

THOMAS WENBERG AND THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN CLASSIC

How a collector's obsession turned into a one-of-a-kind ode to contemporary violin making

Steven L. Shepherd

Three times he was burglarized. Each time in New York City. Each time on the same block. It was a bad spot, apparently, but it was where he wanted to be.

He never got used to it, but the first time was by far the most traumatic. That was the time his truck's windows were smashed, the camper shell rifled, and his tools stolen—including a set of finger planes he was using to carve a viola while on the road. That was the time his film was taken, including pictures of an instrument in North Carolina, 600 miles away. The time he almost turned back.

It was the time his friend and host told him he should go back to Minnesota. "Get a reasonable life and a reasonable job and quit this Don Quixote kind of lifestyle." The time he promised, in the morning, to do just that: quit and go home.

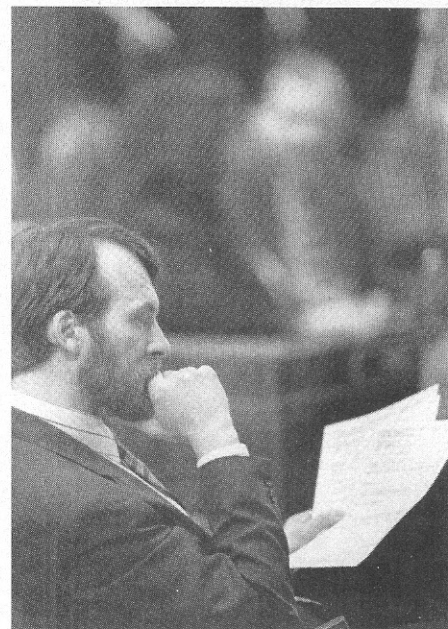
But in the evening, when the friend returned from work and asked if he was ready to leave, he said, "No—actually I went downtown for an interview today, and I've got three more scheduled for tomorrow. Then I'm going to Boston." Later, he drove to Charlotte to reshoot the instrument whose picture had been stolen.

"And that," says Thomas Wenberg, "is how long I moped."

All the same, his friend had a point. "You're nuts," he told Wenberg. "People don't do this. Companies do this, but people don't do this."

"This" was the single-handed conception, research, writing, publication, and sale of Wenberg's now-classic reference work, *The Violin Makers of the United States*. Published in 1986, the book documents the lives and work of some 3,500 violin makers known to have ever produced an instrument in the United States—from Aagaard, Larsen, a Danish immigrant born in 1847, to Zygmontowicz, Samuel, an American-born maker alive and at work in Brooklyn today.

Though little known to players, Wenberg's book is today a vital part of the working library of dealers and makers across the country. Its appearance, says Claire Givens, owner of the Minneapolis-based Claire Givens Violins, "was pivotal in terms of the acceptance of



Opposite, Wenberg in 1986 with his newly published book. At right, in his current incarnation as an Oregon State Senator.

American violin making in the world." There are endless books on the luthiers of Italy, France, and elsewhere—each helping to solidify its country of interest as home to a long and respectable tradition of violin making. But prior to Wenberg's book there was no single, comprehensive documentation of American lutherie, and in that absence, says Givens, "I don't think anybody realized the extent of the violin making that had gone on in the United States."

Day to day, dealers like Givens use the book as a source of information they can pass on to customers. They use it in authentication. They use it to further their own understanding of a particular maker. ("Who the person was and what their background was. What their output was, and how serious they were.")

But in a larger sense, the book gave both a context to the myriad early American makers seen most commonly as striving in isolation, and a lineage to the many well-respected luthiers working in the U.S. today. And in this sense, says David Bromberg, "The book was an epic."

Bromberg, a dealer and collector with his own considerable reputation in the field of American violins (see "On Native Ground," *Strings*, September/October 1993), is as enthusiastic about Wenberg's method as he is about the result. Most violin reference books, he says, tend to be based on earlier works, but Wenberg "did it from scratch. It was all original research. And he did a fantastic, fantastic job."

But it wasn't easy.

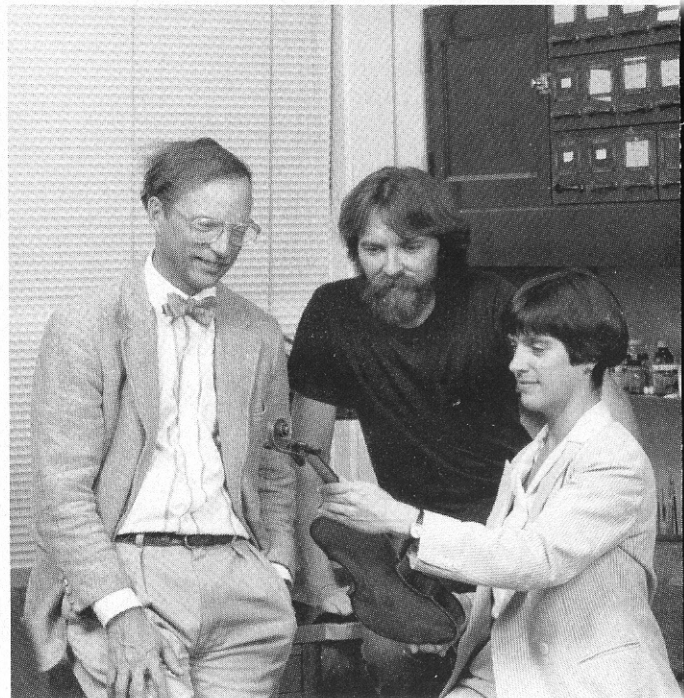
He spent the better part of three years living out of the back of his pickup truck, scouting out and interviewing makers who were alive and the family members of those who were dead. He traveled more than 140,000 miles, visited 49 states, wore out three sets of tires, and acquired some sense of what it's like to be a street person. "Nothing," he says now, "will take more out of you than sleeping in a different spot every night, seeing different people every single day. It wipes you out. There is no permanence, no stability."

He was born Thomas James Wenberg in Minneapolis in 1950. He started playing piano at six, cello at nine. He has studied photography, welding, and business administration, and in 1979 he entered the program in stringed-instrument repair at Red Wing Technical College in eastern Minnesota. Two years later he qualified himself for an eventual entry in his own book by making a viola, followed thereafter by a total of ten violins.

All this is from his book. But at 17 lines, the entry doesn't begin to tell the story. It doesn't say, for instance, that it was the

sight of a woman that led him to take the course at Red Wing. (He was, he now says, taking another class in the same building and he'd occasionally glance in at the violin repair course. "And there was a girl there that I was kind of interested in, so I had to look in fairly often. And then I just thought, 'Well, I guess that's the next course I'll take.'") Nor does it say that he quit the class when the curriculum turned to guitar repair. ("I was such a purist. I didn't want to work on guitars. I thought they weren't acceptable forms of stringed instruments.")

But the entry's biggest understatement is unquestionably the six-word sentence, "Collector of books on



"Nobody had realized the extent of violin making in the United States," says dealer Claire Givens.

the violin." For it was the book collection that swelled, took over his life, and led to the creation of *The Violin Makers of the United States*; indirectly, it also led ultimately to the burning out even of Wenberg's passion. "It was," he says, "an obsession of huge proportions."

It began in 1980, after he quit the repair course. For a while that year he worked at setting himself up in business, mostly doing setup and minor repairs, and never making much money. But he also made a trip to Europe.

He traveled in what he calls his "frugal way"—with a backpack and pup tent, and living off "a can of cold soup and a loaf of bread a day." He was long-haired and scraggly and had holes in his clothes. But even so, he went to visit the shop of the venerable British violin dealers W.E. Hill & Sons. There, despite his appearance, he was given a place for his pack and time alone

with the finest of instruments. "I was nobody from nowhere," he says, "who looked like a slob. And yet they treated me with incredible kindness."

His host was the firm's aging patriarch—Albert Edgar Phillips Hill. Wenberg speculates that perhaps the old man sensed in him a kindred spirit, someone to whom he could pass on a part of his life's passion. Perhaps that's why Hill asked if he collected books on the violin.

He had a few, said Wenberg, that he used for work. But he wasn't a collector.

"No," said the old man. "It's very important. You must collect reference books. If not for the value, then for the

Wenberg with violin dealer Claire Givens and Schubert Club Director Bruce Carlson in 1988.

AMERICAN VIOLIN MAKING IN BRIEF

knowledge." At which he took out three numbered volumes from the Hills' personal collection and presented them to his young visitor, saying, "I want you to buy these."

"I don't have the money," said Wenberg, recalling that "one of the books was *The Violin Makers of the Low Countries*, by Möller. Which was a very expensive book then, and is a very expensive book now." But Hill waved the protest aside and sold him the books at a price Wenberg later realized amounted to just ten percent of their value.

"And at that point," says Wenberg, "I became obsessed. I mean, it was like flipping on a light switch. Ten, 15 years straight, it was all I did. I could go to any city, anywhere in the world, and the first thing I said was, 'Okay, where are the used-book stores?' And when I found a book that I didn't have and wanted to add to my collection, I did double back flips. I started jumping up and down and squealing, and book dealers would look at me as if, 'Wow, this guy is not real.'

"It was beyond an obsession. I was bitten, and I don't know why."

At its peak, Wenberg possessed one of the world's premier collections of books on the violin. "He is a real perfectionist," says Claire Givens. "And he managed to acquire the finest bindings, and the best editions in the best condition, of some of the rarest books that have ever been published about violins.

"It was," she says, "an amazing collection."

Largely, it was financed on poverty. He rarely sold or traded the books for profit, and he lived on very little. Plus, he acknowledges, "I was really nuts about it."

For the collection, he risked family estrangement—living intermittently with his mother to cut down on overhead ("until she'd drive me nuts, and I'd have to leave"), and from his father, a vice president at the University of Minnesota, hearing a plea not long before his death in 1981 to "just please, please, get out of violins."

But still, it was the book collection that gave him the vision for *The Violin Makers of the United States*. It showed him where "the holes were in the literature." And of them all, he came to view the most gaping as the missing book on the makers of the United States. Given the current influence of contemporary American makers, it was a book, he would tell people, that "just has to be written."

Apparently, he made this comment more than once. And in 1982 the woman he was living with finally goaded him to action. She was taking a course that required her to develop a business plan and

In the course of his travels, Thomas Wenberg has learned a lot about violin making in the United States, past and present. Last winter, he shared his observations as guest speaker at the 1998 Exhibition of American Violin & Bow Makers, in Los Angeles ("A New Golden Age," *Strings*, July/August 1998).

From its earliest days, says Wenberg, violin making in the U.S. has been characterized by the most American of traits: individualism and resourcefulness, for instance, and the free exchange of ideas. Unlike the historic guild systems of Europe, under which the teaching and practice of many trades was strictly controlled, in the U.S. anybody who wanted to make a violin has always been free to do so.

This has been as true for those who wanted to make violins professionally as for those who chose instead to do it as a hobby. Indeed, says Wenberg, from the beginning, one of the most distinctive aspects of American lutherie has been the avid participation of amateurs—those who, in the richest sense of the word, do something solely for the love of it.

Commercially, Americans have long done whatever was necessary to make a living. Many early makers were self-taught, and many borrowed skills learned in other professions—cabinet or furniture making, for instance. Inevitably, says Wenberg, the results of such endeavors were "rather rough."

Beginning in the late 1800s, makers and repairers with more conventional backgrounds were recruited from Europe by the country's rapidly growing musical-instrument firms, such as that of Rudolph Wurlitzer. In turn, these immigrants helped train subsequent generations of American luthiers.

A significant development that began in the early 20th century was the formation of numerous regional and national societies and organizations devoted to diverse aspects of violin making. These ranged from such groups as the Violin Makers of Maine (formed in 1916 as a sellers' cooperative) to the more recent Catgut Acoustical Society—the latter being typical of many such groups in that its members tend toward scientific or engineering backgrounds and have strong interests in "figuring out exactly what properties make a violin do what it does," a tradition that has made the U.S. a world leader in violin research.

In 1973, the Violin Society of America was formed, with membership open to everyone. In 1980, this was followed by the VSA's conceptual opposite, the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers, which maintains strict professional standards for entry and is the closest American counterpart to a European guild. But whatever their emphasis, all such groups, says Wenberg, have furthered the art of violin making by fostering the open exchange of information and ideas. "The art," he says, "progresses by people talking to each other."

A noteworthy occurrence in the latter part of the 20th century has been the founding in the U.S. of several schools of violin making, beginning in 1972 with the Violin Making School of America, located in Salt Lake City. Together, the schools have helped raise the technical expertise of America's violin makers. Technical expertise is handmaiden to artistic excellence, and, in concert with other recent developments, such as the growth of modern travel (which has enabled the easy study of old masterpieces), Wenberg says the result is that Americans are now making "some fantastic instruments."

The road has been long, but Wenberg believes that among America's luthiers today are some who are making "the finest violins that have ever been made." Ever.

—S.S.

she told Wenberg, "I've decided to make your violin book be my project, as to how you'd set it up." And she started asking questions.

What model would you use? (Jalovec, he said. He'd do it the way Karel Jalovec had done such classic texts as *Encyclopedia of Violin-Makers*, *The Violin Makers of Bohemia*, and *Beautiful Italian Violins*.) How many pages? What kind of paper?

"She went through the whole thing," says Wenberg. "And then I priced it out." And though he kept upgrading as he went, the ball was in motion.

His first step was to page through his entire collection, some 1,000 books at the time, and write down on three-by-five cards every bit of information about every maker ever mentioned as having worked in the U.S. Then he sent a two-page questionnaire

to the membership of the Violin Society of America.

He bought an Apple IIe and began filling the first of what would eventually become 34 floppy disks. Work slowed during his year-long recovery from a near-fatal automobile accident. But in June of 1983, virtually the moment he was able to drive again, he got in his truck and set out: driving and interviewing, interviewing and driving, until two years later he came to a stop in the town of Mt. Hood, Oregon. "A magnificent little spot in the upper Hood River valley. Rather beautiful. And a nice place for writing books."

With him he had a stack of notes more than five feet tall. So then he sat down to enter data—and did nothing but for the next four months, sleeping next to his computer, taking time out only for meals, and doing that "solidly. I mean, just sitting there at the desk, seven days a week."

And then . . . he was on the road again. This time for follow-up and the tracking down of those last elusive codgers he'd heard rumors of in all the small town bars and barber shops.

In early 1986 he finally called a halt to his research. It was time to begin production. As is common for such books, Wenberg initially sold *The Violin Makers of the United States* by subscription: \$250 for a regular copy, \$350 for a deluxe copy bound in sheepskin. (Later, when it was finished, he hit the road yet again and even went to Europe, selling the book by hand.) He had promised his subscribers the book in October and it was that commitment that now drove him. Though, too, it was the subscribers who were his principal source of capital for production—despite its coming in dribbles, and not without considerable nail biting.

The subscribers were buying on faith; no one knew how the book was going to turn out. Wenberg, in turn, had no way of knowing the response he'd get to the advertisements he'd placed for subscribers. He had gone three years without an income, invested huge amounts of his own time and a significant amount of his own money (saved and set aside earlier in the stock market), and it was all coming down to a question with a then-unknowable answer: is it gonna sell? Or, more immediately, is there even going to be money to print it?

And each day the question raised itself anew. "Because each day I would have a deadline coming up: the printer needed money, or the binder, or somebody. And I would be down to, say, \$200. And I would go to the mailbox and there would be ten checks sitting there. And then I could drive into Portland and make my payment, which

was due that day." It was, he recalls, living on the edge.

But it worked. It's how he paid for the boxcar full of paper he purchased to ensure that all the books were printed on the same manufacturing run. It's how he paid the tanner in California, from whom he selected individually each of the hides used in the deluxe bindings. It's how he paid the printer, on whose floor he slept as the plates were made and the presses rolled, and whose employees he drove nearly to the point of collapse.

It's how he got what he wanted.

In its sheer physicality the book is magnificent, indisputably pronouncing itself in size (400 quarto pages, including some 175 pages of photographs), heft, and feel as a work of substance. The 100 limited-edition, deluxe volumes sold out even before the printing began. And he was able to pay in cash virtually the entire \$125,000 in expenses it cost to print the run of 2,500 copies. The \$5,000 that he did borrow he repaid four days after the book began shipping on October 9.

The aftermath of *The Violin Makers of the United States* has been multifaceted. Contemporary American luthiers are enjoying an unprecedented stature worldwide and many now command top dollar for their work. This, of course, is a stark contrast to the experience of their predecessors, and Wenberg attributes much of the turnaround to the appearance of his book. Once it came out, he says, "The tide changed almost immediately and the demand for U.S. instruments rose tremendously"—the mechanism for which he suggests is the same as that of a high-quality but little-known stock that rises in price after it's been studied and publicized by a securities analyst. Documentation, in other words, helps spur the bandwagon.

Similarly, he credits the book with an increase in the use of native American woods, noting that "some of the most striking photographs in the book are of American wood," and that after flipping through its pages many luthiers asked where they could get such woods for themselves.

These are impressive claims, and Claire Givens, for one, takes a more measured view of the book's effect. Without question, she says, "it has given recognition to the importance of early American violin making." But she believes that determining its role in the current surge of reputations will require the passage of time and a more distanced historical perspective.

All the same, Givens was sufficiently impressed with his work that when, in 1988, she and the Schubert Club of Minneapolis decided to produce a book on the important

makers of Minnesota for that year's convention of the Violin Society of America, she called on Wenberg. "I knew," she says, "that if he made a commitment, he would do it. And he would do it in a really first-class way." And he did, spending countless hours in the library, sleeping this time on the floor of the Schubert Club's warehouse, and ultimately producing a work, *Violin & Bow Makers of Minnesota*, of which David Bromberg says, "Every book should be as good."

But despite his willingness to engage in such a project so soon after finishing *The Violin Makers of the United States*, the years of uninterrupted work, with no personal life and to the exclusion of all else, took its toll. "I really got burned out," he says. "I was just fried." He began withdrawing from the world of violins, settling first on the life of "a granola mountain man." And then getting married.

He had sold a copy of *The Violin Makers of the United States* to a dealer in Portland, who placed it on the counter for customers to look through. One such customer was a full-time attorney and part-time violist who had once played with the Portland Baroque Orchestra. Recently, she had signed up with a dating service—as had Wenberg—and after connecting his dating-service description with the author of the big blue book, she gave him a call.

They were married in 1991. Marriage, as it will, brought more changes, and among the first was a new name. "I never did like Wenberg," he says (the name being an invention of his Swedish grandfather, who adopted it upon arriving in the Twin Cities and finding the area already overflowing with Petersons), and he took the occasion of marriage to change it. He and his new wife sat down with a phone book, started at the beginning, and arrived a week later at a name they could both agree on: Wilde. Melinda Benson for her, Thomas Andrew for him. "Since it was a freebie," he says, "I decided I'd change my middle name as well."

He bought a house, using his profits from *The Violin Makers of the United States* and paying cash. He became a father. And it wasn't long afterward that he decided to sell his book collection. Partially, he was prompted by the thought of his young son with crayons in hand—"They weren't," he says with emphasis, "going to become coloring books." But more importantly, the books weren't being used by anyone. "And I don't believe in that."

To prepare for the sale, Wilde compiled and printed a 100-page catalogue. He planned to distribute it publicly, but before he could do so he showed a few copies to friends (Claire Givens among them), and it was they who, in groups of 100 books here,

150 there, bought the books before they ever went on the open market. He confesses to both regret and relief at the books' disappearance but says that, on the whole, "I don't mind. They went to good people." The catalogues he recycled.

That same year, in a final break with violins, he became a politician. The story is circuitous and improbable—involving both a potential head-to-head race against his wife and the last-minute death of his six-term incumbent primary opponent—but in November 1996, he became Oregon State Senator Thomas Andrew Wilde, representing the eighth district.

Now two years into his term, Wilde voices mixed feelings about politics. On the one hand he calls it a slimy, stab-'em-in-the-back business, "where you try to be honest and forthright but it just doesn't work." But clearly, too, there are issues about which he is passionate. Protecting the environment and helping the poor, for instance, are two concerns about which he feels so strongly that he is angered they are even considered subjects for political debate.

Whether he'll run for a second term is undecided. Indeed, it's uncertain whether he'll run for anything again—or just what his future will be. But it's not for lack of ideas.

"I've got," he says, "lots of things I want to do."

He toys with the thought of teaching. Of studying microbiology. Of writing—fiction, perhaps, and maybe some children's books on the violin. He still has a penchant for collecting, having made forays into gemstones, pocket watches, and Tiffany.

And there is always the question of a revised and updated edition of *The Violin Makers of the United States*. He is ambivalent about this when asked, at one point saying, "No, I wouldn't do a U.S. book again," but then later speaking wistfully of reviving his Mt. Hood Publishing Company and allowing that he'd "like to get back into doing violin books"—maybe doing a new book on the makers of Canada, or maybe, yes, an update of his U.S. book.

He keeps a file of additions he'd need to make: people inadvertently left out the first time or who have only just begun making. He has been thinking about how, technically, he'd do it a second time; maybe putting it on CD, because it would be cheaper and he could provide so much more information; and definitely, when their resolution is good enough, using digital cameras. And there's always the matter of life on the road—harder to do when you're middle-aged and married and have a child.

Although his wife did just buy a 37-foot motor home, and that would certainly make things more comfortable. ♣