

Frank E. Coulter Portland's Iconoclastic Luthier

Gregg Miner



His establishment was in Portland's oldest business section, close to Chinatown. It was on the second floor of an old building, reached by dark, dusty flight of stairs, the rest of the second floor being used by a printing establishment. The room was some 20 by 30 feet, with windows opening onto a court. The floor was of old, worn and uneven boards, and a rusty stove sat in the center of the room. Piled everywhere, on the floor, on shelves and tables and benches, was old and new wood of every description from which he made his instruments. Scores of instruments, completed and in the making, hung against one wall. His work bench stood beneath the dusty, cobwebby windows. A motor-run whipsaw was in the center of the room, neither the whipsaw itself nor its band being protected. In one murky corner was a stationery washbowl with running water. Cans of glue and varnish, used and unused, as well as other incidental materials, was here, there and everywhere. What little floor space remained was filled with a nondescript assortment of chairs, doubtless for the use of his many visitors and cronies.

He was tall and slender, with a smooth kindly face and wearing shabby clothes. Though interested in the welfare of mankind, he was of the fanatic type, with considerable ego attached.

*That, my friends, is a remarkable firsthand account of luthier Frank Evans Coulter, one of America's most eccentric builders of violins, mandolins, guitars and harp guitars.¹ He was just shy of 77 and still building instruments. And *what* instruments!*

Love them or hate them, there is no denying that Coulter built one of the most unique lines of plucked stringed instrument in America. From guitars and harp guitars to the entire mandolin family, with the occasional banjo or ukulele tossed in, he was a one-man custom shop that built things *his* way, and only his way. Because – as he would tell anyone he could corral, whether in his shop or at the podium – his way was far superior.



Coulter's first public advertisement included his famous trade mark. The "knight's helmet on table" seems to have been inspired by the Good Templars, which he joined as a young man. *Portland Spray Courier*, May 4 1916.

Indeed, in the quick glimpse into Coulter's shop above, what sticks out is the interviewer's final observation: "Interested in the welfare of mankind, but with considerable ego attached."²

¹ Though edited into this "historical eyewitness account," all the observations and opinions are the words of a woman (Sara Wrenn) who interviewed Coulter on March 27, 1939, as part of the Oregon Folklore Study's American Life Histories. This was a year before Coulter's death in 1940.

² See the Appendices below.

Frank E. Coulter would become a lifelong “socialist,” zealous for a system of “equal opportunities” and lecturing anywhere and often on his theories concerning the “science of government.” A wordy, but revealing, portrait of his complex personality was penned by a friend in a 1937 article, who admits that Coulter “can (be), and frequently *is*, exasperatingly irritating,” “intolerant of opposing opinion,” and “known to the unknowing world as a crank.” Yet the unnamed author (who clearly dotes on his friend), defends Coulter by describing him as a “poet, a wit, and a philosopher, a truly great humanitarian” who, apparently, mere mortals can’t hope to understand.³

Biography: Life Before the Instruments

We are extremely fortunate to have rare family documents, images and correspondence from Coulter’s great-granddaughter, Jane Sanford Harrison.⁴ You’ll see some on these first few pages and elsewhere.

She told us that “My great-grandfather was quite a character, by all reports (he died a year after I was born) – extremely opinionated, and apparently very individual in the way he built instruments.”

Indeed!

Frank Evans Coulter was born in Marion, Ohio on April 16, 1862 to parents of Scotch and Irish stock.

He eventually moved to California, where he attended Stanford University for one year.

Right: Frank looking overly confident even as a child.



³ At least this is my take on it, with the author ending by comparing Coulter to “a god.” See the Appendices below for the entire profile. One of my favorite stories that illustrates Coulter’s true selfless humanitarian nature is the one in Appendix 3 where towards the close he relates the tale of a gifted “natural” on the violin, a local “19-year-old Italian hunchback,” named Guisepe Amato. His hands too small for even a $\frac{3}{4}$ violin, Coulter made him a custom violin as a gift. Seeing the young man playing on the corner outside “Ben Selling’s store” some days later, he slyly suggested that Selling fund the boy to study in Italy. A week later, the violinist was indeed sent to Genoa, where “he studied hard, but wasn’t very strong, and he lived only four years after that.” The story rings true, as Ben Selling (1852-1931) was a prominent Portland businessman, commissioner and local politician, who did own a major clothing store in 1912, and was known for his philanthropic efforts.

https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/selling_ben_1852_1931_, accessed March 3, 2026.

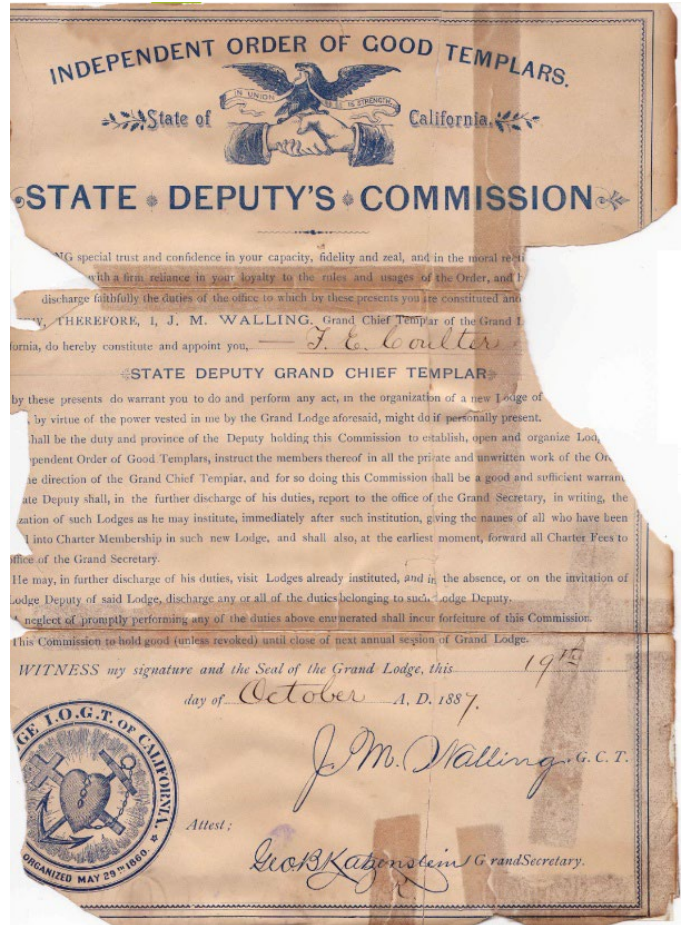
⁴ See Image Credits for her contributions. Coulter collector John Riley corresponded with Jane quite a bit on Facebook from 2012 through 2015. Sadly, she passed away in 2024 before I began my own Coulter research in earnest.

Moving to nearby Modesto at about age 20, he proved to be an extremely intelligent and enterprising young man. He joined the local lodge of the Order of Good Templars (his commission papers at right); abstinence would become his first “religion.” He was also getting good reviews in some of the town’s dramatic plays, such as “Mark Ashton” in “The Last Loaf, the temperance drama in two acts.”⁵

Coulter first became a minor celebrity as the town’s first bicyclist. After ten years, he was still at it, becoming an agent for “Victor Bicycles.”⁶



At left, an 1892 Victor advertisement.



In fact, that’s how a 16-year-old Jessie Smith, newly arrived in Modesto, remembered first seeing Coulter: “Frank (whose mother was Rebecca Mary Andrews Coulter Dunning) apparently caught Jessie’s eye in Modesto. The family notes say ‘saw him pass house in high wheel velocipede in brown suit.’”



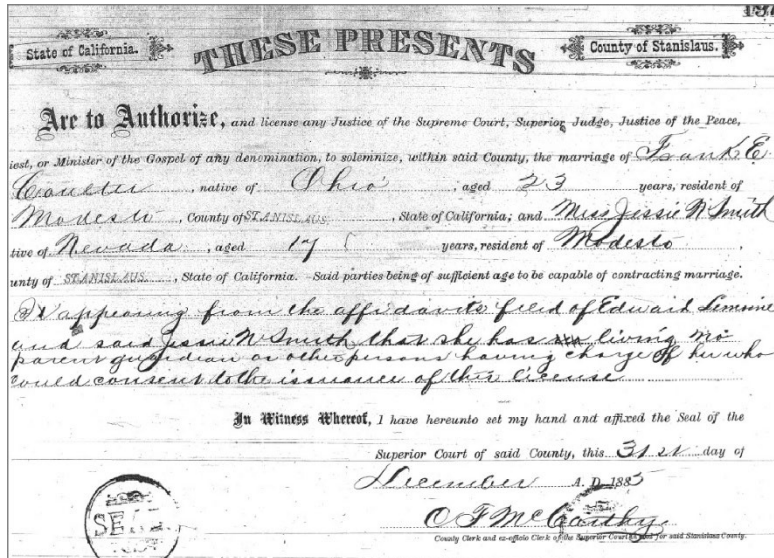
In 1885, Frank married 16-year-old Josephine (Jessie) Jenny Natalie Smith, who was born in Austin, Nevada on July 27th, 1869.

Images believed to be the young couple’s wedding portraits.



⁵ *The Modesto Bee*, January 16, 1885.

⁶ *The Modesto Bee*, December 19, 1891 and January 2, 1892.



Left: Though Jessie gave her age as 17 on their marriage license, she was actually still only 16.

Sometime before their marriage, Coulter and a partner (Charles Maze, Jr.) had opened a stationery and variety store called the Modesto Bazar. Within just a couple years, he bought out his partner at the end of 1885.⁷ April 1886 saw him moving the store – now “Frank Coulter’s Bazar” – to a new location, where within a few

more weeks, he was offering the town’s citizen’s a “large circulating library.”⁸

The Coulters had their first daughter, Inez (Mary), on July 21, 1887.⁹ Now just 25 years old, Frank would begin his volunteer community work in earnest. In October, he would be named “State Deputy Grand Chief Templar of the Independent Order of Good Templars.”¹⁰ A year later, he would run for city clerk (though lose).¹¹

In the next few years, he would continue to appear in the occasional drama, while increasing his role in the temperance movement, becoming secretary of the local Prohibition Club in the summer of 1892.¹²

In this same year, he became a self-employed cabinet maker.¹³ In July, he volunteered – and was elected – to be the town librarian, headquartering it in a woman’s store, in which he had a “work shop” in back.¹⁴ While only cabinet making was listed as his occupation, he later claimed that he had been experimenting with old violins even before this time. It’s impossible to know if that’s actually true, and the first mention of such an interest was still a dozen years in the future.

Curiously, a Frank E. Coulter was also listed as a cabinetmaker in Stockton in 1893.¹⁵ This was where his mother was living, and it may be that his family briefly moved in with her between August 1892 and July 1893.

⁷ *The Modesto Bee*, December 16, 1885.

⁸ *The Modesto Bee*, April 5 and May 17, 1886.

⁹ *The Stanislaus County Weekly News*, July 29, 1887. Jessie was just shy of 18 years old. Inez is Jane Harrion’s grandmother.

¹⁰ *The Modesto Bee*, October 28, 1887.

¹¹ *The Modesto Bee*, November 7, 1888.

¹² *The Modesto Bee*, June 9, 1892.

¹³ California Voter Registration, Modesto 1892. No evidence of where he might have learned his craft has been found.

¹⁴ *The Modesto Bee*, July 28, 1892.

¹⁵ 1893 Stockton City Directory.

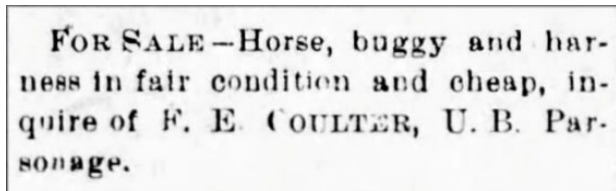
We next find Coulter living in Sacramento, California by August of 1893, where he continued his activities in the next Good Templars lodge.¹⁶ He was even listed in the city directory as “superintendent lecture field I. O. G. T.” Were the templars paying him a salary? In 1894, he ran for Railroad Commissioner and became chairman of the city’s Prohibition party.¹⁷ Clearly, he was serious about this movement, which filled his next three years in Sacramento as he expanded his local political activities and gave the first of what would become a lifetime of speeches in the summer of 1895.¹⁸

Some “musical endeavors” finally began the next year; it seems he was a decent tenor soloist, and he would make the occasional appearance at one of the lodge programs.¹⁹

At the end of his years in Sacramento near the end of 1897, there were still no signs of 35-year-old Frank being an overtly religious man beyond his “Christian-adjacent” lodge activities and growing leadership in the Prohibition movement. Then somehow, in the period of just a few weeks, he moved to Selma in Fresno County, now “Reverend Frank Coulter.”²⁰

In actuality, he managed to combine his multiple roles. In May of 1898 he became California’s State Chairman of the Prohibition party and he spent all of the year speaking throughout the state on a bewildering variety of topics, from San Francisco to Los Angeles. As both Prohibition leader and minister, he had a *lot* to communicate: temperance, economic theories, even – as a member of the Merchants and Manufacturers Association – the subject of “street sweeping” with L.A.’s leaders.²¹ He was intelligent, forward thinking, highly opinionated, and by now tireless and fearless.

For his less distant bookings, Coulter may have traveled alone by horse and buggy; in October 1898 (the last entry anywhere until 1900) he placed this ad at right.



FOR SALE—Horse, buggy and harness in fair condition and cheap, inquire of F. E. COULTER, U. B. Parsonage.

Note that he and the family had been living in the parsonage provided by the United Brethren church. It may have been at this time that the church assigned him to a new church in Riverside County in Southern California.²²

¹⁶ *The Sacramento Bee*, August 26, 1893.

¹⁷ *The Sacramento Bee*, May 18 (it’s not known if he got the RR appointment) and June 9, 1894.

¹⁸ Notably, he became president of the Sacramento Union Temperance Committee (*The Sacramento Union*, February 1, 1895) after which he was the “Prohibition nominee for Congress of the Second Congressional District.” (*ibid*, October 4, 1896).

¹⁹ *The Sacramento Bee*, May 19, 1896.

²⁰ *The Selma Enterprise*, January 8, 1898. He officiated a wedding as “Rev.”

²¹ *The Expositor*, May 2, 1898; *The Los Angeles Evening Post-Record*, June 16, 1898; *The San Francisco Chronicle*, August 8, 1898 (to name some key notices).

²² Riverside County census, June 6, 1900 (living with wife and daughter). He may have then lived in Riverside from late 1898 to shortly after this date in 1900, when they moved him again to Portland.

Portland Controversy

After a year or so in Riverside, pastor Coulter had been reassigned once again by the United Brethren church. Could this have been because of his increasingly radical ideas? Perhaps, and if so, this would be his last chance. He and his family once again took up residence in the provided parsonage, and Coulter began his new Portland ministerial duties on July 29th, 1900.²³

His sermons gradually became more controversial as he brought his own personal humanistic views of socialism into them. Finally, in April 1901, he gave a sermon that made headlines (at right).²⁴

The article solicited a fair amount of criticism for Coulter and the church, and he wasn't long for United Brethren. Nor the Centenary Methodist church, where just two sermon attempts caused an uproar.²⁵ Mercifully, he found a home with the Universalist church, which seemed to align more with his beliefs. He would continue to sermonize there while lecturing at clubs and lodges for the next few years.²⁶

Meanwhile, on February 2nd, 1903, the Coulter's second daughter Dorothy Bernice was born.

And finally, some instrumental music! On New Year's Eve of 1904, Frank Coulter "rendered a horn solo" during the Y. M. C. A.'s watch party.²⁷



²³ *The Sunday Oregonian*, July 9, 1900. He had been proactively listed in the city directory as "gospel minister" on June 6.

²⁴ *The Oregonian*, April 3, 1901.

²⁵ *The Sunday Oregonian*, December 1, 1901.

²⁶ This was presumably the same "People's Christian Union" church, where he was listed as pastor in Portland's city directory from 1901 to 1905. The family's residences during this time were 668 Belmont (two years), then 309 Flanders, 363 16th and 64 Grand av N over the next three years.

²⁷ *The Sunday Oregonian*, December 31, 1904. His selection was "The Almighty Deep." Curiously, this would be the sole mention of his instrumental abilities that I have found.

Violins Enter the Picture

As the story was told more than once, Coulter quit the ministry when the church insisted that he take a salary; it seems that his “equal opportunities & economics for all” socialism had become that serious.²⁸

However, just before his leaving the ministry, he had already made the leap into the music business. He had likely been interested in, and possibly even building, violins already. In Portland’s 1905 city directory (month unknown) he is for the first time listed as “violinmkr” (along with “pastor”). His violinmaker address was 234½ Morrison.²⁹ He would then quit the ministry before the next directory was issued.

1906 entries inform us that the Morrison address was indeed a shop, at this location for about two years. He was now calling himself a violin expert. We get a better sense of this shop from an ad for a piano (at right),³⁰ and secondly, when the store made the news when it was robbed.³¹ For this second year, the family’s residence was also at the shop address.³²

PIANO, square grand, \$25. Call F. E. Coulter, violin expert, 234½ Morrison st., cor. Second.



At left: Morrison & Third in 1905, as Coulter set up shop less than a block south.

Photo from <https://www.vintag.es>

²⁸ That’s the story Coulter himself told often. His great-granddaughter provides two alternate scenarios: “My Great Aunt always claimed it was over a difference in theology; my mother said he had to leave the church because he couldn’t quit chasing the women. Truth is probably in there somewhere.”

²⁹ While the family lived at 64 Grand Ave N.

³⁰ *The Oregon Daily Journal*, May 13, 1906.

³¹ *The Oregon Daily Journal*, July 31, 1906. “A thief with musical propensities broke open the showcase in front of F. E. Coulter’s store at 234 ½ Morrison street last night and carried away a violin, a viola, a harmonic tail piece and a violin bow.”

³² 1906 Portland city directory.

In November of 1907, the Merchants and Manufacturers Association presented several local industries speakers and Coulter proved once again to be the "most interesting." This was the first time he lectured about his opinions on tonewood, specifically local Oregon wood (right).

At this juncture of 1907 into 1908, Coulter moved his shop to a new address nearby, and had moved to a new residence.³³ Publicly, his sole focus remained the violin. Did Coulter also *play* the violin?

Other than his single horn solo, I've found no evidence that he was a musician himself, let alone a violinist. Indeed, for his lectures on the history and construction of the violin, newspapers informed the public that "it is not a musical performance" or "some local talent has been secured to play some violin selections." Our conclusion can only be that he could not play.

How then would Coulter perform his constant experiments with woods, construction techniques, repairs and modifications in a quest for his own personal tone? He must have had at least *some* rudimentary abilities in order to judge his results; did he have a stable of local players to help?

Industries Gaining Ground.

Probably the most interesting address of the evening was that of F. E. Coulter, who is engaged in the manufacture in this city of violins and other musical instruments from Oregon woods. Mr. Coulter testified that the red cedar and yellow fir of this state, when properly selected, is far more valuable for the manufacture of musical instruments than either Swiss pine or the larch and spruce of Norway. These Oregon woods, he said, are principally valuable for these uses because of their superior resonant qualities.

Oregon Woods for Violins.

In open competition with violin manufacturers from all over the world, 23 different instruments being submitted, Mr. Coulter recently sold to an orchestra leader of Philadelphia a violin that was made exclusively of Oregon woods. This served to introduce this state and its wood products to the East, and one of the largest importing firms of musical instruments in Boston is now buying large quantities of fir and cedar from this state for manufacturing purposes. Mr. Coulter exhibited to the members of the Association a violin he had manufactured from yellow fir, also a mandolin that had been made of chittim wood obtained near Hillsboro.

"What is needed for the development of this industry, for which there is a great future," said Mr. Coulter, "is machinery by which the expense of producing these instruments can be reduced. Few violins are made in this country, all such musical instruments coming from Germany. There is an enormous amount of timber suitable for these purposes to be found along the Columbia River, extending on the north side from Vancouver to Chehalis and Grays River and on the south side of the river from Portland to the Nehalem River. A large and profitable industry can be built up by interesting any manufacturer of musical instruments who has the necessary capital to finance such an enterprise."

³³ 1907 & 1908 Portland city directories. The shop was at 227-1/2 Washington, the residence at 323 E. 1st N.

Coulter undoubtedly loved music and perhaps the sound of the violin particularly. We know that he was in love with the physical instrument itself along with its history, as he amassed an impressive collection of violins and even lectured on “the old masters.”

UNIQUE COLLECTION OF VALUABLE VIOLINS.

Owned by Frank E. Coulter and on Exhibition at a Local Jewelry Store.

One of the oldest collections of violins ever brought to this city is now on exhibition at Owen's jewelry store and is attracting quite a number of music lovers, especially those who find pleasure in looking at old instruments. Some of the violins could not be purchased for any amount of money and each has a history of its own. The collection belongs to Frank E. Coulter of Portland, Oregon, and among the instruments are the following:

A genuine Joseph Guarnius-Del-Gesu, made in Cremona in 1742 and valued at \$1000. This violin once belonged to a descendant of Garibaldi.

A genuine Jacobus Duke (greatest English make), made in London in 1757 and valued at \$250.

A genuine Jacobus Stainer made in 1774 and valued at \$250.

A genuine Tomaso Eberle made in Naples in 1774 and valued at \$250.

Two violins made by Coulter himself in 1907-08 and valued at \$250 each. Also a mandolin made by Coulter and inlaid with pearl. The value of this instrument is \$100.

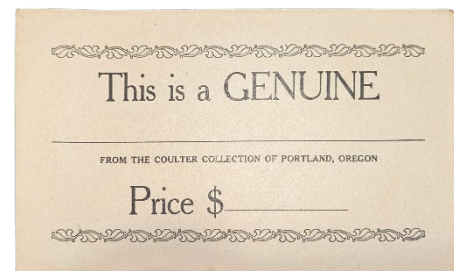
Mr. Coulter was born at Woodbridge and attended the Woodbridge school under D. A. Mobley, late of this city.

In June 1909, while visiting his mother in Stockton, California, Coulter took the entire collection to his old stomping grounds in Modesto, where he exhibited it in the town's jewelry/music store's windows. Check out his inventory at left and see what you think. If the 1742 Guarnius from Cremona was truly worth the \$1000 Coulter claimed, that one alone is about \$35,618 in today's (2026) currency. He also claimed to have sent his violins “east as far as London and other European cities.”³⁴

Apparently, this was a lecture he also gave on the Chautauqua circuit, where he would also take a violin apart to explain its intricacies. This fascinating series of articles also informs us that Coulter then made no more than four violins a year, since his work “is so particular and needs so much care.”³⁵

The Appendices include a rare copy of Coulter's violin circular, where he first gives one of his long-winded lectures before explaining that he uses mahogany and redwood rather than “conventional spruce and maple.” However, he *does* list other wood combinations that he stocks. It is well worth reading for anyone curious about his unusual claims regarding how he improved the “then-terrible instrument;” there are simply too many bizarre statements to include here!

Right: An unused price card; believed to have been used when he sold instruments from his violin collection.



³⁴ *The Modesto Bee*, June 21 & 22, 1909. *Modesto Morning Herald*, June 22 & 23, 1909. His mother's name was Mrs. M. R. Dunning. While the reporters are only repeating Coulter's claims, I don't think he was necessarily exaggerating. From all I have read, while he was extremely opinionated and egotistical, he was never really deceitful.

³⁵ OK, maybe a bit overly boastful! None of his instruments show such meticulous care.

Coulter Violins



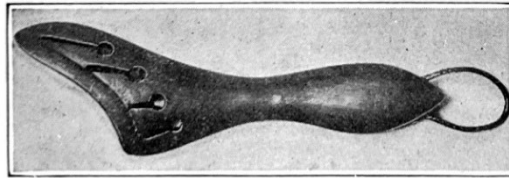
Above are two violins with Coulter labels; however, we are certain that neither was actually *built* by him. This, despite the first one being offered by a violin “expert” as a “1902 Coulter” instrument., with “Coulter, Maker” inscribed inside. The work is simply too fine and “normal.”

Luckily, we have a smoking gun clue in the second instrument, in which Coulter adds his own label to a customer’s violin, writing “Regraded – 1907.”

Whether Coulter actually had an *ear* for such things or not, he essentially never met a violin he liked the sound of, so would invariably take them apart and “improve” them!



At left is Coulter's own hand-built violin, from his original circular. Note the asymmetrical, bulbous headstock, and his own "harmonic tail piece."



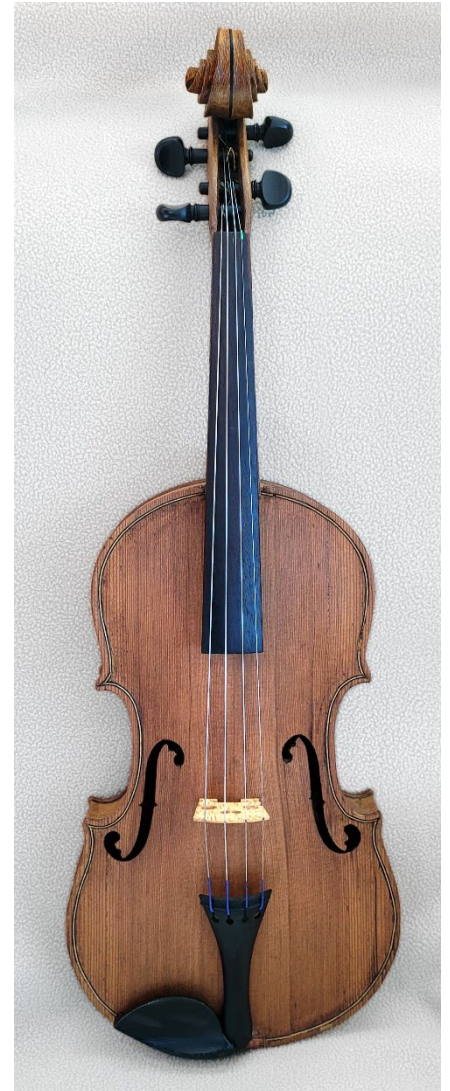
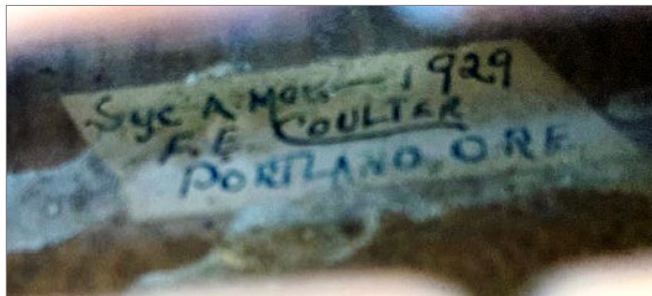
HARMONIC TAIL PIECE FOR VIOLIN

We are extremely fortunate that at least *one original Coulter violin* survives! It appears to be all original with the exception of a replaced tailpiece.

With these closeup images, we can easily see the crude carving of the head and sloppy lines of the purfling.

Of course, it's possible that it sounds wonderful, but I'm not holding my breath.

The top wood may be spruce, while the striking sides and back are sycamore. We know this because Coulter labels the 1929 instrument the "Syc-A-Mor"!



The 1929 violin does not include the harmonic tailpiece; of course, this may just be a replacement.





Above: Coulter's fit and finish is definitely on the rougher side.

Below: His wood-burned logo is hidden underneath the end pin.

OK, we can see his work; but how did they *sound*? I asked its owner, Reed Bennett, if he knew any experienced violin players, and he quickly made a trip, coming back with this reply:

"I took it over to a violin friend and he used his well-rosined bow and tested it. I asked him how he would rate its sound on a scale of 1 to 10, and he said an "8"! I was a bit surprised to say the least, but I listened as he did it and I would say that (with its old strings, and not professionally set-up) I would only give it a 6+.

He said it has some unusual building methods and wasn't particularly well-constructed."





Coulter's – shall we say – *distinctive* carving skills are readily apparent on his own violin, above. Below, the anonymous 1902 professional violin repaired or “improved” by Coulter.



Coulter undoubtedly tweaked many dozens of violins (whether they needed it or not!). He did all the bowed instruments as they came in; one sale listing described “a lovely upright bass with a really nice full sound that has a repair label of “ Reworked by F.E. Coulter” inside.

But I would especially love to find the other original Coulter violin referenced on Amati.com.³⁶ The entry reads “COULTER, F. E. early 20th century Portland, Oregon USA. Maker, repairer, and dealer. Personal model with profuse mother-of-pearl ornamentation but poor workmanship.” In other words, it sounds like he threw inlay scraps all over it like some of his fretted instruments!

³⁶ <https://amati.com/maker/coulter-f-e/>, accessed 3-28-2926

Itinerant Interlude

Suddenly, a curious break from instrument building, as Frank E. Coulter found himself on the lecture circuit throughout much of Canada.

In mid-1909 Coulter had his shop in the Labbe building and had just been to Modesto to display his rare violins in Modesto. And he was apparently in the thick of his mandolin and guitar building experiments; indeed, he seemed to be going full blast on his music venture. Yet something prompted him to travel east, during which he would visit a dozen violin and fretted instrument makers, presumably for research.³⁷

But that doesn't seem to have been the true purpose of his trip east; he had apparently been sent on a long personal lecture circuit by his "Single Tax" friends. In fact, Coulter would be away from Portland for the next year and a half, with his wife and daughters remaining behind.³⁸ This was when Mrs. Coulter decided she had had enough. Jessie would divorce Frank before his return and remarry around 1920. Coulter would waste even less time, remarrying in 1914.³⁹



Left: The Coulter's first daughter, Inez, born in Modesto in 1887 and died in Vancouver in 1960.

Right: Their second daughter Dorothy, seen here in China about 1939 while teaching in the American School in Tsingtao, died in Seattle in 1986.



And what of Frank during these "lost years"?

He was back to doing what he did best, lecturing on his many causes. By September 1909 Coulter had arrived in Toronto, Ontario and made it his home base. He was immediately voted in as the new "Secretary of the Single Tax Association of Ontario,"

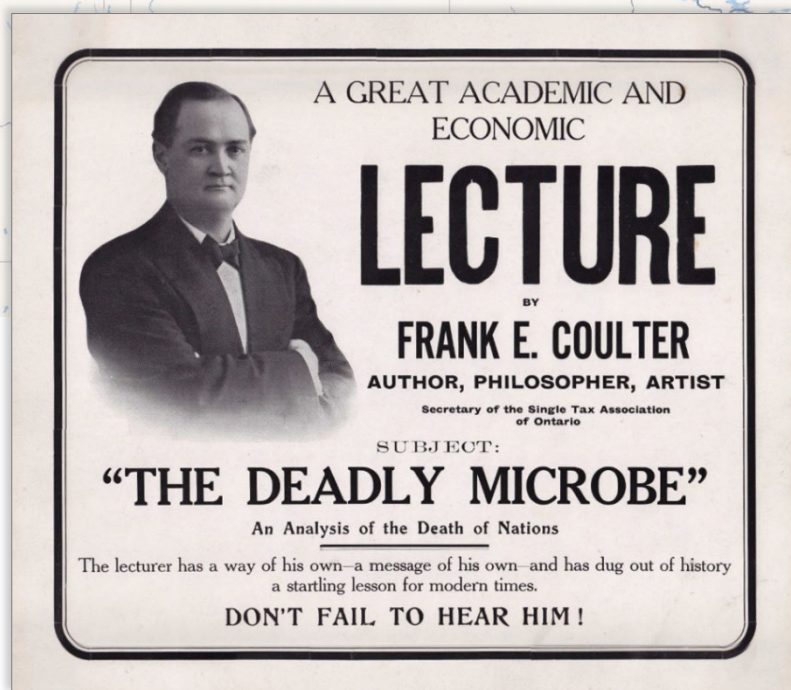
³⁷ His later circulars stating, "In 1909 and 1910, during a trip through the East, Mr. Coulter took occasion to visit violin makers and instrument makers in more than a score of cities..."

³⁸ "Mrs. Coulter" was listed as a clerk for the Hasty Messenger company, both in 1905 and 1910, but "Josephine N. Coulter" in 1911.

³⁹ Portland city directories (Coulter's second wife Ellen was listed in 1914 and then for the next 13 years) and Ancestry.com for Josephine's subsequent marriage and family.

travelling around giving his lectures to the same small audiences who had listened to him in California and Oregon. The pins show just some of the cities he travelled to during the next two years. Manitoba was likely chock full as the Grain Growers Assoc. ran ads in their Guide publication for many months for Coulter's speaking services.

His great-granddaughter Jane says, "I have a scrapbook he kept with some of his speeches in it. It's interesting. This was a man who was never at a loss for an opinion, who seemed to pride himself in being a kind of maverick."



Coulter not only *spoke* on Single Tax Theory and local municipal economics, but was also a determined participant. For example, he proposed a Municipal Act amendment to give towns home rule on assessments, organized branches

of the Direct Legislation League (managing Manitoba's division), and submitted a petition to the Ontario Legislature. In his several months in Winnipeg he would organize and manage the league of farmers of western Canada.⁴⁰ He even appeared again as "Reverend Coulter" at the Zion Church on such topics as "How Christ, if Taken Seriously, Would Bring About Social Revolution."⁴¹

He finally returned to Portland on February 9th, 1911, but kept up his lectures in the city throughout the rest of the year. The only evidence of his return to lutherie seems to have been a single classified ad in the "Musical Instruments" section of the paper.⁴²

⁴⁰ Winnipeg would be his final home base before he resigned from his leadership duties.

⁴¹ Canadian newspapers from September 1909 through January 1911 formed the timeline, locations and gist of these activities.

⁴² *The Oregon Daily Journal*, May 24, 1911. He was back in a new room of the Labbe building; see next chapter.

Coulter's Plucked Stringed Instruments

During 1907 through mid-1909, Coulter was likely making himself available for *any* musical instrument opportunities for his store and workshop, including buying, selling, consigning, repairing and building. He had also been quietly experimenting with mandolins and guitars – first by repairing or “improving” those brought into the shop, and secondly by his radical new construction ideas. Had he been thinking about these concepts while on his extensive eastern & Canadian tour? Undoubtedly, as he quickly created his first line of instruments.

But first, some musical stage-setting...

Between 1905 and 1915, America's mandolin and banjo clubs, with their guitar and harp guitar accompaniment instruments, had been going strong for a good two decades. Known then and now as the BMG community,⁴³ nearly all of the minor to major manufacturers had their own line of instruments and seemingly every city and town in America had their own clubs and teachers. Though I wasn't able to locate a specific group at this precise moment in time, The following images give us just a small snapshot of Portland's BMG activities for nearly four decades.



In 1893, guitars, mandolins and the odd harp and banjo were popular with music students at St. Mary's Academy in 1893. (Image from the online version of *The Oregonian*.)

⁴³ The common abbreviation for America's long “Banjo, Mandolin & Guitar” obsession at the turn of the 20th century.



The Florentine Troubadours were a well-known popular ensemble of Portland, even appearing on sheet music in 1898. This was just two years before Coulter arrived in the city. Note the violin and cello, instruments he was already building. The others play typical bowlback mandolins and parlor guitars, with an additional bowlback octave mandola (or 'cello) and a Chicago Joseph Bohmann harp guitar.



By 1928, Portland's BMG groups had all but disappeared, but in 1928 a passionate player resurrected the idea with the new Portland Mandolin Orchestra.⁴⁴

Their instruments were all Gibsons (but one), which must have stuck in Coulter's craw!

He was then a bit past the mid-point of his career building competing instruments.

⁴⁴ Image from *Musical Merchandise Section of the Music Trade Review*, July 14, 1928.

THE COULTER Co

COULTER'S VIOLINS



F. E. COULTER, Luteier and Manager
227½ WASHINGTON STREET
PORTLAND, OREGON

Charles Darwin, philosophizing of natural things, says, "That all things arise because of an outward urge;" an environment that shapes their ends, as it were. Emerson, in a thousand different ways, takes issue with the author of the theory of Evolution, and puts it that all things arise from an inward urge, striving to harmonize the individual in correspondences with the spiritual uplift of all other things around it. If one were looking for proof of Emerson's vision, the history and character of the violin would furnish it completely.

Comes now the dark ages of civilization. Humanity is choked, gagged, bound in the chains of festering sensuality, a legacy from the landlordism and aristocracy of the old Roman world, which, as it ever does, destroyed the harmony of the sexes, so that Paul, the apostle, in his letter to the Roman (Italian) church, admonishes that their women "keep silent." Evidently he reasons that since women were so degraded by the false economic system of the times as to be a source of moral contamination, they should not take part in outward forms of spiritual worship. This fact, strange as it may seem, produced the violin, in response to an inward spiritual urge for a soprano voice with which to worship God in song. The first violin-makers were either monks or religious zealots, striving in soul travail for expression of the inner spiritual uplift. It was only in new countries where men found God in forest or mountain or some intellectual fad, that the fiddle was relegated to be a creature of the devil. In all times since, the violin-maker has had his part in the revolutions and upheavals that mark the upward path of man.

This is the real reason why men cling with such tenacity to the old violin and the legends surrounding it, for always and ever always the intellectual bigot, who follows in the footsteps of the spiritual and loving prophets, tries to fix, to crystallize and make permanent the forms of his master's vision rather than its spirit. So we see the so-called professional musical world, which in the very nature of things is intellectual and sensual in its expression, fighting tooth and nail for the old established forms and voice, even going so far as to maintain that the old instruments themselves—the identical,

THE COULTER Co

MANDOLINS AND GUITARS



F. E. COULTER, Luteier and Manager
227½ WASHINGTON STREET
PORTLAND, OREGON

When Queen Elizabeth used to assuage her maidenly grief over headless suitors, she took her long necked lute and gently strummed a sonnet, to Walter or Raleigh or what's-his-name, on the great-great-grandmother of the modern mandolin; but, of course, she did not know that she was really doing anything like that, which could be used by posterity for some purpose. I reckon if she had she would not have done it. How was good Queen Libby to know that the soft tongued Latin races would take up her long necked lute and make it the instrument of their master passion. (The modern Greeks, Bulgars and Serbians have her lute exactly as she used it, even to the strings of gut wound around the neck, instead of wire, for frets, and the extraordinary back bent head that gives you a "criek" in the neck to even look at it.) But the Italian and Spaniard must have sharper sounds. They do not enjoy gutterals or mezzotints, so they shortened up the neck of the Maiden Queen's lute until it was the length of their beloved violin, and the mandolin was born, such as it was, crude, weak, powerless up to within a score of years ago.

With the broadening of the musical mind and the raising of standards, there came a demand for lead instruments that did not require so much time to master. The mandolin and guitar were lifted out of the realm of folk-lore and became real musical instruments.

What wonder that a flood of them were loosed upon the western market, or that schools sprang up like mushrooms in a night to take advantage of this opportunity for gentle graft.

About eight or nine years ago the mandolins used to come into the shop in flocks of fifty or more to know if we could not put more tone in them, for the schools and their pupils. Inasmuch as some people were spending their good money for music that was bad, a fierce demand arose to make it good. Into that demand, about the time of the Lewis & Clark Fair, our Mr. F. E. Coulter went with all his mind and heart and skill, only to be baffled at every turn, since every effort to improve the mandolin or guitar tone, only made it merely loud or tubby and empty without in any way improving its musical quality.

This was necessarily true because he, like all the rest, reasoned that the mandolin and guitar were the same as the violin, and tone must be gotten out

Coulter's first "Mandolins and Guitars" circular (above right) was printed at the same time as his violin circular (left).⁴⁵ Unraveling the clues to date these, however, proved extremely challenging. I only began to "crack the code" when I finally realized that "227½ Washington" was a rarely used street address for the Labbe building, the location for Coulter's business for many years after this.⁴⁶

At right: This clue from Portland's 1918 city directory verifies that Coulter was then in room 311 of the Labbie Building, at 227½ Washington Ave, the same address as on his two circulars above.

**COULTER CO THE (Frank E Coulter),
Makers and Repairers of All Kinds
of Musical Instruments 311 Labbe
Bldg 227½ Washington, Tel A7287
(See Classified Musical Instrument
Manufacturers and Repairers)**

—David shipwkr r 95 E 12th N
—Ernest R (USN) r 95 E 12th N
—Frank B millwkr r 44 10th N
—Frank E (Ellen L) (The Coulter Co)
h Riverdale sta

⁴⁵ The two undated circulars are courtesy of Kerry Char. Both of his circulars are Xerox copies. Both state "The Coulter Co.," with "Luteier and Manager" above the address at 227½ Washington Street. The typesetting, layout and size are also identical. The Violin document is four pages, the Mandolin & Guitar, six.

⁴⁶ Specifically, the Portland city directories list Coulter's shop at "227½ Washington," with his residence at "323 E. 1st N." The 1909 directory puts the shop at "31 Labbe bldg" with a new residence at "191 Stanton." He then left for his ~18-month trip. On his return in 1911, he was back in the Labbe bldg in room 300 until 1915, after which he moved to room 311 up until 1918 or 1919.



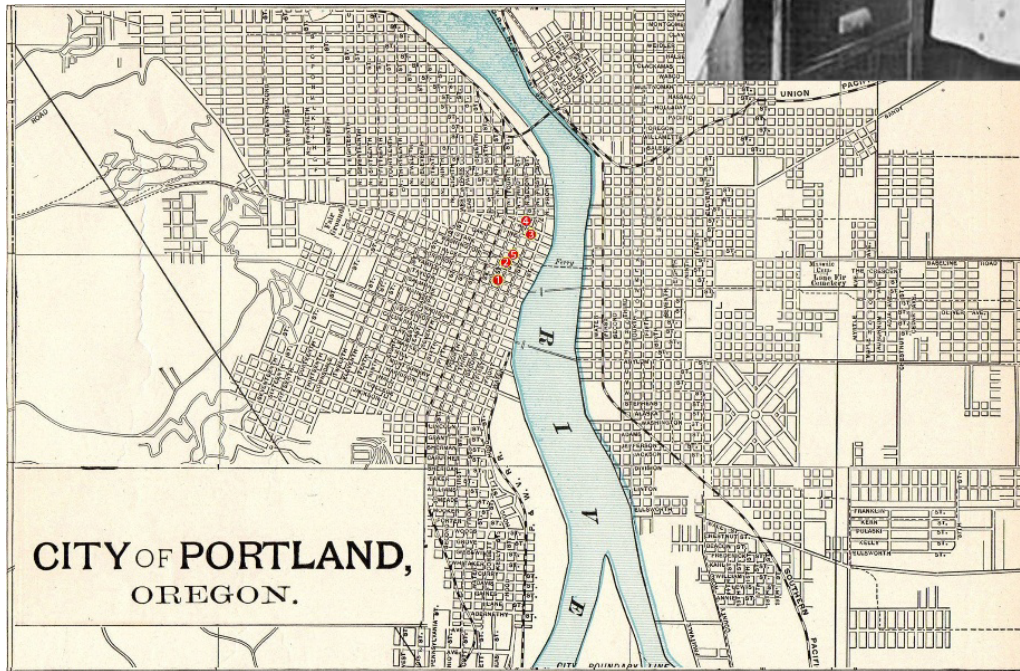
Left: Pictured in 1884 is the Labbe building where Coulter would build his instruments and greet customers for some of his many years.⁴⁷

Right: The well-known image of Coulter in his shop was likely taken at the Labbe building shortly after his return in 1911.



Below: A period map of the city, showing Coulter's five known shop locations, all in today's Old Town:

- 1) 234½ Morrison, 1905-1906
- 2) Labbe Bldg, 227½ Washington, 1907-1909/1911-1918
- 3) 145½ First St., 1919-1926
- 4) 109 2nd, 1927-1933
- 5) 421 2nd, 1934-1939



⁴⁷ From Wikipedia: The four-story Labbe building, located on the northeast corner of SW Washington Street and 2nd Avenue, was called the "first skyscraper built in Portland" by the *Morning Oregonian* newspaper. When it was built in 1883, it was also the first building in Portland to have a passenger elevator. Entrance halls, stairways, and the elevator shaft displayed "fine hand-carved woodwork." In 1933, when the building had seen fifty years of service, one of the tenants, a sculptor, bemoaned newly announced plans for its demolition, saying that the building is "a fine example of the day's best in architecture." Unlike the "quickly built and frequently flimsily constructed buildings" of Portland's "boom" period, the building, he said, "if allowed to, would be standing after many of these more modern buildings are abandoned." The building was razed in the 1930s.

Knowing now that there is a long period in the Labbe building in which Coulter could have produced the first circulars, it's time to look at the statements Coulter includes in his Mandolin & Guitar circular for clues about when he might have begun those experiments, and eventually, production.

The first clue: *"In 1909 and 1910, during a trip through the East, we took occasion to visit violin makers and instrument makers in more than a score of cities..."* So, the circular came *after* his 1910 trip.

Next, Coulter roughly remembers that *"About eight or nine years ago the mandolins used to come into the shop in flocks of fifty or more to know if we could not put more tone in them, for the schools and their pupils. Inasmuch as some people were spending their good money for music that was bad, a fierce demand arose to make it good."* I'm picturing his 1905 shop being up and running during this time, so he could have been writing this no earlier than about 1914.

Note also that Coulter's circulars include his trademark, which did not appear until May and June of 1916, when he ran it simultaneously in every Portland paper.

"Add to this that since the opening of the shop fifteen years ago more than 500 mandolins, guitars, zithers and banjos have been brought in to be corrected in this regard, from the finest to the cheapest grades of all makers..." An "opening of the shop" in 1905 plus "fifteen years ago" now puts us at 1920. *However*, Coulter would leave the Labbe building sometime in 1919, so once again our timeline becomes skewed!⁴⁸

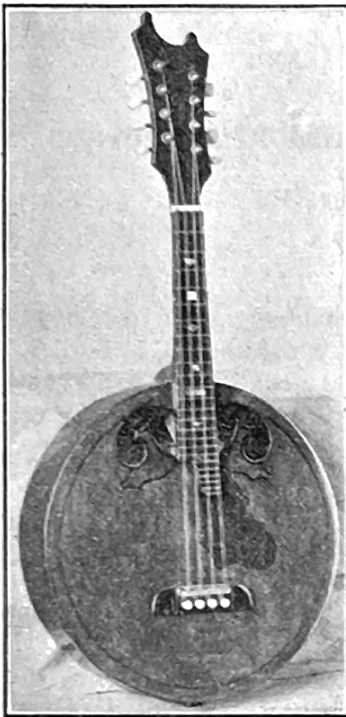
Coulter's follow-up statement to those "bad mandolins" above was that "about the time of the Lewis & Clark Fair" he put all of his efforts into improving the mandolin and guitar. This is a nice "smoking gun" as the famous Expo only ran from July to October in 1905 (coinciding with his new dedicated store). And, having just quit the ministry, and with a dedicated space, this makes perfect sense. This doesn't date the circulars, but instead, the time of his first real efforts into his own instrument experiments.

Finally, after his lengthy explanation of his experiments and conclusions, he introduces his photographed round mandolin and guitar (along with a finished hollow-arm harp guitar), stating that "Out of these conclusions was born about eight years ago the Coulter Round Mandolin and Guitar..." *and also* "the changes made by us in the form of the standard guitar and the twelve-string Harp-Guitar." The two latter meaning his improved construction of standard, waisted (hourglass shape) instruments.

Taken all together, I would thus propose that Coulter had been studying violin construction since about 1900, frequented the Lewis & Clark Expo in latter 1905 at which time he decided to explore mandolins and guitars, experimenting with them into 1909, then – after his year and a half away – finishing his first fretted instruments by 1912. He then created these circulars in 1918/1919.

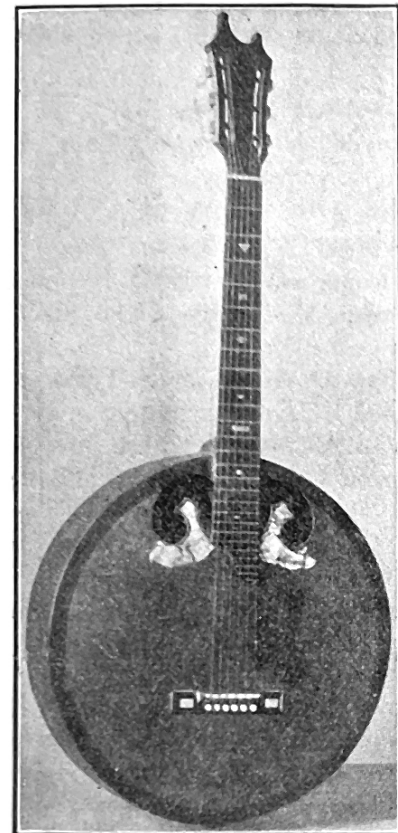
⁴⁸ A mandolin dated 1919 has the Labbe's Washington address colored over, with a new address of 145½ First Street *printed* on the label.

Let's take a look now at Coulter's meticulously-studied and chosen construction techniques in his c.1918/19 circular. On *paper*, they all sound quite logical and clever!



THE COULTER MANDOLIN
Style A with Guitar Bridge

- Utilize the “perfectly round form to homogenize its vibrating conditions, as little corners and hollows produce echoes and false tones.”
- Build the tops under stress “to increase the resilience and responsiveness to twenty or thirty times the amount necessary for a violin.”
- “Move the sound hole to the extreme upper end on each side of the fingerboard where it would use up the least possible amount of valuable fibre and at the same time give a continuing brace from the neck to the bridge.”
- “Curl the sound hole up in a scroll like a rolled up piece of sheet metal” (inspired by Coulter’s early experiments with organ pipes where the wobbly tone was made firm by corrugating the orifice of the pipe).
- Back and sides are laminated with “the grain running in opposite directions,” and “assembled under great tension and reinforced by concentric layers or lining of birch to stiffen the edges.”
- Use spruce, pine, larch or fir for braces, but not cedar, “which after being bent and under pressure exposed to the sun and rain for a year, went back to its original form as if it had been spring steel.”
- The sounding board is “first braced and bent up high in the center and then drawn down tight.”
- Bindings: “No celluloid or pyralin is used on the edges...since no end wood is anywhere exposed.”
- “No oil varnishes are used.”
- Surprisingly, for mandolins, “Guitar style bridges, which greatly improve the character and power of the tone” are recommended.
- Fret placement with a special mathematically calculated and manufactured tool with one portion for the first twelve frets and the other for the frets above that.



THE COULTER GUITAR
Style B

And my favorite, his fascinating solution to his opinion that one single wood type could not work for both treble and bass registers.

- For uniform quality of tone from bass to treble, make the tops out of two different woods: “hard fibred, stiff, quick-acting yellow fir on the treble side” and “soft-fibred, slow-acting larch or spruce on the bass side.”

How many of you modern luthiers have experimented with this? And what were your results?

This Coulter feature is seen on many early instruments, but not always as he described. In practice, the woods for the sides are occasionally swapped. This makes me think that every “experiment” to determine his c.1920 conclusion above was sold to an unwitting customer. His later catalog would not include this feature, so at some point he abandoned it.



THE COULTER GUITAR-HARP
Style D

Coulter next lists the specs of his *fifteen* possible mandolin models (three different body sizes with five different trim choices), which range in price from \$25 to \$100, with additional customization beyond that. Then comes his “complete Mandolin Suite,” available in those same styles at the same prices.

- Piccolo Mandolin (10.5” scale on 8” body)
- Tenor Mandola (16” scale on 14” body)
- Octave Mandola (18” scale on either 14” or 16” body)
- ‘Cello Mandola (24 scale on 18” body)
- Double Mandola Bass (44” scale on 28” body)

His round guitar options are described next: Customer’s choice of 16” or 18” body, 24” or 25” scale, in the mandolin’s lowest three styles. A “regular Grand Concert Guitar” is listed last, below the harp guitar of the same shape (with waist).

His standard “12-string Harp Guitar” choices were 6+6 stringing configuration on an 18” wide body in the mandolin’s five levels of trim, ranging from \$60 to \$125.

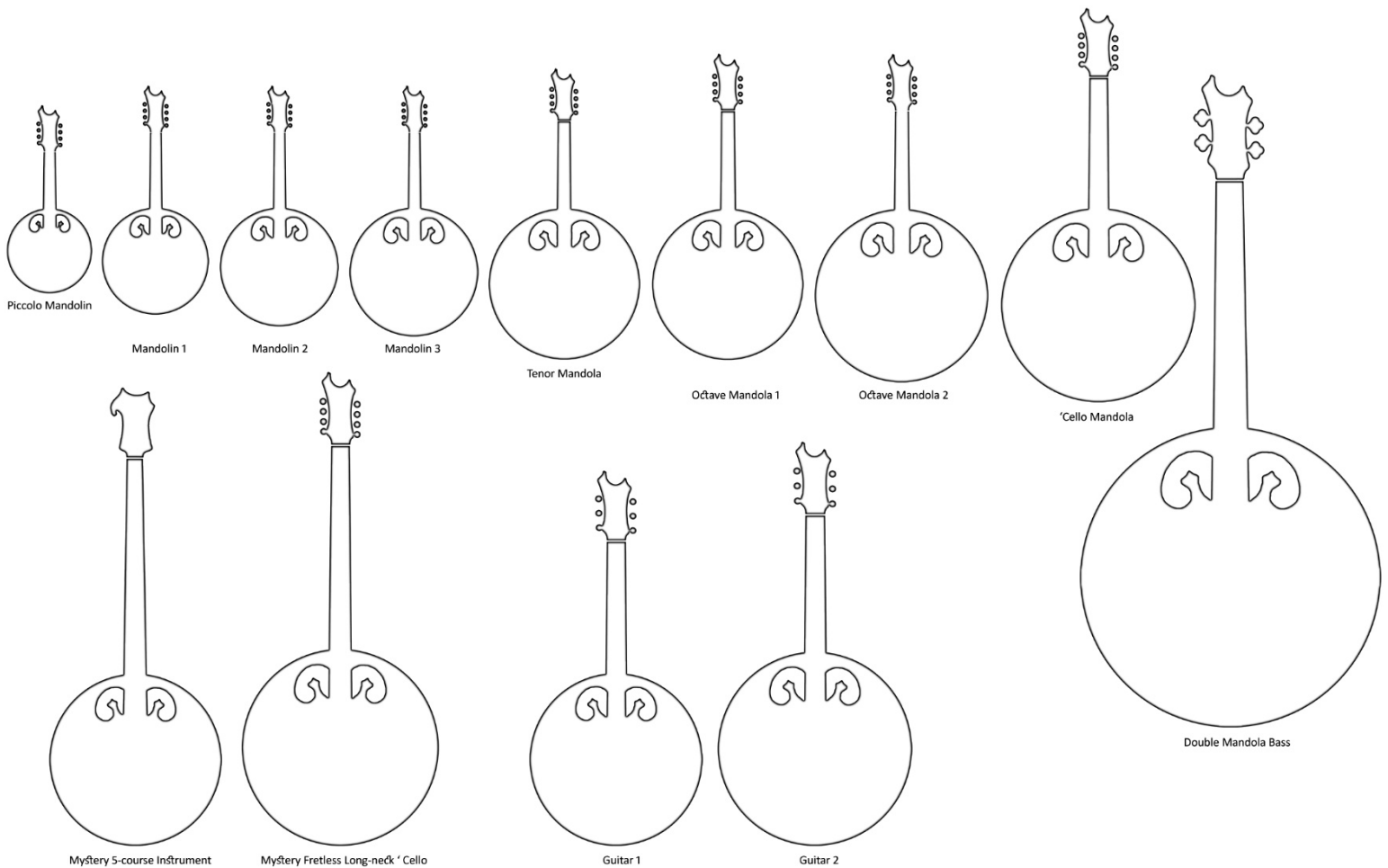
On all instruments, Coulter used “only the finest Black Diamond Strings.”

Left: Coulter knew harp guitars, but the term was obviously new to his typesetter!

What is hard to grasp today is that, while Coulter may not have *built* every single instrument he listed, he at least offered what was surely America's most complete and versatile orchestra of mandolin orchestra instruments ever known.⁴⁹

Using his provided dimensions and a few extant specimens, I created his full line below. Mind you, these are only the *round-bodied* instruments he offered.

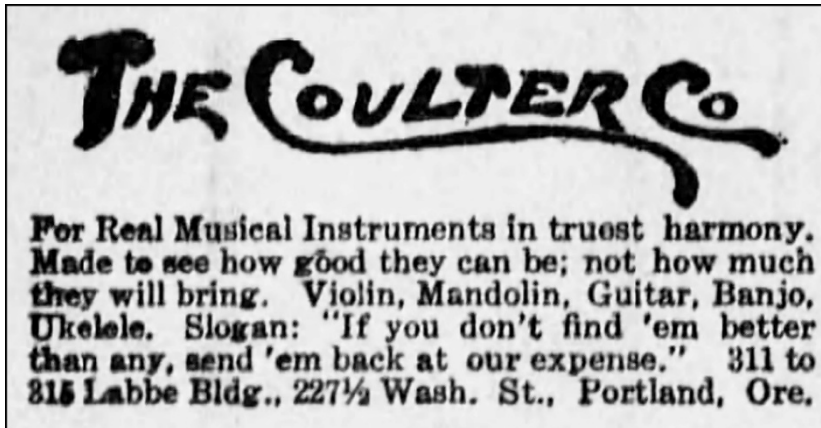
This is the complete set from Coulter's first circular, with two additional surviving custom instruments that match nothing on the list.



Size comparison of all hypothetical and/or known Coulter round-bodied instruments

⁴⁹ Specifically, the "standard" mandolin club or orchestra duplicated the bowed orchestra in plectral form: mandolin = violin, tenor mandola = viola, mandocello = violincello and mandobass = double bass. Extremely few companies ever attempted a piccolo mandolin, and most stuck to one *size* of mandolin. For some time, the BMG community was in a passionate war over which mandola to include – the *tenor* or *octave* (or both). With the octave mandola (technically an "octave below" mandolin) having no common counterpart in the string orchestra, the tenor soon won out. Of course, as Coulter's imagination was endless and his instruments were mostly custom orders, he could build anything...and did!

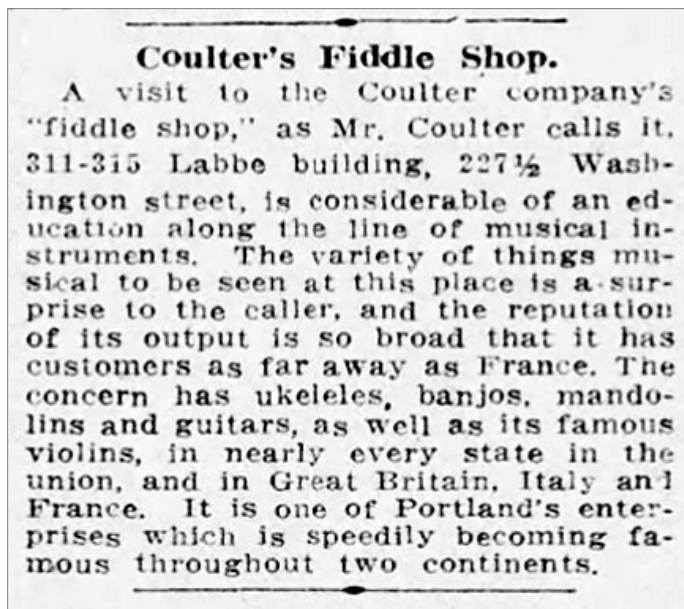
Here are a few additional clippings during the 'teens, before Coulter's first circulars were issued:



THE COULTER CO.

For Real Musical Instruments in truest harmony. Made to see how good they can be; not how much they will bring. Violin, Mandolin, Guitar, Banjo, Ukelele. Slogan: "If you don't find 'em better than any, send 'em back at our expense." 311 to 315 Labbe Bldg., 227½ Wash. St., Portland, Ore.

A second ad (curiously, absent his trademark) from *The Athens Press*, December 1, 1916.



Coulter's Fiddle Shop.

A visit to the Coulter company's "fiddle shop," as Mr. Coulter calls it, 311-315 Labbe building, 227½ Washington street, is considerable of an education along the line of musical instruments. The variety of things musical to be seen at this place is a surprise to the caller, and the reputation of its output is so broad that it has customers as far away as France. The concern has ukeleles, banjos, mandolins and guitars, as well as its famous violins, in nearly every state in the union, and in Great Britain, Italy and France. It is one of Portland's enterprises which is speedily becoming famous throughout two continents.

Above: In early 1917, a reporter visits Coulter's store in the Labbe building, which now takes up rooms 311-315. Note the 227½ address confirmation once more. Curious that he has added ukuleles and banjos to his line, but did not include them in the circular. *The Oregon Daily Journal*, January 27, 1917.

Right: The next year, Coulter appears to be going gangbusters on banjos. The reporter describes his new creation as "all-wood" with an additional removable resonator. Clearly, this is an instrument with a wooden rim, but I wonder if it might have also had a *wooden top* (like the "banjo-harps" and "lutes" of the era) in place of a skin head. *The Oregon Daily Journal*, May 7, 1918.

Nothing the Matter With Portland

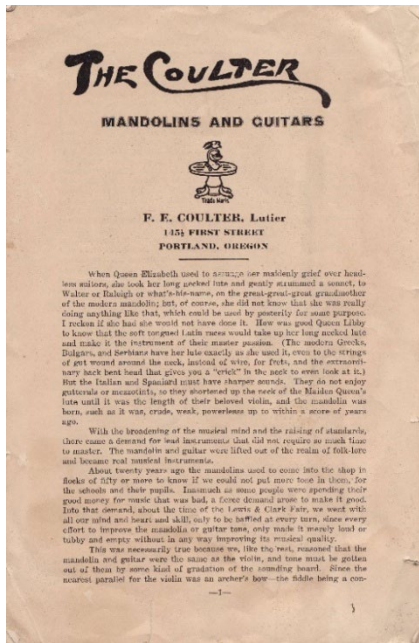
By H. S. Harcourt

An all-wood banjo, provided with a resonator, having the effect of clarifying and doubling the tone of the instrument, adding power and snap without the harsh, disagreeable "twang," has been developed by the F. E. Coulter company, Labbe building, First and Washington streets, manufacturers of stringed instruments. Mr. Coulter is the "chief magician" of this establishment, and it was his genius that originated and completed the banjo, pronounced by critical judges of such things the "best thing of its kind on earth." The instrument is made by hand of Oregon maple, all the work being done by Mr. Coulter himself. The resonator consists of a wooden back which rests against the body. It fits tightly on the banjo and can be removed and laid aside conveniently.

"This is a banjo era," Mr. Coulter says. "The banjo is the popular instrument. Perhaps one might say that a banjo craze is on, and now is the time to make the best of them. A majority of musicians—players of stringed instruments, I mean—have turned to the banjo, and, of course, manufacturers must do likewise. There are more calls for banjos, two to one, than for any other stringed instrument. They sell more readily, and I find that most buyers are willing to pay for the best. As for this factory, inferior instruments are not made. We established a reputation for our violins, which has created a demand for them not only throughout the United States but in Europe also. I have customers in France, England and Australia, and were it not for the war would enjoy a large trade in these countries. Our mandolins are equally popular. They are used by the best players. I have received strong letters from the highest authority on these instruments, declaring ours greatly excel. Like compliments are bestowed upon our new style banjo."

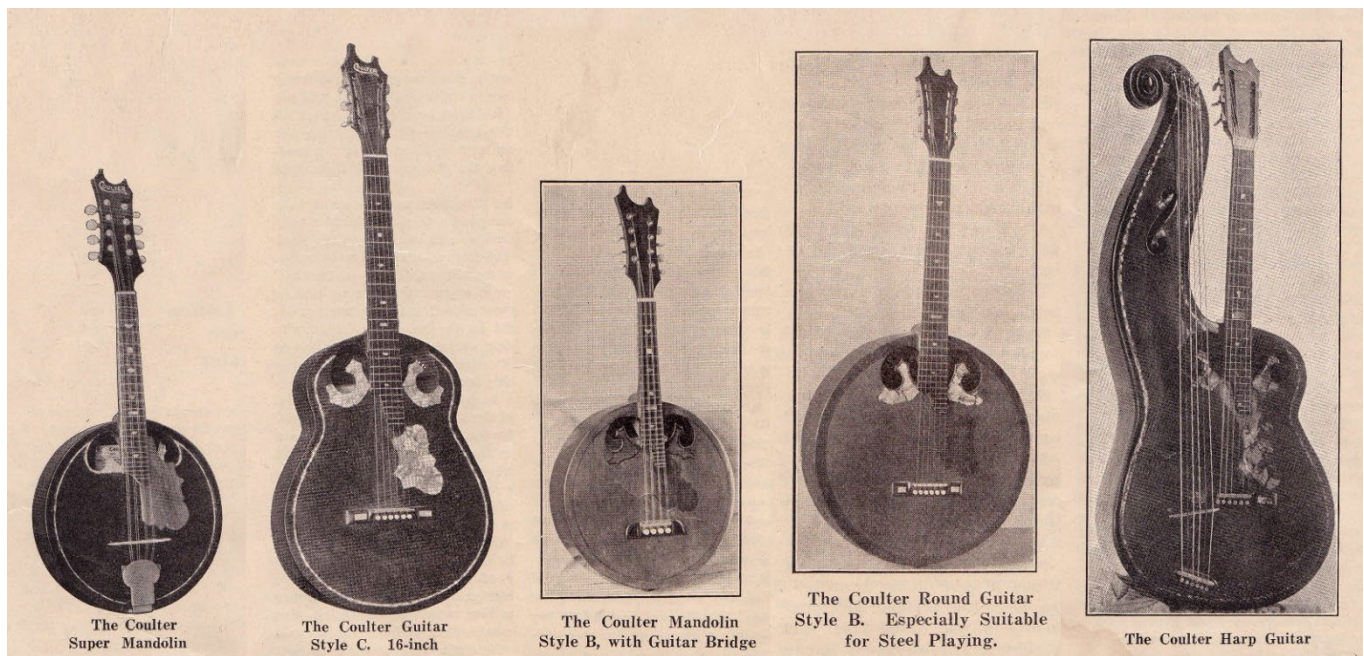
The quality of the Coulter instruments is so widely known that a large eastern concern has made Mr. Coulter a most flattering offer to give up his business here and take charge of its factory. There is at this time an embargo on the importation of musical instruments. Mr. Coulter says, and this is causing unusual activity, more particularly in the manufacturing of stringed instruments. This, he believes, is one of the reasons why the eastern factory is seeking his services. He says he never has and never will cater to the "cheap" class of trade.

On May 15 Mr. Coulter will close his place for a rather extended vacation and enjoy a well earned and much needed rest.



Let's move on now to Coulter's next (final?) circular produced about 1926.⁵⁰

There is no additional crucial information in this one, and prices are omitted. Again, there are no ukuleles or banjos and just two additional images (the line-up below). The same woods and construction methods are still in place, other than the sounding boards of two different woods had been retired. He introduced the name "Super Mandolins," though they appear to be the same. The standard guitar has only the 25" scale and is only "built to order." Within the Mandolin Suite, the octave mandola's optional larger 16" body is omitted, while he *adds* a smaller 16" circular body option to the mandocello's original 18" option. The piccolo mandolin's tuning error is corrected here from "a fifth above" (highly unlikely) to a "fourth above." While his harp guitar is still the 6+6 12-string version, he mentions the tension of "six to twelve contra bass strings," implying any option. The sole new additions are his new "Mute Mandolins" and a final lecture for us, "The Spirit of Things."



The Coulter Super Mandolin

The Coulter Guitar Style C. 16-inch

The Coulter Mandolin Style B, with Guitar Bridge

The Coulter Round Guitar Style B. Especially Suitable for Steel Playing.

The Coulter Harp Guitar

This catalog includes a new Super Mandolin and standard guitar. The three boxed images are those from the previous circular, with one correction (the mandolin is now a Style B, instead of A).

⁵⁰ In this document, Coulter made the same comment he made in the previous circular, but changed to "About 20 years ago the mandolins used to come into the shop" in place of "8 or 9 years ago." That *should* put this printing at about c.1930, but the circular's address of 145½ First Street only lasted into 1926 (Polk city directories; "Rooms 9-10" of that building); in 1927 he had again moved. Thus, my date crunching is wrong, or Coulter's dates were sloppy. Regarding the First St. address, the 1919 city directory listing is the one year missing, but a dated 1919 mandolin includes that address on a new label. This original circular is courtesy of Coulter's great-granddaughter, the late Jane Sanford Harrison.

Plucked String Specimens

At the time of this writing, I've inventoried at least thirty-six extant Coulter instruments, but there are likely many more out there. The count below includes all specimens that I have images of (while I know of other additional instruments).

Specimen Count	
Mandolins	13
Mandolas	1
Round Guitars	1
Standard Guitars	9
Harp Guitars	4
Ukes	1
Mandolin-Banjos	1
Custom instruments	3
Modified instruments	4

No one has yet decoded Coulter's strange "No." system. It doesn't appear to be sequential or address or style related. So far, the known list of inscriptions seems arbitrary.

Numbering Mystery		
Year	No.	Instrument
1924	59 AS	Mandolin
1924	B 544	Mandolin
1925	C 25	Mandola
1928	73	Guitar, standard
1929	79 GB	Guitar, standard
1932	26 AC	Ukulele
1935	1290	Guitar, large
1935	130B	Guitar, small

I needn't show every single instrument, but, like Chris Knutsen's instruments, they're interesting in that *no two are exactly alike!* For example, this first set of mandolins owned by Kerry Char; note how the Styles get fancier around the soundholes while the inlaid pickguard similar becomes more elaborate, finally ending in an elevated pickguard!

12" Mandolins The four mandolins below – dated from 1915 to 1924 – all have a 12" diameter body and a 14" playing scale.



11" & 10" Mandolins



Show above are one of the previous 12" mandolins alongside the two rarer smaller body sizes. A parallax effect within each of their owners' random photos makes proportionally sizing them fairly difficult. Indeed, I would expect all of them to use the same set of mandolin tuners and thus headstock size and shape, which I'm not seeing here (despite my best Photoshopping tricks).

Additionally, any of these instruments might have Coulter's 13-½" scales instead of his 14" scale *and*, while each has the 12th fret meeting right about at the body, there is a certain amount of offset.

The 11" instrument in the middle has a replaced tailpiece and the elevated separate pickguard screwed onto the top.

Mandolinetto

At right: *Mandolinetto* is today's common vernacular term for tiny guitar-shaped mandolins, which were quite common at the beginning of the 1900s. Nice to find Coulter creating his own delightful version! His 1916 instrument has his standard 14" mandolin scale.



Mandolin construction: Some of Coulter's work is quite complex, imaginative and detailed. Are the many joints original or repairs? The laminated colored wood necks and head volutes are quite striking, and this one has these two additional wooden side fret markers!



Custom Upgrade

This one is definitely a Coulter mandolin – but what is going on with that head?! We can see the crude scarf joint and that the head is missing the Coulter logos (unless they are patched and painted over).



The carved scroll is wonderful and very “Coulter-esque,” yet seems too fine for his work?

Still, my vote is that he did this himself (to replace a broken head or neck), and subsequently he or the customer came up with this unique idea.

Another clue is that Coulter did a very similar scrolled headstock on a bowlback mandolin “upgrade” (seen below under Modified Instruments).

Mandolas

Surprisingly, only a single Coulter tenor mandola has so far been found. It has the 14" body with a 16" scale, but with only a 2-½" deep body. Handwritten on his original Guarantee Tag, Coulter listed its materials and string replacement suggestions. It originally had a screwed-on celluloid pickguard, now disintegrated. Its unique tailpiece is likely a later addition.



Round Bodied Guitar/Harp Guitar Conversion

This seems to be the sole surviving round-bodied guitar, despite Coulter's stated preference for the design.

It has the 18" body and a 25" scale (the two full images creating very different "parallax" perspectives).

An added bonus is that Coulter himself later modified this into a *harp guitar*! Though its "theorbo-type" headstock extension piece is missing, we can see where it was mounted to the front (there are no marks in back), while the added sub-bass bridge shows accommodation for four strings.





Standard Guitars

Here, things again are a bit tricky, due to perspective and parallax effect of each image taken by many different instrument owners. However, with some provided measurements, I've been able to determine that there appear to be three basic body sizes.

Shown below, let's call them small, standard, and extra-large. The scales are all 25" or close (though some may be his shorter 24"), while the lower bout widths are 14.5" (small), 15.25"–15.5" (standard), and 17.25"–17.5" (XL).



The two instruments above at far left and right were some of Coulter's latest, built in 1935. The left instrument is so far his only small bodied guitar, though with a full 25" scale length. Its body dimensions are: UB: 10- $\frac{3}{8}$ ", Waist: 9- $\frac{1}{2}$ ", LB: 14- $\frac{1}{2}$ ", Depth: 3- $\frac{3}{4}$ ". The far right giant bodied guitar (also with a 25" scale) is UB: 12", Waist: 11", LB: 17- $\frac{3}{4}$ ", Depth: 3- $\frac{3}{4}$ ".

The small-bodied guitar with “Mother-of-toilet-seat” pickguard and original fitted case – what’s not to love?!



Some assorted standard size guitars, with details:







A Coulter guitar in its natural environment.

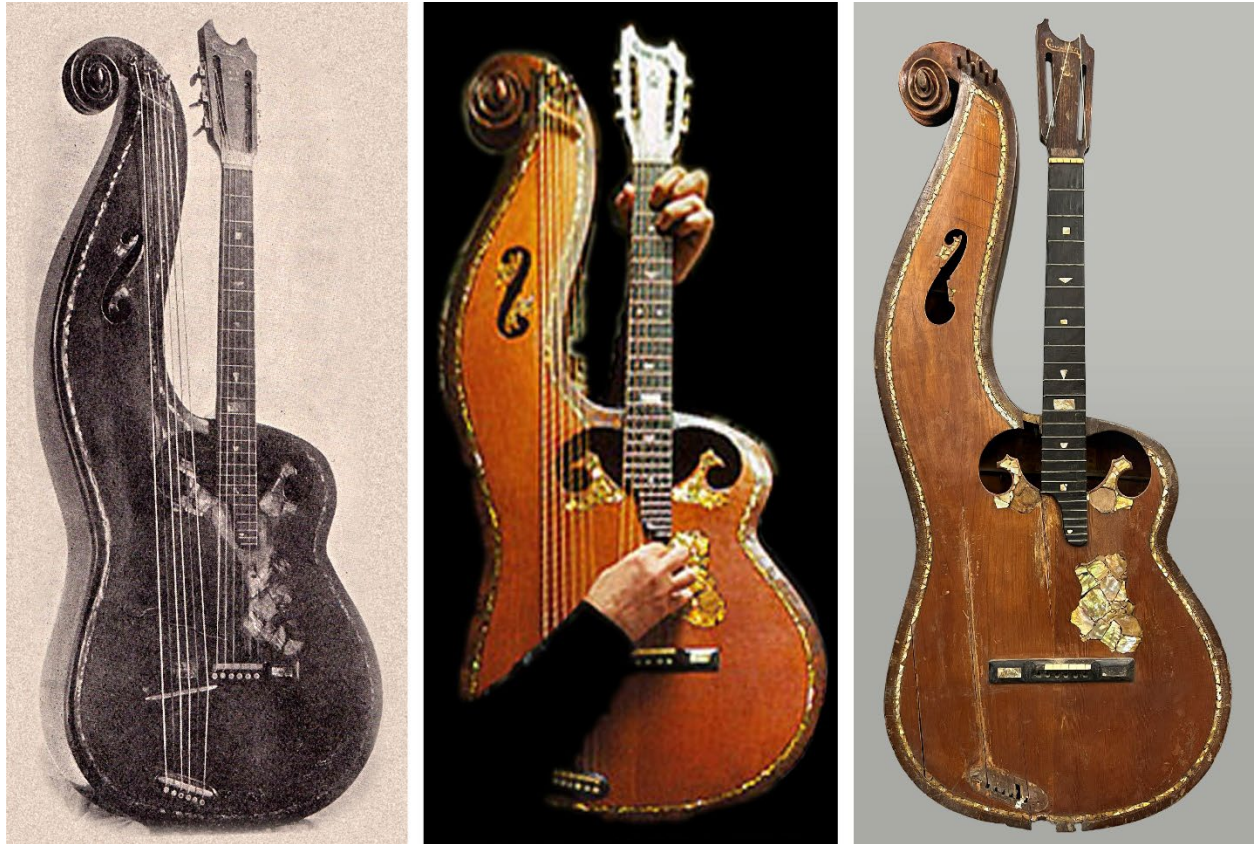
Extra-large guitars, with details:





Harp Guitars

I think we can be almost certain that Coulter saw some of his Pacific Northwest neighbor Chris Knutsen's instruments, and was also inspired by them. Not just the hollow arm, but specifically in neck stringing configuration. Six examples are known – four extant and two from historical images.⁵¹ Of these, half are standard 6 + 6 configuration first row, below).



6-string neck, 6 basses

Amazingly, *two* of the others have *nine* strings on the neck (the top three courses being doubled) and one has a *twelve-string* neck, with an additional seventh sub-bass (all next page).

As I wrote in my article on America's 12-string guitars, many harp guitar builders chose 12-string necks to go along with their large, loud harp guitars (including Knutsen, several times). Additionally, Knutsen built some harp guitars with the third (G) string doubled, and one instrument (at right) with the top three strings doubled. That instrument having been built about 1913, we can assume Coulter later copied the idea (or a customer requested it).



⁵¹ Along with a seventh, the altered round-body guitar seen earlier.



9-string neck, 6 basses



12-string neck, 7 basses



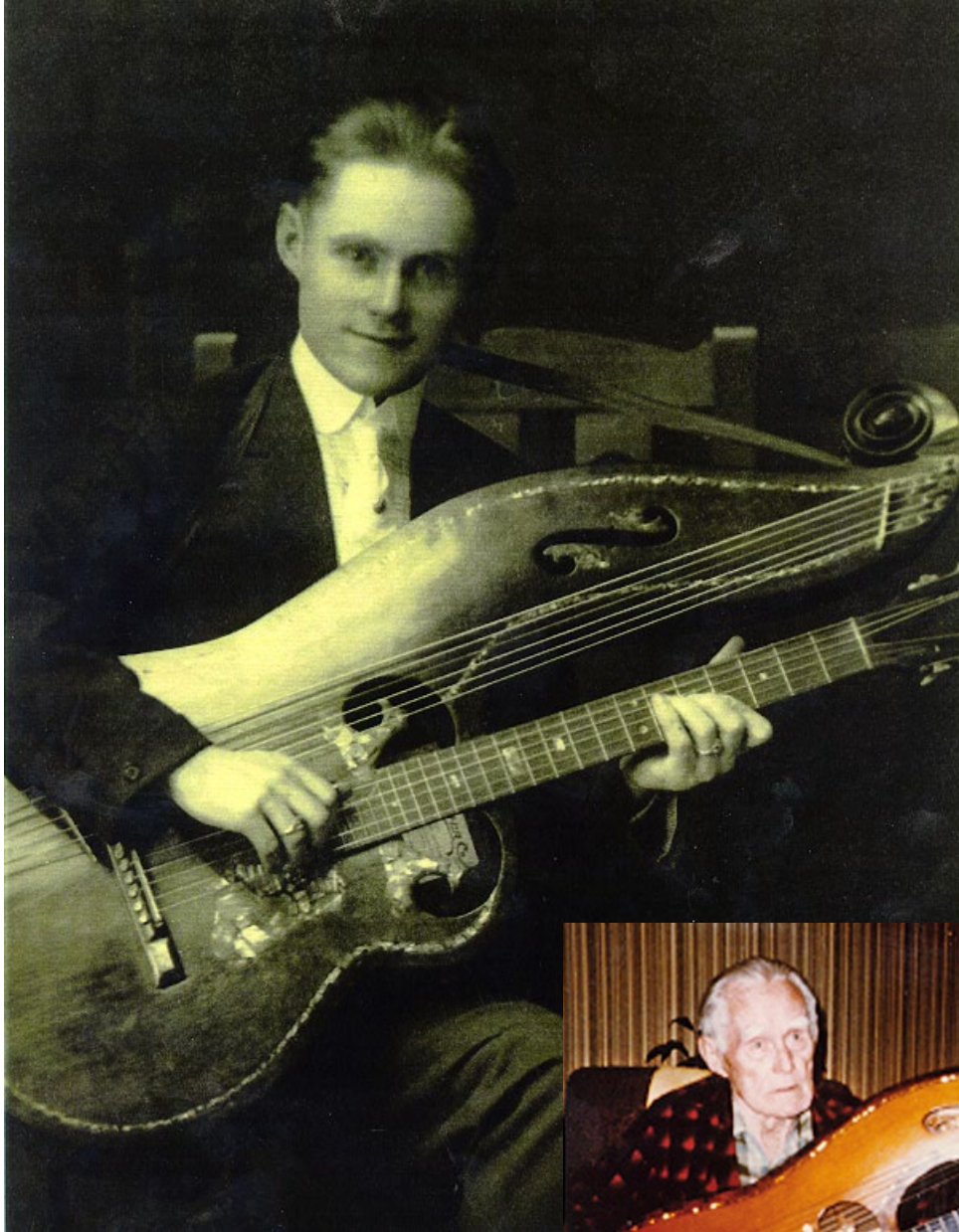
The instrument in the center had some strange measured markings on the top that I was never able to deduce the purpose of:



Next page: More images of the very cool 12-string neck harp guitar:



In 2000, the first Coulter harp guitar turned up – in photos sent to harp guitarist John Doan by owner Gordon Anderson. The instrument had been custom-ordered from Coulter by Gordon's grandfather, Leroy – seen at left at around age 20 with his brand-new harp guitar and below late in life with the well-preserved instrument.





Above: This is the full image that includes the first 9-on-the-neck instrument, accomplished with additional friction tuners in the middle of the headstock like the 12-string-necked example's four.

The photograph's owner, Cynthia Kirkley, wrote:⁵² "My great grandfather (Leigh Northrup) played one. Leigh Northrup and John Montgomery built Bethel Mission Church in Tillamook County, Oregon (Woods or Cloverdale). The photo shows him, my great grandmother, and the Montgomerys."

Interestingly, Coulter's first harp guitar – in fact, one of his very first instruments, built in 1913 – has the unusual 9-string neck. His harp guitars range from 17" to 17.75" wide, with scale lengths of 24.75" to 25". They are large and fragile things, with two of the extant examples found with the bass bridge ripped out of the top. John Riley painstakingly repaired his, and was glad he did after discovering its impressive sound.

The other was eventually abandoned by its eBay purchaser and found its way into Kerry Char's ever-growing Coulter collection (Kerry conveniently lives in Coulter's Portland, Oregon). Asked about it, Kerry, who restores rare instruments for a living, said he prefers to leave his Coulter finds "as is" – the wear and tear and often-shoddy workmanship is part of their charm!

⁵² Her image and comments were kindly forwarded by Dave Powell of Tonedevil Guitars.

“Mystery” Instruments

Ah, now we get to my favorites. Coulter is the only luthier who actually bragged about his weirdness – he even put “Odd Instruments to Order” on his labels!

Our first oddity is a giant long-necked... *something*.

It has a 16" diameter body and a very long scale of ~29.25" along with a more distinctive headstock shape. Even stranger, at some point Coulter himself seems to have re-configured it from one “odd instrument” to another!



Note the bridge. It was built for *five* courses, from low to high, two single and three double courses. Later, it was changed to eight strings, with the nut seeming to show even spacing, rather than double courses(?!). Strangely, the saddle was left as it was.

Owner Joshua Levin-Epstein described it thus: "The planetary tuners are not original, but I am guessing they were installed by Coulter. The peghead veneer was filled and spacers added to the back of the peghead to take up the extra depth of the tuners. The wood and finish of the spacers match the rest of the instrument. Dated 1925 and looks like it was a custom order as there is someone's name (Chas. Frank?) on the peghead along with Coulter's."

So, what *was* it, and what did it *become*? Odd on top of odd!

Even stranger are the “fretless long-neck ‘cellos.” That’s my term, but honestly, I have no idea what Coulter was intending. And he was *deliberate*, as *two* are known!

These monsters have bodies of 18.25” diameter and playing scales of 29-3/8” – *and* they have inlaid *flush* fret markers, of very specific colors. Decades after their first discovery,⁵³ we are all still at a complete loss!

Like the previous instrument, there is something strange about the stringing: the saddle plainly shows the four double course slots, but the nut includes additional slots. Was this for a different stringing arrangement?



⁵³ John Doan unearthed the first one; now it and a duplicate are in Kerry Char’s collection.

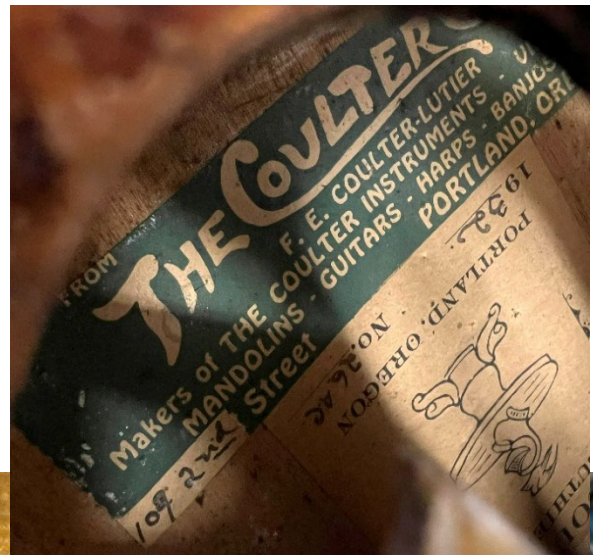
Ukuleles



The single Coulter ukulele may be one of his cutest attempts. Here, the smaller size and simplicity of the uke seem to fit Coulter's "folk art" aesthetic best.

Dated, 1932, Coulter has taped over and hand-written a newer address on his green label.

Coulter did a good job on his custom cases. Plush-lined and not-quite-form-fitting, they're an additional treat for the collector!



Banjos

While banjos were noted to have been a large part of Coulter's production, few are known. His late great-granddaughter owned one, but no image was ever procured. Then there was the foot-noted "all-wood" banjo with an additional "removable resonator" I mentioned above.

I eventually located this single mandolin-banjo identified as a Coulter, though I can see no markings on it. The neck and head are certainly his, but I've yet to discover where he sourced his metal rims and brackets.



A Banjo With a Neck Nine and One-half Feet

Special Instrument This Size Is Made for Portland Small Goods Department of Sherman, Clay & Co.

PORTLAND, ORE., December 26.—Three artists of the banjo are inspecting an enlarged model of the famous Montana banjo, which was made to order, by F. E. Coulter, a luthier of Portland, maker of special odd-sized instruments. The instrument was built for the small goods



The Jumbo Banjo

The Music Trade Review

department of Sherman, Clay & Co. for demonstration purposes, and it is to be used in a series of presentations before schools, clubs and musical centers by "Inky" Henneberg, staff banjo artist of KOIN, and Joe Sherman, staff banjo artist of KGW.

These two young men are seen in the picture, one each side of Howard Stanchfield, manager of the small goods department of Sherman, Clay & Co., who is explaining just how it can be done. Some idea of the size of the instrument can be realized by comparing it with the young men, who by the way are real "he-men." The head of the instrument measures twenty-eight inches and the neck is nine and a half feet long.

On account of its unusual length special wound strings were found necessary, and these were spun to order in the piano shops of the San Francisco headquarters of Sherman, Clay & Co. The instrument is true to scale, being identical in every way to the Montana. It has the original fret markings and head scroll, with the resonator trimmed with metal around the edge as found on the Montana and, of course, is all white. The materials used were holly and birdseye maple. It was found advisable to enamel the shell of the drum and reinforce it on the inside. This was found necessary in order that it might stand the pressure required to bring the instrument up to the required pitch. The instrument itself is tuned one octave below the voice of the plectrum banjo.

Messrs. Sherman and Henneberg expect to do considerable practicing before they master the instrument and have decided that it will take both of them to play it—in other words, one will do the fingering while the other strums.

Modified Instruments

If you thought Coulter's *original instruments* are wild, let's examine some of his "Frankensteined" creations! Musicians had been bringing Coulter instruments for repair or evaluation for several years,⁵⁴ and to hear him tell it, it's like Coulter never heard an instrument he actually *liked*. Violins, mandolins and guitars all sounded terrible to him.⁵⁵ He considered his second specialty to be "making bad instruments good." And so, he did. Re-topping was his most common first step, but he often had to then add his own gaudy take. Did his customers truly think these were improvements?

At left is a parlor guitar owned by Kerry Char that had its top replaced by Coulter, which of course included his "corrugated-shaped" soundholes.



As Coulter would have certainly used his traditional headstock shape, we can assume he retained the instrument's original neck and head. Did he replace the fretboard? That seems likely, as perfect fret placement with his special fixture was his specialty.

What about those fret markers? The "throw some random inlay at every fret position" seems like overkill, even for Coulter; perhaps the customer requested it?

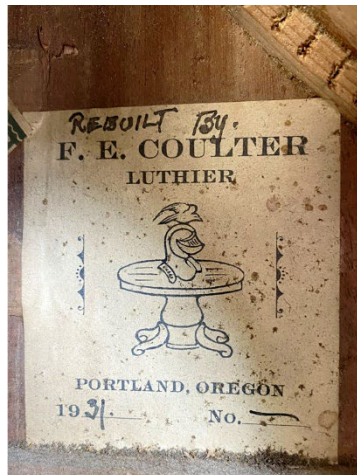
Kerry Char's best Coulter story was when someone brought in a Fairbanks-Vega No.7 Whyte Laydie banjo like the beautiful original example at right that had been "customized" by Coulter. The owner was hoping Kerry could reverse Coulter's "improvements," which included removing the 5th string tuner and crudely filling in that side of the neck, while installing a *new* banjo tuner in the middle of the headstock, *right through that center inlay!* If this isn't proof that Coulter had zero artistic aesthetic sense, I don't know what is! (P.S. Kerry refused the job.)



⁵⁴ A statement in his first circular referred specifically to intonation had the count at "more than 500 mandolins, guitars, zithers and banjos have been brought in to be corrected in this regard, from the finest to the cheapest grades of all makers..."

⁵⁵ This is my only conclusion after reading all of his statements in the interview and circulars. Peruse the Appendices and I'm sure you'll agree!

In 1931, Coulter rebuilt this acoustic lap steel guitar, but actually disclosed the fact, writing "Rebuilt by" on his applied label.⁵⁶

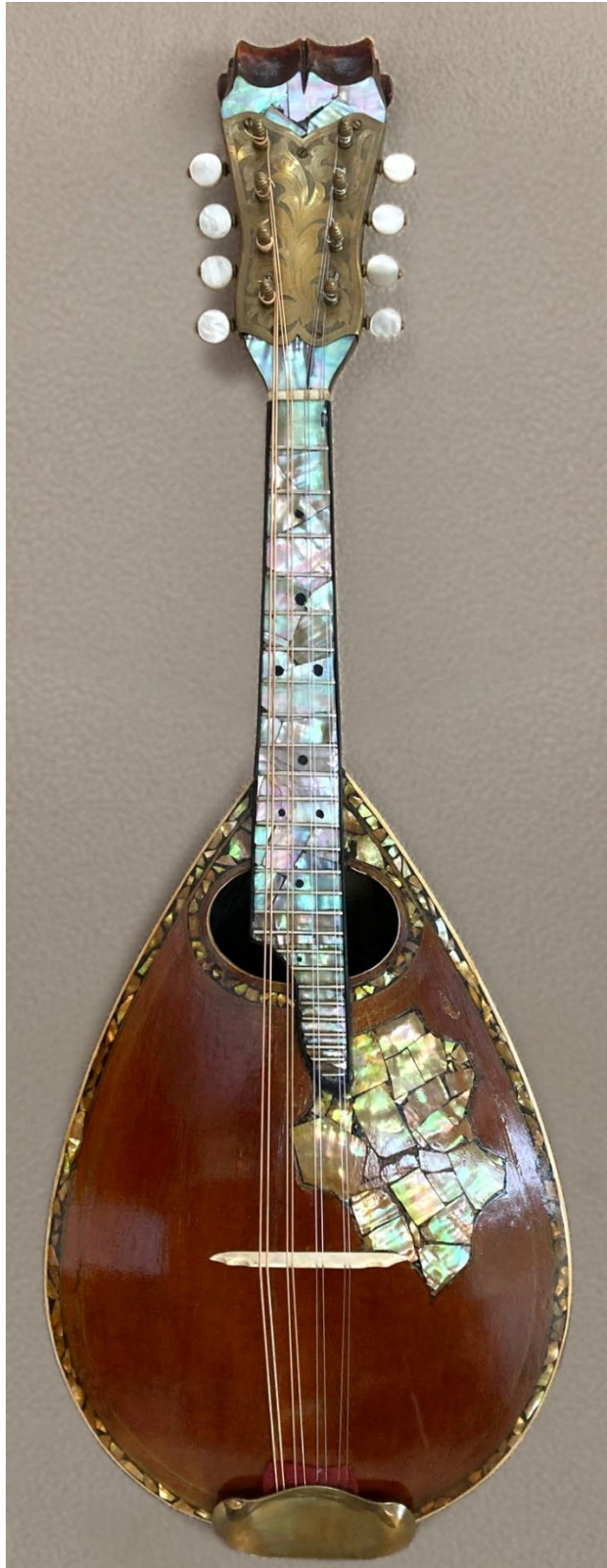


He also installed a new bridge with a high saddle made of shell. Note how he moved the original nut and fretboard down quite a bit in order to place the bridge extremely low – for reasons unknown. And I'm not sure if the inlaid position markers still line up with proper intonation for slide playing!



⁵⁶ He also included his green label from a previous address. He had moved five years prior, and must have kept a stash of printed labels. Normally, he taped and wrote over with his next address.

My favorite Coulter rebuild is this fascinating bowlback mandolin (next 3 pages). In fact, the *bowl* – a fancy model with over 30 ribs – may be the only original thing *left* (in addition to the engraved tuner plate and pearl buttons). Otherwise, where does the original neck, body joint and binding end, and Coulter begin?! The first thing to note is that carved top of the headstock, similar to the one seen earlier.



This time, Coulter did not write anything about “improving” this Neapolitan mandolin on his label. We do know that this may be some of his very first work, as his original mandolins probably didn’t start until after 1911. He must have worked on this instrument before leaving for his lecture sabbatical in early 1909.





Coulter Construction, Quality, Aesthetics and Sound

I once owned the harp guitar #5 shown above (with 9 neck strings). I absolutely adored it. I had John Riley (owner of #6) craft a duplicate of his sub-bass bone bridge, so that I was able to string the thing up to play and hear it. My recollection was that it was a perfectly adequate and fun instrument in every way. Then it was time to place it within my collection of other American harp guitars and vintage plucked string instruments. These range from very fine and fancy to somewhat plain and a bit wacky (Knusten, anyone?). *Yet, I could not find one nook or cranny where the Coulter did not stick out like a complete eyesore.* I'm being completely serious. As much as this rare prize belonged in the Miner Museum of Vintage, Exotic & Just Plain Unusual Musical Instruments, *it was simply too ungainly and unattractive, even for me.* So, let's start with:

Aesthetics: Collectors (and there are really only a few) either love them, appreciate their unique quirkiness and rarity, or (like me) refuse to have them on the premises. In all honesty, I've never heard anyone say anything about "attractiveness," but have heard a couple references to "folk art." I'd put them somewhere in the middle, as they are indeed a "professional line of instruments," even if their sole luthier was sloppy with his tools and had terrible eye for art. While I find his "corrugated organ pipe openings" sound holes fairly off-putting, others don't seem to mind them. I have various instruments adorned with all manner of celluloid, pyralin and "mother-of-toilet-seat" just like Coulter utilizes. He just happens to use scraps of material that look as if his young children had cut them out with scissors. He doesn't seem to have ever *considered* something as tedious and unnecessary as simple "refinement." His round bodies are rather fun in their simplicity and his other plantillas are fairly decent, and I do love his distinctive headstock shape, which is really a wide variety of variations on that theme (like Knutsen, he seems to have done this by hand, with few or only basic templates).

Construction & Quality: This is probably debatable, depending on which collector you talk to! As I said earlier, the reported research and logic behind Coulter's choices are extremely compelling. But did those ideas actually work? Were his original wood choices better than the industry standard choices, or were they just a cheaper local alternative that he "talked up"? We find some of his 100-year-old instruments in quite decent shape. Others are falling apart in various ways. His finishes – meant to allow the wood to sing – are often cracking throughout, and the sidewalls on his round instruments are sometimes split at each grain line. Interestingly, he claimed that with this technique, his guitar with "crossed veneer for strength and resonance...took the first prize at the New York Exposition, and I sold then to all the big factories."

Regardless of the success of his ideas, we are still left with Coulter's "fit and finish." He was either extremely impatient, like Chris Knutsen, or just a poor woodworker. His hand-carved elements are cool, but quite inelegant, while the scraps of shell and celluloid he chose for his inlays and pickguards look just like that – scraps. Review the photos above again and see if you agree.

Two-piece tops: As you'll recall, in his c.1918-c.1919 circular, Coulter mentioned using "hard fibred, stiff, quick-acting yellow fir on the treble side" and "soft-fibred, slow-acting larch or spruce on the bass side." On actual instruments (only two of which are datable to between 1915 and 1924), he may have actually used spruce and cedar, and switched sides half the time! If these identifications by Kerry Char on his four instruments below are accurate, then why was Coulter changing his mind?! In truth, Kerry is only making his best guess, saying "It is hard to tell what exact woods he used because he put such a heavy orange shellac finish on them. My best guess is the darker colored wood is cedar and the lighter is spruce or fir. To tell you the truth, I am not sure if he was all that well versed in wood species. I don't know if he had any real background in lutherie or even woodworking before he decided to build instruments."



Sound: Again, I think one would have to ask each owner. John Riley describes his harp guitar with one word: "Loud!" Mandolin owners have ranged anywhere from very mediocre to "resonates like crazy" (and that last quote was for the small 10" body mandolin!).

Epilogue

Frank Evans Coulter appears to have been acknowledged – accepted? – as a witty, highly opinionated, curmudgeonly old man who loved to share his thoughts with anyone who might stick around to listen.

Coulter’s latest known dated instrument is 1935, with another having a “repaired” date of 1939.



In fact, Coulter would continue building until just a week before his death at age 78.

If Coulter is remembered today, it’s likely only for his fascinating, highly personal original musical instruments – and that only by a select few who have come across them.

Personally, after expanding my original short article into this monograph, it’s made me hope for someone to create a permanent exhibit – surely in Portland! – to document and share this wonderful and distinctly American lutherie story.

Appendices

- Coulter’s Violins circular, c.1918 – c.1919
- Mandolins and Guitars circular, c.1918 – c.1919
- Mandolins and Guitars circular, c.1926
- 1937 *Everybody’s Business* article: “People: Frank E. Coulter”
- Oregon Folklore Study: Interview with Frank Evans Coulter March 24, 1939
- Portland Obituaries

THE COULTER Co

COULTER'S VIOLINS



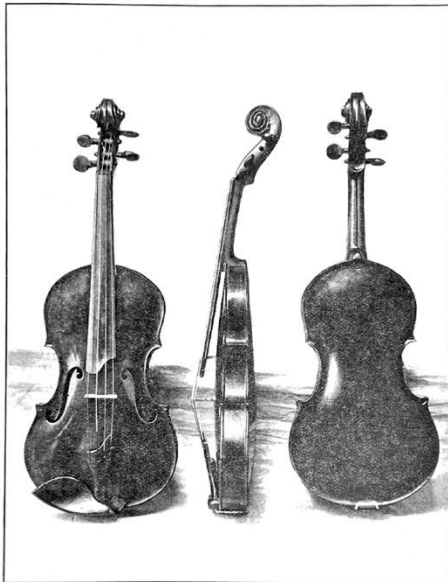
F. E. COULTER, Luteier and Manager
227½ WASHINGTON STREET
PORTLAND, OREGON

Charles Darwin, philosophizing of natural things, says, "That all things arise because of an outward urge;" an environment that shapes their ends, as it were. Emerson, in a thousand different ways, takes issue with the author of the theory of Evolution, and puts it that all things arise from an inward urge, striving to harmonize the individual in correspondences with the spiritual uplift of all other things around it. If one were looking for proof of Emerson's vision, the history and character of the violin would furnish it completely.

Comes now the dark ages of civilization. Humanity is choked, gagged, bound in the chains of festering sensuality, a legacy from the landlordism and aristocracy of the old Roman world, which, as it ever does, destroyed the harmony of the sexes, so that Paul, the apostle, in his letter to the Roman (Italian) church, admonishes that their women "keep silent." Evidently he reasons that since women were so degraded by the false economic system of the times as to be a source of moral contamination, they should not take part in outward forms of spiritual worship. This fact, strange as it may seem, produced the violin, in response to an inward spiritual urge for a soprano voice with which to worship God in song. The first violin-makers were either monks or religious zealots, striving in new countries where men found God in forest or mountain or some intellectual fad, that the fiddle was relegated to be a creature of the devil. In all times since, the violin-maker has had his part in the revolutions and upheavals that mark the upward path of man.

This is the real reason why men cling with such tenacity to the old violin and the legends surrounding it, for always and ever always the intellectual bigot, who follows in the footsteps of the spiritual and loving prophets, tries to fix, to crystallize and make permanent the forms of his master's vision rather than its spirit. So we see the so-called professional musical world, which in the very nature of things is intellectual and sensual in its expression, fighting tooth and nail for the old established forms and voice, even going so far as to maintain that the old instruments themselves—the identical,

Since more and deeper tones must be produced, the earth must be combed for better material than the conventional spruce and maple which were the only woods the old Italian and German masters had. They could not have found an iller adapted wood than maple, due to its lack of fibre in the make-up of the wood. Besides, these woods are subject to attack by insects and very susceptible to dry rot. The very best materials yet found



The Coulter Concert Violin

are mahogany, the light and very stiff varieties, combined with California redwood, the everlasting cedar. Neither of these are affected by weather, time or insect-attacks, while they are both of a low specific gravity, a very essential feature, indeed. The Yaki or Nada of the Philippines is, perhaps, the equal of the mahogany in every way. The old Italians' very best instruments were made of sycamore and fir, both superior to any other white the tendency to dead spots in the fingering.

individual instruments—are the only ones that can possibly fill the need of the artist. "An Old Master or nothing," is the fashionable motto. It is true Antonio Stradivarius, heralded as the king of makers, made altogether about 2000 instruments, some 200 years ago, but my! They have bred; for beyond a doubt you could find ten thousand of them, all genuine (?), today, if you combed the musical world for them. Joseph Guenarius, the greatest artist and genius of them all, made 25 instruments all told, but, parbleux, you can go out in any city of half a million people and find a hundred, all genuine! (?) This condition is a response to the outward urge for shekles and form, and, like all intellectual things, culminates in absurdities. It sounds like a college of bishops quarreling over how much water constitutes legal and effective baptism. Yet always the great diapason of men's souls goes on making new the chords of eternal fitness, so that today the great artists play, not the old violins; (They only own the old ones) they play the good ones that fit the modern needs and satisfy the inward urge of the modern man. It may be old and made over, (There are no good old violins save those that have been made over and so rendered fit.) it may be new and perfectly made, to fill the meed of modern demands. It must be fit.

The old Stradivarius was fit in its day, a piercing, shrill voice, fit to be the female and consort of the trump in a world dedicated to battle and blood, sensuality and lust. The Stainer, harsh and falsetto in voice, was fit in its day, to lead men on to acts of violence and bigotry. The Guenarius was always fit in the hands of great spiritually-minded men, to express love and hope with its deep, smooth and mellow voice, and was never sought for save by such men in whom love was more than emotion, music more than sense.

Twenty-five years ago the standard of pitch was a high concert, piercing and sharp. The favorite singer was a clear soprano, feminine and dainty. Madame Patti was the last high priestess of that order. Today the standard is low international, or even French Pitch, still lower—a deep, mezzo or contralto, powerful, vigorous, majestic, fit to fully express a new and greater womanhood, and Madam Schuman-Heinke swings the censor before the altars of its worship.

In harmony with this inner urge for a greater, deeper and more fitting expression of modern needs comes

THE COULTER VIOLIN,

the result of twenty years of thought, experiment, study and work, in constant reminder of that glorified vision, "Forgetting the things of yesterday, to press on toward the mark of a higher glory for today." After all these years it is not too much to say that there are practically no old, or new violins modeled after the old, that are perfect. One string is bad. A wolf is here, an overtone there. The tone too confined. ("Boxed" is the language of the trade.) Finally, after years of failure and discouragement, like Copernicus when his mathematical formula showed that the sun stood still and the earth moved, it became evident that the trouble was not with the violin but was the work the violin was called upon to do. What was needed was an instrument to do the work of today, not yesterday. Pursuing the problem in this spirit, the model had to be altered by widening the middle bout so as to eliminate the weakness in the G string. A more pronounced trend to the idea of the archer's bow in the graduations followed, in order to give all four strings more power and the same character of tone. It is a common fault that most violins have A and E strings of one type of tone, while the D and G strings are altogether different. The flat square tail piece must be fitted in a circular form to give each string its natural harmonic behind the bridge, so eliminating the tendency to dead spots in the fingering.

wood in fibre and sonority. We try to keep on hand for those who are sticklers for particular woods, a violin of maple and spruce; sycamore and fir; Oregon myrtle and fir; mahogany and redwood, and yaki and redwood. It must always be borne in mind, however, that a good violin can be made of any wood, only some woods are better than others, and the best is none too good.

The least possible amount of varnish is used because the varnish is a destroyer of tone, never a producer. It is in the nature of a necessary evil, to protect the sounding surfaces from moisture and to add to the appearance of the instrument.

Finally, to complete and render harmonious the whole, a longer and more symmetrical scroll of a special pattern is added, making the pegs easy of access and giving character to the individuality of the instrument.

The Standard Size

The violins are made in two sizes. The standard size for those who must needs have the exact size of the Stradivarius. These are made in maple and spruce or fir only, unless specially ordered, and with standard scroll.

DIMENSIONS—Length over all 23½ inches; length of body 14 inches; width of lower bout 8½ inches; middle bout 4½ inches; upper bout 6½ inches; depth of rim front end 1½ inches; at lower end 1½ inches. Full ebony trimmed. Fitted with the Coulter easy chin rest, burnished copper perfect G string, aluminum wound D string, gut A and E strings. Complete F. O. B. \$150.00.

The Concert Size

The concert size, masculine, bold, powerful, brilliant. The real Coulter violin.

DIMENSIONS—Length over all 24½ inches; length of body 14½ inches; width of lower bout 8½ inches; width of middle bout 4½ inches; width of upper bout 6½ inches; depth of rim at upper end 1½ inches; at lower end 1½ inches. Full ebony trimmed, fitted with the Coulter easy chin rest and harmonic tail piece. Burnished copper G string, aluminum wound D string, gut A and E strings. Complete F. O. B. \$200.00.



HARMONIC TAIL PIECE FOR VIOLIN

All Concert size Coulter violins are fitted with the Harmonic tail piece, correcting the constant harmonic behind the bridge, thus freeing the strings from stiffness and rendering the harmonics anyplace on the fingerboard more perfect. What taking the weights off of an athlete is to the runner, such is this tail piece to the violin.

Write for Special Discount to Teachers and Dealers.

THE COULTER Co.

MANDOLINS AND GUITARS



F. E. COULTER, Luteier and Manager

2271 WASHINGTON STREET
PORTLAND, OREGON

When Queen Elizabeth used to assuage her maiden grief over headless suitors, she took her long necked lute and gently strummed a sonnet, to Walter or Raleigh or what's-his-name, on the great-great-great-grandmother of the modern mandolin; but, of course, she did not know that she was really doing anything like that, which could be used by posterity for some purpose. I reckon if she had she would not have done it. How was good Queen Libby to know that the soft tongued Latin races would take up her long necked lute and make it the instrument of their master passion. (The modern Greeks, Bulgars and Serbians have her lute exactly as she used it, even to the strings of gut wound around the neck, instead of wire, for frets, and the extraordinary bent head that gives you a "crick" in the neck to even look at it.) But the Italian and Spaniard must have sharper sounds. They do not enjoy gutters or mezzotints, so they shortened up the neck of the Maiden Queen's lute until it was the length of their beloved violin, and the mandolin was born, such as it was, crude, weak, powerless up to within a score of years ago.

With the broadening of the musical mind and the raising of standards, there came a demand for lead instruments that did not require so much time to master. The mandolin and guitar were lifted out of the realm of folk-lore and became real musical instruments.

What wonder that a flood of them were loosed upon the western market, or that schools sprang up like mushrooms in a night to take advantage of this opportunity for gentle graft.

About eight or nine years ago the mandolina used to come into the shop in flocks of fifty or more to know if we could not put more tone in them, for the schools and their pupils. Inasmuch as some people were spending their good money for music that was bad, a fierce demand arose to make it good. Into that demand, about the time of the Lewis & Clark Fair, one Mr. F. E. Coulter went with all his mind and heart and skill, only to be baffled at every turn, since every effort to improve the mandolin or guitar tone, only made it merely loud or tubby and empty without in any way improving its musical quality.

This was necessarily true because he, like all the rest, reasoned that the mandolin and guitar were the same as the violin, and tone must be gotten out

of them by some kind of gradation of the sounding board. Since the nearest parallel for the violin was an archer's bow, the fiddle being a contrivance to shoot air, so it must be with the mandolin and guitar. (Several large manufacturers in the East are today working upon this basis. Their instruments are from a quarter to three-eighths of an inch thick in the middle of the sound boards. The resulting tone is slow, ponderous and stiff, to remedy which they increase the weight of the strings and raised the height of the bridge until the whole instrument is almost unplayable. It is as if you tried to put a piano into a mandolin box or a steam calliope into an accordion.) Finally, after many failures, he came to see clearly as in a vision that the mandolin and guitar were not to be improved upon the same basis as the violin, and for a very simple reason. The tone of the violin is drawn out by a bow drawn across the strings, which has behind it the muscular power of the whole arm and body of the performer, and is sustained ad infinitum at the performer's will, while the mandolin has behind it for tone purposes only the relatively weak muscles of the wrist, and that for the hundredth part of a second, through the medium of a plectrum or pick. Manifestly, what would constitute a very brilliant violin would be so lifeless and slow that as a mandolin it would be a dead failure. As noticed in the pizzicato notes of the violin, a good violin would be a miserable mandolin or guitar. Neither could this fault be remedied by any form of higher gradation of the sounding boards. Clearly, the only remedy was to so build into the instrument stress and strain in the fibre of the wood itself so as to increase the resilience and responsiveness to twenty or thirty times the amount necessary for a violin. To do this then was the problem.



THE COULTER MANDOLIN
Style A with Guitar Bridge

In rebuilding the tops of old mandolins and guitars there was always one difficulty: A weakness of the tone. It was as if you set a tall wobbly pole up, or a flat piece of sheet iron, and tried to make it stand erect. It would not stand. Neither would the tone stand. It seemed to fall over on itself or wobble, so that while loud enough it had no power. Finally, after repeated experiments it was noticed that the space above the sound hole of all instruments did not vibrate with the intensity of the space below, which was so because the cutting away of the fibres to make the sound hole weakens the whole top right in the center under the boards where it needs to be strongest. (There has always been two theories about building instruments: The one that the vibrating string agitates the air through the sound hole and hence produces the tone; the other that the string vibrating the sounding board which vibrates the air inside the instrument and thus it escapes in pulsations through the sound hole. European instruments are nearly all built on the first theory; American instruments on the latter.) So, being American, inasmuch as the air pressure in the body would be equal over the entire surface, it did not matter where the sound hole was placed, we decided to move it to the extreme upper end on each side of the fingerboard where it would use up the least possible amount of valuable fibre and at the same time give a continuing brace

from the neck to the bridge. This determined, the form of the holes must also be determined. Here came a memory of our youth while experimenting with organ pipes. We observed that the weak wavy spirited tones of the pipe could be made firm and solid by corrugating the orifice of the pipe like a piece of corrugated iron. Presto! We curled the sound hole up in a scroll like a rolled up piece of sheet metal, or like the violin sound hole, instead of leaving it round, and the wobbly sound was gone. Even the tone of old guitars stood out solid and stiff.

Out of these conclusions was born about eight years ago the Coulter Round Mandolin and Guitar and the changes made by us in the form and methods of construction of the standard guitar and the twelve-string Harp-Guitar.

The perfectly round guitar was chosen because where wood is put under great stress and strain it is hard to homogenize its vibrating conditions except in the true circular form, as little corners and hollows produce echoes and false tones. Besides, it gives more neck room and so is correspondingly easier to play and easier to handle.

When the first one was done a strange feature became manifest: With the sounding surfaces strained very much to increase their resilience, it was very difficult to get the bass side and the treble side to have the same quality. Indeed, this is likely to be true in mandolins and guitars. If the bass is big and deep the treble will be too soft and dull; if the treble is bell-like and brilliant, the bass is a hard baritone or hoarse bass. The new method of construction seemed to brighten this peculiarity. Finally, a happy thought solved the trouble: A hard fibre, stiff, quick-acting yellow fir on the treble side was assembled with a soft-fibred, slow-acting larch or spruce on the bass side, the result, we feel confident, being the very best balanced mandolin or guitar yet produced. Oregon woods proved the solution of the problem.

But there was yet another problem, which was to find satisfactory bracings which would hold the tension for a term of years or unlimited time without relaxing. This could only be determined by experiment, to which end small bits of spruce, pine, larch and fir, and also cedar, were bent and under pressure exposed to the sun and rain for a year, in order to subject them to a trial greater than they would ever have to bear in an instrument. The result was most astounding. All except the cedar assumed permanently the new form as bent so that they lay inert. But the good old red cedar, taken out of a pile top that had been in the Clatskanie river or twenty years before it came to the shop, went back to its original form as if it had been spring steel. It did not yield a particle. Neither has the instrument braced with it yielded in any way though they are made as delicate as watch springs, almost. Indeed, those made five years ago seem to be more responsive after this long continued service than they were when they were made.



THE COULTER GUITAR
Style B

best balanced mandolin or guitar yet produced. Oregon woods proved the solution of the problem.

But there was yet another problem, which was to find satisfactory bracings which would hold the tension for a term of years or unlimited time without relaxing. This could only be determined by experiment, to which end small bits of spruce, pine, larch and fir, and also cedar, were bent and under pressure exposed to the sun and rain for a year, in order to subject them to a trial greater than they would ever have to bear in an instrument. The result was most astounding. All except the cedar assumed permanently the new form as bent so that they lay inert. But the good old red cedar, taken out of a pile top that had been in the Clatskanie river or twenty years before it came to the shop, went back to its original form as if it had been spring steel. It did not yield a particle. Neither has the instrument braced with it yielded in any way though they are made as delicate as watch springs, almost. Indeed, those made five years ago seem to be more responsive after this long continued service than they were when they were made.

There was still a most puzzling problem to be solved that is common to all fretted instruments, which was how to get them in tune with themselves—a universal fault, since the geometrical theorem that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line has to be continually encountered. If the instrument is tuned in fifths on the open strings, when you press down the string to the fret you tighten it and make it too sharp because you make it a bent line; and worse, as you come up the finger board this tension increases to about the twelfth and then remains stationary to the twenty-third or twenty-fourth fret, so that if you set the instrument in tune on the twelfth fret, it will be too flat all below, and if you set it for the open strings it will be too sharp all the way up. The way all instruments are now ordinarily set is to have them a little too flat at the lower end and bit too sharp at the upper end, and so trust that the ear will not detect the inharmonicity. (In this connection it might be mentioned that all pianos are tuned a trifle flat, since when the hammer lifts the string the pitch is raised over so little, due to the bending or forcing the string out of a straight line.)



THE COULTER GUITAR-HARP
Style D

About the time this problem came to a climax we accepted an order to build a very special, valuable and odd-length German Zither, and the finger-board had to be made. In this case, as always, "man's extremity" proved the real opportunity, for we had to stop and invent a tool to do the work with, which we did by the help of a friend who was a cunning worker in steel, and then to make the situation complete, we discovered that we could make one tool in which allowance would be made for the pull of the string, to set the first octave or twelve frets, and, since the tension did not increase above that, another tool could be made to set the second octave without the compensation, the result being a fingerboard that will play to the twenty-fourth fret without the variation of even one sound wave from perfect tune in its whole length.

In 1909 and 1910, during a trip through the East, Mr. Coulter took occasion to visit violin makers and instrument makers in more than a score of cities, and found them all in the same boat, working along hap-hazard, trying divide the variations in tone so they would not be noticed. Add to this that since the opening of the shop fifteen years ago more than 500 mandolins, guitars, zithers and banjos have been brought in to be corrected in this regard, from the finest to the cheapest grades of all makers, we, therefore, feel that our instruments are as nearly perfect as first-class material and human skill

can make them, and so we send them out to all the world under an absolute guaranty of satisfaction as to durability, tone, ease of playing and material, or money refunded.

DESCRIPTIONS

The Mandolins and Guitars are made of various woods selected for their beautiful grain, which are drawn over a frame or under fabric of birch, each skin being about one-sixteenth of an inch thick, these having the grain running in opposite directions, giving the well proven laminated construction that is unaffected by heat or cold or jars. This constitutes the sides and back, which are assembled under great tension and reinforced by concentric layers or lining of birch to stiffen the edges, the whole making an accident or fool proof frame or holding base for the sounding board, made of fir and larch or spruce, which is first braced and bent up high in the center and then drawn down tight, giving the most responsive vibrating surface yet devised. The ornamental woods used are Rosewood, Circassian Walnut, Mahogany, English Curly Poplar, Myrtle, Mexican Vermillion and Bird's Eye Maple, all carefully selected. The method of construction is such that the joints lay the one over the other at right angles, thus locking the whole in a complete unit. No celluloid or pyralin is used on the edges to break loose or come off. None is needed since no end wood is anywhere exposed, thus getting lessening liability to accidents.

No oil varnishes are used, since a heavy coat of oil would surely destroy the resilience of the wood. Instead a clear beautiful spirit varnish is put on by rubbing, making the lightest possible perfect protection to an instrument. The polish will not chip or peel, and resists wear to the utmost. The guard plate is a No. 20 gauge piece of Pyralin inlaid, as any extra piece placed outside will surely rattle under the powerful vibration of the instrument, since it must be fastened to the bridge to hold it in place.

MANDOLIN

The round Mandolin is made in three sizes. For those who want a very sharp soprano tone, like the regular mandolin only much more of it, a 10-inch circle is used. Three inches deep.

For those who desire a sweet and less sharp tone, suitable for orchestra or solo work, a mezzo-toned instrument, an 11-inch circle is used. Two and seven-eighths inches deep.

For those who desire a great voice, the Schuman-Heinke of the mandolin family, powerful, deep and mellow, contralto in character, a 12-inch circle, two and three-fourth inches deep is used.

All have 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ or 14 inch focal scale length as desired. If no desire is expressed the 14-inch is made as a standard.

They are made in a number of finishes as follows:

STYLE A—Perfectly plain finish of mahogany or myrtle with canvas case \$25.00.

STYLE B—The top edge reinforced by the material of the back with a purfling, making a jointless finish on the whole instrument, a bit of pearl inlaid at the sound holes and guard plate, sides and back of mahogany, English poplar, myrtle or vermillion. Canvas or oil cloth over chip board case, \$35.00.

STYLE C—Same as B, with the addition of pearl inlay around the edge next the purfling and full pearl trimmed at the sound hole, back and sides of vermillion or myrtle, in case made of wood covered with canvas imitation leather, black, opening like a violin case, velvet lined, complete, \$50.00.

STYLE D—Full pearl and imitation Turquoise, trimmed with guard plate of pearl, guitar style bridge, back and sides of Circassian walnut finely figured,

in wood case covered with leathette, opening like a violin case, velvet lined, nickel trimmed, \$75.00.

STYLE E—Pull pearl and imitation Turquoise matrix trimmed, pearl guard plate, guitar style bridge, sides, back and neck the finest bird's eye maple, in imitation alligator case opening like violin case, plush lined, the finest mandolin that can be made, complete, \$100.00.

In addition to these regular mandolin styles, we also make to order only the complete Mandolin Suite in either style at the same prices, consisting of:

A PICCOLO MANDOLIN—String a fifth above the mandolin, with 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ inch scale on an 8-inch circle body, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep. A most brilliant and piercing voice for orchestra leaders.

A TENOR MANDOLA—String on a 16-inch scale with a 14-inch circular body, 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep.

A OCTAVE MANDOLA—Has an 18 inch scale with either 14 or 16 inch body, 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep. We especially recommend this instrument for small orchestras as most useful.

A CELLO MANDOLA—Has a 24-inch scale with 18-inch body, 4 inches deep. The greatest voiced instrument of this character yet built anywhere.

A DOUBLE MANDOLA BASS—Has full 44-inch scale with 28-inch body, furnishing bass for orchestras of 25 or more pieces. Made only in the Style B finish and sold at \$60.00.

Guitar style bridges, which greatly improve the character and power of the tone, are furnished free with the Style D, and E, and can be put on all the others for \$5.00 additional. Otherwise the Styles A, B, and C are furnished with the nickled arm rest and tail piece used on regular mandolin in connection with an ivory bridge of the guitar pattern.

The very best high grade plain machine heads, with white buttons, are used on all alike, for the reason that there are none better to be had, and they are none too good. Solid ebony finger boards fretted with German silver frets, plain edge abalone, position dots on all alike.

GUITARS

All styles of the round guitar are the same as for the mandolins, except that they all have guitar bridge, are built in either 16-inch or 18-inch bodies, 4 inches deep, having the standard 24-inch scale, or the grand concert with the 25-inch scale respectively, are furnished at \$5.00 additional to the mandolin prices, except Styles D, and E, which are furnished at the same prices.

HARP GUITAR

Our Harp 12-String Guitar is put out as the latest word in this form of instrument, is 18 inches wide at the lower end and 42 inches long over all, and is built in the same manner as the mandolins, as per the cut. Styles A, B, and C are furnished at \$60.00, \$75.00 and \$85.00 respectively. Style D, and E, at \$100.00 and \$125.00 respectively.

A regular Grand Concert Guitar built upon the same model as the big harp guitar without the extended arm, is built to order in Styles C, D, and E, at \$5.00 additional to the mandolin prices.

Only the finest Black Diamond Strings are used throughout.

Instruments sent on 10 days trial by express.
Write for Discounts to the Trade and to Teachers.
Special Discount to Clubs.

THE COULTER

MANDOLINS AND GUITARS



F. E. COULTER, Lutier
145½ FIRST STREET
PORTLAND, OREGON

When Queen Elizabeth used to assuage her maidenly grief over headless suitors, she took her long necked lute and gently strummed a sonnet, to Walter or Raleigh or what's-his-name, on the great-great-grandmother of the modern mandolin; but, of course, she did not know that she was really doing anything like that, which could be used by posterity for some purpose. I reckon if she had she would not have done it. How was good Queen Libby to know that the soft tongued Latin races would take up her long necked lute and make it the instrument of their master passion. (The modern Greeks, Bulgars, and Serbians have her lute exactly as she used it, even to the strings of gut wound around the neck, instead of wire, for frets, and the extraordinary back bent head that gives you a "crick" in the neck to even look at.) But the Italian and Spaniard must have sharper sounds. They do not enjoy guttersals or mezzotints, so they shortened up the neck of the Maiden Queen's lute until it was the length of their beloved violin, and the mandolin was born, such as it was, crude, weak, powerless up to within a score of years ago.

With the broadening of the musical mind and the raising of standards, there came a demand for lead instruments that did not require so much time to master. The mandolin and guitar were lifted out of the realm of folk-lore and became real musical instruments.

About twenty years ago the mandolins used to come into the shop in flocks of fifty or more to know if we could not put more tone in them, for the schools and their pupils. Inasmuch as some people were spending their good money for music that was bad, a fierce demand arose to make it good. Into that demand, about the time of the Lewis & Clark Fair, we went with all our mind and heart and skill, only to be baffled at every turn, since every effort to improve the mandolin or guitar tone, only made it merely loud or tubby and empty without in any way improving its musical quality.

This was necessarily true because we, like the rest, reasoned that the mandolin and guitar were the same as the violin, and tone must be gotten out of them by some kind of graduation of the sounding board. Since the nearest parallel for the violin was an archer's bow—the fiddle being a con-

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would not stand. Neither would the tone stand. It seemed to fall over on itself or wobble, so that while loud enough it had no power. Finally, after repeated experiments it was noticed that the space above the sound hole of all instruments did not vibrate with intensity of the space below, which was so because the cutting away of the fibers to make the sound hole weakens the whole top right in the center under the strings where it needs to be strongest. (There has always been two theories about building instruments; The one that the vibrating string agitates the air through the sound hole and hence produces the tone; the other that the string vibrates the sounding board which vibrated the air inside the instrument and thus it escaped in pulsations through the sound hole. European instruments are nearly all built on the first theory; American instruments on the latter.) So, being American, inasmuch as the air pressure in the body would be equal over the entire surface, it did not matter where the sound hole was placed, we decided to move it to the extreme upper end on each side of the fingerboard where it would use up the least possible amount of valuable fibre and at the same time give a continuing brace from the neck to the bridge. This determined, the form of the holes must also be determined. Here came a memory of our youth while experimenting with organ pipes. We observed that the weak wavy spiritless tones of the pipe could be made firm and solid by corrugating the orifice of the pipe like a piece of corrugated iron. Presto! We curled the sound hole up in a scroll like a rolled up piece of sheet metal, or like the violin sound hole, instead of leaving it round, and the wobbly sound was gone. Even the tone of old guitars stood out solid and stiff. But when we had progressed thus far we still, had to deal with more of the over-tone trouble, that is, the harmonics would still sound as we tried to hold the pure stopped tone. Finally we decided to try the experiment of changing the form to see if by chance that would not eliminate the trouble. To this end we made a great many blue prints of the nodes of the various tones and made a discovery;

the form of the sound pulsations were invariably like a wave caused by the fall of a pebble in the water, going out towards the edges in concentric rings. Eureka! Perhaps it was the irregular form of the instrument that caused the trouble, by causing certain sound waves to interfere and thus have two coalescing produce a third that was out of harmony. From these experiments came the round form. The perfectly round form was chosen because where wood is put under great stress and strain it is hard to homogenize its vibrating conditions except in the true circular form, as little



The Coulter Guitar
Style C. 16-inch

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trivance to shoot air—so it must be with the mandolin and guitar. (Some large manufacturers in the East are today working upon this basis.) Their product is really not a mandolin at all, but a highly amplified pizzicato tone of the violin. To produce the amplification they increased the weight of the strings and raised the height of the bridge until the whole instrument is almost unplayable. (It is as if you tried to put a piano into a mandolin box or a steam calliope into an accordion.) Finally, after many failures, we came to see clearly as in a vision that the mandolin and guitar were not to be improved upon the same basis as the violin, and for a very simple reason.

The tone of the violin is drawn out by a bow drawn across the strings, which has behind it the muscular power of the whole arm and body of the performer, and is sustained ad infinitum at the performer's will, while the mandolin has behind it for tone purposes only the relatively weak muscles of the wrist, and that for the hundredth part of a second, through the medium of a plectrum or pick. Manifestly, what would constitute a very brilliant violin would be so lifeless and slow that as a mandolin it would be a dead failure. As noticed in the pizzicato notes of the violin, a good violin would be a miserable mandolin or guitar. Neither could this fault be remedied by any form of higher graduation of the sounding boards. There was another condition that was puzzling, which was the tendency of the instruments when we had gotten them overstrung sufficient to give the quantity of tone necessary, to produce false tone, or over tones as they are called—really harmonic tones. Now as a matter of fact any over tone whatever is an insurmountable obstacle in a perfect instrument. The well known wolf tone of the violin is a good example; it is produced by the harmonic sounding at the same time as the stopped tone and the effect is paralyzing to anything like pure music. Do not be deceived by any soft words of praise for over tones, as there are some doing at this time. We once knew an organ builder that developed a bad harmonic in the tone of some of his pipes and he finally tried to persuade himself and the friends that were buying the organs that these over-tones or harmonics were just the thing that they wanted. However, when the fault was pointed out to him; that the overtone was caused by the shape of one of the orifices that particular shape disappeared, sudden like, and with it went the overtone that had been one of the talking points up to that time. So we found that the more we overstrung the instrument, the worse the over-tone became. Clearly, then, the only remedy was to build into the instrument stress and strain in the fibre of the wood itself so as to increase the resilience and responsiveness to twenty or thirty times the amount necessary for a violin. To do this was the problem.

In rebuilding the tops of old mandolins and guitars there was always one difficulty: A weakness of the tone. It was as if you set a tall wobbly pole up, or a flat piece of sheet iron, and tried to make it stand erect. It

corners and hollows produce echoes and false tones. Besides, it gives more neck room and so is correspondingly easier to play and easier to handle.

There was still a most puzzling problem to be solved that is common to all fretted instruments, which was how to get them in tune with themselves—a universal fault, since the geometrical theorem that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line has to be constantly encountered. If the instrument is tuned in fifths on the open strings, when you press down the string to the fret you tighten it and make it too sharp because you make it a bent line; and worse, as you come up the finger board this tension increases to about the twelfth fret and then remains stationary to the twenty-third or twenty-fourth fret, so that if you set the instrument in tune on the twelfth fret, it will be too flat all below, and if you set it for the open strings it will be too sharp all the way up. The way all instruments are now ordinarily set is to have them a little too flat at the lower end and a bit too sharp at the upper end, and so trust that the ear will not detect the inharmony. (In this connection it might be mentioned that all pianos are tuned a trifle flat, since when the hammer lifts the string the pitch is raised ever so little, due to the bending or forcing the string out of a straight line.)

About the time this problem came to a climax we accepted an order to build a very special, valuable and odd-length German Zither, and the finger-board had to be made. In this case, as always, "Man's extremity" proved the real opportunity, for we had to stop and invent a tool to do the work with, which we did by the help of a friend who was a cunning worker in steel, and then to make the situation complete, we discovered that we could make one tool in which allowance would be made for the pull of the string, to set the first octave or twelve frets, and, since the tension did not increase above that, another tool could be made to set the second octave without the compensation, the result being a fingerboard that will play to the twenty-fourth fret without the variation of even one sound wave from perfect tune in its whole length.

Do not be deceived by any fancy do-dads in the way of notches or backwards and forward settings of the bridge. Every string is in obedience to the same law; viz: The weight of the string plus the tension of the string will determine the pitch of the string. The do-dads only flatten the sharp-toned string so that the fault will not seem so bad, while the others are left to sound as they please. The best form of the bridge is the knife edge, as the very thin edge prevents any jar or side contact and so gives the purest tone that can be produced. The material is preferably ivory as it is the most elastic of anything there is and so conveys all the tone to the instrument.

In 1909 and 1910, during a trip through the East, we took occasion to visit violin makers and instrument makers in more than a score of cities, and found them all in the same boat, working along hap-hazard, trying to



The Coulter Mandolin
Style B, with Guitar Bridge

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divide the variations in tone so they would not be noticed. Add to this that guitars, zithers and banjos have been brought in to be corrected in this regard, from the finest to the cheapest grades of all makers, we, therefore, feel that our instruments are as nearly perfect as first-class material and human skill can make them, and so we send them out to all the world under an absolute guaranty of satisfaction as to durability, tone, ease of playing and material, or money refunded.

THE SUPER MANDOLIN

After several years' experience we finally began to classify the suggestions that came in from the players, who after all, are the court of last resort, they all agree in some particulars, so that we finally determined to



The Coulter Round Guitar
Style B. Especially Suitable
for Steel Playing.

put out an instrument in harmony with the suggestions which should be the very last word in the building of musical instruments. This is called the Super Mandolin, and differs from the others in having the back much more spherical so that the well known rolling motion of the old style mandolin may be employed. It is finished and built throughout to the one end to make it the very finest instrument in the world. The Super Mandolin is made regular in the eleven-inch size fitted with Coulter improved arm-rest tail piece, and has either Transparent Pyralin guard plate, or Lignum Vitae wood plate raised just a bit above the sound board.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Mandolins and Guitars are made of various woods selected for their beautiful grain, which are drawn over a frame or under fabric of birch, each skin being about one-sixteenth of an inch thick, these having the grain running in opposite directions, giving the well proven laminated construction that is unaffected by heat or cold or jars. This constitutes the sides and back, which are assembled

under great tension and reinforced by concentric layers or lining of birch to stiffen the edges, the whole making an accident or fool proof frame or holding base for the sounding board, made of Spruce or California Redwood, which is first braced and bent up high in the center and then drawn down tight, giving the most responsive vibrating surface yet devised. The ornamental woods used are Rosewood, Mahogany, English Curly Poplar, Mexican Vermillion and Bird's Eye Maple, all carefully selected. The method of construction is such that the joints lay the one over the other at right angles, thus locking the whole in a complete unit. No celluloid or pyralin is used on the edges to break loose or come off. None is needed since end wood is everywhere exposed, thus greatly lessening liability to wear and accidents.

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No oil varnishes are used, since a heavy coat of oil would surely destroy the resilience of the wood. Instead a clear beautiful spirit varnish is put on by rubbing, making the lightest possible perfect protection to an instrument. The polish will not chip or peel, and resists wear to the utmost.

MANDOLIN

The round Mandolin is made in three sizes. For those who want a very sharp tone, like the regular mandolin only much more of it, a 10-inch circle is used. Three inches deep.

For those who desire a sweet and less sharp tone, suitable for orchestra or solo work, a mezzo-toned instrument, an 11-inch circle is used. Two and seven-eighths inches deep.

For those who desire a great voice, the Schumann-Heinke of the mandolin family, powerful, deep and mellow, contralto in character, a 12-inch circle, two and three-fourths inches deep is used.

All have 14 inch focal scale length except when specially ordered.

They are made in a number of finishes, as follows:

Style A—Perfectly plain finish of mahogany or Koe with canvas case.

Style B—The top edge reinforced by the material of the back with a perfling, making a jointless finish on the whole instrument, a bit of pearl inlaid at the sound holes and guard plate, sides and back of mahogany, English poplar, or Koe. Canvas chip board case.

Style C—Same as B, with the addition of pearl inlay around the edge next the perfling and pearl trimmed at the sound hole, back and sides of English poplar, in case made of wood, covered with fabricoid imitation leather, black, opening like a violin case, corduroy lined.



The Coulter Harp Guitar

A Piccolo Mandolin—Strung a fourth above the mandolin, with 10½ inch scale on a 10-inch circle body, 2½ inches deep. A most brilliant and piercing voice for orchestra leaders.

A Tenor Mandola—Strung on a 14-inch circular body, 3½ inches deep.

An Octave Mandola—Has an 18-inch scale with 14-inch body, 3½ inches deep. We especially recommend this instrument for small orchestras as most useful.

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A 'Cello Mandola—Has a 24-inch scale with 16 or 18-inch body, 4 inches deep. The greatest voiced instrument of this character yet built anywhere.

A Double Mandola Bass—Has full 44-inch scale with 28-inch body, furnishing bass for orchestra of 25 or more pieces. Made only in the Style B finish.

Guitar style bridges, which greatly improve the character and power of the Bass tone, are furnished for \$5.00 additional. Otherwise the Styles A., B. and C. are furnished with the nickled arm rest and tail piece used on regular mandolin in connection with an ivory bridge of the regular pattern.

The very best high grade plain machine heads, nickled, with white buttons, are used on all alike, for the reason that there are none better to be had, and they are none too good. Solid ebony finger boards fretted with German silver frets, plain edge, abalone position dots on all alike.

GUITARS

All styles of the round guitars are the same as for the mandolins, except that they all have guitar bridge, are built in either 16-inch or 18-inch bodies, 4 inches deep, having the grand concert scale 25-inch.

HARP GUITAR

Our Harp 12-String Guitar is put out as the latest word in this form of instrument, is 18 inches wide at the lower end and 42 inches long over all, and is built in the same manner as the mandolins, as per the cut, in Style C only.

The building of a satisfactory Harp Guitar involves one extreme difficulty. When the pressure of six to twelve contra bass strings is added to the pressure of the six fingerboard strings, the instrument has to be made so heavy and stiff that the tone and playing qualities of the fingerboard strings are destroyed in great part. If we leave the bracings and top light enough to give the playing qualities and add the basses to the bridge in the same line of pressure, the instrument will buckle or else the basses will absorb the tone of the lighter strings. If on the other hand we make the top stiff and strong to prevent bending, the whole guitar is rendered stiff and clumsy. To obviate this obstacle we do not set the basses on the same bridge as the fingerboard strings, and we change the direction of pressure by drawing the basses from the bottom of the instrument over a bridge of the violin pattern set just behind the regular bridge, so that the finger board strings are as free as in a standard guitar.

A regular Grand Concert Guitar built upon the same mould as the big harp guitar without the extended arm, is built to order in Styles A. B. and C., as per cut.

MUTE MANDOLINS

For the use of those persons that find themselves in the hotels, or have to do their practicing in small rooms, so that they might annoy others in the immediate vicinity, we make a mute mandolin. Fashioned exactly on the lines of the regular mandolin, but made of a solid piece of Balsa Wood—the lightest in the world, weighs less than cork—it is made solid and gives a faint yet perfect tone in every register. The most delicate music may be played and every note will be perfect, yet not audible outside the room. Made to order only. Furnished without case unless otherwise ordered.

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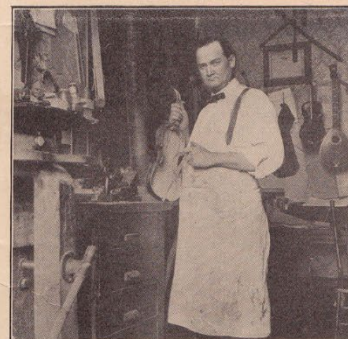
THE SPIRIT OF THINGS.

The fundamental mistake of the age is the intellectual concept that things can be done in a quantitative and mechanical way without destroying their value and usefulness, to say nothing of the entire loss of the art side of it. The great violins and other instruments of the past and the great paintings were the product of great loves and the individual efforts of passion driven men.

So it is with the creation of the instruments described in this circular. Indeed this idea has been at the heart of the whole endeavor, so much so that we run at the head of our office letters, this motto:

"Men do great things in order to express great loves. Without the loves the things are only caricatures of other men."

Mr. Frank E. Coulter, the creator and master builder of the instruments in this circular, is, by nature, both artist and scientist. He relinquished a career as a professional man, minister and platform orator with brilliant prospects, and turned to the creation of stringed musical instruments as the field of his creative endeavor.



The Master at His Bench

He soon found that an almost virgin field was open to him, because the endeavor has been, outside of the evolution of the piano, to build, not a great instrument, but to merely copy the form of an old one.

Following out this fundamental idea of personal service and personal touch, we have steadfastly refused the advice and kindly offered assistance of friends in the matter of a big factory—choosing to make our Mandolins, Guitars, Violins, or what nots real personal things, giving to each its own individuality, and rejoicing not in the number manufactured, but in the joy of having each one up to the same wonderful standard of skill and excellence.

It is not enough that instruments should be mechanical contrivances. No matter how excellent they may be, they must have character, express individuality and be at the head in their own class, else the work on them will have been in vain, and the time wasted, no matter what the return may be in money. This was the spirit of the Stradivarius and Guegnarius, and is the spirit of the Coulter shops of today.

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People: Frank E. Coulter

If you ask a hundred persons what manner of man is Frank E. Coulter their composite answer will be that he is a contradiction. He is a high-minded idealist, or he is a crafty dissembler. He is a philosopher; he is a practicalist. He is an aesthete who sees not only the beauty about him but creates in his imagination beauties which do not exist, or he has only a mechanical mind which keeps in the groove in which it was started by heredity or early environment. These and many more contradictory appraisals are made by the superficial who take his measure in their own limited perspective.

Coulter is *not* a contradiction. It is true that he is an unusual pattern, but his life follows that pattern consistently. To his fellows he appears in these varied and contradictory characters because of the myopic vision of those who see him.

This article is an attempt to present the man as he appears to one who has known him nearly two decades, one who has observed and tried to analyze his seeming inconsistencies. Possibly this measure is as untrue as the measures which have been applied by others, for it borders on presumptuousness for anyone to profess to be able to look into another's soul and see the hidden springs which move the individual to the acts which make up his life and portray what we call character.

Following violin making as a vocation, his avocation is politics—not politics in the commonly accepted sense of scheming and working to gain a public office, but in the better use of the term to denote the science of government. He has been a candidate for office, polling 28,000 votes as an independent candidate for a seat in the United States Senate in 1924. But Coulter knew he would not be elected; he made the race as a means of advancing the theories which he advocated. It is too much to believe that if by some inexplicable turn of fate he had been elected his influence would have made national history different in the "prosperous era" of the late twenties, but his clearer vision would have inspired a message foretelling the catastrophic events which followed. He might have been able to assist in furthering policies which would have lightened the blow. All of Coulter's theories may not be accepted by the reader, but no one can dispute that he rises far above the level of public opinion and discernment which accepts fallacious political and economic practises

as sound merely because they have not been rejected by a formal action.

The one subject which has been subordinate to all others with him is money, the monetary system, the manner in which national credit has been given into private hands. If it appears that his interest in the symbol of gold is inconsistent with aestheticism, with art, with philosophy, it is only because one does not see all of Coulter's dream. He sees the beauties and his imagination pictures the possibilities for human happiness under a system which gives equal opportunities. He sees these possibilities frustrated by an artificial control of credit and the tokens used for exchange. In his opinion, a change in the present financial system—removal of control from private hands—would solve many—perhaps most—of our economic ills, and would make possible the better life for the masses. If many believe the problem is bigger than that; if we believe that a better distribution of income can be achieved only by a more drastic change than can be effected by any monetary reform, still we must concede that Coulter's program would go a long way toward releasing the forces necessary to accomplish economic emancipation.

At the age of 73 Coulter stands erect and is physically agile, twenty-five years after eminent physicians gave him but two or three years to live. He refused to accept their verdict and recovered, not by any mysticism or by supernatural aid, but by a rigid discipline based on sound scientific practises, a discipline which not one man in ten thousand would have undertaken, much less carried through.

Coulter left the ministry when he had promise of reaching a high place in the profession, for he is a fluent speaker with an extraordinary command of words and is a brilliant thinker. Once when asked why he left the ministry, he replied that the incident which decided him was the contribution to his salary fund of \$20 by a poor widow who was supporting a number of children. He admitted that perhaps this incident was only the last straw, and then related a conversation he had with the bishop of the church. The bishop held out to the minister the bait of a desirable church, but warned that the successful preacher must avoid championing economic or social issues which might adversely affect wealthy parishoners. In his characteristic manner, Coulter replied that he would "stay with God and let the church go to hell."

Frank Coulter has ever been of the minority, perhaps for the reason that the majority cannot

keep up with the advanced thinker. This experience causes him to question himself when his advocacies appear to be accepted by numbers. He is a pioneer in the realm of thought who has ever moved onward and onward into the wilderness to blaze the trail. He is so human as to love the plaudits of his fellow man, but he has not let that desire restrain him from keeping so far in advance that he has but infrequently heard the applause. This trait is illustrated by his course in the Townsend movement. His sympathies with the privations of aged people and his approval of the issuance of new money, threw him into the movement in its infancy. When it had attained strength, and might have rewarded his labors had he remained regular, Coulter renounced the organization because he was convinced that it was following strange gods of unsound economics, and he denounced the head office for practises which he considered dishonorable.

The reader should not become imbued with the thought that Coulter is some sort of an ethereal creature, infallible and devoid of human traits. He can, and frequently is, exasperatingly irritating. As is often the case with persons intensely interested in a cause, he is intolerant of opposing opinion, though in no circumstance would he deny to an opponent the privilege of presenting his side.

On his aesthetic side, he is consistent with the practical. Music and poetry are not something aside; they enter into—they *are*—his politics. On the door entering his cluttered, yet orderly, shop he has built a set of chimes, which are set in motion when one enters. The visitor is greeted by soft tones of music which disarm against the sharp shafts of wit which at times are loosed to the discomfort of the visitor.

Years ago he confessed to the pleasure he experienced from holding his fingers lightly on the shell of the violins as he made them, and feeling the rhythmic vibrations which were caused by the rumblings of heavy interurban trolley cars which passed in the street below—a sound which was almost intolerably annoying to other denizens of that section of the city.

A poet, a wit, and a philosopher, a truly great humanitarian, but known to the unknowing world as a crank, Coulter is too far above to make a good companion, for who would choose to be chained to a god?

Frank Evans Coulter, Oregon Folklore Study

American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, WPA

1936-1940 [Violin-Making and Local Politics]

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Sara B. Wrenn Date March 27, 1939

Address 505 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon

Subject: **Violin-Making and Local Politics.**

Name and address of informant: Frank E. Coulter 421 S. W. Second Ave, Portland, Oregon.

Date and time of interview: March 24, 1939 A. M.

Place of interview: Workshop of informant, 421 S. W. Second Ave., Portland

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant:

Chas. Olson, fellow-worker on Writers' Project.

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.: Second floor of old building, reached by dark, dusty flight of stairs. Room some 20 by 30 feet, with windows opening on court. Floor of old, worn and uneven boards, and a rusty stove in the center of the room. Piled everywhere, on the floor, on shelves and tables and benches, is the material -- old and new wood of every description -- from which the informant makes his instruments. Scores of instruments, completed and in the making, hang against one wall. His work table or bench stands beneath the dusty, cobwebby windows. A motor-run whipsaw is in the center of the room, neither the whipsaw itself nor the band being protected. In one obscure corner is a stationery washbowl with running water. Cans of glue and varnish, used and unused, as well as other incidental materials, is here, there and everywhere. What little floor space remains is filled with a nondescript assortment of chairs, doubtless for the use of the informant's many visitors and cronies. One of Portland's very old business blocks, the rest of the second floor being used by a printing establishment. Building is in the town's oldest business section, close to Chinatown.

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| 1. Ancestry | 1. Father, Samuel Coulter; mother, Rebecca Andrus Coulter. Stock: Scotch and Irish. |
| 2. Place and date of birth | 2. Marion, Ohio. April 16, 1862. |
| 3. Family | 3. Wife, Ellen Louisa Kent Coulter; two daughters, Mrs. Inez Boskill, Dorothy Coulter. |
| 4. Places lived in, with dates | 4. Ohio, California and Oregon. In Oregon 50 years. |
| 5. Education, with dates | 5. Public schools; 2 1/2 years denomination school, Woodridge, Calif. 1 year, Stanford University. |
| 6. Occupations and accomplishments | 6. Minister, United Brethren Church. Maker of stringed instruments. |
| 7. Special skills and interests | 7. Especially interested in political and economic questions dealing with humanitarianism. |
| 8. Community and religious activities | 8. General community interests. No lodges or fraternal organizations. Member United Brethren. |
| 9. Description of informant | 9. Tall and slender, with smooth kindly face. Shabby clothes. Of the fanatic type. |
| 10. Other points gained in interview | 10. Interested in the welfare of mankind, but with considerable ego attached. |

Text:

I've always been musical and a natural mechanic, so when I turned from preaching in the United Brethren Church, I looked about and it struck me that, since there seemed to be so much racketeering in the business world, the best thing I could do was to develop the very finest stringed musical instruments that could be made. Of course that meant first, the violin. The tone of the violin has always been high-pitched. What I wanted to do was to develop an instrument of powerful tones. Along about 1910 an immense change in the world of music began to be noticeable. It was then the standard pitch began to go down.

There was a firm in Chicago doing a half million dollars' worth of business that now does about three or four thousand. The fall in the use of violins was terrible. There were some teachers here then, a man and his wife, who had about 600 pupils and about 40 teachers in their institution. They dropped to him and her and ten teachers. Then they went to Hollywood. With the advent of the radio, music changed. The high soprano voice and the high-pitched instruments, like the mandolin and the banjo, are no good on the radio. You never hear the shrill-voiced old Italian violin any more. The most popular instruments today are the saxophone and the double-bass viol.

There's no good or bad wood in making musical instruments. Any wood is all right. It's the way you use it. It is all nonsense, that talk of special wood from Europe. Appearance now counts for a lot, too. I won \$450 once in a wager. I was to make three violins, one of standard material, one from a dry-goods box - Ontario tamarack -- and the third from a camphorwood chest. The judges were to listen to each of them being played in the dark, and if they could notice any difference -- know when the violins were changed -- I won the bet. They couldn't detect any difference in the tone of those three violins, and they bought them for \$150.00 each. That was the wager. But not one of the three but what was made different from the other, so as to allow for the relative stiffness of the wood.

Now take the guitar. I was up in Canada for two or three years, and when I came back in 1911 the guitar was most in favor. I went to work to make the finest guitar possible. In it I used crossed veneer for strength and resonance. It took the first prize at the New York Exposition, and I sold then to all the big factories. I used yellow fir with white for brilliant tone, and California redwood, with rosewood and Australian lacewood for the top. The father of the lacewood tree is said to be the oak, and its mother, the mahogany.

Freak instruments aren't as popular as they were years ago. Once, there was a young man here in vaudeville at the old Marquam theater. He was a genius, who appeared under the name of Motzarto. The program showed a solo by him on a one-stringed violin. It was really a cello. He wanted to know if I couldn't make him a real one-string violin. I did and he took it with him to Europe, and brought it back with him to Cincinnati, his native city. He died not long after he returned from Europe, and the City of Cincinnati today has that little one-string fiddle in its museum. Violin players sometimes lose what is known as their "tone" ear for getting the major scale. I worked out a plan for a player who suffered that loss by placing frets, tiny cross pieces of inset steel on the finger board. He used that for two years.

It was in 1906 that I took an order for a German zither. That was for vaudeville too. They wanted the zither on legs, with a solo slide overstrung scale 1-1/2 inches longer than the regular. There wasn't any such fingerboard in existence. The Philadelphia firm I wrote to said no such a thing could be made in tune. Well, I got my old calculus out -- I never was very good at mathematics at best -- and I sweat blood trying to get the differential for a semi-tone, and finally I worked it out. As a matter of fact, I found the formula in an old [Harper's?] Magazine under the section of the "Editor's Easy Chair." After I got the formula, I had to make the tool, and here it is. It is what I call a proportional divider. It is made of steel, with the longer arm 11 inches from the exact center of the pivot to the extreme end of the point; the short arm is one inch, to give 1/18. The formula for semi-tone in a musical instrument is that each semi-tone be 1/18 and 3/1000 less than the preceding one. Spreading these two arms keeps the exact proportion of the semi-tone.

Here's something else I'm doing to produce the depth of sound now wanted. On guitars I place the sound-holes on the edge of the face to aid in giving volume. And here's a mandolin with a rounded back, that I turned by hand to produce the "roll" in playing. I took this instrument out to a mandolin-player friend of mine in the hospital, when it was finished. His eyes just lighted up when he saw it. He played that mandolin the last thing he did, then he put it on the pillow beside him, so they told me, and went to sleep forever.

There was a violin player here in Portland about 1912 that was a natural. He was an Italian hunchback, nineteen years old and only about four feet tall. I used to listen to him. He didn't have a decent violin -- a three-quarter, no tone affair, and his arms were too twisted to handle it properly, so I modeled a violin for him, making it so that without shortening the scale he could make the reach. I brought him down to my shop and I said, "Guiseppe, here's a violin for you." (His name was Guiseppe Amato.) He took the fiddle without a word, only his big, wistful eyes shining, and he went to a corner of the shop; and there he played, without stopping, for more than an hour. He played out his very soul. He made that violin wail and laugh, while the tears ran down his cheeks. He just couldn't believe it was for him. He had to go and get his father because he was afraid his father might think it was a game to make him pay money for the violin. I forgot to say the boy played on the street. It was just three days later, and he was playing on Ben Selling's corner -- I think it was Fourth and Morrison -- and Ben Selling came out to listen to the boy. I said to Ben, "Ben, don't you think it's a shame such genius as that hasn't a chance to develop." Ben answered, "Well, what do you think?" I said, "Well if I was Ben Selling, and I had as much money as he's got, I'd send that boy to Italy to study." Ben laughed. But just one week later that boy was started on his way to Genoa. He studied hard, but he wasn't very strong, and he only lived four years after that. The world lost a great musician in his death.

Once when Fritz Kreisler was playing here, he dropped in to see me. He had his Stradivarius, valued at \$25,000 with him. There was some little thing he wanted done on the violin, nothing of great importance. I said to him, "Sit down, and let me finish this while you're here. I don't want the responsibility of keeping this." So, he waited. He is a friendly sort. His concert was due two days later, and on that evening, I went up to Graves Music Store, on Sixth street, about six-thirty o'clock. And there in the window was the old Strad. I thought that was funny, so I waited around till ten o'clock that night, and that old Strad was still there in the store window. I saw Mr. Kreisler after the concert, and I said to him, "Mr. Kreisler, do you always give your old fiddle absent treatment?" And I told him about seeing it in Graves' window. Kreisler looked kind of sheepish, as he laughed and said, "That damned fiddle, I forget him." He actually used a new violin he got in Montreal.

Editor's Note: Coulter next went on a rant about "Oregon Initiative and Referendum laws" for another whole page that is unrelated to our topic (and likely his interviewer's interest!), so is omitted here.

Comment:

Mr. Coulter proved an almost perfect informant, very generously giving the interviewer more than two hours' time, and patiently explaining and showing his various instruments and the improvements he has worked out.

The Fiddle Maker Passes

The making and repairing of violins was the work that came to his hand, and in this Frank Coulter was a master—but nearly always he called them fiddles. He had a way of saying it with that unconscious nuance of drollery which is the very hallmark of fondness. He made good fiddles and he fixed old ones so that they had tone and sweetness again. And something of this sort he wanted to do for the world. Something of this sort he did.

One might as well call them his disciples, the many who sat with him in the dingy restaurant at noon, over their noodles and pork, while he talked of life and philosophy, and of how want and sorrow might very nearly be driven out of the world, never to come again—such sorrow at least as is risen from want. Gentle of voice and of look, with the confident zeal of the prophet about him. Such men, though not many are given, are sometimes misunderstood, but at long last they have this in common—they leave the world better than ever they found it; clearer and richer of tone.

FRANK E. COULTER

Frank E. Coulter, 78, Portland violin-maker and student of politics, died Tuesday of pneumonia at Good Samaritan hospital. He made his home at 01895 Southwest Palatine Hill road.



Mr. Coulter remained active in his business of manufacturing violins and other musical instruments un-

til a week ago, when stricken with the fatal illness.

He was born in 1862 in Ohio, but was a resident of California for most of his early life until coming to Oregon in 1904. He began his work at that time.

Mr. Coulter conducted many forums on political and economic problems. At the time of his death he headed a class in "free economy" which met in the Dekum building. He was a candidate for the democratic congressional nomination about ten years ago. He also wrote many articles on economics which appeared in national publications.

Survivors include the widow, Ellen; two daughters, Mrs. Inez Boskill of Portland and Mrs. Frank Keefe of New York and Tsingtao, China; a sister, Mrs. M. Dunning of Modesto, Cal., and three grand-daughters, Mrs. Ray Sanford of Salem and Mrs. Jack Buckner and Mrs. Orville Isley, both of Portland.

Frank Coulter Fought for Humanity

Those who knew Frank E. Coulter as a politician and sometimes candidate for office did not know him as a craftsman and builder and repairer of stringed instruments; those who knew him professionally as a violin-maker may or may not have known him as a politician, and probably knew only a very little about him as a humanitarian and friend.

Now that Frank Coulter is dead, a social center, a haven, a forum that has served humanity in Portland for many decades, will be closed. Even if violin-repairing were continued in that shop, upstairs at 421 S. W. 2d avenue, it would have to be continued without Frank Coulter, and it was Frank Coulter that gave the place its character.

Whatever side Frank Coulter fought on in Oregon politics, one might be sure that he fought with conviction and sincerity, and that he evaluated the conflict solely on the basis of humanity—for Frank Coulter was before everything else a lover of humanity.

That is why today, hearing that he is dead, there will be folks grieving in certain mansions and madhouses and parsonages, farms and prisons, Y. M. C. A. halls and hobo jungles, libraries and dumps—folks in every conceivable walk of life who at some time have come in contact with the pure gold of humanity and human kindness that was the heart and core of Frank Coulter's life.

Acknowledgements: Kerry Char, Reed and Alice Bennett, John Riley, Robert Armstrong, Gordon Anderson, John Doan, Dustin Wilson, Kevin Dunham, Joshua Levin-Epstein, Dave Powell, Cynthia Kirkley, Cynthia Spence, The Mandolin Café Forum, Ayshea Khan at the Portland Archives & Records Center, James Scott at the Oregon Historical Society, and (at right) Frank Coulter's great-granddaughter Jane Sanford Harrison (1939-2024)

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John Riley: 10 (bot), 11 (top & bot R), 31 (all), 41 (top R), 42 (all)

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Worthpoint: 48 (all)

<https://reverb.com/item/46170371-rare-1902-f-e-coulter-american-gothic-violin>: 11 (top L, cen L), 14 (bot)



About The Author: Gregg Miner is, at various times of the day, a plucked stringed instrument collector, scholar, recording artist and performer. He is widely considered the world's leading authority on harp guitars. His web sites include Harpguitars.net, Harpguitarmusic.com and Minermusic.com.

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