

Cracking the Dyer DNA Code

Gregg Miner



In the field of American harp guitar history, there has always been three key – and very prominent – names: **Gibson** (Orville, and the Gibson Company), **Knutsen** (Norwegian Chris Knutsen) and **Dyer** (the W. J. Dyer & Bro. Company). A *fourth* name – less prominent, but today the most popular of all – is that of the **Larson brothers**, namely Carl and August, who built the popular Dyer harp guitars (among many others).

Today, aficionados and scholars alike continue their research on the makers above, though, admittedly, no one has been as fascinated (obsessed?) with our friend Mr. Knutsen than I! Creator of the hollow arm harp guitar in America – one that led directly to today’s popular “Dyer” and its many copies and variants, Knutsen will always remain a critical component of the instrument’s history. And there will always be more historical holes to fill in, on both Knutsen and Dyer/Larsons.

And so, I treat every single new historical photo that appears as potential gold and am always on the lookout for the next “smoking gun.”

Take for example the photo above. How long has it been hidden within the “Cranberry growing and family photographs, 1892-1948” folder in the Wisconsin Historical Society archives?! I only learned of it in early September 2024. At a glance, the small low-resolution image looked like “just another typical Knutsen” photograph.

And yet...something about it triggered a response. One that led to the Harp Guitar Foundation acquiring a high-resolution scan and web site use permission...*just in case*. Turns out I was wise to do so!

After thorough analysis, I believe this single photograph solves a dilemma in dating, not a *Knutsen*, but a *Dyer*; in fact, perhaps the *earliest Larson-built Dyer yet found*. The discovery of an “early” or “the first one” of anything is always exciting, but in this case – *if I am correct* – it also answers a nagging question we’ve had ever since I published my **Dyer Dating** theories in 2010. Specifically, *did the Larson brothers begin building for W. J. Dyer & Bro. in 1901, or 1904?* (This minutia is what often keeps us guitar nerds awake all night. Yes, you should pity us.)

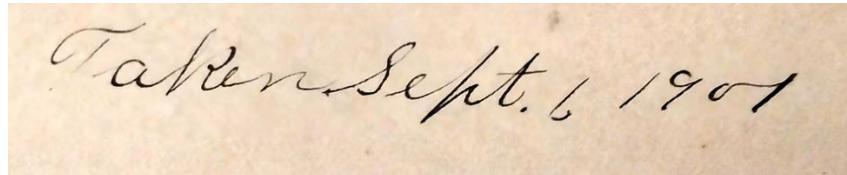
First, our “smoking gun” photo, enlarged and enhanced:



© The Wisconsin Historical Society. Used by permission.

This is “Emory Bennett and Family” in the town of Wisconsin Rapids in September 1901. Emory Clinton Bennett was born December 5, 1887, and thus would have been just a bit under 14 years old in this photo. While the Society believed Emory to be the one holding the harp guitar, this does not seem to be the case. If he is perhaps the one seated in the chair in the dark suit, it’s curious why he is the key listed figure of the photograph. He would marry in 1909 and pass away on 29 Jan 1920. The 1910 census shows him to have been a “fruit grower,” and he was presumably

related to the “Asa Bennett” depicted in the WHS as owning a cranberry farm in the area. (I would love for any descendants or relatives to discover this article and ad to the story!) Identities aside, what concerns us is the date handwritten on the back of the photograph:



Note that someone wrote “Taken” (on), with a specific day. This leads me to take it on face value; it doesn’t seem like a general “guess” scribbled at a later date. The WHS lists the date as “09 06 1901.” To confirm, I queried my Facebook friends, some two dozen of which answered. All agreed that it is definitely 1901 (not 1907), with the day either “1” or “6.” Luckily, the exact day is irrelevant; it is that **1901 confirmation** I was looking for.

In my Dyer Dating article, I originally gave multiple alternate serial number timelines, with the Larson “Type 1” harp guitar beginning in either 1901 or 1904. Part of the reason for the uncertainty was that the Dyer Company distributed Knutsen’s own Symphony harp guitar into 1900 or so as seen in his Port Townsend flyer at right.

As for the Larson brothers’ 1901 start date, our clue is the advertisement that began running in December 1901 in *The Cadenza*. Here, for clarity, are the three key Cadenza Dyer ads for the timeline:



Cadenza Ads: December 1901



December 1904



November 1906

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 Knutson 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, &c.

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 unequalled, 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 guitar provides an excellent neck support and the neck will not bend even under the tension 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.

Note that the 1901 ad woodcut appears to show either a Knutsen or a Larson built “Type 1” Dyer. Most of its features are shared with both Knutsen and Larson instruments, but the slotted headstock (if an accurate representation) would seem to come from the Larsons’ instruments. The common “Type 2” Dyer with the “cloud” sub-bass head appeared by late 1904, with what looked like a “re-launch” in the 1906 ad. Currently, a total of just five extant Type 1 Larson-built Dyers are known, with serial numbers ranging from 120 to 127. We presume that “101” was the

first, and with a surviving Type 2 with serial #140 known, we calculate that somewhere between 27 to 39 Type 1 instruments could have been produced. I should also point out that while Chris Knutsen himself signed the labels of the first Dyer's (nearly 200 of them), no *Knutsen-built, Dyer-labeled* instrument has ever been found.

So, what exactly transpired between 1900 and 1905? There is much to consider, but now let us consider the instrument appearing in our remarkable new *dated* photograph.



1901 Emory Bennett instrument

Dyer #125, extant instrument

Dyer #125, historical image

Typical c.1901 Knutsen

I could see in the WHS thumbnail image that the headstocks looked suspiciously like those of the Larsons, and when I obtained the high-res scan (left), this was born out. The center two images depict our best-known Larson-built Type 1 harp guitar (Dyer serial number 125; the color image showing the instrument today, the other, from an early 1900s photograph). At right is a typical 1901 Knutsen, which now has his "slanted frets." Note Knutsen's crude individual holes for the six strings on the headstock. At *no* point did he himself "slot" the headstock; it was always these individual tuner holes until 1902, when he switched to a *solid* headstock.

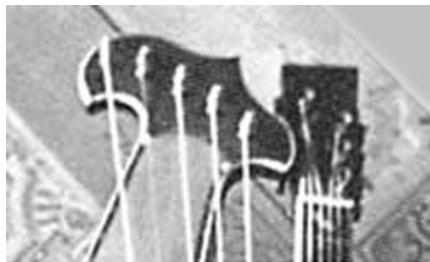
However, for completeness, we must look at his friend Otto Anderson, who built many of Knutsen's early instruments (right).



Headstock slots by Otto Anderson

Anderson built instruments both for Knutsen and for himself from perhaps 1895-1898; it's not clear if he built any beyond that. He *did* use slotted headstocks, both square and rounded as shown above. However, there is no record of him creating (in whole or in part) the 1901 Symphony style above, and without further examples, I don't see the Emory Bennett family instrument possibly being an Anderson.

And I'm positive it's not a Knutsen, both from the 6-string headstock and the sub-bass head:



Knutsen asymmetry



Larson symmetry

The top image shows an example of Knutsen's Symphony bass head at the *most* symmetrical it ever was. As you can see, it was always heavily weighted toward the left side; in 1901 it would become even *more* so. The Larson-built Type 1 followed Knutsen's design closely but used a neck heel (not visible in the WHS photo), a *slotted* headstock and a *thinner, more symmetrical bass head*. All five extant Dyer Type 1's look almost exactly like this.

Interestingly, all five extant Larson-built Dyer Type 1's have the same bridge which is an essentially identical copy of Knutsen's. So that wouldn't have been a clue...*except* that the 1901 WHS photo bridge is a distinct variant!



Standard Knutsen bridge



Larson-built Dyer bridge



1901 Emory Bennett instrument

The extremely straight bridge on the September 1901 instrument has never been seen before. Indeed, I think it *is* a clue. It is as if this was the Larson brothers' first iteration – or even, *prototype* – after which they were instructed to "copy Knutsen's!"

The Larsons' Knutsen-accurate bridge would (presumably) appear on all Type 1 harp guitars until the Type 2 Dyer appeared. *That* bridge – like the headstock – may have been suggested to the Dyer firm by the Larsons in the 1904 redesign.

A final clue about the builders of the Emory Bennett family instrument is the label that appears through the soundhole:

We can see faint hints of text on the large light-colored label. Check out the [Knutsen labels](#) from this period. None from the years around 1901 remotely look like a match. But the *Dyer* label that would have been included in this instrument (if our theory holds), *does* look like a reasonable match, as shown in my experiment above.



Readers may think of other features of these instruments to further cement or affect my conclusions above, but this “too good to be true” provenance does indeed seem both very good and very true to me.

Let's recall that December 1901 Cadenza ad above, the Dyer harp guitar's first appearance. Lead time on the Larsons building an instrument and Dyer creating and submitting their ad puts our timeline back a couple of months, and here we have an instrument – possibly a “prototype” – already in the hands of a customer by early September 1901! Incidentally, Wisconsin Rapids, where the Bennett family lived, was smack dab in the middle of Wisconsin, and about 180 miles as the crow flies to St. Paul, Minnesota, where the W. J. Dyer & Bro. store was. Did the fellow in the non-famous WHS photo – uncle, father, cousin, or cranberry-picking farmhand – take a horse or wagon to the twin cities to buy himself a guitar? Only to witness there the debut of the shiny new Larson-built harp guitar creation?

Quite possibly.

And like many of us, it was immediately a “gotta have”!



About The Author: Creator and Editor of Harpguitars.net Gregg Miner has been fascinated by harp guitars since the early 1970s. He purchased his first instrument (a 1916 red sunburst Gibson) in 1983, then fell in love with the harp guitars of Chris Knutsen when he found his first one in 1988. He collects harp guitars, researches harp guitars, writes about harp guitars, plays harp guitars, produces harp guitar CDs, buys and sells harp guitars, and runs Harpguitars.net, Harp Guitar Music and the Harp Guitar Foundation. You would think that by now he would be sick of harp guitars, but he is not.

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