

# Fiddle Making

by

Ralph Warren Stanley

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Celestia  
Gertrude (Dix)  
Mrs. Ralph  
Judson  
Robinson  
(1875-1961)

As a small boy I always liked to hear fiddle tunes on the radio. I sometimes could get a Canadian radio station that featured a lot of hornpipes, jigs and reels. My grandmother, Celestia (Dix) Robinson, had a violin that she had bought sometime before 1898 from Sears and Roebuck for five dollars. This violin was kept in its original cardboard case in the attic and occasionally I would get her to bring it out and play a few tunes. I don't know if she ever had lessons but she played by ear. She could play tunes on the piano also by ear. After I learned to play some tunes on the fiddle she would play along with me on the piano. When she had a stroke and could no longer play her sister, Vienna (Dix) Lawler, would sometimes play with me. They had a special way of playing chords that I have never heard anyone else do. A lot of people have played piano with me but not like they did. I don't know where they learned but as teenagers they attended Coburn Classical Institute for two years and possibly learned there.

Vienna Sophia  
(Dix)  
Mrs. Edwin  
Albert Lawler  
(1871-1955)

Gladys Ella  
Whitmore  
(1887-1977)

Growing up in Southwest Harbor there was so many things to do that kept me busy, music was not a top priority. However, I still liked to listen to old time music. I think it was fifth grade in school that our teacher, Gladys Whitmore, tried to teach us the fundamentals of music but it seemed to go in one ear and out the other.

In my first year at Ricker Junior College one of my classmates played the fiddle. Occasionally I would hear him playing jigs and reels and I thought, "I wish I could do that". When I got home I decided to see what I could do with my grandmother's fiddle. I think she showed me how to tune it and I got so I could pick out a few tunes by ear. I found some music to some more tunes I wanted to play but couldn't read the music. I wished I had paid more attention in fifth grade. I just happened to find in the back of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary a section on music. After studying it over a little those fifth grade lessons all came back. I must have retained some of it as it passed through.

When I graduated from Ricker my mother bought me a violin and I continued to play and learn more tunes until I was stricken with a lung abscess and tuberculosis. While in the sanatorium, where I spent a year, I could not have my fiddle but I thought if I am ever able to get out of that place I would like to make a fiddle. My mother found a couple books on violin making.

Robie Milton  
Norwood, Jr.  
(1873-1955)

Upon finally getting out of the sanatorium, I set about finding some wood. I went to Robie Norwood looking for a piece of maple for the back and sides. The best thing he had was a stair tread of birch that came out of the Underwood cottage that they had

“Squirrelhurst”  
Underwood  
Cottage  
1901

torn down. He sold me the stair tread and I had a piece of ponderosa pine for the top or belly that was left over from a cabin side of a boat that I had built. I found a piece of maple for the neck in our firewood pile. Violins are usually made with a maple back, sides and neck and a spruce top but I had to make do with what I could find.

Alvah Murch  
“Allie”  
Batchelder  
(1879-c. 1961)

While making this first violin I traveled to Frankfort to see Allie Batchelder who made some nice violins. At this time I found him making a new violin and he had one all finished that he had made for a professor at the University of Maine. This was in 1955 and he was getting five hundred dollars for that one. It looked so nice I hardly dared to touch it. I asked him about the wood and he said, “Sonny, there is just as good wood growing in your back yard as there is anywhere.” Mr. Batchelder was a blacksmith by trade working in the shipyards around Stockton Springs but he made over one hundred violins.

Simeon J.  
Marshall  
(1874-1962)

Instead of the traditional scroll, I decided to carve a lion’s head. What inspired me to do this was the lion’s head on an old fiddle that was loaned to me by Sim Marshall. Sim was a stonemason and must have been in his eighties at this time. He liked fiddle music. I met an Irishman who worked at a summer cottage at Northeast Harbor who played the fiddle. This man weighed about three hundred pounds and had big hands with short stubby fingers but he could really make them move while playing the fiddle. I took him to visit Sim a couple times and he played Irish jigs and reels all evening long not playing the same tune twice. Sim sure got a kick out of that.

I don’t know where Sim got this old fiddle with the lion’s head. I suspect that it was a fiddle made by George Bartlett at Bartlett’s Island. I know that George Bartlett made a number of violins. This violin must have been very old as it had a short neck. At about the mid nineteenth century the pitch of the note A above middle C was raised to a standard pitch of 440 vibrations per second so that the necks of all the old violins have had to be lengthened to accommodate the increase in pitch.

The Sylvester  
violin was  
probably made  
at Cape Breton  
by a fisherman  
who drowned  
in the Gulf of  
St. Lawrence  
off a mackerel  
schooner.

At Deer Isle I have found a fiddle that is owned by the Sylvester family that has a very similar lion’s head. They don’t know who made this fiddle or where it came from. The original owner was a fisherman who went each year with the mackerel fleet to the Bay of St. Lawrence where he was eventually lost at sea in a storm. There is some speculation that the fiddle came from Cape Breton. Many of the early settlers of Cape Breton Island came from Scotland and having no musical instruments made their own violins.

Millard Scott  
Spurling  
(1877-1967)

I varnished this first violin with a red violin varnish that I bought in Bangor. This varnish never really dried to my satisfaction but I played it for several years mostly with a group at the Knights of Pythias Lodge Hall at Bernard. This hall had once been the Bernard Grammar School. I really did not like the sticky varnish so I decided to scrape it down to bare wood and refinish it. Meanwhile I played a violin that I had bought from Millard Spurling. This violin had a mother of pearl inlay on

George Jacob  
Joy  
(1861-1936)

the back. Millard had bought the violin from George Joy, who I believe taught school at Great Cranberry Island. Millard had intentions of learning to play but never did. After his wife died he had a lady friend at Ellsworth who had a daughter going to school who wanted to take violin lessons so he let her borrow it. When he got it back it was damaged. He had it for a number of years before he sold it to me. I repaired it and that gave me something to play while I scraped the varnish off the one I made. I intended to re-varnish but didn't get to it so it set around in this condition for years.

While playing at the Grange Hall at Northport I miss-stepped and fell off the stage with the Spurling violin in my hand. I was not hurt but the top was in splinters. I had another violin, made in Japan, that some one had given me so I got that one out and played it for a while. Then I decided to re-finish the one I had made and I have that one playable again. For finish I used several coats of polyurethane, having previously colored the wood with a stain that I made out of beet juice.

David  
Norwood, son  
of Maurice and  
Pauline F.  
(Chase)  
Norwood,  
Southwest  
Harbor, Maine

In the meantime I had some parts where I had started to make another but laid them aside. I had a back that was made of beech wood that came out of the fire woodpile. I made the sides of poplar that I had in the shop and I found a piece of Maine white cedar, left over from boat planking, to make the belly. David Norwood gave me a piece of maple for the neck. This violin has quite a loud tone.

David Ashton  
Holmes  
(1929-)

After I got that violin done I decided to make another. The back, sides and neck of this one are made of poplar furnished by my brother-in-law, David Holmes, from a tree cut in Kingfield, Maine. The top is another piece of cedar. I finished it bright with no color, just the natural color of the wood. This violin has the best sound of all that I have made. While making this violin I made a new spruce belly for the Spurling violin, which has greatly improved its sound.

[Vittoria (Vitelli) McIlhenny, Mrs. Alan McIlhenny of Northeast Harbor, purchased the "White Violin" for her collection in 2010.

"The more I play that [white] violin, the better the sound is." – Ralph Stanley Oct. 18, 2010]

I am now making another, number four. The back will be made of cherry, again furnished by David Holmes from a tree cut in Kingfield. I have some spruce for the belly from a healthy tree that blew down recently here in Southwest Harbor. The neck will be maple from the wood pile. While waiting for this wood to season I have made a new spruce belly for an old fiddle that was given to me years ago by Les White, Jr. I once made a new neck for this fiddle but it never sounded good. The new belly has greatly improved the sound.

At present I am making a new belly for another old fiddle that I had. This belly is made of local white pine. Here again I am making do with what I could find.

See SWHPL 10202 and 10203 for photographs of Ralph Warren Stanley playing his Underwood Violin.

See SWHPL 10204, 10205 and 10206 for photographs of Ralph Warren Stanley's Underwood Violin.

See SWHPL 10207 and 10208 for photographs of Ralph Warren Stanley playing his Secundo Violin.

See SWHPL 10236 for a photograph of Ralph Warren Stanley playing his White Violin.

See SWHPL 10237, 10238, 10239 and 10240, for photographs of Ralph Warren Stanley's White Violin.

See SWHPL 6104 for a photograph of Ralph Warren Stanley playing his Spurling Violin.

See SWHPL 10427 for a photograph of Alvah Murch "Allie" Batchelder - Violin Maker

See the chapter, "Fiddling for Fun" in "Ralph Stanley : Tales of a Maine Boatbuilder" by Craig S. Milner and Ralph W. Stanley, published by Down East Books, Camden, Maine, p. 131-134, 2004.



Ralph Warren Stanley in his violin workshop – January 5, 2011

Ralph is playing the violin he got from Les White Jr. [Leslie Frank White Jr. (1921-2010)]. Ralph made a new neck for it and later a new top, which "improved the sound quite a lot."

The violin workshop consist of some space around a massive iron (and therefore level) table saw base in the basement of Ralph's house at 102 Clark Point Road, Southwest Harbor, Maine. The house was built by Ralph's great uncle, mariner William Doane Stanley, "Uncle Jimmy" (1855-1950), in 1928 and has been owned by the Stanley family to this day (2011). Ralph's boat shop next to the house, and the sheds on the shore and wharf are the site of Ralph Stanley's boat shop where he built many of his well known boats, becoming a one man boat building institution, revered in the history of wooden boat building.







Ralph is holding a piece of spruce for the top of his next violin. The spruce top is made from two pieces joined together. A wedge is cut from spruce tree, split and turned so that the center of the tree is on the outside of each piece and, therefore, the outer edge of the violin.







This particular piece of wood is from a tree that blew down on Mike Carroll's property on Dirigo Road, Southwest Harbor, in 2010.







Ralph made a new top for this old violin. The sides (frame) of a new violin sits beside it. Ralph uses plans that he found in "Popular Mechanics" magazine.



The pieces for a new violin assembled on the work bench. The sides (frame) of this violin are cut, not steamed and bent.



All the tools Ralph needs are at hand on the bottom shelf of the table saw.





The calipers and scraper.



Using the scraper to hollow out the flat piece, made from two pieces of wood glued together so that the parts of each that were originally close to the center of the log are now on the outer edges of the violin. Ralph scrapes until the front or back of the violin is shaped to the desired depth and the curves he wants.



Measuring the various depths or thickness of the wood with calipers.



Checking the spruce top, or “belly” for the desired depth using lines carefully drawn with a pencil.





Ralph made this mold for his first violin, the “Underwood Violin” named for the source of the wood he used for the back and sides - a birch stair tread from the demolished Underwood cottage, “Squirrelhurst.” He steamed the sides for that violin. The shape for the mold came from “Popular Mechanics” magazine.



The outside mold was given to Ralph by Emery Gardiner Bartlett (1881-1970), Ralph's grandmother's [Celestia Gertrude Dix (1875-1961)] cousin's son, Ralph's first cousin twice removed.



Fitting the sides around the cedar pattern. The depth of the sides goes from one and one quarter inches to one and one eighth inches front to back.





The top for the new violin resting on the sides. This new blonde violin (Ralph's 2011 violin) will have a different top from the one shown, as he is not happy with this top. In the photograph the top is spruce, the back is cherry and the sides are poplar.





# Ralph's Hornpipe

Ralph Stanley

Ralph's playing, 4 May 2003

Reel

Musical score for Ralph's Hornpipe, a reel in G major, 4/4 time. The score consists of three staves of music. Chords are indicated above the notes: G, Am, D, and G. There are first and second endings marked with '1' and '2' respectively. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

# Ralph's Jig

Ralph Stanley

Ralph's playing, 4 May 2003

Jig

Musical score for Ralph's Jig, a jig in D major, 6/8 time. The score consists of four staves of music. Chords are indicated above the notes: A7, D, A7, D, A7, D, G, A7, A, D, G, A7, and D. There are first and second endings marked with '1' and '2' respectively. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Transcription by Dick Atlee - May 4, 2003

# The Wind and The Wood

Nev Jackson

© 1998

Up on the coast of Maine  
Where American life's still sane  
Son of Chester and the son of Ralph  
Buildin' the workin' boats plain.  
Along Southwest Harbor's ways  
And the moorings across the bay  
Friendship Sloop and lobster boat  
Built in the old-time way.

Oh the wind and the wood is a lonesome way  
And it harkens back to another day  
Oh the wind and the wood and the lonesome pine  
Harken back to another time.

He's makin' vessels out of wood  
Makin' vessels like they should  
Nailin' the ribbands sightin' the lines  
The only way Ralph Stanley would.  
When his hands are done for the day  
And the varnish glistens in the rays  
He'll pick up a fiddle and he'll pick up a bow  
And he'll work wood another way.

Oh the strings and the wood is a lonesome way  
And it harkens back to another day  
Oh the strings and the wood they sound so fine  
Harken back to another time.



## Making wood Sing!

By Mark Good

An argument could easily be made that Ralph Stanley is a Stradivarius of boatbuilding. Even to the untrained eye, the wooden boats designed and built by the Southwest Harbor man show an attention to detail that establishes them as the work of someone who is as much an artist as an artisan. And, if further proof is needed, look closely at his resume, which includes being honored with a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and as Boatbuilder Laureate of Maine by former Gov. Angus King.

Much has been written, and even more said, about Mr. Stanley's skills in fashioning wood into watercraft that are as shapely as they are seaworthy, but even his most ardent admirers may not know that the softspoken 79-year-old shares more than woodworking abilities with the legendary 17th century instrument maker. Mr. Stanley, too, makes violins.

Like so many of his projects, making a violin was just something that he wanted to try. The seed was planted when he first picked up the instrument at the age of 20.

Mr. Stanley was attending what was then Ricker Junior College in Houlton, where a fellow student sparked his interest.

"My grandmother had a fiddle she played for years," he recalled. Back home in Southwest Harbor, he thought he'd give the instrument a try. "I got so I could pick out a few tunes," he said.

He also built a couple of boats, but then he came down with tuberculosis and related lung problems. He was placed in a sanitarium in Bangor, and later transferred to the Central Maine Sanitarium in Fairfield.

"While I was there I thought if I got better I'd like to make a fiddle," Mr. Stanley said. He got a book—probably a Popular Mechanics publication—which had plans and instructions for making a violin. But, it would be a year before he was well enough to go home.

Before tackling that first instrument, Mr. Stanley decided to get some expert advice. He visited Alvah Bachelder in Winterport.

"He was a blacksmith but he'd made violins since he was a young man," Mr. Stanley said. "He probably made a hundred of them in his lifetime. They were nice. You'd hardly dare touch them."

Traditionally, the sides and back of a violin are made from maple; the top is spruce. Mr. Stanley asked Mr. Bachelder for his advice on what wood to use.

"He said there's just as good wood in your backyard; you don't need any exotic woods."

Mr. Stanley returned home, picked over his woodpile, and got to work. Using a piece of pine left over from a boat project for the top and an old birch stair tread from a Bar Harbor summer home for the sides and back, he made his first instrument. True to form, he discarded the Popular Mechanics plans, instead copying an old violin he believes was made on Bartlett Island. Instead of the traditional scroll on the peghead of the violin, this instrument had a lion's head, a feature Mr. Stanley painstakingly carved on his own violin.

"I played that fiddle for quite a while," Mr. Stanley said. But, he was never satisfied with the finish on the instrument; the varnish never set properly and stayed soft. He stripped the varnish but never got around to refinishing it. Instead, he bought a 150-year-old violin from a Cranberry Isles resident. The old instrument had some problems.

"I had to take it apart and rebuild it," Mr. Stanley said. Once it was rebuilt, he played that fiddle until recently. He was playing

*"I'm going to make another one just for the fun of it, to see how it comes out."*

— Ralph Stanley.

music at the grange hall in Northport when he tripped.

"I fell backwards and I busted the top of that fiddle," he said.

The accident led him to revisit an earlier, unfinished project.

"I had some pieces of another fiddle I was going to make but never got around to it," he said. The parts were the result of another visit to the woodpile. The top is cedar, the back beech and the sides—this time sawn and not steam-bent like on his first violin—made of poplar.

"I thought I'd try something different," he said of sawing out the curves of the sides. "It seems to be working out all right."

About this time, Mr. Stanley decided to refinish the first violin he made. He wanted a red stain. Instead of making a trip to the paint store, he sent his wife Marion to the produce market for beets. The beets were made into juice, cut with alcohol and applied to the wood, giving the instrument a decidedly unique deep red appearance.

Mr. Stanley downplays his violin-making skills. Working in wood is something he has always had an affinity for, beginning as a child when he would take apart wooden orange crates to build model airplanes, boats and other items.

"I was always building something; it just came to me," he said. He is even more modest about his violin playing.

"I'm not really a violin player," he said. "I would have liked to have some lessons."

But he has a good ear for music. "I can play along with most anything they can sing, whether I've heard it or not. If they tell me the key, I can get it."

Mr. Stanley began performing on the instrument around 1964, at the age of 35. At the time, there were dances every weekend at what was then the Knights of Pythias hall on the Bernard Road in Tremont. He joined the band there, playing old-time music and popular songs of the day. Later, he would play in a group with Ruth Grierson on piano, Fred Black, Sr. on guitar, Floyd Farley on tenor banjo and Skip Fralley on washtub bass.

"For a long while I didn't do much playing," Mr. Stanley said. He had a heart attack in 1999 that slowed him down some. Since then he's turned the boatbuilding business over to his son Richard and gotten back into performing.

He plays regularly at a nursing home in Bucksport, one of his favorite gigs.

"I like playing over there in Bucksport. That's pretty good," he said. "It's fun to do. People seem to enjoy it."

Mr. Stanley has also become a composer, writing two tunes: "Ralph's Hornpipe" and "Ralph's Jig." Both songs have been recorded on a CD by Maine musicians David Mallett and Susan Crippen.

"I'm working on some more," he said. "But I haven't perfected anything yet."

Mr. Stanley will be playing with guitarist and singer Yodelin' Wade Dow at the grange hall in Surry on Saturday, Aug. 2, and on Saturday, Aug. 9, at the Bass Harbor Memorial Library in Tremont. He is also thinking about making a third violin.

"I'm going to make another one just for the fun of it," he said. "To see how it comes out."

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ISLANDER PHOTO BY MARK GOOD

Boatbuilder Ralph Stanley plays one of his custom-made violins during an impromptu performance in the living room of his Southwest Harbor home.



Mr. Stanley poses on the dock at his boatshop in Southwest Harbor.



Ralph Stanley performing with friends recently in Bar Harbor.



Mr. Stanley at the helm of one of his boats with a Friendship sloop he built in the background.