

A PERFECT GIFT FOR ROBERT

By David L. Funke © 2009

My step-dad, Robert E. Gharst, did not like his violin. He was always complaining about it, which intensified after he joined the Bremerton Symphony orchestra in 1952. He wanted a better instrument, one worthy of playing the music of the masters. His violin was orange, but he never complained about that.

Whenever I complained about anything as much as Robert was, spouting his discontent, I was told to stop and be appreciative for the things I had. Considering how many sacrifices and the history Robert had had with his violin, I felt he was being unappreciative and ungrateful.

Robert received his violin when his Uncle Jessie and Aunt Nell bought it for him in 1912 when they lived on a farm north of Pincher Creek, Alberta, Canada. It was not an expensive violin, but better than a lot of instruments. His aunt and uncle had to skimp and save before they purchased the violin. They were not known to be good farmers and economic times were tough. Buying the violin was just the beginning of their musical sacrifices for Robert.

There were the violin lessons every week from a music teacher in the area. The cost of replacing strings, music books, a tuning fork, and resin for the violin bow, time away from Robert's chores traveling fifteen miles to Pincher Creek for lessons, and time for Robert to practice every day. Then one day Robert did not return from his violin lesson increasing the sacrifices.

Robert was an hour late and Uncle Jessie and Aunt Nell became concerned. When

Robert's horse arrived without him, they were alarmed. They retraced the horse's steps and found Robert laying on the prairie with his violin. The horse had tripped in a gopher hole and fell on Robert's left leg breaking it in two places. Two compound fractures. Robert was excused from any farm chores for awhile and there was more than enough time for practicing. Even the violin case received a permanent gash on its top from the saddle horn during the fall as a reminder of the incident. The sacrifices continued.

Robert's right leg grew normally while his left leg was mending. As a result, the left leg ended up being about a quarter inch shorter than the right one. From that time on, Robert required special therapeutic shoes with a thicker left shoe sole so he could walk without a limp.

During the 'Great Depression', Robert's violin kept him from becoming dependent on the many soup lines in Seattle, Washington after he was employed by a Tacoma radio station to play his violin. A plush job Robert talked about often, adding how he had to control tapping his foot to keep time because it could be heard over the airwaves. I am not sure how he solved the foot tapping problem, but I always thought the solution was simple. Remove a shoe.

By the time Christmas of 1952 came around, my mom decided to put an end to Robert's griping about the inferior quality of his orange violin. Buying a new violin was beyond consideration since our funds were limited. But when my mom decided about

anything, not having enough money for it was just a challenge to be worked around. Like one summer my brother, Jim, and I wanted cowboy shirts. Since they were so expensive, mom bought material and shirt patterns and made us cowboy shirts. So, when mom read the advertisement for a book in "Popular Mechanics" on how to make your own Stradivarius, her prayers were answered. It became her Christmas gift to Robert.

When Robert opened the gift, he thought my mom had wasted her money. He didn't think he could build something as delicate as a violin. One look at this rough fingers, I had to agree. But, mom told him, "You should, at least, read the book." So he did.

Soon after, a fifty dollar check was on its way to Lewis & Sons in Chicago, Illinois for naturally aged violin wood when Robert decided he could make a Stradivarius after all. The wood arrived in blocks (front, back, and neck), strips (violin sides), round rod for the sound post, and four pegs for the strings, finger and tail boards, and a nob to anchor the ebony tail board located behind the bridge of the violin. It was obviously not an erector set. One had to carve and shape the violin by hand as special molds and tools were needed.

Since Robert did not have a work shop, the violin was made on our kitchen table. Once dinner was done and the dishes cleared, out came the violin making stuff. It took Robert a year to finish making his Stradivarius. It was an improvement over his old orange instrument, but he felt he could do better: "Not in my kitchen, you aren't," exclaimed my mom! So, Robert converted an abandoned mink shed into a violin making shop.

Mom's gift for Robert became similar to a religious experience, like being born again. It literally changed his life as he made a total of 39 violins - Stradivarius (5), Guarnerius (3), da Salo (4), and his own design "The Monarch" (27).

He acquired new friends, too. A number of Washingtonian violin makers were found - several in Seattle and Tacoma, one in Ryderwood, one in Ephrata, named Fritz, who had violin making secrets, and a disciple, Henry Mitchell, an Arkansas fiddler who worked with Robert.

Robert visited Fritz often attempting to unlock some of Fritz's secrets. Finally he learned how to tune the wood. Robert's violins improved notably afterwards as he began making violins of his own design - "The Monarch."

If you ever look inside a violin and see a stamp that is a capital 'G' with smaller capital letters 'R' and 'E' inside it, you are looking at one of Robert's violins. An instrument made from a perfect Christmas gift for Robert from my mom.

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