



## Chapter 1

# THE PROCESS - Learning to be a detective.

How do you get a persons name in a directory? You can't just call up the author or publisher of the directory and say something like: "My great grandfather was a violin maker and I think you should list him in your directory." You have to have something substantive to say about him and I didn't know very much about Sol. It's no mystery either why makers like Sol aren't in the directories. According to the luthiers I've talked to, American violin makers during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were paid little attention, even very well known and competent makers. The mind set was that stringed instruments had to come from Europe to be of any value. Many makers were relatively unknown outside of there own locality. Some had apprenticed and others were self-taught. Some operated commercially and others strictly as amateurs or hobbyists. There were many books published in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on how to make a violin, complete with templates and step-by-step directions.

Perhaps my moment of epiphany at the House of Note took place at a providential moment. I had been planning for months to undertake a massive family history project anyway. I had already made two trips to Pennsylvania just for the purpose of research but the object of my interest at that time was my father. My mother passed away just after Christmas of 2004. Even though she had alzheimers and was in a long- term care facility, I felt that while she was living her possessions were her possessions so I didn't disturb them. With her passing they became mine and preparation for her funeral really proved the need for such a project. Attempting to put together a picture board for her funeral revealed that there were pictures in several locations around the house. Collections had been broken up to create scrapbooks for specific occasions with different family members materials mixed together. One pile of pictures, dutifully wrapped in a plastic bag with several rubber bands around it and tucked away on a shelf with, well, junk, contained pictures with dates ranging from about 1902 to the early 1980's. Most of these pictures had no dates or identification written on them. My answer to this was to scour the house and find every hiding place and get every piece of family history in one place, tear it all apart, reorganize, date and identify it as best I could, then store it in a way it could be easily used for reference.

I started in October of 2005, and working at it every day, finally finished up in March of 2006. As I worked my way through my father's possessions I found just a few pictures of Sol and his wife Margaret but nothing else about them. By February of 2006 I felt that I had everything well enough under control that I could start to devote time to Sol and act on my desire to garner for him some manner of recognition.

The first efforts were the usual internet searches that turned up nothing. Then I started looking for violin or string sites that might lead me to something. One site, Oriscus.com, had a question answering service. The site was run by Dwight Newton who works at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. Dwight is an organologist and is currently editor of

the newsletter for the prestigious American Musical Instrument Society (AMIS). My query explained what I was trying to do and Dwight replied that it was all very interesting, especially the documentation inside the violin. He suggested the same internet searches I had already made but could offer nothing better at the time than best wishes. After a couple of exchanges I heard nothing more from Dwight until July. In an e-mail message he said that he had decided to feature Sol as a research project on his web site and asked if I could take pictures of the three violins in my possession and send any and all materials to him.

Thus started a flurry of activity. My nephew came over with his digital photography equipment to make sure we got high quality pictures. Dwight had sent instructions about what shots were important and what they should look like. We suspended violins with nylon fishing line from light fixtures and shot over a hundred pictures of the three violins. These along with the three images of Sol, went to Dwight.

Dwight also suggested that I take all of the information I had and put it on to a time line, which I did. This covered less than a page. I then expanded the time line into a narrative during which the simple act of explanation revealed new directions to pursue and elaborate on. It also helped define the questions that should be asked and areas of weakness. Many of these issues could be resolved using the internet. Some issues though, could only be resolved by hard evidence that could only be gained from someone who knows the answer or from an actual document or artifact. Since none of these things existed in the family, outside sources would have to do. The images I had, along with the nine page narrative, went to Dwight and were presented as a research project on his website.

There was a strategy here in addition to being generally informative. People viewing the site would be on the lookout for Roach violins with the result that instruments might be located. The detailed pictures of the violins were there with the hope that an experienced eye would see something in the construction technique that might suggest a known school or maker. Ultimately the site had an impact as it produced the earliest known Roach violin and also influenced sales activity on the internet auction site E-bay. Suddenly there was a flurry of sales activity involving Roach regraduated violins. Bidders were corresponding with Dwight and using language common to the E-bay descriptions and quoting from my narrative about Sol in an attempt to gauge the value of the instruments.

What kind of paper trail did Sol and the Roach family leave in the different locations where they lived around central Pennsylvania? Fortunately the Windber Museum had a 1900 special edition of the Windber Era newspaper that identified every merchant and industry with a bit of biography to go with it. This at least, provided a beginning along with Sol's obituary, for determining where he had lived.

It didn't take long to determine that hard facts and evidence would be hard to come by. The life stages of someone born on the Pennsylvania frontier a hundred and fifty years ago may not have been recorded as consistently as we record life today. Our subject was several generations removed, his artifacts lost or destroyed, his friends and the relatives that were living when he was living were gone along with their stories. Encouragement by Dwight to present only hard fact was graciously taken but that approach would not tell much of a story. In its absence, fact would have to be approached obliquely.

The search became an exercise in dot connecting. There is a great danger in this approach as it is too easy to create a life that didn't actually exist. You can only connect the dots that you have in order to draw your conclusions. **You may be missing that one dot that would completely change your conclusion.** In many areas speculation would have to be the order of the day and anyone reading the conclusions must be ready to differentiate between what is obviously a known fact and what is still up in the air. Too often we encounter an anecdote and want in the worst way to have it be fact, even when there is nothing on hand that will prove it. Dancing around the subject with oblique references may give a tantalizing indication, but it still doesn't prove the point conclusively.

My direction of research now shifted from my father to my great grandfather. The internet was only marginally useful. It was good for searches of public documents like census records. My cousin Nancy Davis of Ann Arbor, Michigan excels at this type of research and she found the Roaches at the appropriate 10 year points, even cracking a mystery along the way.

Sol's parent's family is present in the 1860 and 1870 counts but they were mysteriously missing from the 1880 census. Skillful internet sleuthing by Nancy uncovered them under the name Hoach, with an "H". She even found the original hand written document that showed what looked like the pen skipping or running very thin at the top of the "R" which could be why it was interpreted as an "H". The census taker may not have heard the name correctly.

Even something so basic as vital statistics was not available. How tall was he? What color were his eyes and hair? How much did he weigh? What kind of person might he have been? In February of 2006 I found that the funeral home that had handled Sol's funeral in 1933 was still in operation. I contacted the Meeks Funeral Home in Windber and they were very cooperative in helping find information. They still had the files from those years and as luck would have it, Sol's file contained several interesting items, among them a copy of his obituary and a pencil copy of his death certificate. As interesting as the death certificate was the blanks for vital statistics were just that, blank.

The death certificate was signed by a doctor that was not listed in the medical section of The Windber Story, so I assumed that as the death was a suicide, the doctor would be the county coroner. I was also able to obtain a copy of his wife Margaret's death certificate from 1931 and found that it was signed by a Dr. Brumbaugh. Margaret's death was the result of age and illness, so the certificate was likely signed by her attending physician, the family doctor. Ed Surkosky informed me that Dr. Brumbaugh's office had been in his home, which was on the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> and Graham Avenue directly west and across the street from the Roach home and business.

Later that year I was able to get a contact at the Windber Medical Clinic who was most helpful in trying to find medical records from those days. As it happened, the person I worked with at the medical clinic had been delivered by Dr. Brumbaugh. Unfortunately, there were no records left from the 1930's. Ed Surkosky suggested that the doctor might have taken his records with him when he moved to California. He said there was a living relative, but that the person was quite old. It seemed unlikely that this person would have any knowledge of old medical records. Not only was I hoping to discover vital statistics, but also a health history that might shed light on the obituary claim of failing health.

All was not lost though. As a boy (1950s and 60s) I was shown by my father a magazine from the 1940s, an Esquire magazine. And in this magazine was an article about a man named Sol who took a boy and his father fishing. My dad told my sister and I that this was a fictional article and that it sounded like it was about Sol, but that most of it was not true. The magazine was kept secreted away at the bottom of a trunk in the attic. After all, it was a girly magazine. Not very “girly” by today’s standards, but of course, as an observant young male, the location of this magazine was indelibly imprinted on my mind. And as another note of historical interest and family connection, the so-called pin-up in this edition was the actress Ann Southern. Ann Southern’s real name was Harriet Lake, and she graduated from Minneapolis Central High School in 1926, a year after my mother. However, I digress.

A search for the magazine in 1985 just before my father died revealed that it was gone! Disappeared! He claimed no knowledge of it. An old high school friend of mine was able to find a copy of that magazine, August 1940, in the Cincinnati Public Library, the pin-up being thoughtfully removed by concerned librarians. In the article entitled *The Parmachene Belle* by Edwin L. Peterson, Sol is described as having pale blue eyes, long white hair and being 6’ 2” in height.

The article is categorized as fiction, but just how much is fiction and how much isn’t? When Ed Surkosky of the Windber Museum read the article he said that even though the town and its location are not stated it can be none other than Windber, Pa. Even the location of businesses corresponded to the 1920s and 30s. However, the relationship between the author and Sol is revealed by my father in a 1979 interview and there would be no reason for Peterson to provide a description that is anything but accurate since he personally knew his subject. As to the height figure, he may never have actually known Sol’s true height. The context of the height figure is that of a small boy seeing his hero Sol at 6’ 2”, next to his father at 6’ 1”, in the dark, walking ahead of him as the towering figures they were in his life. Anyone over six feet in those days would be considered towering, so this may be an exaggeration to make a point. However, in a 1924 article about Sol’s younger brother Charles in the Clearfield Progress newspaper, Charles is said to be six feet two inches. It would then be entirely possible for Sol to be six two with one of his siblings also at six two.

The interview that was earlier referenced took place at the John Roach home in Glencoe, Minnesota in 1979. One of my cousins, Jeff Davis from Michigan (at that time), was studying at Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota, about 45 miles from Glencoe. Jeff paid an unannounced visit one day and was in search of family history. He brought his tape recorder with him and was able to get my father to open up like he never did with my sister and I. In that interview John said:

*“You’ve heard of Esquire Magazine. They still put it out today. It’s a sexy type of thing and the fellow who was the editor of Esquire, not the one who owns it now, but another one, lived in Pittsburgh. And, he was a regular fishing pal of your great grandfather’s. And he would come to Windber, which was about 75 miles, and Grandpap would take him fishing. So, after Grandpap died he wrote an article in Esquire Magazine*

*and we have it upstairs. It's somewhere up in the attic. But it's an article about Sol. That's what they called Grandpap, your great grandfather. They called him Sol, short for Selman. And the story is about Old Sol who's a great fisherman who made his own flies, even his own fishing rod and the many pleasant hours that this editor spent with Old Sol fishing. And then at the end it made some remark about, well, where ever Old Sol is now after he died, we're sure he's enjoying fishing someplace. Real nice."*

Of the few images that I had of Sol, one from 1913 showed him with several other people, adults and children of various ages, along with objects like fly fishing poles of standard length. I decided to see if I could use this picture to determine Sol's height.

The first step in determining Sol's true height was designating which item in the picture would be the measurement standard. I chose the disassembled bundled fly rods held in the adult's right hands. In a closet I had two old fly rods that my father had, one being old enough and similar



**(L-R, rear) Ted Wills, Bernice Roach age 12, Sol Roach. Front: John S. Roach age 5 and Stewart Roach. Picture not to scale.**

in appearance to the one in Sol's hand that it could be that very rod. The actual rod

segments measured 37 inches. Next I measured the rods in the picture and was satisfied that they both measured 1 and 3/8 inches (1.375"). I measured Sol's height in the picture from the back of the heel of his right leg to an estimated point inside his hat and got a measurement of 2 and 9/16 inches (2.562"). Doing the math for a proportion Sol's height came out to 68.94 inches or roughly 5' 9". Sol's son Wilbur was 5' 11". Wilbur's son John was 6' 2" and John's son (me) has been just over 6' 4" for most of his adult life. This would seem a normal progression as health and nutrition got better over the course of 100 years. If his younger brother Charles was said to be six feet two inches as a statement of fact, it would then be entirely possible for Sol to be six two. Note the length of the fishing pole in his right hand in the above picture. At 37 inches, two of these pole bundles on end would equal 74 inches, or six two. Does it look like the bundles would be taller than Sol?



The above photo is from a larger picture of the Roach family taken on the occasion of Sol's parents, Robert and Sarah's, 50th wedding anniversary. Standing behind their seated parents are the four Roach brothers, (L to R) William, Selman, Robert and Charles. Using the same proportion method based on a known height, we can estimate the height of each of the brothers. In this case the known height is that of Charles, who is described in the newspaper article as being "six feet two in his stockings".

Several problems present themselves. First is determining where the bottoms of the feet are behind those seated in front of them. I have cropped the photo so that the bottom edge is at their feet. Each brother is wearing a hat so that a guess has to be made as to where the top of the head is inside the hat. Each is wearing his hat differently too. One other issue is the known subject himself. Like many taller people (myself included) Charles appears to be standing with his head forward, perhaps slouching a bit. If we call the "slouching" measurement 6' 2" then the others will come out taller. If we adjust this measurement up a bit as though he was standing up straight, the others get smaller. Just for fun I did two sets of measurement.

With Charles head down Sol is just under 5' 10". With the adjustment for Charles standing up straight, Sol is just over 5' 8.5". Combining the two, we can say that Sol was about 5' 9" tall. Robert comes out at between 5' 10 and 11" and William just over 5' 6".

The biggest question to be answered was from whom he learned his craft. Dwight Newton had a computerized index of violin makers and was able to break out all the violin makers **known** to be working in Pennsylvania between 1870 and 1930. The results showed makers in 27 communities. This should be easy. Just take the towns Sol lived in and the years he was there and match them up to the towns listed and the dates the makers were working. It wasn't as easy as it looked. First, you have to find all of these

places on the map. Most of them were on modern maps but several defied all efforts. It was not uncommon for Pennsylvania towns to disappear or change names depending on the fortunes of the coal or timber interests. Once I had accounted for most of the towns the closest match-ups were two makers in Brookville, the county seat of Jefferson County, just 17 miles north of Punxsutawney. Not only were they violin makers but both were gunsmiths, as was Sol! They were Henry Bonnet and Daniel Long. They were in the peak years of their craft during the 1890's when Sol lived in the Punxsutawney area. Now we had something to work with.

I discovered that Jefferson County had a first rate historical center and contacted the curator. She knew of both violin makers and was able to forward to me copies of the pertinent portions of a book by local author Russell Harriger entitled **“Long Rifles of Pennsylvania, Jefferson, Clarion and Elk Counties”** Volume I, 1984, published by George Schumway, York, Pennsylvania. Harriger details the lives of these two gunsmiths and goes into great detail about their violin making activities. Imagine, learning violin history in a gun book! A phone conversation with Harriger revealed that everything that is known and available about the violin making activities of these two men is in his book. He also revealed that some of the pertinent gun information had been sent to him anonymously and to this day he doesn't know who the person was that sent it. He was sure there was more, like a “day book” from Henry Bonnet's shop, that could reveal his violin contacts and transactions just like the gun information that was sent to him. Harriger's book however, was not able to reveal any connection between Sol and the Brookville makers. I did learn that the Jefferson County Historical Center had a Daniel Long violin in its collection and that one of the center's volunteers owned a Daniel Long in excellent playing condition and was married to a relative of the maker.

Harriger was also unaware of Sol and of any of his gunsmithing activities. A historical perspective may clear up the issue of gunsmithing. Bonnet and Long were 20 years older than Sol and grew up in the era when commercial guns were not yet available. Guns had to be manufacture from scratch. Sol grew up in the era that followed where commercial guns were available. Sol may never have made guns from scratch but worked more with modification and adjustment. Russell Harriger's book deals with those of the earlier era where guns were made from scratch.

It was becoming obvious though, that I couldn't get much further than I had doing my research by phone and internet. People had been cooperative and accommodating but I could only expect so much from disinterested parties a thousand miles away. I was going to have to have a strategy and I was going to have to go to the places where people lived, where things happened, to see what trail might have been left. All of my basic questions were still up in the air. There were no vital statistics on Sol. When did he start making violins? Where was he living when he started? From whom did he learn the craft? How many violins did he actually make?

The Windber Museum had Roach violins and a couple of other people in the Johnstown, Pennsylvania. area were identified as owners of Roach violins. The Johnstown repairman who had worked on the Ambro's violin said he had seen Roach violins. Gary Nastase suggested that if these were still in the Johnstown area how many others might there be. He suggested that an article in the Johnstown paper might turn up something and that he knew one of the editors and would see if something could be arranged. Johnstown Tribune Democrat writer Bill Jones took the assignment so I sent

materials to help him with the story. Bill actually got two local interest stories as Sol's son Roxey was in both the Johnstown War Memorial Hall of Fame and the Windber Hall of Fame for his exploits in professional and local baseball. At the conclusion of the article on Sol, Bill asked that owners of Roach violins contact him at the paper. Not only did he get replies at the paper but discovered that an owner of two violins lived only a couple of houses from him!

I had also made contact with a contingent of my family that had moved from Windber in 1924 to Tawas City, Michigan. We had not had much contact over the years with these families and I was interested in what materials and memories they might have and whether there were any violins in their possession.

The stage was now set for a trip and it came together for the middle of January 2007. The first stop was Michigan, then on to Brookville, Pennsylvania. to see if I could find a Long/Bonnet connection and then on to the Johnstown area. There was also a list of side trips, should time permit. At the beginning of the trip I knew of 8 original Roach violins. After the trip the count was 17! I had discovered several cousins and many wonderful people who owned the violins. Before the trip the manufacturing dates of the known violins was 1907 to 1924. After the trip it was 1903 to 1928.

While in the Johnstown area I had an opportunity to talk with or visit most of the owners who were found by the newspaper article. During the visit I was able to photograph the violins and take measurements as well as get the story on how they had acquired their violin and how it had been used. This information appears in Chapter 8. Some of the pictures are very good and others not as good because ideal field conditions can never be assured no matter how much equipment you drag along. Where I was unable to make a personal visit the owners were very willing to supply the data and take the pictures, transferring them to me by internet.

With the success of the newspaper article in Johnstown I decided to try the same approach in Punxsutawney, since Sol had lived in that area for 9 years and as a colorful local citizen had often been the subject of reports by the paper. If he was making violins while living in Punxi then it's possible that some of them may still be around. The Punxsutawney Spirit newspaper prepared a story similar to the Johnstown paper but with a localized twist and published it during the summer of 2007 in a shopper style publication that goes to 18,000 homes in three counties, two of which Sol had lived in. There were no replies to the article indicating that he probably hadn't begun his "making" activities until he got to Windber in 1898.

Also during the summer of 2007, I was asked by a group in Windber to write an article about Sol and the violins for use in a magazine that was coming out in conjunction with their Miner Days celebration. It was another opportunity to solicit violins and also emphasize the important roll the Windber Museum had played in my research and how genuinely cooperative my contact had been.

There was not much new happening though, until February and March of 2008. The real importance of Dwight Newton's website showed itself when one of his readers turned up with a Roach violin that was made in 1900! The earliest find so far, and made the year after he arrived in Windber.

Another of my cousins, Joan Ferrier Smith of Sidman, Pennsylvania, about 10 miles over the mountain from Windber, contacted me at the end of April 2008 with information about someone with whom Sol might have studied violin making. Joan owns one of Sol's

violins through her mother. Joan's mother said that many years ago a man named Orpheo Dibiase had called and identified himself as a professional musician. He had a Roach violin and wanted to purchase a second and wondered if she would sell hers. She declined, but they had a nice conversation during which she took notes. She had recalled that Dibiase told her with whom Sol had studied, but she couldn't remember and needed to search for the notes. She found them and hence the call. Orpheo told her that Sol had studied with a Mr. Phillips in Pittsburgh.

My thoughts went immediately to an article that Gary Nastase had forwarded to me from the Pittsburgh Post Gazette from August 2005. Pittsburgh luthier Phillip Injeian was interviewed and spoke of having discovered what he called the Pittsburgh school of violin making. One of the key names he mentioned was Benjamin Phillips! I had spoken with Injeian at the time by phone, but our conversation was inconclusive. I dug out the article and found that Phillips had come to this country from Poland in 1902 and had worked with the key player amongst the group of makers until about 1923 when he opened his own shop. It was clear that he couldn't have been the original teacher because we have examples of Sol's work from before Phillips arrived in this country.

Now I needed to learn what I could about Benjamin Phillips. I put his name in the Yahoo internet search engine and the top and only two articles that appeared were about his son Eugene Phillips. Eugene lives in Pittsburgh and has been a professional string player his entire career having held seats in both the viola and first violin sections of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Two of his sons are also professional string players and the article was about his 80 birthday and a concert that he and his sons were performing, all using instruments made by Benjamin Phillips! I had to speak with Eugene.

I entered his name in a phone directory website and it came up with five or six Eugene Phillips in the Pittsburgh area. Which one was it? I've not been above calling everyone on a list until I find the right one, but I have to be in a special mood to do it. This time I chose to create a Yahoo map for each of the addresses listed. The article had noted his residence in a section of Pittsburgh called Squirrel Hill. I kept making maps until I got one that came up in the Squirrel Hill section, dialed the number and Eugene answered.

We had a nice chat and after I explained what I was doing he said that he remembered the Sol Roach name. Although he would only have been about 5 years old when Sol died, he apprenticed as a violin maker in his fathers shop until just before World War II when he and his brother both found Benjamin to be too demanding and decided that life as performers suited them better. Unfortunately, there is not much information available about Benjamin either, and Eugene couldn't tell me much more than is listed in the one paragraph in the Directory of American Violin Makers. One interesting note though, was that before coming to this country from Poland, Benjamin made guns! Another gunsmith turned violin maker.

What evidence might suggest a connection to Benjamin Phillips? It can be inferred from the notations made inside several of the violins that Sol made for family members, that Sol's construction and tonal concepts were always subject to improvement. These violins may be based on different patterns with different measurements but they were all regraduated by Sol in 1922, about the same time that Phillips opened his own shop in Pittsburgh. New insights gained from working with Phillips may have induced Sol to make these adjustments on all of the violins he could get his hands on.

The violins themselves have a story to tell. Information from the maker's tags inside the violins yielded a lot of information and that the amount of information Sol put on the tags increased as the years went by. It became obvious that Sol used two distinct types of tags representing his work. The original violins all had tags that distinctly said "Made By Sol E. Roach". His repair and graduation work always had tags that read simply "Sol E. Roach-Windber, Pa.". People who were selling violins on E-bay, and thought they had Roach originals, were unaware that what they had was a regraduated commercial violin, even when the original European makers ink stamp was right next to Sol's tag. Sol never covered up another's stamp or tag.

Other information that showed up on the tags often included who they were made for, his code for graduating the top and bottom boards, the date of manufacture, the type of wood and age of the wood used. One sign that starts appearing as early as a 1903 violin is the double sharp sign. This is an "X" with a dot in each of the four corners where the two lines cross. This only appears on tags in instruments that he actually made. A musician will see this as a double sharp sign but Sol may never have thought of it as such. Its meaning on the tag remains a mystery.

This is just a rough idea of the process of reconstructing Sol's life and will go on as facts become available. Conclusions may have to change based on new material. The book itself is a part of that process as it may reach readers that have information or artifacts that can add to his story.