



## Chapter 9

### Regraduated Commercial Violins and Repaired Instruments

#### **In Windber Museum**

**1919:** This violin is stamped in ink: “Stainer in Absam  
Oenipontum 1665”.

Sol’s tag reads: “ Sol E. Roach  
Manufacturer of violins  
1101 Grahm Ave. Windber, Pa.  
B. 6 x 2/16  
T. 5 x 7 1919”

Not in playing condition.

**1920:** This violin has a manufacturer’s tag which reads “Simon and Fry” and a logo stamped in ink into the wood. It also has written in two places “solo violin.”

Sol’s tag includes his code B. 8x8 T. 5-6 x 78 1920

This violin belonged to Joseph H. Sherriff and was donated to the museum by his son, Dr. Joseph H. Sherriff Jr. of Roaring Springs, Pa. Not in playing condition.

#### **In Private Hands**

**1913:** This violin belongs to Bonnie Ott of Windber and was not viewed.

**1919:** This violin belongs to Edna Mae Cook, South Fork, Pennsylvania. By phone Edna described the tag inside the violin. The commercially printed tag says: “Sol E. Roach Manufacturer of violins....general repairs of bicycles and supplies.” Handwritten on the tag is: BOW 6 X5-6 T 5X [?] 1919. On a separate tag: Vuilla Ouc Paris, Petite Champa 46, the original makers tag. There is no characteristic double sharp sign on either tag.

**1921:** This violin belonged to Joseph Nemanich of Johnstown and is in playing condition.

### **Other Re-grads**

During the year 2007 three of Sol's re-graduated violins showed up on the e-bay internet auction site. Nancy Davis monitored the site and found the following violins for sale; a smaller size commercial violin with one of Sol's repair tags with a printed date of 1899 and a handwritten repair date of 1902, a commercial violin re-graduated by Sol in 1908, and a commercial violin re-graduated in 1921. Two of the sellers were advertising their violins as Sol Roach originals, being unaware of the different tags, even with the word "regraduated" written on the tag. The third was a musical instrument dealer who knew what he saw.

### **1899/1902**

The violin with the plain tag and the printed date 1899 was of the greatest interest, so much so that Nancy Davis bid on and purchased it. Since a key question is when Sol started making violins as opposed to just repairing and re-graduating them, this printed date is confirmation that Sol was at least in the repair business as soon as he arrived in Windber, even though he did not yet advertise it as part of his main street business. He came to Windber in 1898 (don't know what part of the year) and erected the second building on Graham Avenue. A 1900 special issue of the Windber Era newspaper describes all the businesses in Windber. According to this article Sol's business was guns, bicycles, and hunting and fishing guide. No violins or string repair. The written-in date of 1902 is probably the date that he worked on the violin. The seller of the violin was in Bloomsberg, Pa.

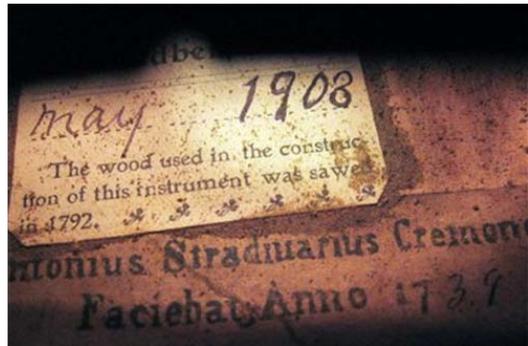
### **Violin Sol E Roach Repaired 1899, 1902-A (e-Bay)**





**1908**

The 1908 re-grad is an obvious commercial violin with the words “Conservatory Violin” in relief on the back of the scroll. The tag inside is a bit confusing though. Pictures through the “F” hole as provided by the seller do not show the upper part of the tag. Visible is Windber, Pa. and then in the space underneath it is written in ink “May 1908”. At the bottom of the tag is “The wood used in this instrument was sawed in 1792,” which is what you find on Sol’s makers tag. Just below the tag is an ink stamp on the wood in Italian common to commercial Strad copies of that era.



**1921**

The third violin was being sold by a Music store in Elkins, West Virginia. They advertised it as a “1921 German Strad Copy, either imported or repaired by Sol E. Roach. Orange varnish, nice tone, VG, HC \$700.”

Violin Sol. E. Roach 1921 at Smakula.com



## 1910 Regraduated

This violin belongs to Steve Dillon of Woodbridge, New Jersey. Steve owns Dillon Music Co. I found Steve through a Yahoo search that took me to a fiddling website where Steve had a profile. He

mentioned his Roach violin and provided contact info. The violin is a commercial instrument with a tag that says Sol regraduated it in 1910. The following pictures were provided by Steve. It's not known who did the mother of pearl inlay on the back.



## 1915 Swanson: major repair

This violin belonged to Ruth (Moore) Gore of Ocala, Florida. Ruth grew up in Windber, Pa. graduating in 1962 from Windber High School. She played the violin as a teenager in the high school orchestra. After moving to Florida with her husband and living in a smaller house she attempted to put the violin into the hands of someone who could use it. She was unable to find a taker. After coming across Dwight Newton's website and my article on Sol, we were able to make contact. She said that she didn't know how her family came into possession of the instrument but that her mother (Bertha Mae Miller Moore) had always felt it was special. She offered the violin to me for the price of postage, an offer that I gratefully accepted.

The tags inside are Sol's tags. There are two of them. One tag overlaps the other. The top tag is a small tag that reads:

<p><b>Sol. E. Roach</b> <b>1101 Graham Ave. Windber, Pa.</b> <i>Repaired 1915</i> <b>General Repairing</b></p>
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In the space under the address he wrote by hand "Repaired 1915." This smaller tag is glued over the top of a larger tag that appears to be a part of one of his "Maker's" tags as it has printed at the bottom the information about the wood being sawed in 1720. Vertically on the left hand margin he wrote "Made By"; on the lower margin "Portage, Pa."; and on the right hand margin "Portage, Pa." In a space above the printed information about the wood he wrote "1913-1915," and under it "Swanson." This apparently means that the violin was made by a man named Swanson from Portage, Pa. sometime during the period 1913 to 1915 and was repaired by Sol in 1915.

Efforts to find out who Mr. Swanson might have been are thus far inconclusive. Census records for 1910 show two Swansons in Portage, both involved with a coal company. The Depot Museum in Portage was contacted, but they were unable to come up with anyone named Swanson who was known to be a violin maker.

The repair work that Sol did appears to be major crack repair on the bottom board. There are two cracks. One runs generally under the sound post area about 4 inches but is confined to the middle of the plate. The other starts at the edge under the chin rest, running up to the length of the lower bout to the first corner and the middle bout. The repair consists of the use of wooden cleats on the inside as well as well trimmed patches. The cracks are filled. Ruth speculated that the repair might also have included changing to the guitar like mechanical tuning pegs. This is probably not the case as the mechanical pegs he seems to prefer for his own personal violin (1907) are of a friction type.

This violin is in good playable condition, is easy to play and has a unique tone. Tested by a professional, it has an ordinary tone in a small room but in a large space it is very mellow, almost like a very loud muted violin. When the plates are tapped they ring a B natural below middle C, unlike the Strad copies that tap around middle F and G.

This instrument also raises a number of questions about the violin-making culture of this region. The maker is not clearly defined by himself, but by Sol as the repairer. Upon close examination the carving work on the body parts is very good. However, the cut of the F holes is very ragged and what appears to be purfling is not in fact purfling, but scribe lines that were meant to be purfled. This accounts for one of the major cracks on the bottom plate and a more recent small crack on the top plate. Now what maker who has the skill to carve a good scroll, neck and top and bottom plates would allow an instrument to go out with F holes that looked like they were made with a dull Boy Scout knife and no purfling, but yet perfectly scribed the lines on the wood of both plates?

My first thought is that perhaps Mr. Swanson was not really a maker but an assembler of pre-made parts. According to Russell Harriger's previously mentioned book "Long Rifles of Pennsylvania" when Jefferson County's Brookville violin maker Henry Bonnett died in 1907 there were found in his shop 8 sets of top and bottom plates ready for assembly. Items like this were obviously available from sources like this or perhaps by mail order.

Perhaps our maker or assembler actually did the major carving work but ran out of patience or felt the purfling was too much to handle or didn't have the tools and assembled it anyway. But then again, what roll did pre-made parts have in supporting the work of these makers? Pegs, finger boards, and tail pieces were ordered out. Could some of the other parts be mail order parts as well?

On the subject of pre-made parts, discovery of the Sol Roach 1903 owned by Kenny Hydock of Suffolk, Va. adds to this thinking. Referring back to the 1908 regrad documented earlier in this chapter it was noted that on the back of the scroll were the words "Conservatory Violin." On the inside was one of Sol's tags right next to the ink stamp of the European maker. The scroll on Kenny's 1903, which has one of Sol's regular "Makers" tags, also has "Conservatory Violin" on the back of the scroll. Does this mean that Sol may have at times used some pre-made parts? Kenny said that his great grandfather used the violin to make a living and the luthier who restored it in the 1980's said that it had to have been heavily used to be in that condition. Could this commercial neck simply be a replacement for a broken neck or peg box?



## **Miscellaneous Comments**

In the narration under the top board of the 1907 violin Sol states that (as of 1914) he had made over 200 violins. In a newspaper article (presumably from a Johnstown paper) found in the 1933 file at the funeral home that buried Sol, information apparently supplied by the family indicates that he made over 50 original violins. It is possible that Sol included his re-graduated violins in his number.

The technician, Harold Wilson of Johnstown, who worked on the 1909 Didik/Ambroe violin, said that he had heard of other Roach instruments in the Johnstown area. He also thought there might be a Roach cello in existence.

From notes by John S. Roach, regarding Sol's violins: "His violins were in demand. They were used by members of the Pittsburgh and New York symphony orchestras. [unconfirmed] Sol Roach himself was a fiddler as compared with a violinist. He played for square dances and country picnics. He also played his own violins to develop and correct the tones." According to John, one of Sol's daughters played her violin in a symphony orchestra in Detroit and the other in an orchestra in Pennsylvania.