



Chapter 11: 2015 Update

It's been three years since the last project update, but this is no indication of inactivity. I am amazed and mystified as to what causes people to pull an old instrument out of the closet, look through the F hole and see Sol's makers tag, go to the internet and find my website, all during the exact time period that I'm trying to locate examples of Sol's work. Not only do these instruments (and their owners) find me, but, it happens in waves. There will be nothing happening for six months and then within a week's time there are multiple contacts. These are duly checked out and arrangements made for information and pictures and then its quiet again for a period of time. Very mysterious! During the past three years three more original violins (#28, #29 and #30) were discovered and #27 found a new home with a professional musician near Atlanta, Ga., plus more connections to Charles Roach and several regrads. I'll approach the new finds in order of importance and by categories, not chronologically.

Original Violin #28

Violin #28 materialized in October of 2013 when Dwight Newton, who runs the Oriscus website, forwarded an email inquiry from Elizabeth Brown of Huntersville, North Carolina. Elizabeth had a 1919 Sol Roach original that had belonged to her grandmother, Jane Skruch Wavrick. Jane was born in Poland in 1907 and immigrated to the United States and Windber, Pa. with her parents. The Skruch family resided at 606/608 Graham Ave. where they ran one of the five bakeries in Windber. Elizabeth related that Jane loved her violin very much but couldn't play it very well. She used it during her school years and kept it wrapped in a beautiful scarf inside the case. She married in 1928 and moved to Michigan with her husband. In 1985 they moved to North Carolina. Jane passed away in 1990. Elizabeth said that Jane's violin was a treasured possession and that Jane included a stern note inside the case to deter her 9 grand children from playing with it.

Violin #28 is a 1919. The information on the tag includes: "Made By Sol E. Roach 1919 Windber, Pa.", "All Italian Wood, old top, of soft barn (?) wood, cut in heavy???", The graduation code is also provided: $7 \times 3/16$ (*characteristic of a bottom plate*) and $5 \times 5 \frac{1}{2} \times 7 \frac{1}{2}$ soft wood", "Feb 1919". The tag also clearly shows a double sharp sign. There is also a picture of Sol glued to the bottom plate suggesting that the violin was originally made for a Roach family member and later resold or some unknown relationship with the Skruch family. There are two unusual features on this violin. The F holes are of the pointed style as found on another 1919 and the endpin is a pitch pipe to make tuning more convenient.

1919 Skruch: (provided by Elizabeth Brown)

Total Length: 23 ½"
Body Length: 13 ¾"
Upper Bout: 6 ⅙"
Lower Bout: 4 ½"
Middle Bout: 8"
F hole length: 3 ¼"
F hole(Outer to Outer) 3 ¼"
F hole (Inner to Inner) 2 7/10"
Rib: 1 ½"
Overall Depth: 2 ¼"

The pictures provided below were taken before the violin was fixed up to playable condition. Elizabeth's father, John Wavrick, holds the reconditioned instrument at right.





Original Violin #29: 1900

On September 5, 2014 Johnstown string repairman Harold Wilson sent an email describing a 1900 Sol Roach original violin that had come to his shop to be put back into playing condition. He also attached five pictures. Across the top of the tag was “Top 200 year cut spruce (covers word ‘pine’)” the word spruce is again written under the sentence. “Made by Sol E. Roach” “Sol E. Roach Windber, Pa.”. “Sumac back and sides”. The date 1900 is written vertically in both the right and left margins. There are no graduation numbers and no double sharp sign. Violins from 1900 are the earliest examples of original work found so far. Harold reported that the instrument has excellent tone and volume.

The violin came to Wilson for repair through a local music store and through them the owner was contacted. Andy Grieco is a Windber man who is fascinated by Windber history and collects artifacts. He purchased the violin from an antique dealer in Somerset. Andy was excited to have the instrument as a piece of Windber history but felt it would be a good instrument for his daughter to play. Andy provided the following dimensions.

Total length: 23”
Body length: 14”
Upper bout: 7”
Middle bout: 4 ¼”
Lower bout: 8”
F hole length: 2 ¾”
Body thickness: 1 ⅜”





On October 12, 2014 I received an email from Roberta Cordeck of Johnstown that contained a link to an auction house in Johnstown. The link indicated the inventory of an auction and a Roach violin was listed. After contacting the auction house it was determined that another Roach violin had been sold at an earlier auction. I was excited that these finds could be violins #30 and 31. They turned out to be regraduated commercial violins and will be discussed later, but while waiting for the auction house to provide the names of buyers and sellers I communicated with Roberta and received a reply that provided another lead. She stated that her daughter worked at the Somerset Historical Center in Somerset and that they had a Roach violin on display. Now, we come full circle back to Andy Greico's violin #29. A chat by phone with the Curator, Jacob Miller, indicated that a Roach violin had been on display and was on loan from a local individual for a special exhibit. Details about the instrument indicated that it was the same instrument now owned by Andy Greico. Jacob provided a scan from their catalogue showing the violin on display.

Made in Somerset County

A sampler of the finest craftsmanship, inventiveness, and ingenuity of Somerset County artisans and businesses during the past 200+ years.

Published by
Historical & Genealogical Society
of Somerset County, Pennsylvania

Made in Somerset County

Pennsylvania Long Rifle & Bullet Mold
*Peter or Jonathon Dormayer
Somerset County
On loan from Bruner Family • L. 49 1/2" Barrel L. 34 1/2"*

Peter Dormayer was listed as a manufacturer on census records in Conemaugh Township as early as 1820. His two sons, Jonathon and David, were trained by him to be gunsmiths. It is believed that the Dormayer family developed unique design elements for the manufacture of the Pennsylvania Long Rifle that were used by all three gunsmiths in their trade. Most Dormayer rifles that display these features are unsigned, making it hard to attribute them to any one Dormayer. This rifle originally belonged to Henry Bruner (1809-1851) and has been handed down through the Bruner family.

Musical Instruments

Patterns for violins are found among Soap Hollow makers, evidencing the fact that they produced such instruments. Two other instrument makers made stringed instruments.

A skilled cabinetmaker, Michael Roman learned to make musical instruments so he could enjoy and play music in the local bars around the coal mining towns. He enjoyed trying new woods and techniques to see how he could improve the sound and volume of his instruments. He crafted mandolins, violins, and guitars.

Seiman (also spelled Saul, Selamon, Solomon in various records) E. Roach owned a shop in Windber servicing a variety of goods from guns and bicycles to locks and violins.

Mandolin
*Michael Roman (1915-1995)
Catsbrook/Central City
Private Collection
L. 28" W. 10"*

Violin 1900
*Seiman E. Roach (1853-1933)
Windber
Private Collection • L. 23" W. 8 1/4"
Label inside violin reads: "Sol. E. Roach
1900 Windber. Top 300 year old spruce
with sumac back and sides."*

14

Regraduated Violins Sold At Auction:

The buyer of the violin sold October 14th 2014 at the auction house was Gerry Branca of West Lebanon, Pa. Gerry is a luthier and is known as the “Violin Doctor”. This violin is a repair and a regrad. The repair appears to be for a cracked top. The makers tag is partially covered by Sol’s tag under the right F hole. Gerry thinks the tag reads “Nooner and Hornsteiner 1882”. The heading on Sol’s tag is “Sol E. Roach Manufacturer of Violins 1101 Graham Ave. Windber”, “Bruce Hoelsopple”, “repaired 1918”. Sol included the dimensions he used to regraduate it: T. 5-6x 1/8, B. 7x 3/16. Written in pencil under the top board: “Mittenwalt 11th month 1877 repaired by Sol E. Roach- 1918 for Hoelsopple”. “This violin is a genuine Mittenwalt made worth at this time 1918 about \$75 to \$150.” Under the upper bout: “This is world war time- German giving lick badly, also Austria and Hungary.” There was more writing behind the bridge area that he couldn’t make out. Another piece of writing on the inside that was hard to make out looked like: “Michael (Ley?) Machen.”

The second instrument sold at the auction house was sold by an employee, Mike Maley, who lives west of Johnstown. It was sold six years ago. Mike couldn’t remember what the tag looked like but we talked about it and decided that it probably wasn’t an original. He bought it from a lady that worked at a Salvation Army store in Richland for \$12. She told him that she had a guitar made by Sol. He couldn’t remember her name. This is new and is like the rumor that Sol made a mandolin, which ultimately turned out to be true. I would expect that it might be a repair, but surprises never cease to amaze!

A final point of interest regarding Roberta Cordeck. Roberta mentioned that her mother-in-law’s grandfather used to make violins and she thought it would be close to the same time period that Sol was living in Windber. Her mother-in-law was born in 1924 in the South Fork area of Cambria County but wasn’t sure where the grandfather lived. She said that he would go out into the woods and select trees that could be used for violins. His name was John Fiffick.

1925 Regraduated Violin:

In late October of 2014 an email arrived through the Sol Roach website from Lisa Ebinger of Seattle, Washington. Lisa related the following:

“John Joseph Flesher was my husband’s maternal grandfather. He was born in 1896 and grew up in Houtzdale, Pa., near Windber. He played violin as a young man, and also worked in the local mine by the age of 10. He earned an associate degree at Carnegie Tech in about 1927, and some time after this he apparently stopped playing the violin. His daughter Norma took lessons on this violin for about two years, in the 6th and 7th grades (around 1946). Since then it has rarely been touched. My husband’s grandmother gave him the violin many years ago, as he majored in piano in college. In 1995 we had some repair work done and now, very occasionally, a friend who plays in the Santa Rosa Symphony visits us and makes it sound quite beautiful.”

“We are planning to pass it on to the next generation, a family of four young boys in Minnesota, (Elk River) three who play violin.”

Lisa gave a very thorough description of the makers tag. She said that the tag inside is printed in red, with a red border, and handwritten additions in black, as follows. At the top is “Made by.....” On that line is “Sol. E. Roach.” written in what appears to be Greek letters and an ethnic spelling. She said there appears to be a line through the word “Made”, and to the left is handwritten what could be “Rep”. Below this, handwritten, is “for John Flesher”. In the center is printed Sol/ E./ Roach with handwritten lines like commas, between the names. The next line is: 1101 Graham Ave Windber, PA. At the very bottom is handwritten: “B. 6-7-10, T. 5-6-1/8 June 1925.” This violin is a commercial violin that Sol repaired and regraduated. The word “Made” is crossed out and there is no double sharp sign. There is also another printed tag that indicates that it is a copy of a Stradivarius. It sounds like this violin will have a good home with three talented young musicians in Elk River, Minnesota, and not too far from my home in Glencoe.

Rob Will’s 1924- Update:

In the 2012 update is the story of Rob Will, at the time, a high school senior in North Carolina, who bought a Sol Roach original at a pawnshop while looking for a snare drum. The story is unique because of the unusual connection to Roach violins earlier in his family’s history. Rob moved on to college the next year but had the violin reconditioned and offered the following comments and pictures. Rob said, “The violin shop here said it is a great violin with wonderful craftsmanship. I too am pleased it was only \$74 for it is a great violin....I am very excited to have this awesome piece of history.”





Sale of #27:

In the 2012 update violin #27 had become the property of Rick Pfrogner of Zebulon, Georgia along with a mandoletto made by Sol. By February of 2013 my cousin Nancy Davis of Ann Arbor, Michigan, had detected Sol Roach activity on Ebay. Rick was selling both the violin and the mandoletto. That wasn't surprising since Rick is a ukulele collector and not a violin or mandolin collector. Nor is he a violin player. An email to Rick confirmed that he was trying to sell them and that a deal was in the works on the violin. Rick said that he had found it a nice home with a musician from Douglasville, Georgia, which is just west of Atlanta.

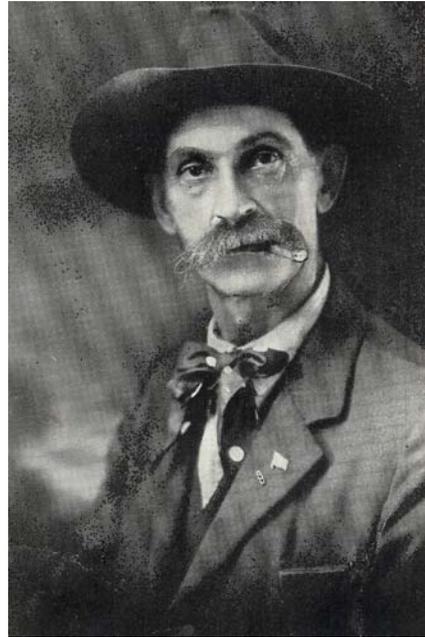
The violin was sold to Bill Lindsey who plays in both a gospel group and a bluegrass band. Rick said that *"This violin found a great home.....I have to tell you something. When he (Bill) came to meet me to view the violin he brought 3 other violins with him, one being the one he plays normally....He tuned up Sol's violin and then played fiddle style. Then he played his other 3 violins. Here is the thing...if I played I would NEVER have sold the violin. Compared to the 3 he brought, Sol's violin had so much more depth and volume. We were outside, and it was a cool day for Georgia, but the sound of that violin came up from the ground. It was just so full. I was very close to not selling, but I could see how impressed he was and I could hear how great it sounded so I let it go."*

Not long after that I heard from Bill Lindsey. He said that the violin *"had a wonderful sweet tone and a very big voice, just what I was looking for....I am also an experienced antique collector and dealer and take pride in my ability to recognize quality. This violin is top quality and has a hand rubbed varnish finish that is as nice as I have ever seen. It is easy to play and responds nicely to fast double stops. I can't wait to take this violin to the festivals this summer. I have bought and sold 15 violins and some have been from listed makers....I know a great sound from a good one and the Roach does have a great one."* He continued, *"I am also an avid hunter and fisherman and have several record-book trophies. The story of Sol's exploits with Buffalo Bill Cody and his hunting/fishing prowess made me an instant fan and amazed that I was holding a fiddle that he hand-made."*

The Rumor of a Charles Roach Violin

One of the joys of this project has been learning of the wide range of talents possessed by the four Roach brothers. So far working on Sol's life has opened up to me the life of his brother Charles. Still to be discovered are the lives of William and Robert. I discovered Charles initially while trying to get some sense of what the family personality was like. He is given space in the book simply because the material existed and because more information became available through a contact made with a direct descendant.

Sol was, in my estimation, a multi talented eccentric and it appears that Charles was too. Charles story, as it relates to violin making, has been a slow process that began five years ago. While talking with Charles' granddaughter it was revealed that there was a rumor in her family line that Charles had made a violin. However, nobody knew anything about it, when it was made, where he did it, who it might have been made for and where it might be now. This is the same type of rumor that floated around among Sol's descendants concerning a mandolin that Sol was alleged to have made. As was the case with the discovery of the mandolin in 2012 the power of the internet came through once again with an answer. In February 2015 a Charles E. Roach original violin surfaced and was ultimately repatriated to the family.



In talking with Charles Roach's granddaughter several years ago I learned of her nephew, Michael McGowan, who lives in Cleveland, Ohio. Michael was a musician who was also interested in Roach family history. Michael was made aware of a violin that had been repaired and regraduated in 1921 by Sol Roach and was for sale by a music store in Pittsburgh, Pa. Michael purchased this instrument in March of 2014 so as to have a piece of Roach history. This violin is discussed in the 2012 Update.

In February of 2015 I received an email from Mark Ralston of Centre Hall, Pa., Near State College. Mark had purchased 32 fiddles from the family of a deceased country fiddler named Elmer Shaffer of Millheim, Pa, one of which was a Chas Roach fiddle. He was interested in information about Pennsylvania makers. We talked by phone and determined that this was, in fact, a Charles E. Roach violin. This was our guy! The tag read Chas. E. Roach. Houtzdale, Pa. January. 1938 #10 . Charles was institutionalized by 1938 but, I'm sure never expected to stay there the rest of his life so listed his home as Houtzdale. Mark sent the following pictures of the instrument.

MADE BY • CHAS. E. ROACH.
HOUTZDALE. PA.
JANUARY. 1938 #10





The Following dimensions were taken by Mark Ralston;

Overall length: 23 ¼"

Body length: 14"

Fingerboard length: 10 ½"

Fingerboard width at end: 1 ¾"

Upper body width: 6 5/8"

Waist width: 4 1/8"

Lower body width: 8"

Top plate to bottom plate: 1 ¼"

Body depth at waist: 2 ½"

The walls of the peg head box are only about 2.5mm thick.

After confirming the authenticity of the instrument I contacted both Charles' granddaughter and Micheal, his great grandson, to let them know that a Charles Roach violin actually did exist and was available. The most exciting part is that it is #10, meaning he not only made one violin but, at least ten and who knows how many more.

Micheal immediately entered into negotiations with Mark and purchased the violin. As of this writing it is in storage pending a move to a new home. In addition to purchasing the Charles Roach violin, Michael found that Rick Pfrogner was attempting to sell his Sol Roach Mandoletto on Ebay and purchased that as well. Once the move to new quarters is complete the violin will be put into playing condition and can be evaluated.

John H. Roach Violins

The 2012 update contains a story about a violin being sold on Ebay made by a John H. Roach in 1958. I speculated as to whether this John H. Roach was Charles son John H. Roach who was born in 1895. In 1958 he would have been 63 years old and he, like Charles, was a carpenter and a woodworker. The 1958 violin was #5. In October of 2014 another John H. Roach violin appeared for sale on Ebay. This violin was listed as a 1956 ¾ Conservatory Violin. No other information was available and to date there is no hard evidence to confirm that this is our John H. Roach.

Violin # 30

On August 15, 2015 Justin Willis of Columbus Ohio contacted me and said he felt he had acquired an original Sol Roach violin. The tag says: "Made by Sol. E. Roach Windber, Pa." Written on the top margin is "hard (?) top" and on the right vertical margin "orchestra". Under the name and address is the graduation code along with March 1922. The code is: B. 7 X 3/16, T. 4 1/2 - 5 1/2 - 8. Justin explained that he acquired the violin at an estate auction for Wayne and Kay Vardaman of Decatur, Indiana.

I contacted Kay Vardaman by phone and learned that she was the daughter of Kenneth Foust and the granddaughter of Lesley L. Foust. Kenneth Foust purchased a grocery store in Rummel, which is east of Windbur on Rt. 56, from the Schaeffer family around 1940. The family lived above the store. Her grand father, Lesley, was in the retail coal business. The violin was originally purchased by Lesley and later given to his son Kenneth who played it. Kay said that her father played classical music and the pop music of the day. She said that the violin was found in 1997 while cleaning out the basement of the store. They held the auction as they were downsizing, moving from a large country place to an apartment, needing to dispose of many things including the violin.

Justin took the violin to Peter Horn, a well-known and experienced repairman in Cleveland, to be fixed up. Getting the instrument back in late September, Justin provided the following commentary: "I got it back from Peter and started playing it. Right away it was very good! As I continue playing it should open up quite a bit more. It is a professional level violin for sure. Light years ahead of intermediate instruments. I was really surprised because I wasn't expecting it to be such a good instrument. I definitely wouldn't be surprised if he was making instruments for professional musicians. He clearly was very talented." Justin told Kay Vardaman that she was welcome to come and hear the violin being played in the future. He provided the following pictures prior to having it repaired.

