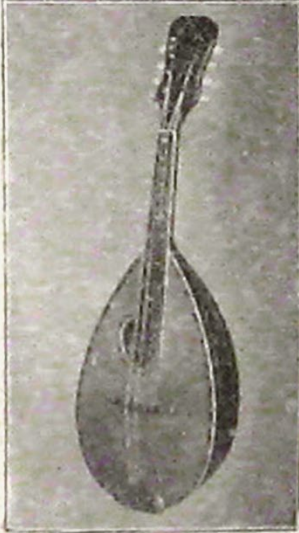


Truax Harp Guitars

Gregg Miner



**TRUAX MANDOLINS
AND GUITARS and the
TRUAX PATENT AD-
JUSTABLE BRIDGE.**

TRUAX Instruments are hand made. Only the best material is used in the construction of the Truax instruments and the workmanship is unexcelled. The system of bracing used, the improved models and designs, and many points in the construction were worked out with especial reference to tone and durability.

Careful attention is given every detail, so that when the instruments leave our factory they are in good playing condition.

The Truax Patent Adjustable Bridge which is used on all our mandolins, guitars and harp-guitars, is one of the most valuable and practical musical inventions of recent years, inasmuch as it has to do with the most important feature of an instrument—the tone.

Write immediately for our Descriptive Catalogue and special prices.

**TRUAX MUSIC COMPANY
Battle Creek, Mich.**



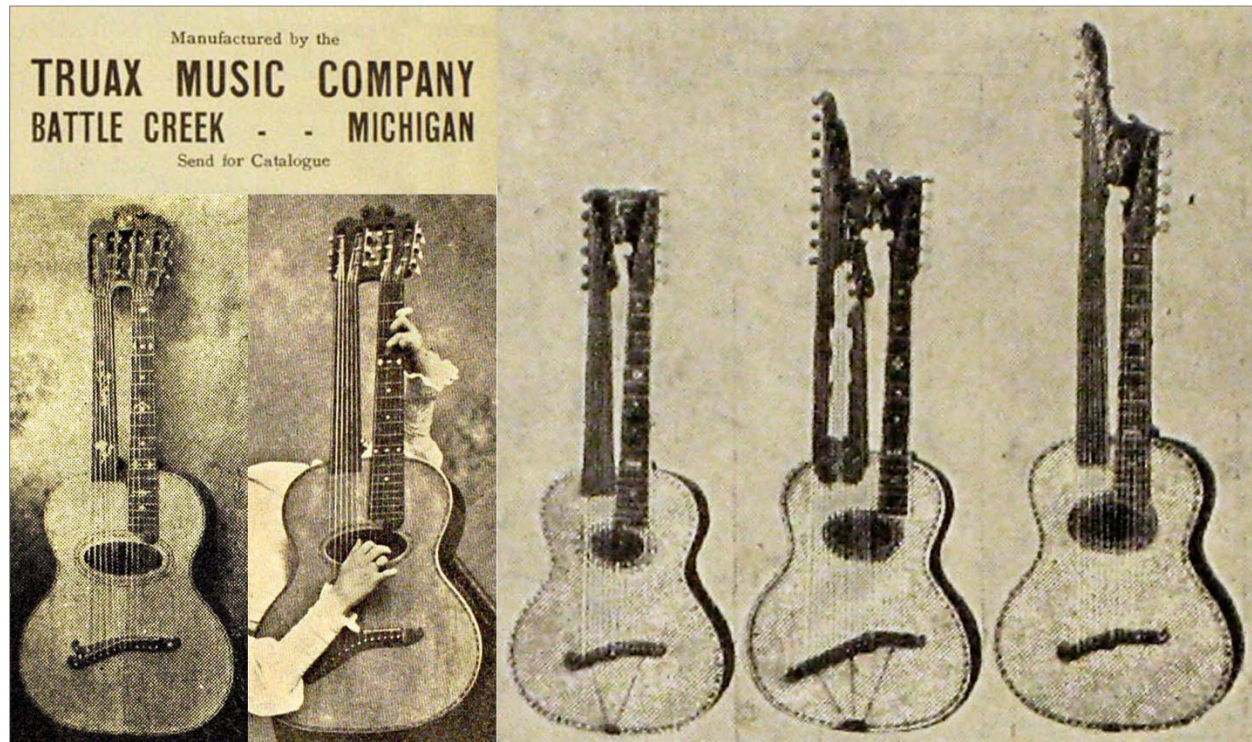
“Write immediately for our Descriptive Catalogue and special prices.”

Man, what I wouldn't give for that 1903 Truax catalog!

Of course, seeing the original Kellogg's factory in Battle Creek, Michigan would've been fascinating as well.

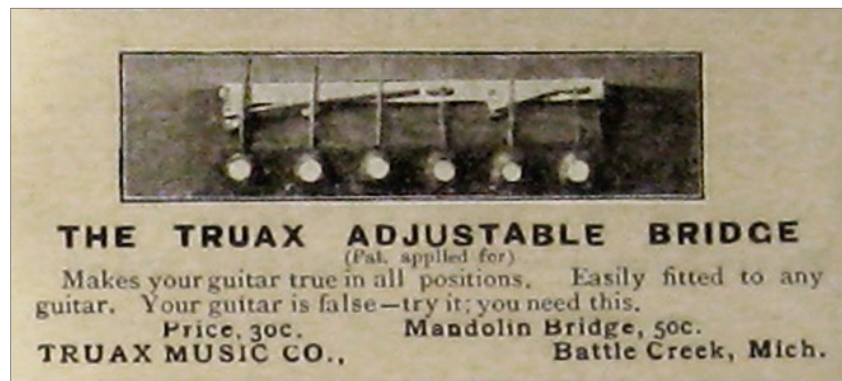


One of the previous Battle Creek establishments grew into a monolith, the other was little-known then, and all but completely forgotten today. In fact, the only reason the Truax Music Company comes up at all is due to their tantalizing early 1900s *Cadenza* ads and the extremely rare occasional harp guitar that pops up today.

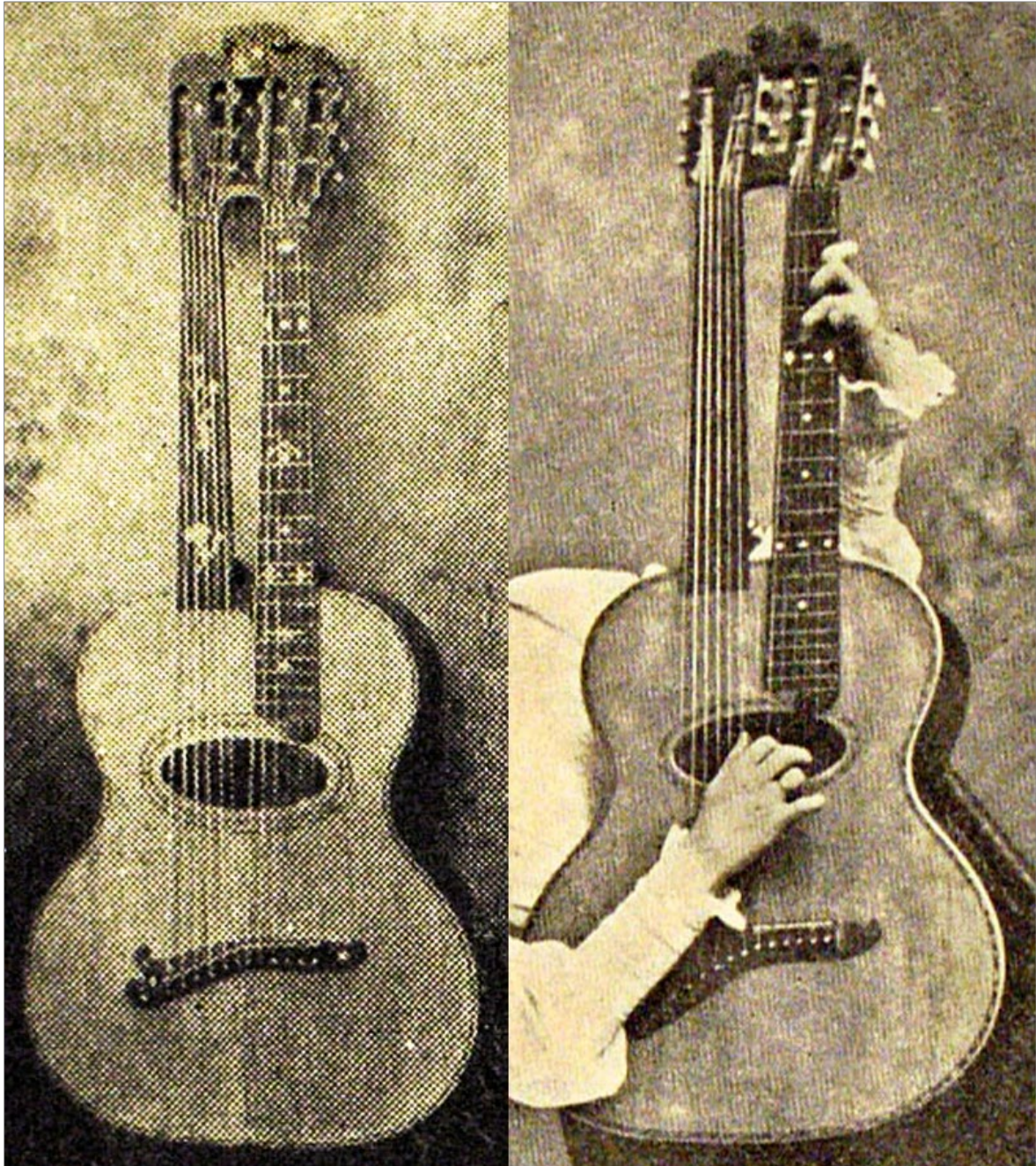


While Harpguitars.net has had references to this cryptic musical instrument brand since its inception, those entries are very few and far between. To date, I have found information on the Truax Music Company only in issues of *The Cadenza* from May 1901 to May 1907, gleaned from their monthly advertisements.

Their first advertisement was for a unique bridge - way ahead of its time - that may look familiar to finicky guitar players and builders today! Has anyone ever found an instrument with one of these early 1900 compensated bridges?



Before the end of that first year, the Battle Creek, Michigan company had also begun offering instruments, including harp guitars, as the December 1901 *Cadenza* included not only a new combination advertisement showing the adjustable bridge and a brand-new harp guitar, but a second, nearly identical harp guitar in an artist profile!



The pictured advertisement instrument at left had fancy inlays in the head and both necks (that for the sub-basses not intended to be played), while the second instrument in the hands of the artist was a plain model, and seemingly otherwise identical, other than having a more slanted bridge for the bass strings.



Estella McCutcheon,

Of Battle Creek, Mich.

Mrs. Estella McCutcheon, of Battle Creek, Mich., whose portrait graces our title page this month, is a most accomplished performer on the harp-guitar and is very prominent in the musical circles of her native city.

The guitar is an extremely difficult instrument to master, and the harp-guitar, especially, is both difficult and awkward for a lady to manipulate successfully; but Mrs. McCutcheon performs difficult music with ease and skill.

She is an advanced pupil of Mr. J. Worth Allen, a noted teacher, of Battle Creek, and is one of the best guitarists in that vicinity. Her talent is unusually brilliant and her musical training has been thorough and effective.

Mrs. McCutcheon plays a twelve-stringed harp-guitar, and, although she is quite small, she handles the large instrument easily and gracefully.

She is a member of the Allen Mandolin, Banjo and Guitar Orchestra, an organization of reputation throughout Michigan.

The artist is one Estella McCutcheon,¹ living in the same town of Battle Creek as the Truax Company. The same issue published the program of a recent concert where she accompanied her music teacher Mr. Allen on her harp guitar. Folks, this was 1901, and “small women” were already easily handling large harp guitars!

The moment I saw these fascinating Truax instruments, I wondered if I would ever actually locate a surviving example.

Finally, in about 2020, one was listed on Reverb.com!

¹ As I wrote in my 2021 blog on Women Harp Guitarists: <https://www.harp guitars.net/2021/03/08/women-in-harp-guitar-history-introduction/>



Though the instrument was (in my mind) a total a basket case, it sold for \$650 and likely hangs on a luthier's wall while they gather the courage (and financial incentive) to tackle their project.





It could almost be Ms. McCutcheon's very own instrument, if not for the slightly different binding and rosette. I would assume the bridge hidden under her arm to match the surviving specimen's as well.

Amazingly, its serialized label was still present!



“No. 1051” is almost certainly the 51st instrument – including “mandolins, guitars, and harp-guitars” labeled by the company.

The label confirms the identity of another that long languished in my files below. Labeled “Truax candidate” and submitted by one Mr. Lugosch, it seems identical, even to the fancy inlay on the fifth fret. If only we had better photos, as this *could* be an example with its original Truax compensated bridge.

Certainly, the rarity of Truax instruments doesn’t bode well for having a much higher count than 51 instruments. Beyond these harp guitars, I have heard only of a possibly related “Thos. Truax” bowlback mandolin, sold on Facebook Marketplace; sadly, the original page seems unrecoverable.

Our bigger mystery is “who made them”?! We’ve been through this rodeo before; the claim of “Manufacturer” means nothing. When I noticed the multi-colored wood purfling on the surviving specimen, I of course thought of the Dyer harp guitars built by the Larson brothers in Chicago. They built instruments for many other individuals and firms around the greater Chicago area – wouldn’t it be a good chance that they also built for Truax? (Battle Creek is a 170-mile drive from Chicago today.).

Which brings me to the marvelous instrument on the next page...





If it looks familiar, it's because it was once owned by the late collector Scott Chinery and has appeared in a couple of books.

In *The Chinery Collection*, author Tony Bacon wrote "Larson Harp Guitar, this example c.1920, Body: 20" wide, 5" deep. Although this instrument has no marks or labels to help identify it, it does have some of the characteristic physical qualities that were commonly used by the Larsons for their instruments. Robert Carl Hartman, grandson of Carl Larson and author of a book on the Larsons, has identified this unusual Gothic-style harp guitar as being the work of the Larsons."

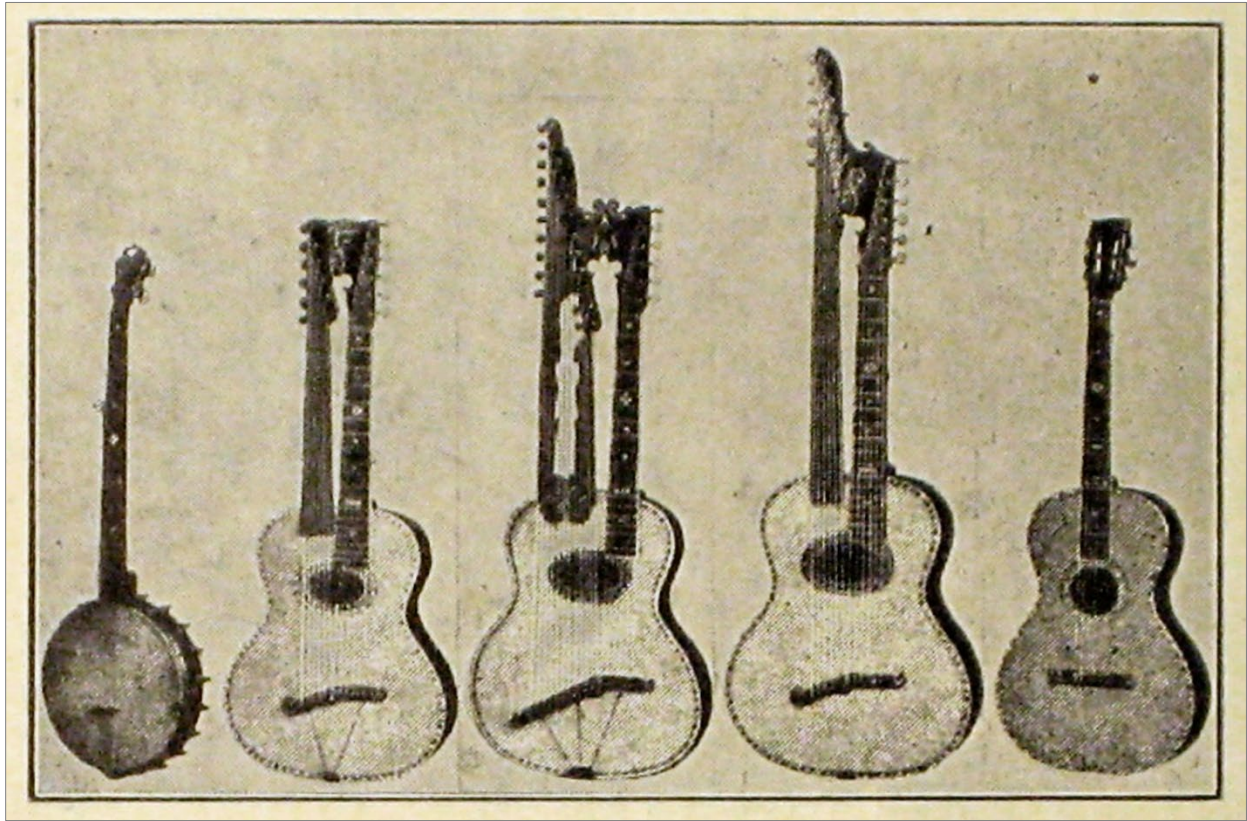
I generally choose to remain neutral on the subject of which of the many hundreds of "Larson-built" instruments out there are truly Larsons – even this one, which I examined in person at its new home in the collection of Guitar Center co-founder Ray Scherr. So, I'll leave that conclusion to the reader.

Below are my other photos taken of it while visiting the collection with Jessica Huebner, then tasked with cleaning and re-stringing all of Ray's instruments! (I supplied them with the necessary sub-bass strings.)

It's certainly an unusual and remarkable instrument. I love the double six-on-a-plate tuners on either side of the bass head to provide for its long scale and fully chromatic 12 subs. I noticed that this entire sub-bass attachment "neck" was carved fairly crudely. The bridge was OK, I suppose, but the bone saddle was slanted *backwards*, a curious mistake.

While Bob identified it as a Larson, it seems to have few design features of their many other harp guitars. My opinion at present is that it was *built for* Truax by either the Larsons or another Chicago luthier/shop yet to be determined. It is of course possible that Truax had their own capable shop in Battle Creek.

Whether or not we agree that this was built by the Larsons, I think we could agree to date it c.1901-c.1907. Personally, I'd push it toward the middle of that timeframe, and I think you'll agree as we continue with the Truax iconography.

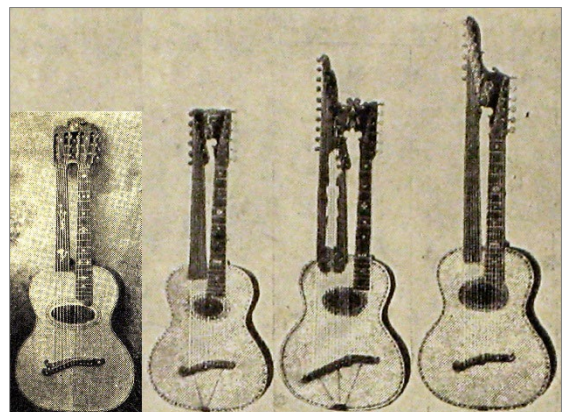


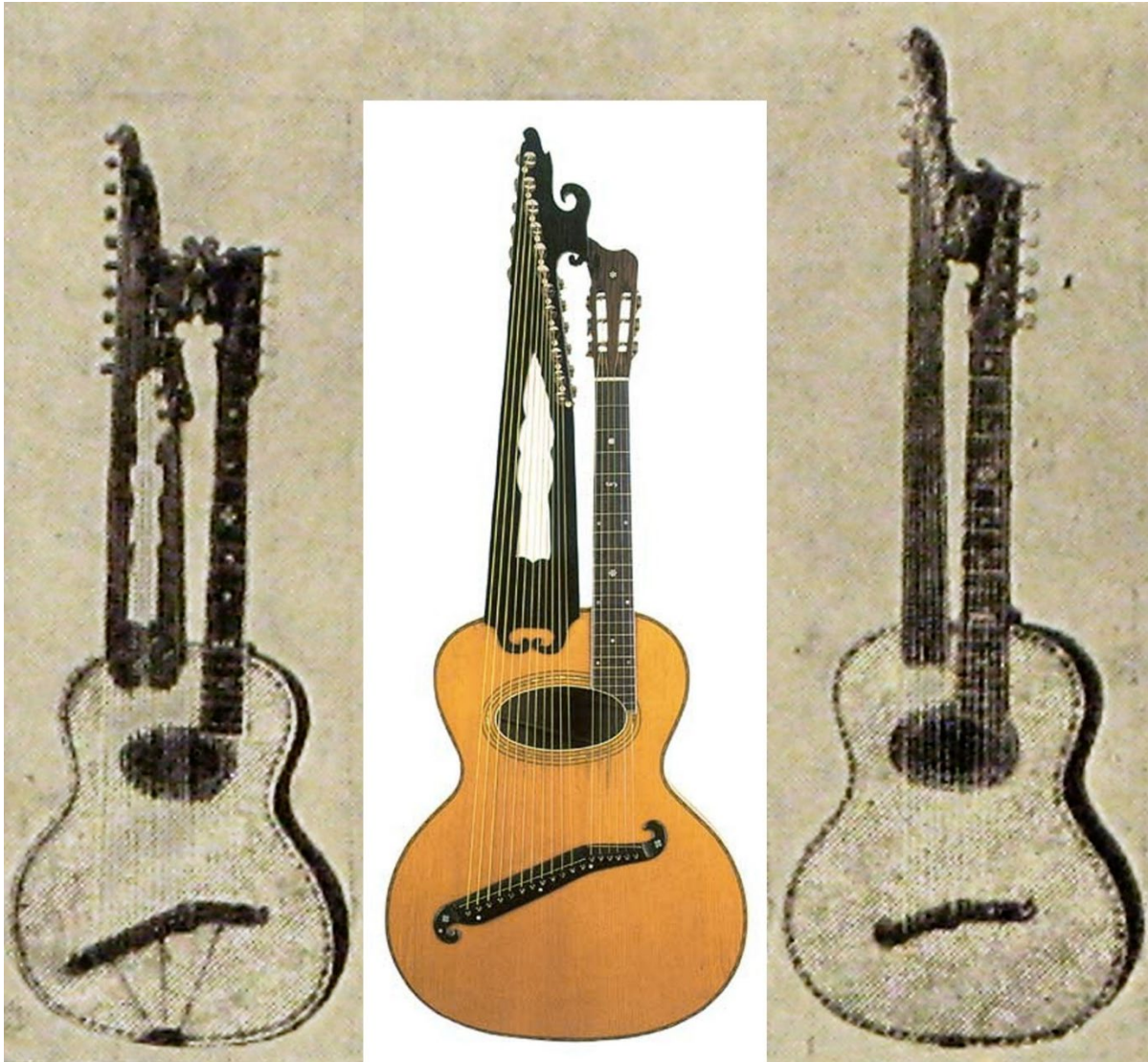
In December 1904, The Truax Music Company advertised a re-vamped line of instruments, including *three* new harp guitars. This ad would continue to appear until their advertising campaign ended in May 1907. Compared to the original 6 + 6 stringing design with four sets of 3-plate tuners, these new instruments were pretty creative!

On the left is a fairly normal-looking “double-neck” 6 + 6 instrument utilizing two 6-plate tuners on the outsides of the head array.

The instrument at right similarly looks like a 6 + 6 instrument with the same tuner arrangement, but with a greatly extended bass neck for a longer scale length.

The middle instrument is the wackiest of all, and of course brings me to why I long ago told Bob Hartman that the Chinery “Larson” was likely a “custom Truax.” Let’s compare, referencing the (now four) Truax models at right.





My observations are that the “Larson Truax” is quite close to the Truax on the left, as both have that wild wide bass string support with the cut-out. Its body appears larger than either of these. The neck reverts to the older 3-plate-on-each-side arrangement, while the subs utilize the new idea of six tuners each on the outside of the head array. (BTW, note that the left Truax *also* has 12 sub-basses – with 10 tuners on the outside left and 2 singles *inside* the cutout!). The extant instrument has the wide oval soundhole of the earlier models with another “what we’d expect from Truax” bridge. With clearer woodcut/halftones, I think we’d see additional similar details on all these instruments.

The bottom line is that without a label, the ex-Chinery>Scherr Collection harp guitar remains a mystery – a possible Larson *and/or* (to me) a likely Truax.

I’ll continue with the rest of the photographs (the only ones we have to date) that I was able to take at the Scherr collection warehouse several years ago...and a reminder to keep on the lookout for that Reverb instrument post-restoration and any other clues!







Sadly, I didn't have the time nor Larson specialists with me when I snapped these photos. Clearly this instrument warrants examination by a team of experts.

You know what else does? The harp guitars built by **August Gerhard Almcrantz**. I bring this Chicago builder into this discussion due to some similarities between his harp guitars and the Truax examples. I'll prepare a short monograph soon.



Acknowledgements: Jessica Huebner, for finagling my invitation to Ray Scherr's remarkable collection, and Ray for his hospitality. Bob Hartman and Andrew Mullane for brainstorming.

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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