

A Vega Harp Guitar

◆ ◆ ◆

Gregg Miner

with Patrick Martin

In the United States, some fifty-five different firms and individuals built harp guitars in the five decades around the turn of the previous century. *Nearly everyone*, in fact!

So, I always found it surprising that the Vega Company, which would eventually make a full line of mandolin orchestra family instruments, never offered their own harp guitar.

Well, apparently, I was wrong!



The very first Vega-labelled – and presumably Vega-built – harp guitar was discovered in a February 2024 auction in Arizona by Phoenix singer-songwriter (and occasional self-taught repairman) Patrick Martin. Though missing any sort of head attachment for sub-bass strings, the instrument was identifiable as a harp guitar by its nine-string pin bridge. Patrick got it for a song just to see what he might do with it. Indeed, he ended up restoring it and creating a new sub-bass string attachment for it. Patrick kindly provided photos of the project. Let's take a look!

Left, as offered by the Auction house

Patrick initially thought he had a Dahlman harp guitar, as the bridge is identical to those instruments, but with only three basses, instead of the usual four. (The last hole on the left is a screw hole, matching one on the right.) But why did it have a Vega label?

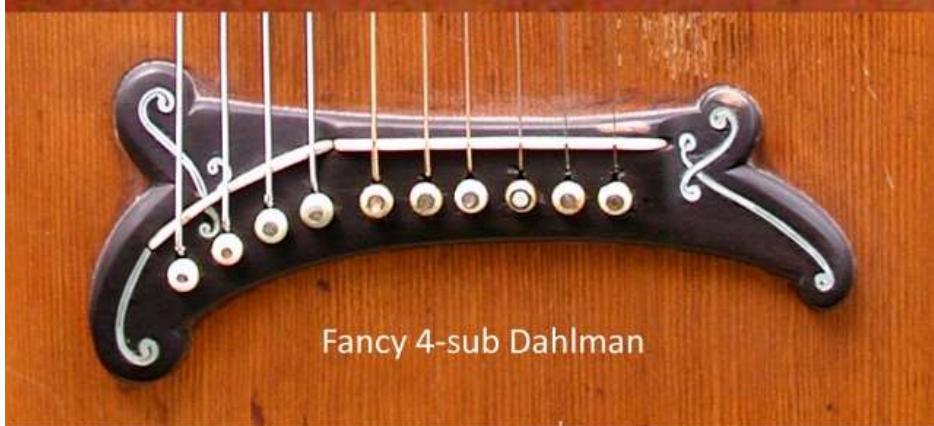


The standard Vega label above was used by the company for over two decades, but no one seems to know when it first appeared (the company was founded in 1881). Dahlman filed the patent for his harp guitar in April, 1891, which was most likely when his instruments were first made – and then into the early 1890s. We know that some have labels by “Charles Akeson,” who was a Minneapolis neighbor of Dahlman’s. Did Akeson make all of them? No one knows, nor have I seen an actual Dahlman label (or any other) in what seem to be “Dahlman” instruments.

Perhaps there were multiple builders of Dahlman’s harp guitars, including Dahlman himself. The bridge details certainly seem to come in varying degrees of carving style and aesthetics. Let’s take a quick look:



Henry Dahlman's original 6-subs instrument



Fancy 4-sub Dahlman



Dahlman or Akeson

The three above have a bit more 3-dimensional carving in the lower scrolls, whereas the next three do not.



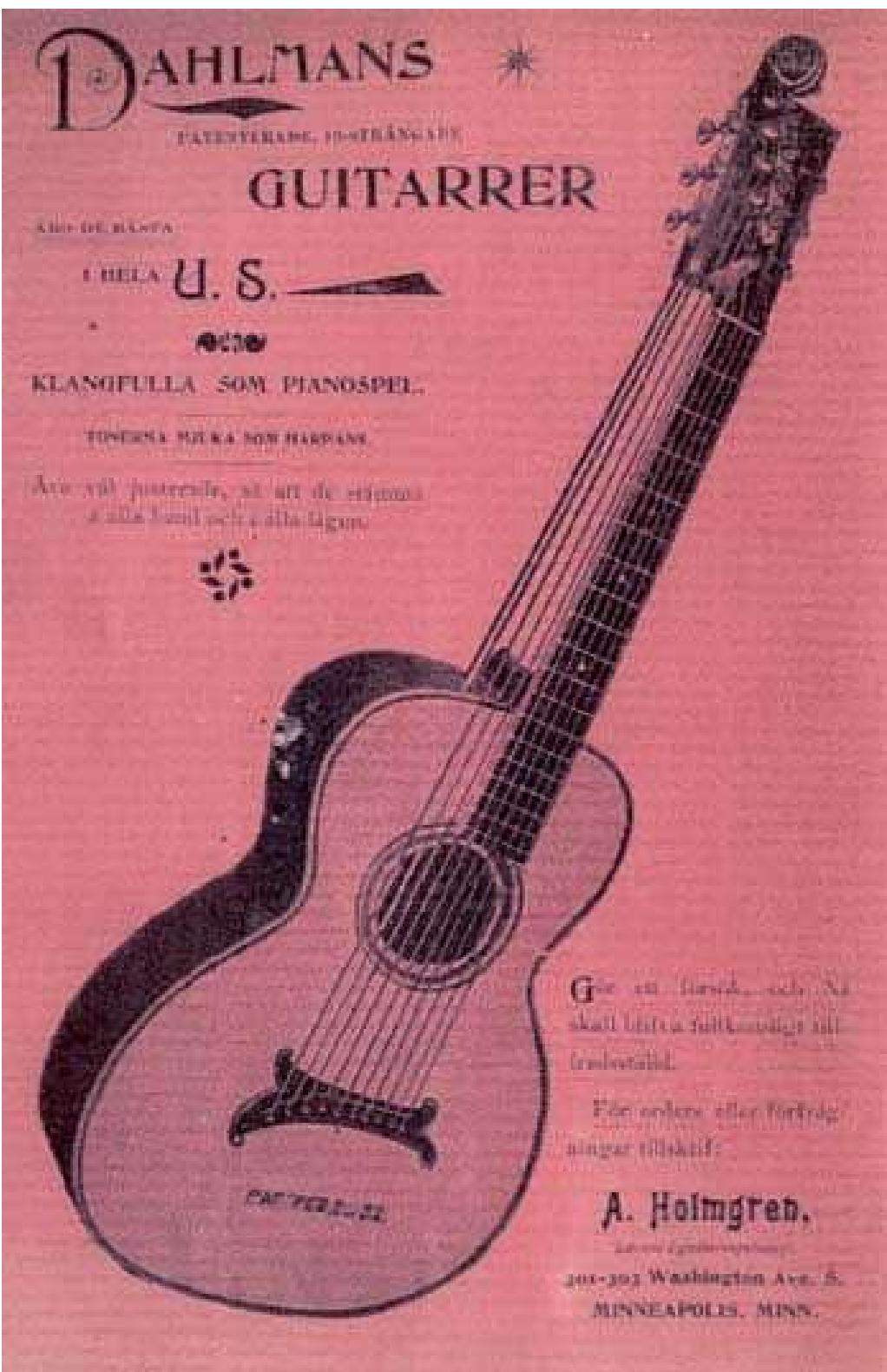
These first two Akeson-labeled instruments above appear fairly identical. The third (a parallaxed image) looks rather different.

In comparison, the Vega looks much like the first group, but with even more carving:



Just for interest's sake, these are not the only bridges copied in this style. The next one comes from Tennessee!





Was there any relationship between Dahlman in Minnesota and the Vega Company in Boston? I can only think of the fact that they are all Swedes! Did Dahlman know some of the Vega builders? Or were they aware of *him*? And more to the point, *which instrument(s) came first?*

Here's a look at both makers, shown roughly to scale:



Vega

Dahlman (Akeson-built)

The Vega is slightly smaller, but has a longer scale. Comparison of key dimensions:

	Vega	Dahlman/Akeson
Scale length	25"	24-1/8"
Lower bout	13-3/4"	14-5/8"
Body length	18-3/4"	19-5/16"
Body depth	4-1/8"	4-3/8"
Bridge width	7-1/4"	7-1/2"

Patrick also noticed that "the neck on your 10-string is farther to the right than the Vega and the rod somewhat balances the offset on the other side." (The Vega had no support rod.)

Dahlmans are seen with various woods (my Akeson back and sides are oak!); the Vega uses Brazilian rosewood for back & sides, head veneer. It has a spruce top and mahogany neck.

Of key interest is how the Vega originally held its three bass strings. Did it *also* have the Dahlman patent head for playing the basses with the left thumb?



Above is the Dahlman/Akeson headstock attachment, which creates a condensed quarter circle for the left hand thumb to easily pluck. (The right hand plucks only the neck strings!)



The Vega, on the other hand, has the same holes and marks on both sides of its headstock for the same standard tuners. The only clues are the two screw holes in the top of the headstock. *What* was attached there? It is difficult to imagine.

The other key question is: *which appeared first?*

Patrick imagines the Vega as being a “prototype” that led from 9 strings to 10 for Dahlman. But that’s assuming there is any relationship. And if we could date it! The label doesn’t offer any real clue; its earliest appearance that I am aware of is c.1899, and it was in use into the 1920s. I queried banjo expert Jim Bollman who had no information either, other than a “wild guess of 1905-1910.”

Unless further dating clues come to light, as I see it, Vega’s Swedish team could have seen an image or specimen of Dahlman’s instrument and built their own “experiment” at almost any time. (I say “experiment” because that’s precisely what this instrument appears as to me.)

When Patrick showed the photos to restorer Jake Wildwood, Jake replied “Just judging from the build and inlay style, I think it puts it from about 1895-1905. I have worked on a half dozen Vega guitars from around then and later ones, and that’s what it looks like to my eye. It’s possible it’s earlier but I think the label style and finishing looks closer to the above time frame. The case looks about 20-30 years earlier in terms of the way it’s built but, considering the guitar, it’s likely they made it custom for it so it wasn’t a standardized case from the time and such things would vary from the norm and maybe use old or wonky hardware. Or... it’s just an older case! That happens all the time, too.”

So, Jake’s eyeball guess doesn’t help us with our “chicken or egg” question. The case he mentions is an old coffin case; of course, we can’t know if it’s original.



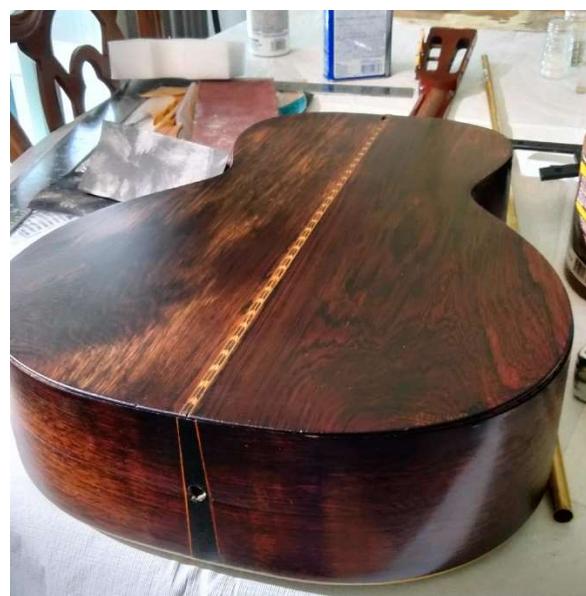


Another curious feature is the “Harry Oster” penciled on the 11th fret. Could this be *the* Harry Oster – the premier folk musicologist of America’s 1950s–’60s?!

Patrick contacted the family, including Oster’s son Aaron and his cousin Jeanne, who currently runs Guitar Stop, the music store founded by Harry’s brother Edward in 1962. Unfortunately, Aaron said he knows of no images of the Vega, and that the signature on the fretboard did not look like his father’s handwriting. Jeanne also does not know of any Vega connection.

Next up are some photos from Patrick’s restoration:





As for the headstock bass attachment, this is what Patrick came up with:



The additional decal was a custom design from a friend. He also added a similar support rod just in case!



The renovated instrument in its case:



Patrick and I would love to hear others' thoughts on the timeline and any hypothetical Vega-Dahlman relationship!



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