

The Fretted Instrument & Zither Inventions of August Gerhard Almcrantz

Gregg Miner



When a colleague¹ pointed out the similarities between the ultra-rare Almcrantz harp guitar above at left and the similarly rare Truax harp guitars, I remembered that I had long ago noticed this also but hadn't really paid much attention to it. For one thing, I always thought that I already *had* a candidate for the builders of Truax instruments.² Still, *could* there be a connection?

¹ Andrew Mullane, pers. comm. 8/11/2026.

² Specifically, the Larson brothers, as suggested by Bob Hartman. See my article: https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/Truax_Harp_Guitars-Gregg_Miner.pdf

I was just then finishing up my Truax article, but rather than address the “Almcrantz-as-builder” possibility there, I decided to take the opportunity to explore Almcrantz more thoroughly in his own stand-alone monograph, something no one seems to have yet attempted.³

Researcher Nathaniel Adams located a short but useful contemporaneous biography from *History of the Swedes of Illinois Part II, 1908*:⁴

“August G. Almcrantz was born in Södra Fogelås, Skaraborg län, Sweden, Aug. 21, 1864. His parents were Anders Gustaf and Fredrika Almcrantz. August attended school for several years. In 1891 he emigrated and came to Chicago. After a few years’ experience he engaged in the manufacture of guitars, mandolins and other musical instruments, at 6015 S. Halsted st. He makes a variety of high grade instruments, among them the “Orchestra Harp,” his own invention. Other inventions of his are a detachable neck and a detachable bridge for guitars, allowing the entire sounding-board to vibrate, making the instrument more resonant. Mr. Almcrantz is married to Cecilia Amalia, born Nov. 20, 1864, in Vestra Stenby parish, Östergötland. Her parents were Carl Fredrick and Caroline Amalia Stendahl. Mr. and Mrs. Almcrantz have two children, Georgia Dorothea, born April 7, 1896, and Oscar Gerhard, born July 27, 1897.”



AUGUST GERHARD ALMCRANTZ

I was glad to see the “Orchestra Harp” mentioned above; it has intrigued me since first seeing it mentioned in Almcrantz’ early *Cadenza* ads. I had never found any visual or descriptive record of it but assumed it must have been a new concert harp – surprising for a relatively unknown small Chicago mandolin and guitar-building firm. Locating an ad for the present article, I discovered that I had not caught the patent notice!⁵



³ The notable exception being colleague S. Nathaniel Adams, who provided a snapshot in 2022 here:
<https://www.snathanieladams.com/2022/02/gerhard-almcrantz-chicago-illinois.html>

⁴ https://books.google.com/books?newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&id=WPMBAAMAAMAJ&dq=Gerhard+Almcrantz&q=Gerhard+Almcrantz#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁵ I thought I already had all the American stringed patents, but this must have been buried. Adam’s article was missing this patent as well.

Dumbfounded, I did another search, and there it was. Not a harp, but a *zither* – specifically, a complex “improvement” on the Autoharp.

No. 659,429.

Patented Oct. 9, 1900.

G. ALMCRAANTZ & G. TÖRNQVIST.
ORCHESTRA HARP.

(Application filed Apr. 4, 1900.)

(No Model.)

2 Sheets—Sheet 1.

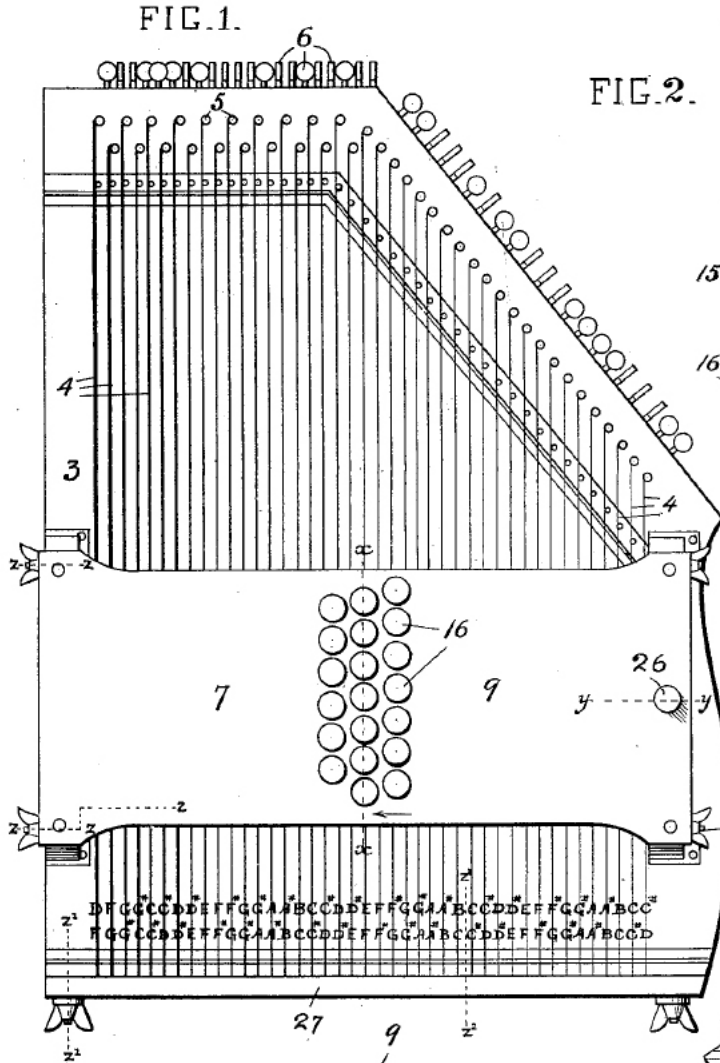


FIG. 2.

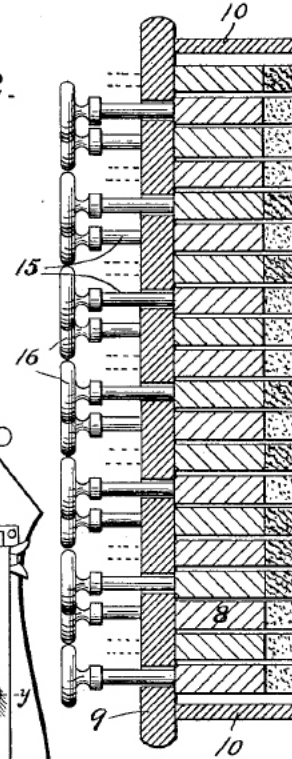
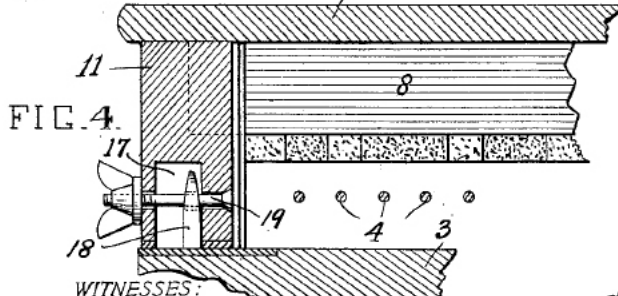
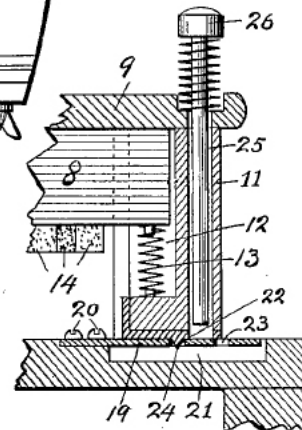


FIG. 3.



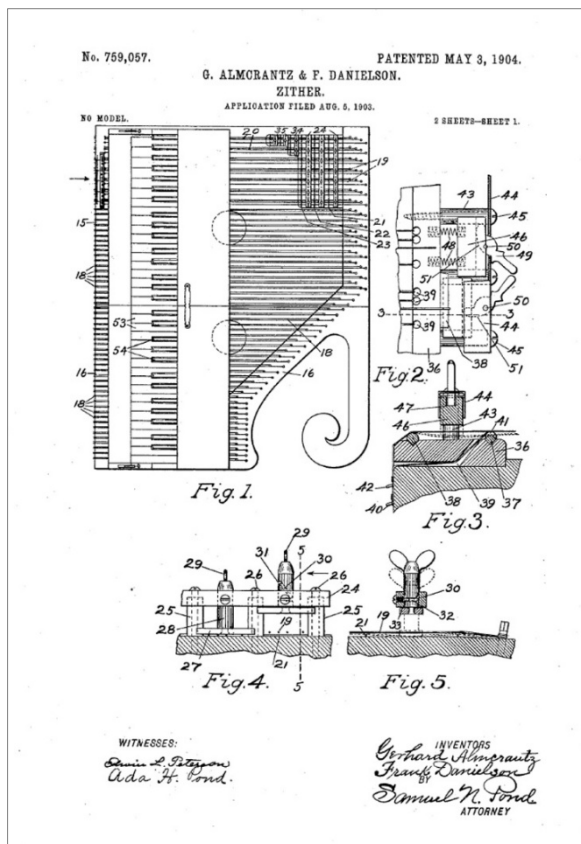
WITNESSES:

F. B. Townsend,
George E. Koenig

INVENTORS.
Gerhard Almcraantz,
Gideon Törnqvist,
By Samuel N. Pond, their ATTORNEY.

Almcrantz was by this point the established guitar maker with a physical address; I suspect his partner Gideon Törnqvist was the mechanical designer. Presumably a prototype was built but I've yet to hear of an actual example. Perhaps the mechanics were overly complicated to manufacture and/or unreliable to operate musically⁶; I've yet to fully grasp the patent!⁷

While we're on the subject of fretless zithers⁸, let's look at a second. Almcrantz & Törnqvist clearly had little to no success with their "Orchestra Harp." Yet four years later, Almcrantz again partnered with a mechanical engineer⁹ to create an even more fascinating instrument.



As with the Orchestra Harp, no example has ever been found to my knowledge, but a prototype must have been built. And what an impressive "keyboard zither" it must have been! The engineer this time was partner Frank Danielson; the pair possibly having been inspired by the new Dolceola keyboard zither patented in 1903 and sold by the thousands.¹⁰

Where the Dolceola's strings were hit by miniature hammers activated by its piano keys, the Almcrantz/Danielson zither's strings in "the higher tones" were apparently plucked with a quill, much like a harpsichord, which "we have found produces a clearer and better tone on the higher strings." Presumably the lower strings were struck with some of hammer mechanism, as were the chordal strings.¹¹ Those were additionally fitted with clever "capo-tasto bars" that provided additional chords.

Once again, without a working specimen, it's hard

for me to analyze the detailed patent¹², though I can see that it clearly had a very different piano key-activated striking mechanism from the Dolceola's.



Above, the Dolceola

⁶ Complicated, as the intent was to get more chords out of their portable instrument.

⁷ <https://www.harp guitars.net/PDFs/US659429.pdf>

⁸ Of which the Autoharp is one of dozens of inventions now classified as such.

⁹ Again, this is only my guess, based on the premise that Almcrantz was a guitar and mandolin inventor and builder, and unsuccessful at that. My suspicion is that he was the "idea man," and these two partners were mechanical engineers who created the working fretless zither prototypes for him.

¹⁰ While less than a hundred surviving Dolceolas are currently estimated, the numbers sold are believed to have been around 4000. See my articles in *The Dolceola Pages*: <https://www.minermusic.com/dolceola/dolceola.htm>

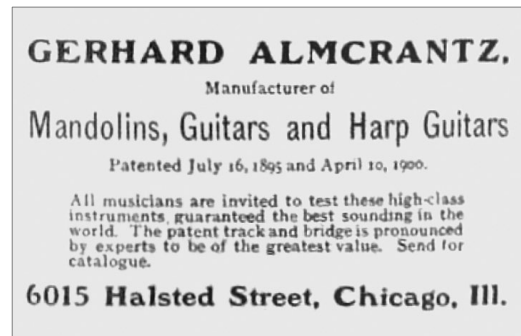
¹¹ A group of 3 or more strings tuned to a chord to be played or struck as one was a common feature of many fretless zithers. The Dolceola had them as well.

¹² <https://www.harp guitars.net/PDFs/US759057.pdf>

Moving on to his fretted instruments, we find surviving Almcrantz mandolins to be extremely rare, while guitars can be found in slightly larger numbers. They're often somewhat larger than Martins and even other Chicago makers of the period, with fit and finish that can be somewhat random, even on the same instrument. We assume Almcrantz built them himself with a very small team.

A second document created around the 1900s captured this workforce:¹³

- 1898 - Factory located at 6001 S Halsted St
 - Employed two men
- 1900 - Factory located at 6022 S Halsted St
 - Employed two men and one woman
- 1903 - Factory located at 6015 Halsted St
 - Employed two men
- 1905 – Same



Almcrantz's first *Cadenza* ad appeared in September 1900 showing that he must have moved to this address even earlier – thus, soon after the #6022 had been recorded.



This remarkable guitar is apparently dated “1895” inside, though that hasn’t been corroborated.

It features unique sloped shoulders, echoed in the unique back. The shape allowed better access to the upper frets.¹⁴ Compare the location of the 12th fret on this one to his other guitars on the following pages.

Those who have examined Almcrantz guitars with wood marquetry inlay on the back and sides pronounce the work to be quite nice.

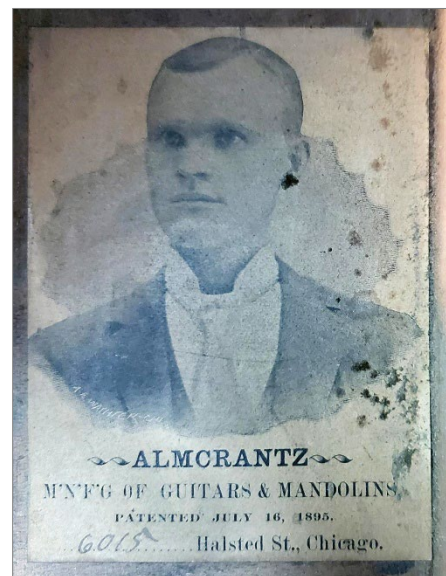
¹³ This information comes from Nathaniel Adams, who misplaced the original source, though confirms that it is correct.

¹⁴ This “pre-cutaway” shorter and sloped upper bout is a fairly common “invention” seen by numerous luthiers throughout the world and centuries.



An even more delightful shape occurs in this one-of-a-kind Almcraantz mandolin in the National Music Museum collection. It is undated like nearly all Almcraantz instruments; the museum's listed "6015" serial number is actually the handwritten Halsted street number, as seen on the same label from a guitar at right. At the moment, that address only gets us close to a date (early 1900s).¹⁵

On the left, an Almcraantz bowlback mandolin, missing its inlaid pickguard.



¹⁵ Chicago city directories remain difficult to find for all years; a thorough Almcraantz search is overdue.

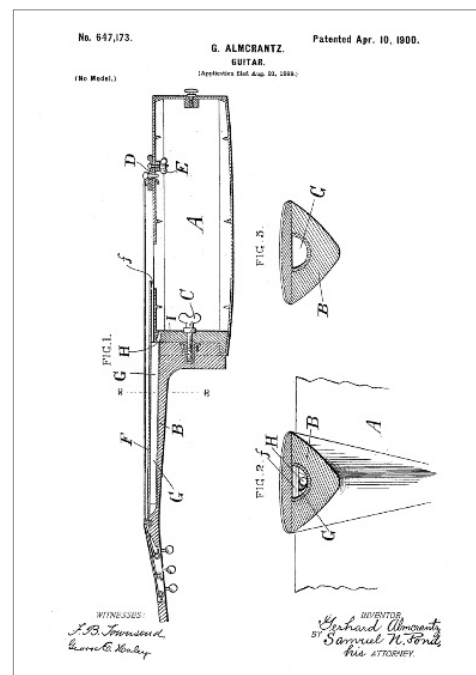
Many Almcrantz 6-string guitars have been found, from extremely plain to quite fancy. Below are two wonderful examples.



So, when did Almcrantz and his helpers build all these instruments? Though few if any can be precisely dated, we assume he was building before the October 1894 filing for his first patent (his harp guitar) and was out of the lutherie business well before 1910, when we find him working as a farmer in Indiana.¹⁶

I wonder if the owners of these guitars have looked inside for Almcrantz's hidden feature?! That was his aluminum half-cylinder tube buried in the neck.

Patented in April 1900,¹⁷ as with Orville Gibson's mandolins and Paul Gardie's harp guitar, many have tried a similar thing, thinking it might improve the tone simply by extending the body's air cavity just that little bit. Seriously?!



¹⁶ Indiana 1910 Census. In the 1920 Indiana Census, he was working as a "Railroad laborer." His last *Cadenza* ads were in early 1905.

¹⁷ <https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/US647173.pdf>

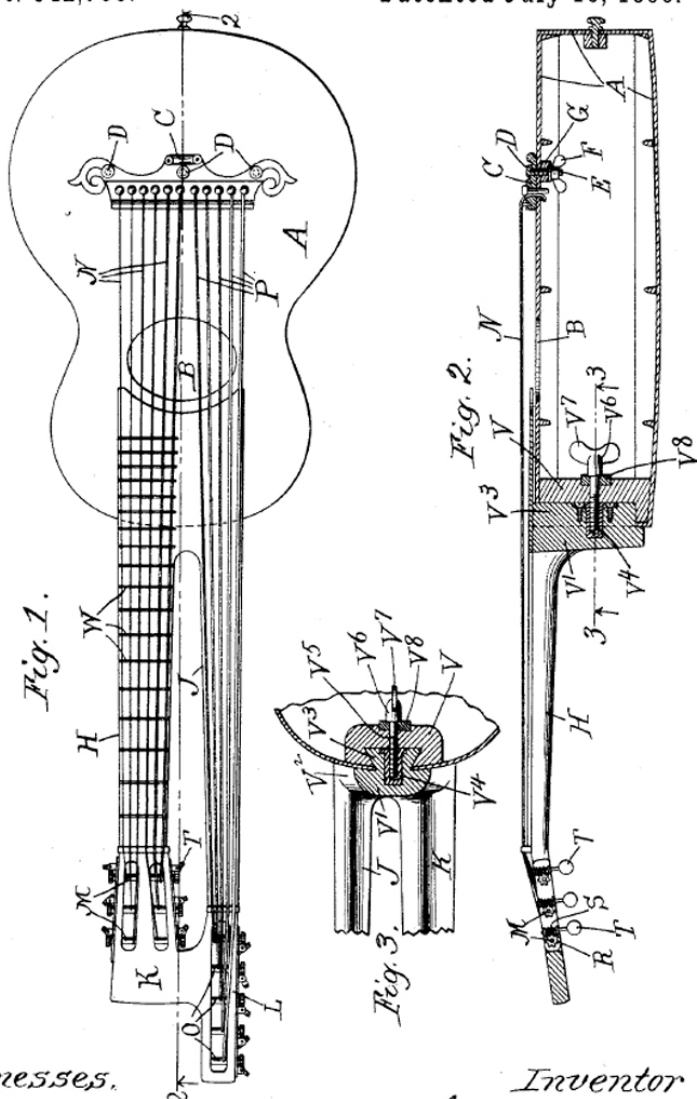
Time now to investigate the ultra-rare and esoteric Almcrantz harp guitars, beginning with his 1895 patent.

(No Model.)

G. ALMCRA NTZ.
MUSICAL INSTRUMENT.

No. 542,788.

Patented July 16, 1895.



Witnesses.
E. T. Wray.
Francis M. Orelaud.

Inventor
Gerhard Almcrantz
by Francis M. Parker,
his Atty.

Just two labeled Almcrantz harp guitars are currently known to exist, along with a possible double-neck guitar.

While all Almcrantz 6-string guitars have *round* sound-holes, his two harp guitars and attributed double-neck in the following pages have distinct *oval* holes. In fact, the oval soundhole is described as part of the “new novel features,” though it appears only vaguely oval-shaped in his patent drawing at left.

Almcrantz filed his harp guitar patent on October 17, 1894, which was granted on Jul 16, 1895. It is a fine and realistic design and surely based on an actual constructed example.

It was apparently not in conflict with Hansen’s 1891 harp guitar patent¹⁸ due to its many new features. These included a second “neck” that improved upon Hansen’s simple metal rod and a bolt-on neck and bridge.¹⁹

No surviving instrument remotely like the patent drawing has been found, though certainly a prototype must have been built. So, let’s examine Almcrantz harp guitars that *do* survive!

¹⁸ https://www.harp guitars.net/history/month_hg/month-hg-7-07.htm

¹⁹ Note the giant wingnuts inside the body!



Specimen #1 is shown above during its three consecutive sale offerings (that I am aware of). None of the photography has been quite worthy of the instrument, but it appears that additional clean-up and restoration took place by each subsequent owner. It has the standard Almcrantz label shown earlier and is not dated. It has a wonderful custom tailpiece string support that I suspect was original, as it is such an elaborate matching unit. It has the typical label with a faint “6015” written in for Halsted, thus c. 1900 – c. 1906 (and beyond?).

The original seller²⁰ provided some dimensions: The body is 22.5” long with 13.25” (upper) and 18.5” (lower) bout widths. The soundhole is 6.25” wide, significantly more dramatic than in the original patent drawing.²¹ On the next page, note how the sub-bass head was drilled with 12 holes, but only ten pin tuners were ever installed. The presumably original nut, bridge and tailpiece were each only configured for ten sub-bass strings. This brings to mind the well-known Gibson harp guitar, which began its switch to 10 subs about 1906. Was Almcrantz possibly inspired by that, building his own variant at that time?

²⁰ Sold by Kramer & Kramer Auctions in Ohio, March 2014.

²¹ The instrument was once inspected by my colleague Andrew Mullane, who added that the top and back were flat.





This more unusual Almcrautz has a label that reads “K. F. Simon & Co., Manufacturers of and dealers in the Celebrated Almcrautz guitars and all kinds of musical instruments.”

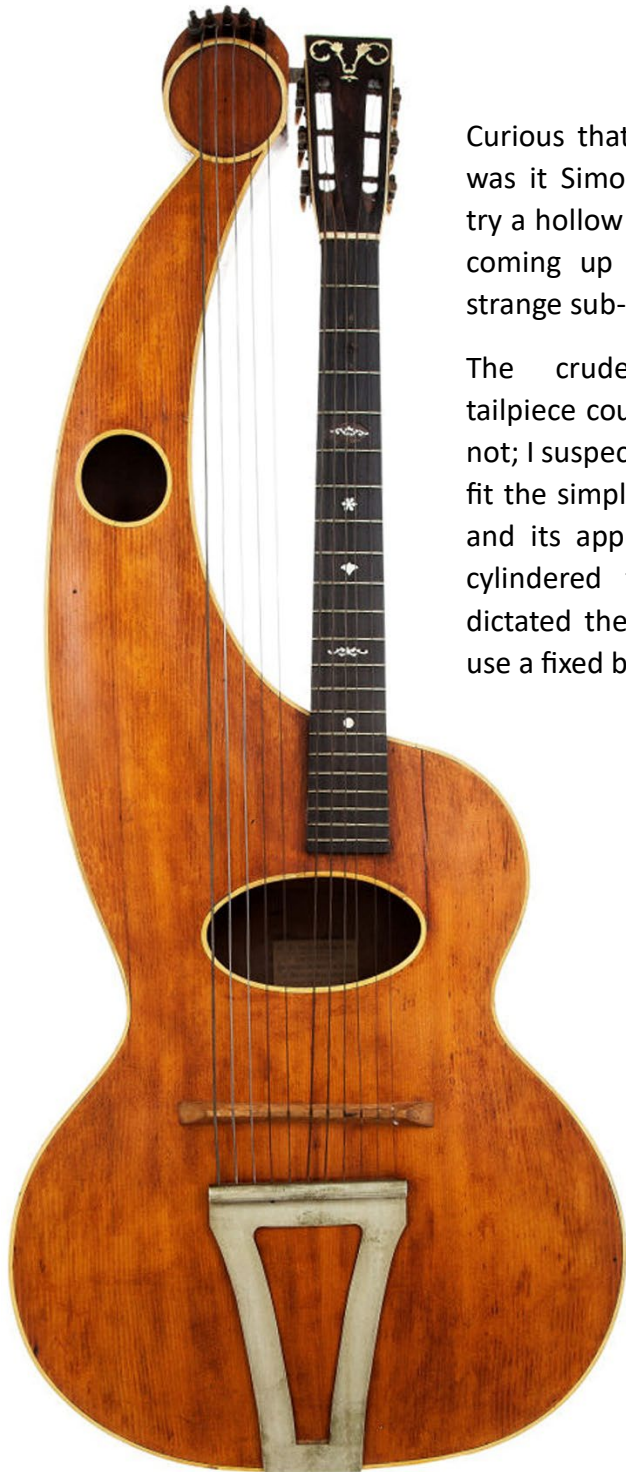
Who was Simon and what was his company? Chicago ads beginning in September 1906 duplicated the label information while providing his address – the exact same as Almcrautz!²²

Were these the Almcrautz-reported workers? Or was Simon a (not so) silent partner with his own workforce that helped build and then sell instruments for Almcrautz? Note that while Almcrautz only claimed “Manufacturer,” Simon added “Dealer” along with “Fancy inlaying and decorating” and “Repairing a specialty.” Perhaps theirs was one big instrument workshop with two entities contributing to the end product. Clearly, more research is needed.



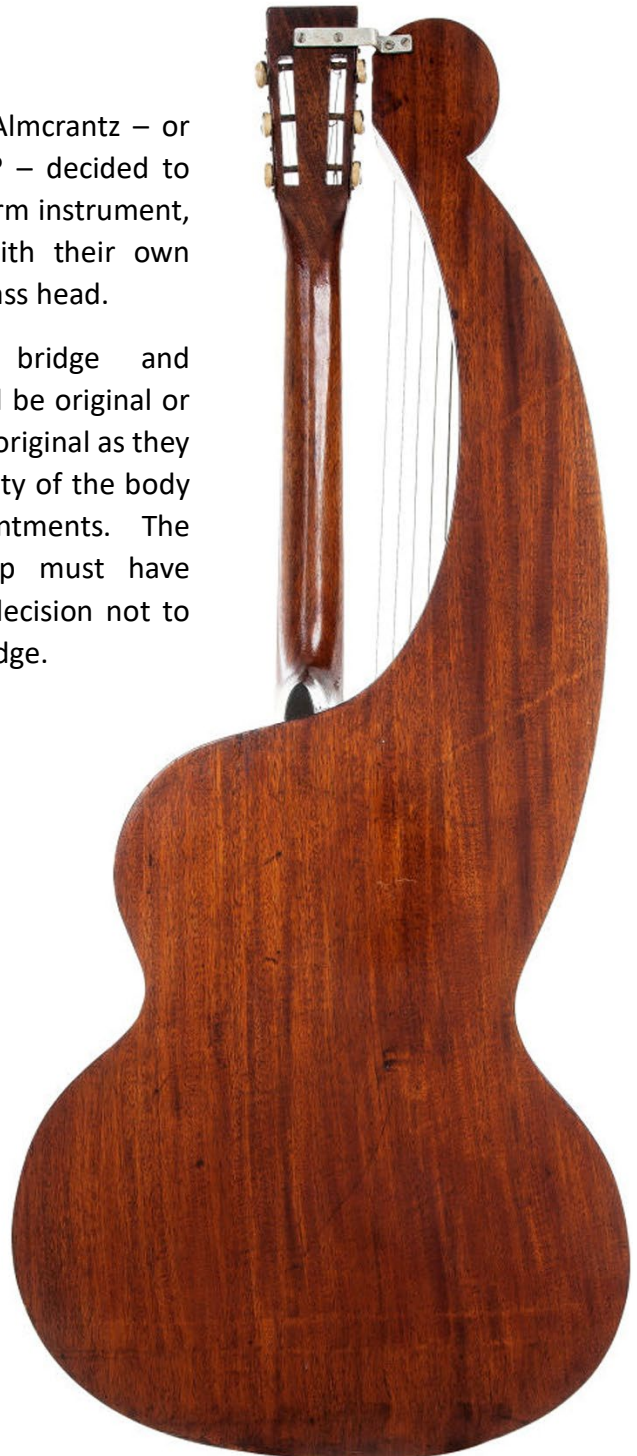
²² This ad from *The Englewood Economist* (Chicago), Sep 11, 1906.

The previous photos were taken by myself at the then-owner's home, where I noticed that the instrument had a noticeably domed or "cylindere" top and hollow arm – a seemingly complex 3-dimensional result to achieve from body into the arm. To my eye (when I took these photos many years ago), the top appeared pressed rather than carved. Below we see the flat back in photos from its auction listing.



Curious that Almcraantz – or was it Simon? – decided to try a hollow arm instrument, coming up with their own strange sub-bass head.

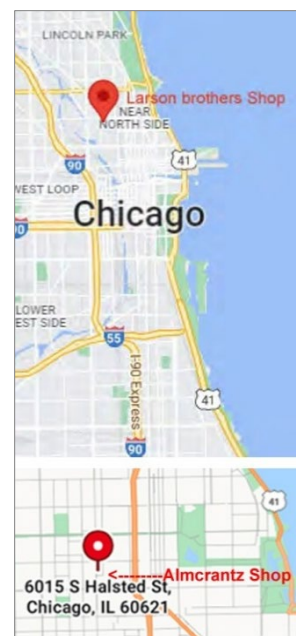
The crude bridge and tailpiece could be original or not; I suspect original as they fit the simplicity of the body and its appointments. The cylindere top must have dictated the decision not to use a fixed bridge.





I can tie Almcrantz to Truax in another way. I had completely forgotten that Ray Scherr also ended up with the Simon Almcrantz, seen below the “attributed Larson/Truax” during my visit to his collection some years ago! (at left)

Speaking of the Larsons, might the Simon Almcrantz have been inspired by the W. J. Dyer harp guitars which the Larsons had recently started building just 8 miles north of



the Almcrantz/Simon S. Halsted shop in Chicago? I think we might surmise as much; in fact, note the similar mahogany, neck attachment and body shape between the Simon Almcrantz and a typical Dyer harp guitar. While the soundboard construction and sub-bass head are miles apart, the back views are certainly similar.

Below: Simon/Almcrantz, Dyer, both overlaid.



Next, keep the two very different Almcrantz harp guitars above in mind as we look at our last instrument “attributed” to Almcrantz (it has no label).



This unusual instrument is in The Sousa Archives and Center for American Music at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and appears to have originally been a double-neck guitar rather than a harp guitar due to the presence of (what appear to be original) matching frets and inlays on both necks. A later owner (or persons unknown) modified it into a special Hawaiian steel guitar for his daughter.²³

They replaced the two nuts with raised bone nuts for steel playing, apparently stringing it to provide three different 6-string Hawaiian tunings. They must have found the new tension too heavy, as they added two support bars on the back of the necks along with the heavy-duty bridge and tailpiece array. This originally would have had some sort of (smaller) straight bridge for the two necks. They also added four additional friction tuners to the second neck, though they wouldn't seem necessary (nor indeed, ever saw use).

Sadly, the instrument is missing a label and "Almcrantz" is only a curator's guess. It's a good one, and I'd give it better than a 50/50 chance. While little seems to match either of the previous instruments, we've already seen that the two Almcrantz harp guitars are totally different from each other, so this later custom instrument could simply be more variation.

²³ The story of the instrument's owner(s) – the father who bought it for his eventually-famous steel-guitar-playing daughter and then converted it was included in the exhibit *America's Hawaiian Imaginations through Letritia Kandle and Eddie Alkire*. Both the page's text and the video have errors, so are not repeated here. The essential details were found in the collection's archives which state "Guitar is believed to have been made by August Gerhard Almcrantz (1864-1942), a string instrument maker working in Chicago, Illinois. Instrument is in fair-to-poor condition with a fracture at the top of the tone hole of the guitar's body. It has been suggested the instrument was modified by Letritia Kandle's father and was given to her for her sixteenth birthday. Accession number 2016.1209150.012."

<https://archon.library.illinois.edu/archives/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=11410&q=almcrantz&rootcontentid=206673#id206673> accessed 8/10/2-26. Note that the curators guessed at Almcrantz as the builder (a very good guess, though the date has to be later; it also tells us there is no label), and that they only surmised (from the Kandle family most likely) that the father did the work.

The fact that this neck had *twelve* strings on the second neck is extremely unusual for the period, suggesting that this would have been a later instrument.²⁴



Above: Front and back of the customized heads for steel guitar playing.

As you can see from all the instruments above – Almcrantz and Simon instruments are *already* diverse enough to make it difficult if not impossible to identify any “smoking gun” features. As mentioned in the introduction, can we possibly compare features between Almcrantz and Truax instruments? If we call up the Truax PDF article²⁵ next to this one and compare all those harp guitars – confirmed or attributed – to those here, what do we find?

Well, oval soundholes, certainly. But that feature was by no means unique to just those two builders. Orville Gibson – in Kalamazoo, just 30 miles from Truax in Battle Creek – was doing the same thing. Waldo up in Saginaw, Michigan did an oval-hole harp guitar as well. Stahl (Wisconsin) would have the Larson brothers use the idea just after 1910. So, it’s hard to use only the soundhole shape for identifications.

To my eye, similarities in design and specific features (seen in images) are superficial at best. Yet it’s interesting that all these makers/companies were based in Chicago or nearby Michigan and Wisconsin and overlapped in time. Almcrantz built c. 1894-c. 1907, Truax from c. 1901 and for just a few more years, the Waldo Company’s output was predominately the late 1890s, while the

²⁴ I have placed the earliest 12-string necks on American guitars so far at c.1900, no earlier.

²⁵ https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/Truax_Harp_Guitars-Gregg_Miner.pdf

harp guitar output of the Larsons (specifically August) were Maurer, Dyer and unbranded harp guitars that seem to have first appeared around 1901. Of course, accurately dating any of the surviving specimens in both my Almcrantz and Truax articles is difficult to impossible.

Nevertheless, without any smoking gun clues, we are still left with many commonalities: to one extent or another, consider method of construction, materials, sensibilities, location, heritage, and community.²⁶

While an interesting “maker’s puzzle,” it was never the real purpose of this article, which was simply to present what we currently know of Almcrantz, an interesting young entrepreneur who deserves more study. It’s sad that beyond perhaps his 6-string guitars, his other instruments and inventions went nowhere, and he found himself struggling in Indiana, first as a farm laborer, then a railroad laborer.

At least he eventually managed to put his old woodworking skills to use once again; by the 1930 census he was back in Chicago, working as a cabinet maker. He stopped working by 1940 and passed away on December 8th, 1942, in Cook County, Illinois.

As one born and raised in Cook County, I *do* hope we discover more Almcrantz instruments and history in the future!

Photo credits:

Kramer & Kramer, Inc. (March 2014): p1 left, 9 left
Heritage Auctions (January 2014): 1 right, 12
The Cadenza (my Photoshop): 2 bottom, 5
eBay (April 2017): 9 center, 10 (all)
eBay: 6
Googlebooks.com: 2 top
Googlepatents: 3,4,7,8
Invaluable.com: 6 bottom right
National Music Museum: 6 top
Schoenberg Guitars: 7 left
Stay Gold Guitars: 7 right
Reverb.com (2025): 7 right
Gregg Miner: 4 bottom right, 11 top, 13
The Sousa Archives and Center for American Music at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign: 14, 15
Anonymous: 5 bottom



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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The Harp Guitar Foundation Archival Project

²⁶ List provided by Andrew Mullane, and a good one!