



Chapter 10: Update 2012

Material added since website activated May 2011.

Several interesting finds have occurred since the website was activated just over a year ago and the book was made available to interested owners. The finds included several regrads, a mandolin, another original violin, the discovery of another violin maker in Windber and his connection to Sol through a marriage, and a violin possibly made by the son of Sol's brother Charles. First, the regrads.

Bowersox 1916

So far four regrads have been discovered. Around October 1st of 2011 Dave Bowersox of Somerset, Pennsylvania called and said he had a violin that had been regraduated in 1916 and that it had come from an estate sale (McLaughlin estate).

Mellott 1927

The second regard appeared when I received an email on October 5th from Jeff Mallott who was originally from Bedford, Pennsylvania. He had a violin that had been his great grandmother's and had been passed down to him through his grandmother and mother. Jeff said the violin was not in playing condition and had a tag that stated that it had been graduated by Sol in 1927. The code used was B. 7-8-9-10, T. 6-7-8, and E. 5-6-7-8. I've not seen the "E" designation before and don't know what it means. This label was partially over another label that had the name Antonius Stradivarius with the number 1716.

Pfogner in Georgia

On December 26, 2011 I received an email from Rick Pfogner of Zebulon, Georgia informing me that he had a violin that had belonged to his grandfather, who had lived in Somerset, Pennsylvania and who had played the violin and occasionally taught others. Rick said that as a child he had learned to play on this instrument and that his mother had kept it for 40 years before giving it to him. After some discussion through several emails we determined that he had a regrad as the violin also had the label of violin maker Herman Geipel. Sol's label included the note, "Wm. Grimm 1929" and what appeared to be "Stoyestown", a community not far from Windber. Rick figured that his grandfather would have been living in either Meyersdale or Somerset at the time. The violin was not currently playable, needing considerable work. However, the 1929 date was the latest date so far showing that Sol was still working on violins, 1928 being the previous date.

1921 on eBay

On September 8, 2012 cousin Nancy Davis sent me an alert that a Roach violin was for sale on eBay. The instrument was being offered by Volkwein's Music of Pittsburgh on consignment for a customer. It was being offered as an original 1921 Sol Roach

violin. As to condition, it was in need of some restoration and although the body was original, technicians had determined that the face (top board) had been replaced. I spoke with the person in charge of internet sales who was gracious enough to get the violin and go over the information on the tags inside.

Sol's tag was one associated with repairs stating only that he was a manufacturer of violins. On the tag in ink was the date 1921 along with the graduation code he used which was B. 5-6-10 6/?, T. 5 5/2-6-8. The numbers were not all easily readable. To the right of the tag, written in ink on the wood: "Sol E. Roach", and underneath it, "new for 1921." Sol's tag partially covered what appeared to be an ink stamping in the wood. Only a few of the letters were visible and could be made out. They are: "...aco.....in absani....prope, ipontum-17..." There is no double sharp sign to be found in the violin. The instrument is clearly a regrad and a repair that was done in 1921. The stamp under Sol's tag gives it away. Those stamps, usually in Latin or Italian, made reference to Antonio Stradivari and a date in the 1700s, meaning that this violin was probably a copy of a Strad pattern from that period. These were very common. What is likely is that Sol repaired this instrument in 1921 by replacing a damaged top and then regraduating the instrument. That would account for the comment, "new for 1921." The F holes also have a more angular appearance than other examples of Sol's work, but are just like the F holes he used on a 1919 original that was found in Johnstown and is now in Chicago. It is possible that he carved a new top for the instrument.

Not all of the discoveries have been about Sol's violins. Inquiries about other makers or some connectedness to Windber, Pennsylvania have led to interesting associations that weren't expected.

John H. Roach

One such case is that of a maker named John H. Roach. Another eBay alert from cousin Nancy in November of 2010 found a violin for sale that was made by a John H. Roach in 1958. The seller, located in Arlington, Virginia, said that he was guessing that the maker was the grandson of Sol Roach, referring to my website book as the source. The John Roach who is a grandson of Sol Roach in the book is my father, John S. Roach, who, in 1958, was busy coaching high school athletes and calling square dances, not making violins. The seller made an incorrect assumption. This, however, prompted Nancy to do some research and she found that Sol's brother Charles had a son in 1895 named John H. Roach and that later census records showed him to have been a carpenter. In talking with Barbara Park, who is a grand daughter of Charles Roach, she related that as children they were told that Charles had made a violin, mostly of inlaid wood. Charles was also a carpenter and a woodworker so it's not unlikely that his son John H. would follow suit. However, there is no evidence in her family that such an instrument exists. Could their tradition be confusing Charles with his son John H., if this is the John H. that made the violin in question? If this is our John H. then he would have started making violins late in life. This is violin #5 made when he would have been 63 years old. Perhaps they both made violins.

The description by the seller includes the contents of the maker's tag: "Handmade in 1958, by John H. Roach, #5, "Betta"." It is described as having a single piece maple back. The seller had it played by a violinist from the Baltimore Symphony who called it "a cannon, pro-caliber or advanced student" instrument.

John L. Breth- another maker in Windber

One of the most interesting discoveries that had nothing to do with Roach violins came with a phone call from Michael Castro of Portland, Texas on February 20, 2012. Michael had purchased a violin made by a John L. Breth. The tag inside the violin only stated that it was made in 1929 and was his 50th instrument (XX50) U.S.A. Doing some research on John L. Breth, he discovered that Breth had lived in Windber, Pennsylvania and thus the call to me. I stated that I was unaware of this maker and had been trying to locate other makers in the Johnstown area. He sent me links to the websites he had visited. One such site was called PA-Roots, where Mr. Breth's obituary had been recorded.

According to the obit John L. Breth had died on June 14, 1940 at the age of 85 and had been a former resident of Windber and a longtime employee of the Windber Lumber Company. Born in 1854 near Cherry Tree, he lived at Bethlehem near Mahaffy and Lajose before coming to Windber in 1899, the year after Sol. He was living with his son in Bluefield, West Virginia when he passed away. What caught my eye was the list of survivors, one being a stepdaughter, Mrs. Sarah Edder. Edder was the maiden name of my father's mother. Michael was good enough to do some more research and came up with the marriage records of Miss Sarah Breth, stepdaughter of John L. Breth and his second wife, to John Curtis Edder, who is the brother of my grandmother Carrie Edder Roach. John and Sarah were married in 1902 before Sol's son Wilbur married Carrie on January 7, 1903. The Edder marriage license was applied for on June 10, 1902 so both Carrie and John Edder would probably have been seeing their respective spouses, Sarah Breth and Wilbur Roach, at the same time. Now we have two men who made violins, who live in the same town, and whose children are engaged to and married to members of the same family. But, we're still back to the same questions. Did one teach the other or was one influenced by the other to start making, or did they learn together? Did the Breths, the Edders, and the Roaches know each other before they came to Windber? The communities listed as John Breth's residence before coming to Windber are only about 10 miles southeast of Punxsutawney where Sol was living before he came to Windber.

Michael measured up the violin and determined that the measurements were the same as Sol's 1924 violins in the book. This wouldn't be surprising as they were probably a standard Strad pattern.





Pictures courtesy of Michael Castro

1914 Original in Johnstown

Another original violin, number 27, appeared with a phone call from a man in Johnstown in October of 2011. He runs a collectables business in a local mall near Johnstown and said that he had purchased the violin at an estate sale. He wouldn't reveal the name of the estate or how much he paid for it. He said that this instrument had the date 1914 and had two pictures inside, one looking like Sol's picture from the back of my 1907, which is pictured in the website book. He was interested in what it was worth and whether I wanted to buy it. After I assured him that I already had three and would rather see it in the hands of another player, we discussed some of the details of the instrument and talked about Sol. He was located along the same road less than a mile from Richland Cemetery where Sol is buried. I told him of a qualified repairman who was also less than a mile away from his store. He promised photos but none ever arrived.

1898 Mandolin in Georgia

In February of 2012 I got an eBay alert from Nancy who found this instrument for sale with a starting price of \$1,000. The seller had to be the same person because the instrument description contained quotes by me from our telephone conversation in October. He got no bids. We'll leave this story for the moment.

One of the unanswered questions of my research was whether Sol ever made instruments other than violins and whether he was making instruments prior to arriving in Windber. There was even family rumor that Sol made violins for his daughters but a ukulele for his son. Reenter Rick Pfrogner of Zebulon, Georgia with an email on March 3, 2012. Rick, who collects ukuleles, said that he believed that he had an interesting find and that it would be delivered to him the next week. He said, "I purchased an instrument that was advertised on eBay as "An 8 String Ukulele from 1898"...and guess who's name is inside?" He said that he found it by happenstance as it was not advertised as a Sol Roach instrument. He was merely interested in a ukulele with an old date. He said that he was assuming that it was intended to be a mandolin, but it has a waist in the middle like nothing he had ever seen. He said it was not in perfect condition and would require some minor work. After some phone conversations and receiving the instrument, Rick was able to provide details about the tags and pictures of the instrument.

The main tag is a printed tag that says "Made by Sol E. Roach, Windber Pa." at the top. At the bottom, "The wood used in the construction of this instrument was sawed in 1720." Across the middle of the tag in handwritten ink is "Christmas 1909." In ink vertically along the left margin is: "Presented to", across the top: "Daughter of", and along the right margin: "Frank Roach". This is the same type of tag used in some of his violins. Just below this tag, and partially covered, is an earlier tag of plain paper on which is written, "Made by Sol E. Roach, Anita, Pa. Wood sawed 107 years ago. July 4, 1898." There is a third handwritten tag and Rick found it on the underside of the top board. It is worn and soiled and difficult to read. Using a dental mirror he was able to decipher it. Rick believed that the label reads as follows:

“wood of this mandolin 107 years old.

Made by

Sol E. Roach July 3, 1898

this day saw ?

destroy the Spanish
ships in Santiago Harbor

Anita Pa

Dimensions:	Total length	25.5”
	Finger Board from nut	8.5”
	Upper Bought	6”
	Waist	5”
	Lower Bought	8.25”

Rick debated whether to do the restoration work himself or seek professional help. One of the luthiers he consulted commented about how rare this instrument was and that it was called a mandoletto.







Pictures courtesy of Rick Pfrogner

1914 Original returns to eBay and Rick Pfrogner

While we were discussing the mandolin on the phone I received another eBay alert from Nancy that violin #27 was for sale again, the seller reducing his starting price by \$50 to \$950. I mentioned this to Rick and he said that he had seen this too and was interested. We discussed the situation and under the circumstances Rick seemed determined to acquire this instrument but wasn't keen on the price being asked. He entered into a negotiation with the seller and on March 11th emailed that he had made the deal and was expecting delivery. When he received the instrument he provided measurements and pictures. The instrument contains a makers tag. This tag is one that gives his name and address and that he was a manufacturer of violins at the top, and "general repairing" at the bottom. However, there are not one, but two double sharp signs on this tag, one next to "manufacturer of violins" and the other right next to the graduation code which is handwritten in the middle of the tag. To the right of the graduation code and double sharp sign is the date, 1914, and under the date, words that appear to read "fir top + L8" (L8 is only a guess. That's what it looks like).

There is only one picture in the violin and that is a picture of Sol, the same one used on the back of his 1907. The picture covers two other tags. The bottom tag looks like an original makers tag, the only part visible being the Pa. of the address. Over that is pasted a plain piece of paper with the only visible handwritten letters being "No 2 Bill" and some other undecipherable scratchings. Over top of this is the picture of Sol. On the upper left corner of the picture is "Sol E. Roach the maker 1914" and on the lower right corner "for Jack Roach." Jack Roach is My father! He would have been six years old in 1914.

The year 1914 must have been a critical year in Sol's life. It was May of 1914 that he regraduated the 1907 violin that he had originally made for a now deceased grandson, and felt compelled to write all of the personal information on the underside of the top board, placing his picture on the back. He places the same picture on the inside of this 1914 and dedicates it to the six year old grandson who is currently living with him. Nineteen fourteen is also the year that he is chronicled in a Johnstown newspaper as making six violins for display and sale in New York. This violin was obviously made in 1914 and Sol reiterates this on the picture so this picture was also placed in 1914. More questions. Could this be one of the violins originally meant for New York? There is another 1914 that has been in the family of Sol's daughter Georgianna and is owned by great grand daughter Joan Ferrier Smith of Sidman, Pennsylvania. This is a lot of violins to be made in one year besides running a main street business and his additional activities. Perhaps the New York event never came to fruition and some of those violins ended up with family members.

Pfrogner 1914 Dimensions:

Graduation Code

Total Length: 23 5/16"
Body Length: 14 1/16"
Upper Bout: 6 7/16"
Middle Bout: 4 3/8"
Lower Bout: 8 1/8"
F Hole Length: 2 5/8"
Inside to Inside: 2 3/4"
Outside to Outside: 3 1/8"
Body Thickness: 2 3/8"

B. 7 X 3/16
T. 4-5 X 7





Pictures courtesy of Rick Pfrogner



Sol Roach Violins in NYC Steinway dealership

This sounds like it could be a newspaper headline. It's not, but it's a good way to start off this story because it brings us back to the New York connection and my father's story of Sol making violins for pros in New York City.

On April 18, 2012 I received an email from Rob Will who lived in Denver, North Carolina. Rob had just purchased a Sol Roach violin at a pawn shop and wanted information. He sent pictures with it. It was a 1924.

Rob was 18 years old and just graduating from high school. He is a musician. He plays guitar (owns 7), drums set (electric and acoustic), and string bass and bass guitar and plays with a group in Binghamton, New York. Although born in Binghamton, he was living in Denver near Charlotte, North Carolina. He had gone into the Bogar City Pawn Shop in Lincolnton to look for a snare drum, but saw the rack of violins and something inside just told him that he should learn to play the violin, so he bought one for \$74. He said, "I really wanted to play one of those things."

I asked him to find out from the dealer where it came from and he replied that it came from a lady in Sherril's Ford, North Carolina. That rang a bell so I checked my records and as it turns out, this was the 20th instrument I had found a couple of years ago. The tag information was a match, particularly some of the undecipherable words. Sherril's Ford, Lincolnton and Denver are very close together and north of Charlotte.

Rob told me that he would be going back to Binghamton for college and this brings an interesting twist to the violin's story. The lady who had pawned the violin had related that she had received the violin from her grandfather around 1990 when she was in elementary school in Binghamton. He had originally come from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. She played it all through school as did her younger brother. Now, it appears, the violin will be returning to Binghamton.

On Saturday April 21 I spoke with Rob by phone and he said that his grandfather, Harold (Tony) Will had told him that as a boy living in Long Island, he had seen Roach violins sold in a New York City music store across the street from Carnegie Hall. He suggested I call Tony, who now lives north of Las Vegas, Nevada.

On April 24, 2012 I spoke with Tony Will by phone. He said that in 1943, when he was about 10 years old, his father, Harold Will, had taken him to the Steinway dealership on W57th St., across from Carnegie Hall, to talk with them about taking his two full size

grand pianos back for sale on consignment, as the family had lost their estate on Long Island and didn't have room in their new house. Tony remembered that in the showroom, hung on the wall near the cashier's desk, was a violin, and another in a case on a table underneath it. There was what he called a bronze plaque there stating that these were Sol Roach violins. Tony said that he was so intrigued by these violins that he badgered his father to get him a violin and lessons so that he could learn to play. That's why he was so certain of the name after all these years. When Rob told him that he had a Sol Roach violin Tony immediately knew what he was talking about.

Since Sol died 10 years before this, why would his violins end up in a NYC top end piano store? John Roach, grandson of Sol Roach, stated in an interview that Sol had made violins for professionals in NYC but could offer no specifics. If those violins were made in the teens or mid 20s when Sol was most active as a violin maker, they would have been played for another 20 or more years. The owner, a professional, had perhaps ended a career or passed away and the violins were being offered on consignment as a favor to the violinist's family. They did the same for great grandfather, Harold Will.

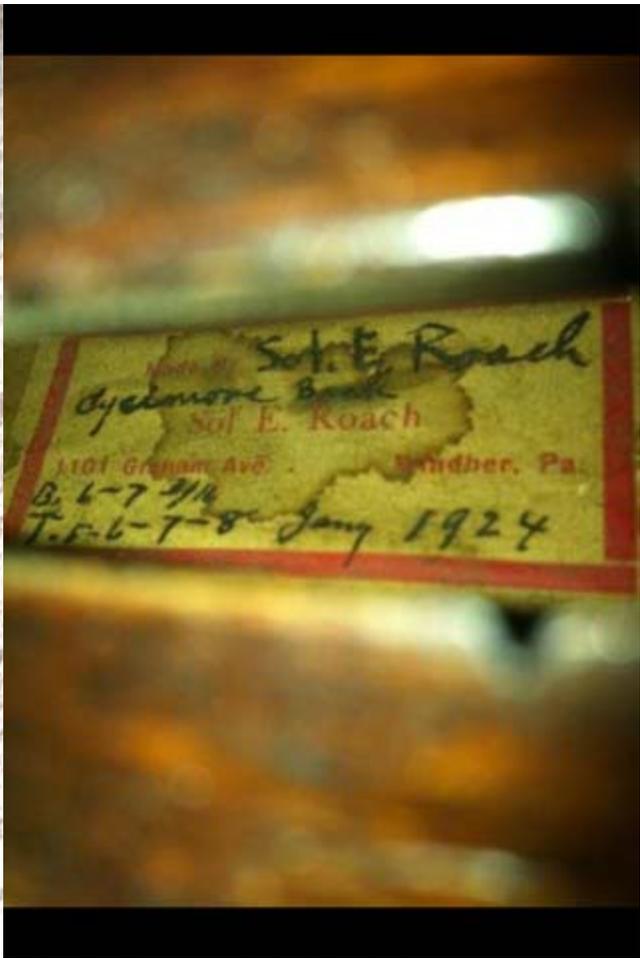
Harold Will (the elder) really had two lives: one as a musician and composer, and the other as Vice President of the Will and Baumer Candle Company in Syracuse, N.Y. who still make the large votive candles for the Catholic Church. As a musician he was a piano player and composer of popular songs, many of which were published. He was friends with George and Ira Gershwin and knew the Tin Pan Alley composers of the 20's and 30's. He also had a radio show on WOR in NYC in the early 30's which was on the air for 15 minutes five days a week. His wife, and Tony's mother, was a Ziegfeld Follies girl who had appeared as a dancer with Gracie Allen, of George Burns and Gracie Allen fame, when they were both dancers with the follies. The family owned a large 12.5acre estate on Long Island in an area known as Roslyn Heights. The house was a 32 room mansion called Villa Marina. It had a music room which featured the two full size Steinway grand pianos and one baby grand. The family lost the estate during the WWII and so moved to another smaller home near Great Neck, N.Y. where there wasn't room for the large pianos. They would keep only the baby grand.

Rob said that he took the violin to a qualified luthier to be put back into playing shape and was told that it is a great violin and wonderful craftsmanship. He said, "I and excited to have this awesome piece of history."

Rob Will 1924 Graduation Code:

B. 6-7 x 3/16

T. 5-6-7-8



Pictures
Courtesy of
Rob Will



The three Roach instruments owned by Rick Pfrogner of Zebulon, Georgia from left to right: 1929 regrad, 1914 original and 1898 Mandoletto.