their few years around the turn of the last century when this unusual harp guitar was offered.[48] It was actually a re-visit of an older, abandoned idea by Jenkins’ Sons in Kansas City, based on the 1885 invention of telephone lineman J. Hopkins Flinn. Salt Lake City mandolinist C. H. Pomeroy apparently was a proponent of this short-sub-bass idea and had tried to convince the Martin company to build them (suggesting piano wire for the short, fat basses). When they declined, he seems to have convinced the people at Wulschner to take it on, and by 1899, they were in production. But where?

[48] See https://www.harpguitars.net/history/regal.htm

Bob Hartman always thought that specimens he'd seen looked Larson-built, and he's not the only one. The specimen above, a Wulschner Regal harp guitar from Indianapolis, Indiana, c.1899/1900, long hung in Salt Lake City in the shop of Intermountain Guitar & Banjo. Co-owner Leo Coulson always believed that theirs was a Larson-built instrument.

When it passed on to Mullane and Miller Historical Restorations, Andrew Mullane fully restored it, at which time he was to analyze it in detail. He, too, believes it appears to be Larson-built. On the other hand, he is doubtful that the other famous Regal (the sunburst ex-Chinery specimen below) had any Larson connection (despite occasional opinions to the contrary).



Above: At Retrofret, current home of the sunburst Regal, held by Andrew Mullane. Amy Mills, restoration expert at Retrofret holds the ex-Intermountain specimen. They and other staff were able to compare and contrast various features, inside and out, of the two important instruments.

Just one obvious difference in the two (not counting the sunburst top, which is non-original) is that the Mullane & Miller instrument (and at least one other) have a Larson- manner "built under tension" top, while the Retrofret instrument does not (being perfectly flat).[49]

[49] My own c.1899/1900 Regal likewise has a perfectly flat top, though, curiously, the *back* has the "one-half inch swell" described on next page.

Yet curiously, both specimens have similar paper labels and the same “Wulschner & Son leather medallion (below), indicating that they would have been built between early 1899[50] and April or May, 1900, when the firm re-incorporated as the "Wulschner Music Company,” with a split-off “Regal Manufacturing Company.”



Left: “Intermountain>Mullane and Miller Historical Restorations” label; right: Ex-Chinery>Retrofret label. The medallions read:

WULSCHNER & SON
TRADE (crown logo) MARK
REGAL
INDIANAPOLIS, IND.

Multiple newspaper articles of the era demonstrate that Wulschner had a huge factory and crew building thousands of instruments (including an illustration that included their harp guitar, surely a smoking gun?). Their own c.1900 ad described the “Larsons” body feature (*italics mine*): “There is, beside above, *nearly one-half inch swell on both back and top*, increasing the volume of tone considerably.”

All these clues, along with the instruments themselves, continue to challenge our interpretations. Were the “tension-top” instruments perhaps Larson-contracted experiments or prototypes? Or did the Wulschner workers simply adopt it? Or are flat-top models the Wulschner factory “streamlined” instruments? A fascinating, if frustrating, puzzle!

Other Possibilities

Other brands with known harp guitars that occasionally elicit “Larson-built” comments (again, take it with a grain of salt) are MayFlower and Adams, both also within Chicago. I also mention the Larsons’ shop being located near Chicago builder Almcrantz in that stand-alone article.[51]

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[50] Potentially back into 1898. Curiously, no Regal harp guitars have appeared with anything indicating the c.1900-1904 period of building when “Regal Manufacturing Company should presumably have been in use. All labeled specimens include only the pre-May 1900 “Wulschner & Son” logo, thus appearing to have all been built in only a short period of two years at most.

[51] https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/The_Fretted_Instrument_&_Zither_Inventions_of_August_Gerhard_Almcrantz-Gregg_Miner.pdf

Appendix: Cubley, Maurer and Stahl

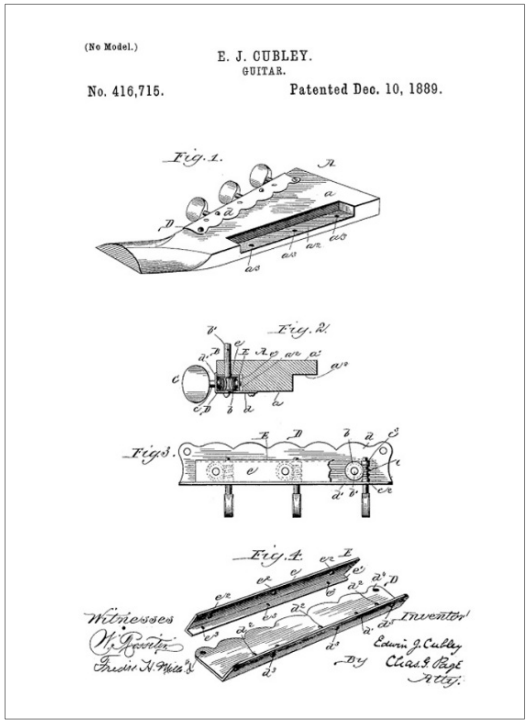
All three men were influential and/or crucial to the Larson brothers' story, but all three may also have been otherwise intertwined,[52] so, let's explore, shall we?

E. J. Cubley's Drum Factory

Michael Holmes gave Cubley's production dates as c.1880-c.1893. Along with the main business of drums, he stated that Cubley's team "produced high-grade Cubley-branded banjos with unique wood marquetry decoration, and banjos that were private labeled for other Chicago manufacturers and distributors such as Tonk Brothers. He was awarded five banjo-related patents between 1882 and 1889." Holmes further stated that, more importantly, Cubley "provided banjos and guitars to the fledgling Lyon & Healy company, until they established their own factory."

Besides drums and banjos (both with patents), Cubley built a few guitars and mandolins.




(No Model.)

E. J. CUBLEY.

GUITAR.

No. 416,715. Patented Dec. 10, 1889.

Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.

Figs.

Fig. 4.

Witnesses

Inventor

Edwin J. Cubley

Chas. E. Page

Atty.

Above: Edwin J. Cubley, c.1871.

Left: Cubley's patent for guitar tuners.

Right: A beautiful Cubley banjo.

While the Larson brothers began their training in instrument bulding at Cubley's factory, it was only for a few short years.

Perhaps it was just as well. In 1893, they would join the workforce at Robert Maurer's.



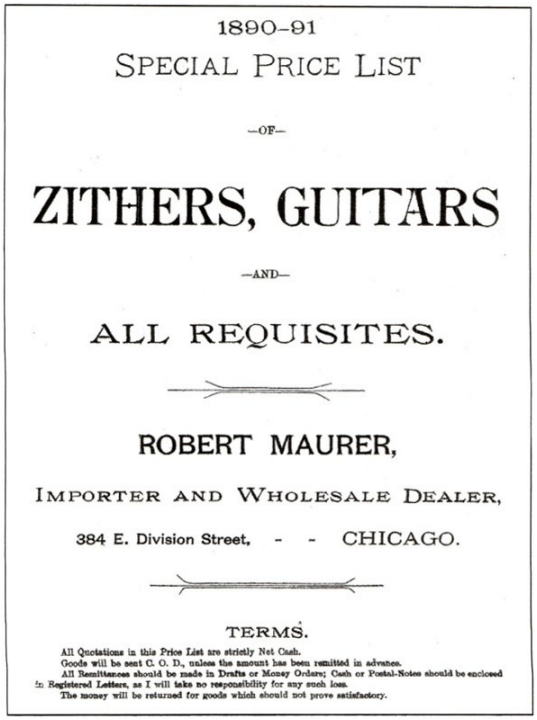
[52] As I discovered (and speculated) while researching my latest Stahl harp guitar, previously written up for my Walter Boehm article: https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/Walter_Boehm_and_the_Gibson_Harp_Guitar-Gregg_Miner.pdf

Robert Maurer

Even as the Larson brothers were just starting out with Cubley, an enterprising young man named Robert Maurer was starting to find success in importing and sales.

He began his Chicago musical instrument business as an importer/wholesaler – instaged by his emmigration to the United States as a representative for fine Austro-German zithers by Kiendl, Halbmeyer and Jobst and an a full catalogue of zither music.




1890–91
SPECIAL PRICE LIST
—OF—
ZITHERS, GUITARS
—AND—
ALL REQUISITES.
ROBERT MAURER,
IMPORTER AND WHOLESALE DEALER,
384 E. Division Street, - - CHICAGO.
TERMS.
All Quotations in this Price List are strictly Net Cash.
Goods will be sent C. O. D., unless the amount has been remitted in advance.
All Remittances should be made in Drafts or Money Orders; Cash or Postal-Notes should be enclosed in Registered Letters, as I will take no responsibility for any such loss.
The money will be returned for goods which should not prove satisfactory.

By mid-1895, he was a manufacturer. And for once, this claim wasn't false advertising; he really *did* produce his own guitars and mandolins. But he had the help of the increasingly skilled Larson brothers.[53]

Above right: Maurer's 1890-91 catalog cover. Perhaps due to his brother's influence, Maurer's main import business began with Viennese and German zithers.

Above Left: Maurer's first ad for his "Champion Mandolin" appeared in *The Cadenza* Sept/Oct 1895 issue.

To date, no image or profile of Robert Maurer has ever been found. However, we catch a brief glimpse – not of his manufacturing side, but of his zither entrepreneur side – through a *Cadenza* profile of his brother, Adolf (shown on the next page).

The German Maurer brothers, one a zither virtuoso, the other a major importer and publisher, emmigrated to the U.S. by about 1880.

[53] It isn't known if the Larsons built any zithers for Maurer; however, they would have certainly become familiar with them. Interestingly, they would build at least one Maurer zither of their own about 1916. See Hartman's *The Larson Brothers' Legacy*.

HARP AND ZITHER

Adolf Maurer.

BORN OCT. 1852.—DIED SEPT. 1902.
From the "Centralblatt" of the Union of German Zither Societies.

A brief sketch of Adolf Maurer's life will doubtless interest zitherists in America because so few zither artists visit us from abroad. He lived in the United States and many have either known him or heard of him, particularly in the West. Death's messenger has again robbed the zither fraternity, on September 1, of one of its Spartan adherents; one who was of so much use to this branch of music and an aid to the zither's advancement in both Europe and America. Maurer was not only a virtuoso but his knowledge of music, acquired through his experience with various musical organizations, as will be shown, made him a celebrity in the United States and Germany. His esthetic and music-loving nature and his imposing personality, coupled with a kindly disposition, influenced all who came in contact with him both professionally and socially during his comparatively short life of fifty years. Maurer's memory will be held sacred for many years because of his complete knowledge of the zither, by means of which it was possible for him to demonstrate its possibilities and thereby win many devotees. He was its champion and fought its battles bravely, unfolding to a seemingly unappreciative public his fine points of information; he defended the zither's purity and wealth in masterly arguments.

Adolf Maurer was born in Ulm, about eighty miles west of Munchen, in the kingdom of Württemberg, Germany. At an early age he studied the zither with his brother under his father's direction. In later years he completed his musical education at the Stuttgart Conservatory, where he also studied composition and violin. After the war of 1870 the family settled in Strassburg, Alsace and Lorraine offering many inducements in business to Germans anxious to fill the places of the migratory French people of the two lost provinces. Here the Maurers did much to encourage a love for the instrument by their devotion to a struggling society in Strassburg, Adolf playing at the time in a theatre as a violinist. His love for travel was realized when he joined the Lumbye Orchestra in Stockholm, with which he journeyed to the northern limits of Sweden, through Norway and Denmark. About 1880 Maurer sailed for the United States, to which good musicians were especially at that time encouraged. He resided first in Washington, D. C., where he was director of a zither orchestra, then in Chicago. After Maurer established himself in Chicago the zither began to play an important rôle there some little time after his arrival, under his guidance through pupils and followers. Robert Maurer, his brother, was then in the music publishing and manufacturing business in Chicago, which fact may have tempted Adolf to locate there. Robert was agent for the celebrated zither manufacturers, Anton Kiendl, of Vienna; Franz Halbmeyer, of Munchen, and Johann Jobst, of Gratz, Styria. Robert Maurer's catalogue of zither music was for many years an exhaustive affair; it had become a vade mecum for players and publishers; each novelty faithfuly appearing in a substantial supplement. It was a disapointment to many zither players when Robert Maurer for some reason quit business a year or two ago. His concern, in the stringed instrument line, had become a center in the West similar to the reliable reputation enjoyed by leading establishments in New York. Aided by his brother, Robert Maurer yielded his attention to advancing the normal system, to the extent of arranging the best music for zither (having accompaniment written in the bass clef) separately, which he gave a prominent place in his excellent list. Together the brothers Maurer deserve much credit for their devotion to the "good cause" of the instrument in the West.

Adolf Maurer was connected for many years with Thomas's Orchestra as violinist. Since his return to Strassburg in 1896 Maurer continued his professional work in conjunction with the Symphony Society and Court Theatre of Strassburg.

Maurer did not throw himself much into composing for the zither. Aside from some original compositions not yet published he arranged and had published by A. Kababek, Leipsic, "Home, Sweet Home," with variations. He understood arranging thoroughly, however, especially for the zither orchestra. His setting of Haydn's "Andante" from the sixth symphony is very popular and successful, as is also the "Lohengrin" wedding march. His selections of material, orchestral effects, correctness, and conception of the zither's possibilities remaining always within the bounds of the instrument, were the characteristics which pervaded his masterful arrangements for which he was much felicitated. In a similar manner he arranged for zither solo a potpourri of Weber's "Freischutz." Maurer's "Hours of Pastime" (Erholgungstunden), published by P. Ed. Hoenes, Trier, Bavaria, which are especially recommendable for instruction.

Death strikes men quickly, wrote Schiller in "Tell." Well is it for those that are stricken thus; but, unfortunately, not in Adolf Maurer's case. For years he suffered of a spinal ailment which medical men seemed unable to relieve. He visited the noted cures of Wiesbaden, Nauheim, Tolz and Wildbad; at the latter resort it was that this itinerant musician entered the road to the eternal home. Adolf Maurer was possessed of a noble soul; his life given up to the beautiful in life and music.

So far, there doesn't seem to be any connection between E. J. Cubley and Robert Maurer – beyond the Larsons being employed at both factories.

But now a final piece of the puzzle:

Wm. C. Stahl

Teacher, dealer, composer and publisher W. C. Stahl was a very well-known and long-time entity in the BMG world. A child prodigy on violin, banjo and mandolin, he was important enough at age 16 to have been one of those invited to inspect America's very first homegrown harp guitar in 1885 (the Flinn creation, later improved and built by the Jenkins firm as "the Harwood"). Stahl was first profiled in *Cadenza's* January 1896 issue and later – now a key figure in the business – *Crescendo* in 1911.

MR. WM. C. STAHL,

OF ST. JOSEPH, MO.

Mr. Wm. C. Stahl, whose portrait appears herewith, was born in 1869, and is therefore not yet 27 years of age. He began the study of the violin and banjo at the age of ten, and after devoting his attention to those instruments for five years, took up the study of the guitar and developed into a full-fledged professional ten years ago, since which time his career as a teacher and soloist has been very successful. Mr. Stahl was soloist for two years with the celebrated Verdi Mandolin Club of St. Joseph, Mo., which is said to have been the first mandolin club in this country to attempt to render the works of Beethoven, Wagner, Liszt and other masters, which, by



the way, they produced successfully. The club's repertoire consisted of 250 selections, mostly classics, the club having been organized in 1885, and was disbanded by mutual agreement in 1895. Mr. Stahl has many professional friends throughout America, and is fully as well known in the East as in the West, his compositions having had an extensive sale. His most successful work is his new mandolin method, recently published, a comprehensive book, thorough in detail, and complete in treatment of positions and technical points. This work has met with flattering recognition from the profession at large. Mr. Stahl is noted among his friends for his modest demeanor and unassuming exploitation of his talents during his long career as a teacher in St. Joseph, and he is undoubtedly popular with musicians and amateurs alike, having always worked for the advancement of the instruments he teaches, and having always used conscientious, thorough and legitimate methods to demonstrate their fitness as legitimate musical instruments.

Prominent Manufacturers and Publishers.



WM. C. STAHL.
Milwaukee, Wis.

Wm. C. Stahl was born Feb. 17th, 1869, at St. Joseph, Mo. He began playing the banjo at the age of 10. In those days players thought that the larger the rim of the banjo the better the tone, and 12 1-2 in. and 13 in. rim banjos were all the rage. Mr. Stahl used a plain fingerboard without frets and played entirely by ear, no music being published to his knowledge at that time. In order to read and understand music, he took up the violin and harmony and studied four years. He could then arrange and write for the banjo any airs that struck his fancy.

When the original Spanish Students toured the U. S. and introduced the mandolin, Mr. Stahl was one of the first Americans to invest in one. He was obliged to import one from Italy as at that time he was unable to find any for sale in this country. Here is where his violin instruction proved of great help and it was not long before he could play some quite difficult solos. His reputation as a mandolin player spread to such an extent that he was flooded with applications for instruction and was practically forced into the teaching business at the age of 16 and has been in it ever since.

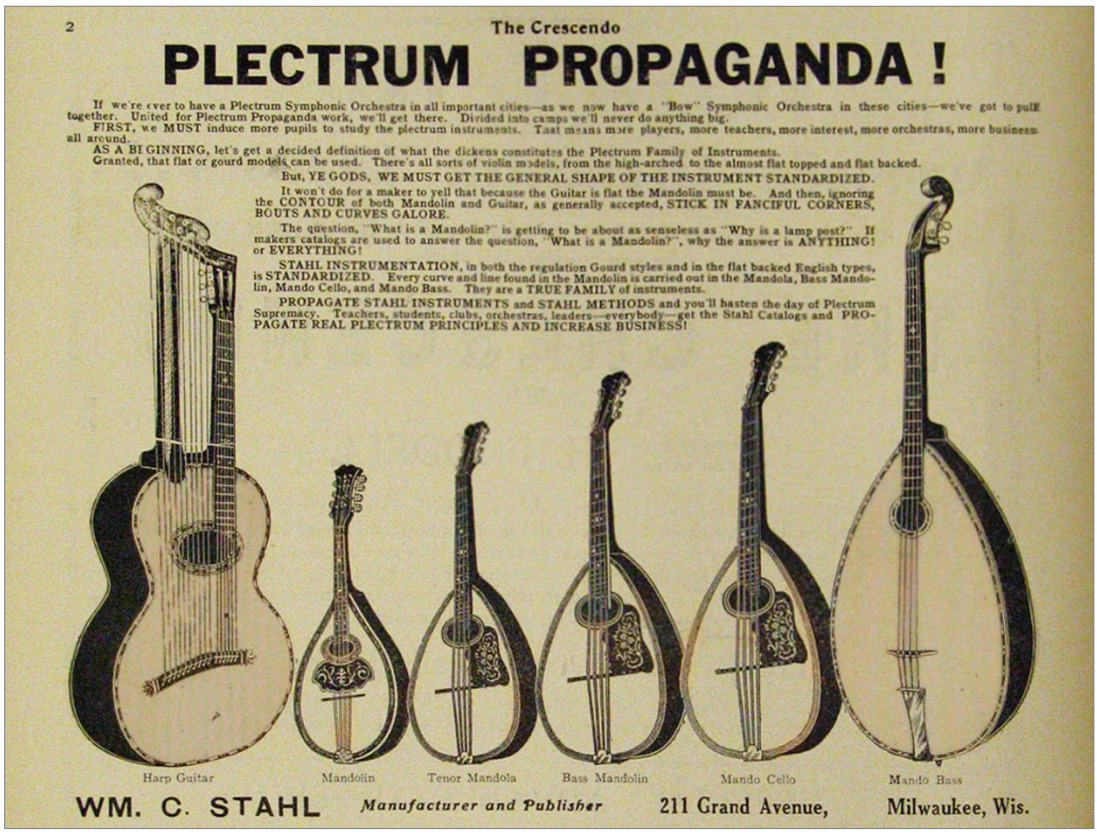
He drifted into the publishing business almost by accident as he wanted a certain kind of a banjo method and those published at the time were not satisfactory, so he wrote and published what is now known as one of the best banjo methods on the market. This work met with instant favor, and many letters were received from well known teachers requesting Mr. Stahl to issue a mandolin and guitar method as good as his banjo method. Having received careful and correct instruction from an Italian mandolin teacher, who was a pupil of Branzoli and realizing there was a large demand for a mandolin method teaching the correct system of using the plectrum, a book properly graded and which taught positions in the proper manner, Mr. Stahl wrote a complete mandolin method, in fact in writing his methods, he spent the best part of three or four years. His methods are used not only by many of the principal teachers of America but is also used extensively in Canada, England, So. Africa and Australia.

In buying methods from Mr. Stahl, these teachers often requested him to recommend good makes of instruments and many also requested him to make a special hand made instrument for professional use. The demand became so insistent for good instruments that he finally decided to enter the manufacturing business on an extensive scale. He spent considerable time and money before he discovered a man competent to handle this branch of his business, but he succeeded as everyone knows who has seen his excellent line of hand made mandolins, mandolas, mando-cellos, banjos, harps, guitars and violins. The Stahl instruments today are recognized everywhere as one of the leading high grade makes of instruments. All instruments are carefully inspected by Mr. Stahl personally before they leave his factory. Mr. Stahl has had considerable experience as a teacher, a player, a publisher and manufacturer and is one of the veterans of the industry in this country.

In addition to his manufacturing and the publication of his methods which include the methods mentioned above also one of the very few complete C notation methods for the banjo published in this country, he also issues a fine large catalog of music for mandolin orchestra which has met with much popularity.

Mr. Stahl joined the **American Guild** as a trade member in 1906 and at the past two conventions has had large and interesting exhibits of his music and instruments. He has been the director of the Marquette Mandolin Club for 11 years and has recently been appointed teacher of the banjo, mandolin and guitar at the Marquette Conservatory of Music.

As an important music publisher, Guild member and exhibitor, William Stahl closely followed Gibson's output over the years and was well aware of Walter Boehm and his Gibson 10-bass notoriety. But Stahl was never a Gibson fan, player or dealer. In fact, he chose to *compete* with them, choosing Chicago's Larson brothers to build his preferred flat-top instruments for his Stahl line. Towards the end of 1913, the gloves were off and Stahl was publicly ridiculing Gibson (without naming them) with obvious comments like these in his advertisements (shown below): "It won't do for a maker…(to ignore) the CONTOUR of both Mandolin and Guitar, as generally accepted, STICK IN FANCIFUL CORNERS, BOUTS AND CURVES GALORE." Yeah, that would be Gibson! But they were the most popular brand since their inception.



Crescendo advertisement August 1913

Stahl was prolific, dedicated to the profession, and knew what he wanted. Nor was he without ego. He listed himself as "manufacturer" of his instruments, inferring that he himself "built" the first one, and boasted of always being the only one to inspect each and every instrument coming out of "his factory." The factory was, of course, the Larson brothers' own Chicago shop (for the most part; Stahl did have other suppliers). At the annual Guild Conventions Stahl would proudly display his instruments virtually next door to the Gibson Company's.

Crescendo editor Herbert Odell – who certainly knew who was building Stahl's instruments but never once leaked it – even singled Stahl out for fully selling out of his instruments during at least

one convention! In fairness to all advertisers, Odell was extremely democratic. Yet in one passionate editorial, he singled several of his advertisers out "by way of example." He mentioned by name two of the BMG harp guitar brands: Gibson and Dyer. These were not just his own favorites, but the two most popular brands – and of course the Dyers were made by the Larson brothers just as the Stahl's were! Surely Odell knew this "inside information" as well?!

Wm. C. Stahl's 1911 *Crescendo* profile shown earlier provides us with an interesting clue. In it, he admits that "he discovered a man competent to handle this branch of his business" – that branch being the "manufacturing business" for his goal of "good instruments" and "special hand made" instruments. I believe that, if we consider the claim he made around this time of making "his first mandolin 25 years ago" (mentioned in several BMG ads), this "competent man" was none other than Chicago's E. J. Cubley.

At that time (the mid-1880s, or if Stahl was remembering precisely, 1886), Cubley was building instruments, with the Larson brothers about to begin their careers there. Meanwhile, a young Robert Maurer was finding success in Chicago with importing and sales, but wouldn't begin manufacturing for perhaps several more years.

The accuracy of Stahl's memory and the timing of Maurer's entry into manufacturing are crucial factors here, and we just can't be certain of either. But *if* Cubley had been building and Maurer was *only* in import and sales at this point, it seems that Cubley would have been the hypothetical "first mandolin" builder/supplier for William Stahl. And if Stahl wanted to keep the instruments coming, then the Larson brothers might be the common thread – and source – as they moved from Cubley's factory to Maurer's, which they then took over. Robert Maurer would sell both his store and factory (for health reasons) in March of 1900. Soon, the factory would be owned and run by the Larson brothers themselves.

Meanwhile, young William Stahl (who moved from St. Louis, Missouri to Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1898) was still keen to supply his own instruments to the ever-growing BMG community. I suspect that he was following the increasingly busy and complicated activities in Chicago, with an eye on Cubley and Maurer both. One or the other, simultaneously or in succession, likely supplied him with instruments. With both Cubley and Maurer retired, it makes sense that the Larson brothers would take over the building of Stahl's instruments.

Now building under their own "Maurer" brand, the Larsons would still continue to build instruments for many other individuals and firms – without using the Maurer brand and without ever including even their own names as builders. Thus, it was basically "business as usual" for them to continue to anonymously build for Stahl. And, boy, did they ever, doing some of their best work well into the 1930s.

Epilogue

Today, we recognize the Larson brothers as the most important and finest builders of American harp guitars of the 20th century. *And we still only know a very small part of* ***their story, their output, their contracts, their customers, their inspiration and process.***

What wouldn't any of us give for that time machine?!

In 2025, one of Bob Hartman's "Larson cousins," Dennis Cline (great-grandson of Carl Larson's sister) came to the Harp Guitar Gathering, along with his own son Sean.

During their panel, Dennis asked if we'd like to hear "a funny little story."

It seems that one day when they were kids, Dennis and a friend were offered $5 each to clean up their aunt's house, who had ordered a giant dumpster, now perched on the curb. Among the household items, she happened to have been storing *the entire inventory of the Larson brothers' business,* **which contained every known record, document, patent, letter, and historical object (tool, form, template, you-name-it) from "those relatives who made guitars."**

Yes. It was all there. It EXISTED. It ALL went in the dumpster.

I'll let that sink in for a moment.



Dennis sharing his charming little childhood anecdote. Carol and Bob had each just told their own stories.

I had heard Bob's version of the story a few times in the past, but here we had the actual perpetrator right in front of us, with a whole new, visceral "You Were There" re-telling.

I am not ashamed to admit that I was literally sick to my stomach.

Oh, the wacky stories we share at the Gatherings!



Afterwards Dennis' speech, everyone who owned a Larson harp guitar went up on stage and collectively strangled him…I'm kidding! (OK, we wanted to). No, every Dyer and Larson harp guitar owner got up on stage for this historic picture. L-R: Dave Powell, David Larson, Stephen Bennett, Carol & Bob Hartman, Dennis Cline, me (Gregg Miner), John Riley, Tom Cook, Stan Sullivan (kneeling), the late Steve Farmer, Andrew Mullane, and Joe Morgan (Martin Pleass missing).

Acknowledgements

Bob, as always, plus all the Larson fans: Kerry Char, Steve Bissell, John Thomas, Stacy Hobbs, Adrien Fournier, and Andrew Mullane.

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About the Author

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