



Lunch with the
Larson
Brothers

Stephen Smith with his 1916 Larson brothers' guitar.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM SAYER



BY STEPHEN E. SMITH

Greg Hanson and David Crawford, the Triangle's premier luthiers (craftsmen who make or repair stringed instruments), Craig Fuller of Pure Prairie League and Little Feat fame (who better to evaluate the playability of a vintage guitar?), and yours truly (junior shade-tree picker that I am) have gathered at the Hibernian Pub on Glenwood Avenue in Raleigh to have lunch with the Larson brothers, although we're reasonably certain the brothers aren't going to show up. They've been dead for more than 55 years. And even in their halcyon days — the four decades during which the Swedish-born August and Carl Larson crafted guitars, harp guitars, mandolins, tipples, harp mandolins, mandocellos, mandolas, ukuleles, and ukulele harps — they weren't, by many accounts, particularly good company. But my 1916 Larson brothers' guitar, sold under the Maurer brand name, is alive and well and very much in attendance, representing its enigmatic creators.

The approximately 2,500 acoustic instruments the Larson brothers produced while working together in a paint-bare barn at 536 Elm St. in Chicago are considered — dare I say it? — the Stradivarius of American guitars and are much sought after by musicians and collectors. A Larson high-end Euphonon guitar recently sold on eBay for \$60,000. (If you want the inside skinny on the Larson brothers, pick up a copy of Robert Carl Hartman's *Larson Creations*, and if you aren't up to speed on your guitar terminology, go to mediaweb-source.com/guitar/glossary.htm.)

"Your guitar is a beautiful instrument, and it really didn't need any major restoration," says Greg Hanson, who four months earlier had given me an estimate for the repair work on my Larson. "We just brought it back to its original playability. The guitar was in remarkably good shape to begin with."



August Larson, 1917



Carl Larson, 1945

Any guitar aficionado can tell you that Martin and Gibson produced the most valuable vintage guitars, but few of them — a lucky few — have experienced the beauty and distinctive sound of a Larson brothers' guitar. The resonance is nicely balanced between bass and treble with a gentle sustain that any guitar player experienced enough to discern the instrument's intimacies will appreciate. There's also a sweet cushiony, unmuddled softness in the midrange that tends to drift into the upper notes. Ah, such sweet resonance. Nothing sounds like a Larson.

So what produces that distinctive Larson sound? The brothers used only the finest materials — quarter-sawn Brazilian rosewood, close-grained spruce, top-quality mahogany, and ebony. And of course there's the meticulous construction of the instrument. Larson guitars are built under tension: The back and soundboard are bowed outward, deepening, balancing and projecting the sound. High-end Larsons have delicately scalloped interior laminated braces which are often constructed with strips of hardwood, usually ebony or rosewood, sandwiched between strips of spruce. In some instances, a steel tone bar patented by the Larsons runs from the neck block to the tailpiece. And Larson guitars were the first to be X-braced — long before Martin — so they would hold up to the tension of steel strings.

"An old center-seam repair on your guitar had failed," Crawford says, "but we began by taking care of that and a few minor problems. The top and back braces were loose. They all had to be reglued. We used a small turnbuckle to glue the braces one at a time."

"We fashioned and slotted a new bone nut and saddle to improve intonation," Hanson adds. "The bridge was removed and reglued, the neck was reset to improve the action and intonation, and the fingerboard was refretted with banjo frets that closely approximate the fret wire used by the Larsons."

The original finish on my Larson was in "very good + condition," and Hanson and Crawford's work was so exacting that there's no evidence the "flattened pyramid" bridge had been reattached. The fingerboard had a slight distortion so it was gently planed, being careful to retain the inlays. "The adjustments were minimal," Hanson points out again, "considering the guitar is almost 95 years old. And the skilled workmanship on the neck was really nice, clearly hand done and much better fitted than most modern high-end guitars, including Martins, Taylors, Gibsons and other factory-made instruments."

What every acoustic guitar player is searching for is a sonic identity, the nuanced articulation of the subtlest human touch — and, of course, the knowledge of how the Larsons achieved such purity of tone.

The total cost for my Larson rehab, including a later adjustment to the bridge, came to \$1,545, a somewhat princely sum for a magazine scribbler. But, hey, this is a Larson instrument, and I'm just its most recent custodian.

Back at Hanson and Crawford's Raleigh shop, we take turns finger-picking my reborn Larson. "This is a hell of a guitar," says Craig, after noodling around for a couple of minutes.

Hanson chuckles. "I hate to see the guitar leave. I was having a good time playing it." **PS**

If you'd like to hear guitarist Danny Infantino finger-picking my 1916 Larson guitar refreshed with Thomastik-Infeld SB11 bronze strings, go to <http://www.dannyinfantino.com/>.

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