

## Willits

“Did I ever tell you of my trip to Willits?” I asked my octogenarian step-mother Winnie, who was sitting in the back seat while I was driving.

She said I hadn’t, but I chose not to try to relate that story. With my admittedly less than perfect enunciation, and Winnie’s 80-something hearing, there was no chance of being understood.

I had also been accused of being a non-communicator. This having more to do with the understanding that emails coming from my wife Kathleen’s computer were from Kathleen – no matter how they were signed – than with my usually having not much to say.

I thought this would be a splendid opportunity to tell my Willits tale and dispel some of those “non-communicator” thoughts. Here goes:

My guitars have always sounded pretty good. I don’t know exactly why, but even from my first efforts they possessed a fine, warm, round tone. They were easy to play. They held up, structurally. They were, however, ugly. A friend told me that I should bill myself as “Guitar Maker to the Blind.” That was a friend – what were others saying? While I thought this was way better than being “Guitar maker to the Deaf,” There were improvements that cried out to be made.

Greg Beyers and I have known each other for years. He is a fine luthier whose guitars have graced concert halls world-wide in the hands of David Russell and other virtuosi. We spoke, often, at Guitar Foundation of America Conventions, about guitar building, woods, tools, etc. When I told him of my trouble with finishing – French polishing – he invited me to his home workshop for an intense one on one session. Of course I would have to pay him for his time, but he would be happy to devote several days to helping me with finishing. With playing concerts and teaching, I could never find the time to take him up on his generous offer. (A word, here about the “generous offer:” Some might think that, because I was paying him, his offer wasn’t all that generous. I have found that luthiers are almost universally ready to share the deepest secrets of their craft/art with everyone. Techniques and measurements that they have laboriously figured out, they routinely divulge at the fumbling of a derby. This was to be such a case – I find it generous indeed.)

Then my sabbatical offered an opportunity to study with Greg. We made arrangements as to dates and fees: I was to get myself to the Best Western in Willits, CA on a certain day, and he would meet me and lead the way to his home/shop. The best way, he said, was to fly to Sacramento, rent a car, and drive to Willits – about 60 miles Northwest.

There appeared, about this time, an ad on the “Lutes for Sale” page run by Wayne Cripps out of Dartmouth University, for a lute made by Lyn Elder. The ad said they would not ship and that the lute had no case. It resided just outside of San Francisco, CA. The maker was well-known and respected. The price was right. I was going to be in that neighborhood. I called and made arrangements to see the instrument at what I thought was a conservative estimate on what time I could actually get there with my empty lute case.

The flight from Philadelphia was scheduled for (Now – you need to know that, because of cloudy memory, I am just making up these times, and that the name of the airline has been left out on purpose for reasons that shall become clear.) 8:00 AM due into Denver at Noon, change planes, then on to Sacramento, arriving at 2:00 PM. I told the lute people I would be there by 3:30, thinking that I could then take a leisurely drive up to Willits.

HA!

Isn’t it Murphy’s Law that states if it can go wrong, it will go wrong? The flight from Philadelphia left late. The connection in Denver was missed. The imagined 2:00 in Sacramento became 7:30. To make a bad situation worse, the entire area had been devastated by torrential rains for the past two weeks. The roads between where I was and where I was going were under water. There were detours. They were poorly marked. Night had fallen – a dark, rainy, moonless night.

I had called and told the seller of my situation, so they were expecting me when I found the house, after many a trial and wet tribulation, at about 9:45. The house was a tiny bungalow in a so-so neighborhood. Its front yard was replete with an astounding array of – well – junk, but (and

here I must stop to thank my lucky stars) no dog. The man who answered the door could have been right out of a Charles Bukowsky novel. He looked like a biker who had been drummed out of the gang for dress-code violations. Black, torn, tee-shirt, cigarette pack rolled up in the sleeve, tattoos every visible place, engineer boots, two-day's growth of beard – you get the picture.

My thoughts began with, "This is not the most likely person to possess a lute," followed closely by, "I don't want any parts of a stolen instrument," when the lady of the house came out of the Kitchen. What a lovely woman, charming and polite. I relaxed a bit. (How this unlikely pair became a couple defies imagination – perhaps she took a thorn out of his paw) She explained to me that the lute belonged to her late husband who used to play it in the Los Angeles Renaissance Faire. He had drunk himself to death, and although the lute had sentimental value, they had fallen on hard times and needed to sell it to pay the taxes.

I thought the story had the ring of truth, more or less. (The lute had no strap-button. Any player at a renaissance faire would be standing and strolling. This is not likely without a place to secure the strap.) The lute had ancient strings and just about useless frets, but I could see it was quite a nice instrument. I decided to buy it and took out my check book. "What," said Adonis, "You don't have cash?" After a bunch of negotiations, they took a check and I took my leave. It was 11:00.

I got to Willits ("Gateway to the Redwoods") in the wee-small hours of the next morning. Promptly at 9:00, Greg appeared at the motel office. He said it had all worked out quite nicely because he had to drive his son into town to get a friend that morning anyway. I should follow him to his house.

I am very adept at following another car because I sometimes follow my brother, who - it seems - is actively trying to lose the person following. Some people are easy to follow. Some are not so easy. Greg took off like his ass was on fire. He turned right after the Willits town center (I won't say Willits is small, but it says "Entering Willits" on both sides of the sign) and went careening up and down a two lane mountain road. We went up hills, down hills, around bends, across streams – about half-way there, the black-top vanished. Remember the rains? Sometimes the two lane dirt road became a one-lane dirt road. Greg never slowed at all. Eventually we got to the house. My but-cheeks were sore from gripping the car seat.

Greg had built his house himself using all of the care and attention to detail he is known for in his guitar construction. It is a beauty! His shop is well appointed and neat as a pin. We set to work.

I brought a rosewood guitar "in the white." (That is, without any finish on it at all) We worked on this guitar all day, preparing it for the shellac. We broke for lunch with Greg's lovely wife, Susan, and coffee sometime later in the day. At about 7:30, Greg decided that we'd done enough for one day, and gave me a map to get back to the motel. He said he realized that it wasn't easy to read a map at night, so I should just follow the car in front of me. (Greg's shop has a window that looks out on the road – zero cars went past all day) One of the landmarks on the map was "a tree." The road back to town went through a forest for twenty solid minutes – I should be on the lookout for "a tree."

I made it back, unscathed, and dined at a Chinese restaurant. Willits kept reminding me of the town in the TV series, "Northern Exposure." There were wooden sidewalks; there was the cowboy architecture; and everyone seemed to know everyone else.

The next day, I headed out bright and early. I was determined to follow the map – and even sanguine about finding "the tree."

I got in back of a model T Ford on the two lane road. Does this seem possible? It was riding on the back of a flat-bed truck. I was in no particular hurry, and found the car to be interesting. This coupled with the fact that passing was not remotely possible – some places did not seem to accommodate even one car – left me following the antique the whole way.

Suddenly (or what passes for suddenly at 10 MPH) the flatbed turned off. I went straight. Soon, the road ended. No, I don't mean the pavement stopped and it became dirt. I mean the dirt road ended – at a river.

What happened? I had been so intent on studying the old Ford that I had missed the turn. The turn I missed? ..Wait for it..at the "tree."

After three days of feverishly intense work with Greg, my guitar was looking great! I was ready to head home.

I had a lute, a guitar, and a suitcase. I knew I couldn't carry more than one of the instruments on the plane, so I checked the guitar and suitcase, and carried the lute. We missed the Denver connection again, and I got to the Philadelphia Airport and my lovely wife at midnight. We waited at the luggage carousel - zilch. I filled out a lost luggage form and the gentleman at the desk told me they'd drive my bags out to the house no later than the next afternoon.

Three weeks of next afternoons came and went, during which I spent long, unfruitful hours on hold, and a bunch more listening to rosy predictions of how my luggage would turn up and all would be well. If you should see a hollow-cheeked fellow at the luggage Carousel with a vacant, far-off look - That's not me. I filed a claim check and made them pay dearly for losing my stuff.

The entire odyssey had taken its toll in terms of time, money, and anxiety, but looking back, I believe it was worthwhile. I had learned a skill that has seen manifest improvements in the cosmetics of my instruments; I had bought a lute that subsequently has become my favorite for public performance; I spent some quality time with fine people - Greg and Susan Beyers; I learned never to check any luggage that flies anywhere near Denver; (I understand from others that Denver is the luggage black hole) and the airline paid me a huge amount of money for my guitar.

I never got the instrument back. One day while speaking with Greg, he said he hoped the person who stole (guitars are not "lost" they are stolen) my guitar was enjoying it. It must be wonderful to have such benign thoughts. I have to admit that my own are nowhere near as charitable.