



Introduction

DISCOVERING A LIFE! Sol Roach

It was December 2007 and I was sitting at my computer working on the introduction to a book. The book was to be about my great grandfather Sol Roach (1856-1933). I was 61 years old and for most of those 61 years Sol had held no special place in my thinking. My only knowledge about him was from a few anecdotes provided by my father who was raised by Sol and his wife Margaret. Many of the remembrances about Sol that he cared to pass on were negative. The most important information to me however was that Sol made violins. In addition to this he was an outdoorsman, a merchant and a gunsmith, among other things. The process of going from casual knowledge to authoring a book about Sol is as much a part of the Sol Roach story as is the actual information about him.

Trying to reconstruct a life that began in 1856 on the Pennsylvania frontier, a life that was lived in the newly opened up coal mining and timber areas of the late 1800's, all the while trying to discover the violin maker proved to be quite a challenge. I discovered that vital statistics weren't kept, records were destroyed in labor disputes, family records and memorabilia were washed away in the Johnstown flood of 1936 and relatives that were still living had incomplete or faulty memories of their youth. There were very few people still living that knew him personally or that even knew of him.

I had been aware of Sol and his violins for most of my life. As a 4th grader in 1955 I had taken lessons for a year on my father's 1911 violin. I was aware that my great grandfather had made it and that inside it were pictures of my father and his sister as high school age athletes. As a music education major at the University of Minnesota in the middle 1960's I had taken a strings technique class and was again in contact with the violin. In 1958 my father's aunt Bernice, Sol's youngest daughter, had sent two more violins and I was aware of them. But being a hard core band person in my younger years, I had the violins in the category of "out of sight, out of mind". The violins surfaced again at my father's funeral in 1985 when we had his violin fixed up and played for the service. But then it went back into the case and into the closet until 2003.

One sunny spring evening in 2003 I was at the sink washing the supper dishes and the phone rang. On the other end was Gary Nastase, one of my best friends going all the way back to military service in 1969. He was now the band director at Forrest Hills High School in Sidman, Pennsylvania, not far from Johnstown and Windber, the town where Sol lived and conducted his business. Gary was on chaperone duty that night at the high school prom with a friend of his, Stan Ambroe of Dunlo. He said that Stan had mentioned that his wife had just picked up her violin from the repairman that day and that the violin had been made in Windber. Gary, remembering our many conversations over the years about my family's connection to Windber and about Sol's violin making, immediately called me on his cell phone. With the sounds of a high school prom in the background I was again connected with these violins. It was agreed that on my next visit to Pennsylvania I would visit Stan and his wife Mary Ellen and take a look at this instrument.

The opportunity for a visit came in March of 2004. The key purpose of the trip from my home in Glencoe, Minnesota to the Johnstown area was research on my father. All of his high school memorabilia had been destroyed in the Johnstown flood of 1936. Although his home town was Windber, 7 miles southeast of Johnstown, he used the home of one of his aunts for storing his personal effects and also as his home address while at college. Her home was in the part of downtown Johnstown where I understand 13 feet of water rolled through during the flood. My goal was to try to reconstruct my father's basic high school record by locating items such as sports clippings from the newspaper and high school year books.

In addition to meeting the Ambroes and examining their Roach violin I also made a contact with the Windber Museum and Edward Surkosky. When I visited the Borough Offices and Police Department looking for information it was suggested that I contact Ed. Ed graciously opened up the museum for me (it's closed during the winter months) so I could view three more instruments that bore Sol's tag. Ed was also able to help me with additional research.

Although Sol's violins had always been around my life, this project officially began at the check out counter of House of Note, a string instrument dealership and repair shop in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. The date was September 29, 2005 at approximately 1pm. Several weeks prior to this a local professional violinist, Jack Noennig, had stopped by my home for a visit and to have me write an easy string arrangement of a tune he had written for use with his community strings group. We did the arrangement and spent some time talking. I thought about the three violins that I had in the closet and brought them out for Jack to look over. While he was "fiddling" with them I was thinking to myself..." If the 8 year olds in his community strings group can do this, I, with my masters degree in music education and years of woodwind playing experience, can do it too." So I asked if I could become a part of the group as a rank beginner. I assured him that I knew enough to know when not to play! That was fine with him.

This meant I would have to decide which violin to use and get it in working order. I picked my instrument, which just happened to be Sol's personal fiddle with his picture inlaid on the back. However, when I tried to tune it the 100 year-old tailpiece gut broke. I called Jack wondering where to take it for repairs and he recommended Paul Dahlin at House of Note. Paul looked the violin over and indicated a few other issues that should be taken care of, the most pressing being a failure of the glue joint joining the top board to the ribs. This all seemed within reason as I wanted the violin as a player and not a family trophy.

In due time I got a phone call from an excited Paul. To properly fix the separation he had to remove the top of the violin, and to his surprise, found the under side of the board covered with handwriting with a lot of personal information. He suggested I come down right away to take a look. Being 50 miles away and on my way to a commitment, there was no way I could get there in a reasonable amount of time so he suggested that he would take pictures for me.

When the violin was done I made the trip to St. Louis Park in great anticipation. Everyone at the shop was fascinated by what they had found. I had a lot of questions too, particularly about the quality of the work. My parting question was: "Is Sol Roach listed in any of the directories of violin makers?" Paul ran to the back room to consult the directories and returned with the announcement that there was no Roach listed. This

project began at that moment as I realized there was an injustice, not only in the violin world, but in the family. I made up my mind that day that I would try to get Sol listed in those directories.

He's still not in the printed directory but that may now be the least of the desired outcomes. In the process of my searching for his violins and the details of his life, Sol has been featured on internet websites. My writings about him have ended up being quoted on forums and in sales activity on the internet auction site E-bay. Newspaper and magazine articles have been written about him. I've had the pleasure of contacting top luthiers who have shown interest in this fascinating character and his work. And now a book! I think Sol is getting a better deal than just a name mention among the thousands in a directory. Not to mention the fact that my search for people who own Sol Roach violins and my inquiries have caused these instruments to be taken out of the closet and in some cases fixed up to playing condition again. What better way of honoring a maker than by having his instruments played.

The best part of this project has been meeting the people who own or are interested in Roach violins and most particularly discovering my many cousins with whom I had had little or no previous contact. As it turns out, several of these cousins are delving into family history, each with their own areas of interest and have been of great assistance to this project. I also feel an unseen hand at work guiding me to the sources that will fill in the blanks of the story. Whether that hand is my father, who never told us what he should have about his family, or Sol, who should have received more recognition and respect for his work but didn't, I can't say. It's been a fascinating journey into the past and into my own family history.

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