

Charles Horner:

Fiddle Maker of the Cumberland Plateau

By Bob Buckingham

Charles and Anne Horner live in a small community a few miles off of Interstate 40, just west of Knoxville, Tennessee, at the eastern edge of the Cumberland Plateau. One warm July day, a student, Tabitha Lawson, and I went to see Charles and try out some fiddles. Tabitha liked her first Horner fiddle so much she wanted a second one. While she tried fiddles, I spoke with Charles about fiddle making and his life.



Horner was born in 1933 in a one-room poplar log cabin that sits 100 yards from his shop. It's the same cabin in which his father, Charles, was born in 1903. This is also the same cabin his grandfather, William, built around 1896. He was named Charles Jean Harner at birth, but his father failed to correct the misspelled birth certificate so his name is Horner today.

In the 1950s, things were beginning to boom in America, but in the Appalachians, jobs were scarce. It was then that Charles began what was to be his lifetime endeavor. From his humble beginnings he taught himself to build an instrument that can stand up to a great deal of scrutiny. Being of that natural independence that is a common trait in East Tennessee, he has been determined to excel at making quality instruments. He would have given anything to have been able to go to "one of those Chicago schools" but when he was of the age to attend he was just a poor boy wearing shoes that did not match. When a classically-trained violinist like Kenny Sears uses a couple of Horner's fiddles for his sessions and Opry performances, it speaks for itself about Charles' capacities as a builder. Twenty-five years ago he re-evaluated his life as he felt he was not living in a way that enabled him to build at his best. He made a decision to change and give more attention to details and making a better product. According to his long-time friend Chuck Naill, today Horner is making the best instruments of his career.

How long have you been making fiddles?

I started trying it when I was fifteen years old in 1948. And needless to say, I didn't a bit more know how to do it than anything. I was just groping around in the dark like a blind man and wouldn't have knowed a good one if I'd seen it. I got real interested in it and just kept trying down through the years. I spent four years in the Navy and finally found me a book that gave me some directions

on how to go about making one. I got started that way. Just trial and error, working on down through the years. I would do other things just to keep going, like making toys and chairs and cabinet work and furniture. Along about 1975, I just quit everything but the musical instruments. I've done banjos and mandolins. I must've made fifty or sixty banjos. Mandolins – 241 of those. I made about six violas, one cello, two double basses, and I don't know how many fiddles. Somewhere around 400 to 500.

Do you keep them all numbered?

No, I didn't number the fiddles. I numbered the mandolins. The banjos, I didn't care that much about them. I made about six or seven guitars. I didn't have the interest in guitars that you needed, and there are so many people making guitars, anyway. I just like the fiddle better than anything. Nowadays, the fiddle and the mandolin's about all I do.

You said you've made one out of walnut?

Yes, that was on a special order, that's the only reason I did it. It was for a guy in Canada.

Do you ever make any out of cherry?

Made one. I did that because I had such a beautiful piece of wood. It had a real broad curl in it. It was real pretty, but I never did do another one.

You were talking about this maple here, curly maple. Where do you get your maple?

Down through the years I cultivated a friendship with loggers.

That's the guy that's gonna find the tree for you because he's in the woods every day. You know we can't go through people's property chopping on trees to see if that's got what we want! And then I'd be around sawmills. There's always a chance a log would get in there. They'd generally sell it to you. I use a lot of American wood. I like European wood. It's just so hard to get the type that you want. You order it from a mail order house and they just pull it out of a bin and ship it to you and I can't afford to go up there and look at it; they might not let you, anyway. But I've had good luck with American wood. There'll be people say you can't make a good instrument with American wood, but I don't believe that.

We were talking about when you get the fiddle done and you get the fiddle to work.

Yeah, that's the key, making the fiddle work. They've got C&C machines, and they can just make 'em like shelling corn. But for some strange reason, they don't work. They don't work like they should. I mean, they're beautiful instruments, beautiful workmanship. Some of the prettiest ones you'll see are coming from China. And actually, I believe if you're looking for a cheap instrument, look the Chinese over good. I prefer 'em over all those European fiddles that have been here over the last 200 years. Them things, the biggest part of them are nothing but junk. They're just pure junk. Once in awhile you'll run across one that sounds pretty good. I know you've seen a lot of them.

I've been through stacks of them.

They don't have any blocks in them.

No lining.

Bass bar is carved in. I would say when they was new, they looked good. You get the picture. I don't know how it was where you live in South Carolina, but here in the Cumberland Plateau, there was no money. People didn't have no money. You could get a fiddle for a dollar and a half, three dollars from a mail order catalog. My grandfather bought one about 1910, I guess. Of course, I wasn't even born. I've still got the fiddle.... It's just junk. It's just a keepsake for the family.

My first fiddle looked like the grain had been painted on it.

I've seen that. And you know the best way in the world to tell that is to hold it up and move it, and if it don't move it's painted on. I've seen some good ones.

This one sounded like a cigar box. It drove me nuts.

You never know what a fiddle's gonna sound like. I've seen people, they'd make maybe one, two, or three, and lo and behold, come out with a pretty good sound. But the darn thing, when you look at it, it'd give you nightmares.

Yeah. Well, you've got some mighty good-looking fiddles here. Do you use local spruce?

I've been using a lot of American spruce. I come into a bunch of it that came out of the Smoky Mountain National Park. That red spruce grows up in the high elevations. I've got the remains of a red spruce that got blowed down and blocked I-40. Well they had to get it out of the road, you know. John Arnold, a guitar maker



The cabin where Charles was born, top front, and his workshop, top rear and below.



from Sevierville, got it from the salvage people and he split it up with Ted Davis. They proceeded to cut most of it into guitar tops and sold a lot of it to the Martin Guitar Company. Ted died, and he still had his part of the tree. He had started a cello for his wife. She had me finish the cello and she gave me the rest of the wood. That's what I've been using. It come out of a tree where, the best they could tell, it was so tight-grained they could hardly get the rings separated, but they figured it was a little over 500 years old. They figured it was about eighteen feet tall when Columbus got here. That was the talk, anyway. That's what I've been using.

This batch of fiddles you have here sound great.

Well, I appreciate that, coming from someone like you. You know something about them. I run into people that don't know the difference in 'em. You can't deal with 'em.



No. So what do you do to make a Horner fiddle?

There's no secrets. It's a matter of good materials, real careful workmanship, pay attention to what you're doing. That's as simple as I can make it. They's certain things that's got to be done or you ain't got a chance. If you leave too much wood in it, you're going to get a kind of a tinny sound. And if you cut too much out, you're going to get a big honky foghorn. Which a lot of people like. I made one, one time — made a mistake and made the bass bar a little too small — wasn't quite long enough or big enough. I thought, I'll just go ahead and finish it up. I did, and pulled a bow across it, and it sounded like a big foghorn, you know. It come up and just hit you in the chin. I said, well, I'll just have to take that apart one of these days and fix that. It hung around here a pretty good while. A guy come in here one time and it was just what he wanted, and he bought it. You never know. Different people want different things. I had one too, one time, I varnished it and it was

a hideous red. I like a pretty red, but this was a hideous-looking thing. There again, I thought, I'll have to redo that. So I hung it up. It hung there a couple of years. And one day a couple came in and it was just what they wanted. So you never know what people want!

You make your own tailpieces and chin rests.

Yeah, and my pegs. Most of the time I make my pegs. I come into a pretty good little bunch of Brazilian rosewood that come out of the old Martin cache, you know. I like that heart-shaped peg. I make my own, personally, too. A lot of people don't do that. I don't make the bridge or the strings, or the tuners, or any of the hardware. Now this little glass ball here is a quilting pin.

So your wife wonders where they go.

Yeah.

They end up in the fiddle pegs! That's good. So did you ever try making any bows?

Got one right here... I've been intending to cut that down to a round stick because it's a little heavy. A good stiff bow.

I like it. I like a good stiff bow. This one's seen some playing. What wood is this on the frog here?

That's a wood called mountain mahogany. A lot of bow makers are using it. It doesn't grow east of the Rockies. Mostly Northern California. Kind of an old, scrubby-looking tree, I reckon. I've read about it, like

“When my violin is out, so is my CodaBow.”

- Darol Anger



in a Western magazine where an old cowboy'd be describing the country as clumps of mountain mahogany. It's some of the hardest stuff you've ever stuck a knife in. Its natural color is like a boxwood that's been treated.

It looks redder than a boxwood.

Yeah, boxwood is a light-colored wood until you treat it with nitric acid. I've done that, too. Bow making is a thing that you really need to devote your time to. It's almost an art or a craft of its own. You'll notice I scorched it a little as I was bending it. I just ain't got the time to put in it like I'd like to. And where are you gonna find anybody to give you any amount of money for a bow? Some people do, I guess, but they wouldn't give it to me.

I met a fellow that was making bows out of bamboo. He started at \$1000.

Bamboo. Would it be stiff enough?

Oh yeah, bamboo's hard. It's really hard and light.

I've seen some of those Coda bows, you know, made of graphite. I've seen some of them I liked. And the prices are right....

It was getting late and we had talked and fiddled through the lunch hour and most of the afternoon. We took a last look around at the amazing mosaic of fiddle parts, fiddles, and tools that surrounded

us and reflected this man's life. It was an enlightening afternoon. We parted with promises to return and a new fiddle in the car.

Charles' shop is located in Rockwood, Tennessee. He can be reached at (865) 354-0774.

[Bob Buckingham fiddles, teaches, and writes in the Upstate of South Carolina.]



An assortment of Charles' handmade pegs.