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Prime Time

A monthly publication for all ages and times.



**A grandfather's legacy:
Restored Schroepfer violin
now on display**

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Museum offers a tribute to a master luthier

The northwoods of Wisconsin is home to a lot more fiddles than fine instruments.

But a century ago, a young man named John Schroepfer began quietly crafting the finest of violins still prized today for their tone and temperament.

And now, a relative and local historian has gifted one to the Langlade County Historical Society Museum.

Jim Posselt, John's grandson, purchased the violin, which had been restored by Antigo luthier Jim Novak, and presented it to the museum this summer.

"When I was a little kid, I watched John make violins and I didn't think a thing of it," Posselt said. "He sold them for a hundred bucks a piece. Now, they are worth thousands."

On Novak's advice, the gift included a few admonishments, including the requirement that the instrument be played regularly. Violins, it seems, are like good dogs, they wither from lack of affection and attention.

John Schroepfer was born in 1886 in Austria, then a part of Bohemia, and migrated to Antigo with his family when he was just a toddler. He married Theresa Augustyn in 1907 and together they had a son, Ed, and four daughters, Evelyn, Margaret, Helen and Alice.

In those days—almost pre-radio—families made their own entertainment and young Schroepfer was soon tuning pianos, playing violins and, starting the year he was married, crafting them.

The Antigo Daily Journal wrote about the luthier on an occasional basis. The newspaper credited the awakening of his talents to a visit to a shop of a Milwaukee violin maker where he had sent the instrument of Bill Davis, an

Antigo barber, for repairs.

"What Schroepfer saw there, in materials, tools and their use, convinced him that violin making was something he could learn," the newspaper reported. "He bought quantities of the woods needed, and started to work without an instructor or manual."

Schroepfer later completed a correspondence course with the Bretsch School of Violin Making in New York, earning accolades from his instructors.

It was a golden age of craftsmanship in Antigo—with the likes of Alvin Linden and Ulrich Vosmek crafting guns; George Falkenhagen painting landscapes; A.J. Kingsbury taking photographs; and John Smith developing potatoes—and Schroepfer soon began being noticed for his skills as a luthier, as a violin maker is known.

Schroepfer was a friend of noted luthier Carl Becker, who had a home and workshop at Pickerel Lake and they likely shared their ideas regarding woods, finishes and carving techniques.

Becker became a giant among luthiers, a legacy continued by his son, Carl Jr. When the younger Becker died in 2013, was reported across the globe.

Schroepfer never sought—or reached—that level of acclaim, but the 153 fine instruments he produced over his lifetime generated quite a following, including from Charles Mills, the director of the School of Music at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Mills purchased two of Schroepfer's violins for the university's orchestra, noting in a letter to Schroepfer that he had chosen them over 27 other instruments and "you should consider this



John Schroepfer with several of his violins.

selection an honor to your fine art and it should prove to be of lasting value to you."

The violins were sold at a set price—\$100 each—and Schroepfer made them to order, one at a time, at a rate of 12 to 20 per year.

An order form for the violins noted that they were "known throughout the United States for their supreme workmanship, smoothness of tone and moderate

price."

The violin's top-plate was constructed of spruce, largely salvaged from old buildings, with choice maple for the back and sides, selected for the beauty of grain and flare.

Those who know these things report that varnish is key to a violin's sound, and Schroepfer concocted his own special elixir, prob-

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On the Cover

Jim Posselt with the violin made by his grandfather, John Schroepfer, that he has donated to the Langlade County Historical Society Museum. Schroepfer was an accomplished luthier and, decades after his death, his violins are prized by collectors and musicians.



The John Schroepfer Orchestra.

Continued

Schroepfer

ably in consultation with his friend Becker.

“Without assuming the role of the charlatan, and without wishing to appear boastful or egotistical, I solicit the privilege of sending Schroepfer Violins for comparison with any other modern or any ‘old’ violin in existence today, confident that the Schroepfer instrument will prove superior,” the order form states.

Most of the violins were elegantly simple, but Schroepfer did make a few with embellishments, including a birthday present for his daughter, Alice, a Catholic nun



John's son, Ed Schroepfer, with the violin etched with angels and the Virginia Mary, made as a birthday present for Ed's sister, a Catholic nun.

teaching at a parochial school in Manistique, Mich. It included etchings of the Virgin Mary on the sound board and angels on the back.

Schroepfer was also a noted musician, playing violin and saxophone in his jazz orchestra together with Art White, cornet and mandolin, Emma Blahnik, pianist; Lee Herman, trombone and violin; and Fred Luebcke, trap drummer and manager.

His son, Ed, became an even more noted musician and longtime



John Schroepfer's tools were simple, but his craftsmanship exquisite.

owner of a music store in Antigo.

It is said that a true artist is never appreciate until after death.

Perhaps that is true because since Schroepfer passed in 1957, at the age of 70, the acclaim—and value—of his violins has climbed steadily.

The violin he made for his daughter, with the etching of the Virgin Mary, remains in the possession of his grandson, Tom, who lives in Marinette. Others have made their way to Ontario, Canada and across the globe, many with five-figure price tags. Several remain in the Antigo area.

Jim Novak, who makes violins as well as repairs them, has Schroepfer's tools and manuals and played a key role in procuring the violin now at the museum.

Novak was contacted by a woman in the Upper Peninsula who had purchased a Schroepfer violin and found his name through a website devoted to the luthiers artistry. She sold the instrument, about 100 years old and badly in need of care, to him.

Novak restored the instrument, which he said has an interesting past. It is not numbered, meaning that Schroepfer produced it prior to 1924, when he began keeping more careful records. Novak estimated it was made in about 1914, perhaps in the range of number 30 or so.

“Jim did meticulous work,” Posselt said. “It was in terrible shape.”

And he jumped on the opportunity to purchase a legacy to his grandfather.

“Next thing I knew he donated it to the museum,” Novak said. “He sure has his heart in the right place.”

The decision to make the donation was a simple one, Posselt said.

“We have no Schroepfer violin

stuff,” Posselt, a regular museum volunteer, said. “We needed something for the collection.”

It is now on secure display in the museum's orchestra section.

Well-crafted words, like violins, age gracefully, and the best way to end a story about the Schroepfer violin may well be a description of the instrument penned by the Antigo Daily Journal shortly before his death.

“He never aimed at quantity production, but at producing the best possible instrument, one that would command and hold the respect of musicians because of its fine workmanship and enduring quality,” the newspaper wrote. “In his effort, he succeeded.”

Enjoy a little bit of ‘me-time’ to stay creative, energized

(StatePoint) Those with creative or artistic aspirations know that consistently staying motivated and inspired is easier said than done.

A little bit of me-time goes a long way. Carve out some space each week for your own pursuits beyond the time spent working on projects. Learn where and when you do your best thinking, brainstorming and reflection. Is it on a morning walk through the park? Do you need complete silence? Don't be afraid to request some solitude from loved ones. This may also be a good opportunity to disconnect from your devices for a bit. Leave your phone off or at home so you aren't tempted to distract yourself. Create a dedicated workspace at home is a good idea. Be sure it's comfortable, away from distractions and brightly lit. Make it a space you want to spend time.

REALITY CHECK By Dave Whamond

