SOUTHERN OREGON HERITAGE Today

CARVING A LIFE OF TRADITION—VICTOR GARDENER
An "American Stradivari"

EXPLORE THE SECRETS OF A TOWN LOST IN TIME
Discovering Golden

MEMORIES OF THE ROGUE RIVER VALLEY RAILWAY COMPANY
All Aboard!

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He's sitting by the window, "just holding the chair down," he says. Most of us would say it's about time; the man will be ninety next July. He says he'd still be working from five in the morning until eight at night if his eyes hadn't given out on him, and if his hands still obeyed his head. But then Victor Gardener wouldn't call what he did work; it was his passion and his dream from the time he was six. It was what he did after he retired from over thirty years of ranching, logging, surveying, building roads and dams, jobs that weren't exactly prerequisite skills for becoming a world class violin maker. And that's what Victor Gardener is, although it is his Italian name, Vittore E. Giarinieri that is inscribed on his instruments.

Gardener carved a total of 405 instruments. What is even more amazing is that he carved them from trees he cut himself.
Victor has made some of the finest violins, violas and cellos being played throughout the United States and Europe, many in noted symphonies. And according to Michael Klein, one of Gardener’s many apprentices and a well-known Rogue Valley instrument maker himself, “I cannot think of anyone who has made as many instruments from trees he cut himself.” For the record (and it probably is a record), Gardener has made 405 instruments. Imagine putting that kind of inspiration and talent on hold until you’re sixty-five.

“My father always was goal-oriented,” remarks Gardener’s oldest daughter, Lucy. “He had drive. They say even as a child he knew what he wanted and was determined to get it. As a young boy, once every two or three years he would go with his parents to Medford. They made the trip on a buckboard from their home at Lake Creek; on the way they passed land in the Yankee Creek area, two miles up from Butte Falls. He set his eyes and heart on that land and made up his mind to own that some day. He did, too. And I can still see him reading by a kerosene lantern night after night while he taught himself surveying.”

“I was twelve when I fell in love with that land,” Gardener says. “Harriet and I were married in 1936; we had a place in Medford for two years, but in 1938 I bought that land and we lived there for over eleven years.”

He was only six when a fiddle fell into his hands. Neither of his older brothers could play, but young Gardener wanted to more than anything. “I decided early on I wanted to play like Jascha Heifetz, and I wanted to play music by Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, but I learned too many bad habits teaching myself to play that fiddle. Fiddlers play the same fifteen or twenty notes over and over. It just didn’t relate to classical music. I gave up lessons and decided if I wouldn’t be another Heifetz, I’d be another Stradivari or Giarinieri,” said Gardener.

Maybe Gardener inherited his perseverance and determination from his mother. Maria D’francesco was born in 1880 in Bozen, Austria, now a part of Italy. Her parents abandoned her in a woodshed. Fortunately, she survived, grew up, and found work in Cavalese in the home of a friend of Raphael Gardener.

Raphael had left Cavalese when he was seventeen, found his way to Vienna, Rumania, and other parts of Europe before returning home to Cavalese for a year. He then went on to America, where he worked as a stonemason and farmer and eventually built himself a house. Fifteen years of living alone was enough. A letter from his friend in Cavalese praised the virtues of Maria, and for ninety dollars he had himself a bride. He was forty-five; she was eighteen. It was a marriage made in the mail, not in heaven, for they were never compatible. But Maria bore Raphael six children, and she made do with what she had, even making the children’s clothes from feed sacks. She was the efficient, frugal partner in the marriage, always looking ahead and taking charge of their home and finances, while her husband seldom looked past their next meal. Neither parent knew the meaning of idleness.

Their children learned about hard work at a young age. Young Victor left early in the morning and walked two-and-a-half miles to school to start the fire for the day, and then stayed late to sweep the floors. For that he earned five dollars a month. After school he’d herd goats, bringing
them back home each evening to protect them from the coyotes. He was twelve the year he put his first money in the bank. He earned eighty-five dollars herding as many as five hundred turkeys that summer, staying with them from early in the morning until nightfall. There were times he drove the turkeys two miles and back to feed on grasshoppers. In the fall, he helped his mother shell corn to ship to San Francisco.

Gardener learned about fighting and standing on his own early in life. As the youngest of three boys, he was forced to wear his brothers’ hand-me-down shoes. The problem was they were handed down with no soles. His father took care of that by making new soles out of maple wood. Since this was Lake Creek and not Amsterdam, the children teased and taunted Gardener as he clip-clopped across the school’s wooden floors. On top of that, he spoke only Italian when he entered school.

As many young boys did at the time, he quit school after the eighth grade and continued to work on the family ranch until he was twenty-one. “There were too many chiefs and not enough Indians,” he says, “so I left home with thirty dollars and what belongings I could carry.” They were hard Depression years. Gardener had for $1.50 a day plus food, managed to save eighty dollars, and worked the next two winters for board. His next job was operating a bulldozer on the road being built from Union Creek to Diamond Lake, now Route 230. Thus, he was lured away from music-making into the work force. “But I always had violins on my mind,” Gardener says.

During his teens he ordered tools from both Sears and Montgomery Ward to make his own violin. With those parts came a suggestion from a thoughtful Sears employee that he contact Thomas Young, a violin maker in Seattle. “Young helped me more than just telling me what books and tools to buy and where to buy them reasonably,” Gardener said. He was hooked. He completed his first violin when he was eighteen. “I showed that violin to Young. He took one look at it and said, ‘Make some more.’ It was terrible and he knew it, but he didn’t discourage me.” It took several more years before Gardener made his first saleable violin. “But it was Hans Weissshaar who helped me more than anyone did,” Gardener says.

Weissshaar was a well-known violin maker and dealer in Los Angeles, and no doubt the best restorer and authority on violins in America at the time. About 1975 while visiting a friend, he was shown a viola made by Gardener. This was soon after his retirement, still early in Gardener’s career. Weissshaar was so impressed by the viola that he got in touch with the Gardeners, visited their home, and invited them to Los Angeles. There, in Weissshaar’s shop, Gardener was allowed to examine closely two Stradivarius violins. Weissshaar offered Gardener valuable criticisms and suggestions throughout the years, and even sold Gardener’s instruments in his own shop until Gardener received too many orders from elsewhere. Their friendship continued until Weissshaar’s death. “I’ve found in life, if you work and are not lazy, you’ll always find someone willing to help you,” Gardener says.

Gardener is unique in yet another aspect of his craft. Most violin makers have apprenticed or attended a special school. Few have taught themselves from start to finish, and of those who have, it is even fewer who have attained the renown that Gardener has. Back in 1967 Bernard Windt, music director for the Shakespeare Festival, told Marjorie O’Harra in an
After Klein saws and cuts the wood on this bandsaw, he seasons it up to twenty years before carving.

article for the Medford Mail Tribune, "Victor's craftsmanship is beautiful. I have seldom seen instruments so beautifully put together, and in them I find the same quality tone I find in an instrument of mine that was made in 1793." Gardener was still at the beginning of his new career.

For those of you who are now dreaming of carving your own violin, viola or cello and are thinking of emulating Victor Gardener, there are a few things you will need before you even begin. Things like money, time, patience, and a big dumpster. The money is to take care of your needs during the years it will take to learn the art. The patience is to curb your temper when you've spent 250 hours on a cello and it sounds like your neighbor's son practicing the tuba, and only your local trash collector will ever see it.

Gardener made twenty violins before he felt he had a decent one. So what did he do with the first nineteen, you might ask, "I sawed some, burned some and gave some away, and I wish I had some of those back so I could throw those away, too."

If you're determined to make instruments Gardener fashion, the first thing you need to know is what kind of wood to look for and how to identify good "tone wood." The back, sides, and neck of all three instruments are made from maple, and the face is made from spruce, so don't go looking for the perfect felt leaf willow to saw up and whittle. For the tuning pegs Gardener used mountain mahogany. He even made his own purfling, the thin strip that runs around the outside on the back of the instrument—the one that looks like it's there just for design. It's actually three very thin strips of wood laminated and inlaid to form a barrier, preventing the linear wood from splitting. For this Gardener used ebony and maple.

"Looking for the perfect tree means we often turn down two or three hundred before we find the right one," says Michael Klein, who learned the art of selection from Gardener. Seekers of instrument wood agree that the right tree is free of insects, twists and broken limbs, all of which could mean rotting. The spacing of the grain is important and, above all, the wood must have resonance; it must have good tone. According to Klein, Gardener observed the trees throughout the day, since the sun casts shadows on the bark differently depending on the time.

Once you've found your tree, then what? Let's hope you've considered accessibility—in other words, how are you going to get it out of there? Most
times it is taken out by a winch, an ATV, or even on someone’s back. It took Gardener and Klein one week to cut up and take home a big leaf curly maple they found in a sheep pasture in Yoncalla, Oregon. That particular tree was a rare find. It was forty-eight inches in diameter, solid and curly all the way through—large enough to make almost a hundred cello backs. They sawed and cut the maple across the grain into wedge shapes, then dipped the ends of the wedges in wax to prevent cracking from drying out too fast. Next the wood was put in storage for at least two years outside away from the sun and rain. It was then taken inside to complete the seasoning for ten more years. There are ways to speed up the seasoning process if need be. There are

Gardener spent years studying the masters’ techniques. He visited schools and museums in Italy, Germany, Austria and England. He studied the texture of wood for tone and for visual beauty. He experimented to create the finishes with the greatest luster. He chiseled and carved to make tools that performed flawlessly, and that fit his hand perfectly. Cutting and sculpting a chunk of wood into the sixty-eight to seventy pieces it takes to make a violin demands precision both in the hands and the tools of the artist. Creating the scroll, the curly end of the instrument above the neck and tuning pegs, is the most demanding of all.

Klein remembers the carving lessons he learned from Gardener during his two-year apprenticeship. “I was intent on erasing any tool marks, but Victor wanted them to show. His was a studied carelessness. He would look at my work, and in his deep, rich Italian accent would say, ‘Smoothie, smoothie, smoothie. You make it like the Germans. You have to remember this is sculpture. Don’t deny your tools.’ He knows I’m German.”

“But I didn’t just learn instrument making from Victor,” Klein adds. “He talked a lot about honesty and being a good citizen. Being a good citizen was important to him. It was the highest compliment he could pay someone. But he didn’t just talk about it; he lived it. If we found just the tree we wanted, but even a foot of it was on another property, he wouldn’t take it. Victor and Harriet are always willing to give of their time, their energy and their possessions.”

Klein is not the only one who praises the generosity of the Gardeners. Carla Shapreau, an attorney and violin maker in Alameda, California, spent a summer in the Gardeners’ home, where she had come as a novice to study violin making. “People like Victor and Harriet [his wife] are rare. You have to know them to believe that people like that exist in this world. They have inspired and contributed to the lives of so many people, never asking for anything in return.”

Notice the pronoun “they,” and remember the saying: “Behind every good man there’s a good woman.” In 1995, as a tribute to Gardener and the completion of his four hundredth instrument, musicians and friends gathered at the Pioneer Club in Lake Creek. Klein told those who had gathered to celebrate this giving couple, “There’s a saying, ‘An army runs on its stomach.’ Over the years there’s been an army of violin makers, apprentices and wood cutters that have marched through Harriet’s living room and bivouacked

Janice Klein assists her husband, Michael, by combing horse hair and crafting bows.

also instrument makers who prefer to season their wood for twenty years before carving.

Most violin makers don’t really trek around the woods for days and weeks at a time to find wood for their instruments. Most buy their tone wood from people like John Tepper in Shady Cove, and even Tepper says, “No matter how many years I’ve been in the business of finding music wood, I still feel that a lot of it is a mystery. I learn something new from each tree I cut.”
around her dining room table eating the most delicious and nutritious meals prepared by Harriet out of her own garden.

You have only to stroll through her gardens to appreciate Harriet’s artistic genius and the green thumb any master gardener would envy. Speak with her briefly and you’ll recognize her love of nature and good literature. Lucy says, “My mother has innate curiosity. She has a need to learn. My mother was always there for all of us. She’s the glue that held us all together.” Klein adds, “Harriet is the silent partner, the one behind the scenes who keeps it all going.”

The Gardeners never charged for instruction, wood, or even room and board. In fact, Victor has given a number of instruments away. “Violin making has to come from the heart,” he says, “and when I met a young person whose heart was there but the money was missing, I remembered what it was like for me during the Depression. I wanted to help promising musicians.”

And help he did. During the eighties, Gardener sold his violins for three hundred dollars. The wood alone was worth that much. Each violin took at least one hundred hours of work. He sold cellos for seven hundred dollars, though they took triple the time to build. Why did he sell at that price while others were charging three times that or more? Same answer: he wanted to help others and he had all he needed. When Denise Stanley, writing for the *Medford Mail Tribune*, asked him why he’d just given a violin away to a young girl, he answered, “She played so well.”

Gardener also cares about the community. Few people know that he saved the money from his sales and donated it to Lake Creek for equipment for the first fire department.

In the early nineties, Gardener donated a quartet (two violins, a viola, and a cello) all made from quilted maple, to a museum in Cavalese, Italy, the home of his ancestors, with the stipulation that the instruments be played twice a year in a free concert for the townspeople. He thought the quartet might be valued at twelve thousand dollars. The appraisers estimated the value to be fifty-six thousand dollars. The people of Cavalese don’t care. To them, Victor Gardener is “The American Stradivari.”

Gardener made his last instrument in 1995. By then he’d raised his prices to his all time high: five hundred dollars for a violin, seven hundred dollars for a viola, and fifteen hundred dollars for a cello. At the same time others were charging five thousand to ten thousand dollars for their instruments. Some of them weren’t so happy about Gardener’s low prices, but then he’s never been one to care much what others think.

Gardener never advertised, yet he received over thirty instrument requests a year. The only contract he required was a written letter of desire, and he took no orders over two years in advance. The most he ever made in any one year was twenty-four instruments.

After making 380 instruments, Gardener decided it was time to quit. Klein had other ideas. He wrote a letter asking Gardener to make him a violin, and he wanted it to be number four hundred. Gardener refused, but Klein wouldn’t give up. Eventually Gardener agreed. He made five more after Klein’s violin and then asked Klein to take over for him. It was a high compliment, for it meant not only did he believe Klein was an excellent violin maker, but it meant he was a good citizen as well. He then packed up his tools and passed them on to Klein.

Gardener’s eyes and hands may be letting him down some, but his memory seems as sharp as ever. Klein remembers asking him several years ago where he might find some mountain mahogany. “Oh, I remember seeing some,” Gardener told him. “Let me see, it was about twelve miles north of Weed. You go east to Hwy. 97 and follow that. You’ll see a sign and a road there that loops to the right. You could see a train trestle and if you went under it and looked up to the left, it was right up in there. They’ve probably put in a highway there by now though.”

“Did you get any wood?” Klein asked him.

“No, I was on a motorcycle then,” he answered.

Klein knew it had been years since Gardener had his 600cc BMW, so he asked him when he’d seen this mountain mahogany. “Gardener scratched his head and said, ‘Well, I haven’t been there for a while. I guess it was about twenty-five years ago.’”

Klein and his wife decided to take a long weekend and check it out just for the fun of it. “Heck, I thought there’d probably be a condominium there by now. Can you believe his directions were exact? I found the trees just where he said they’d be and I even brought him back a branch to show him.”

The Gardeners moved to Medford in 1996, when their hilltop home on ten acres of land, part of the original homestead Raphael and Maria raised their family on, had become too much to take care of. There are no Gardener instruments in their Medford house. “My children and grandchildren each have one, but I don’t have any left,” he says. “My hearing is going, too, so I don’t even listen to music anymore.” But when Gardener isn’t “holding down” his chair and reading books on history, travel or politics, he’s off helping friends and neighbors however they might need him.

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Christened Vittore Ettor Garinieri, Victor Gardener is a life-long Jackson County resident. He was born in the Lake Creek area in 1909, the son of Italian immigrants. He learned English while attending Lake Creek School #19. Gardener said, “for my career when I first left home, I had three things I wanted to be… violinist… the next was surgeon… the next thing was for civil engineer, but in the Depression [the engineers] were out of work. I got some books and I learned what I could about surveying. I’m not a surveyor that would do all types of work… I can do what I needed to do, water and stuff like that, do section line”—(Oral history #345. pp. 21–22).

In fact, glancing at any map of the Lake Creek area today, one sees several spots of blue depicting reservoirs and canals, most all the hardiwork of Victor Gardener, either surveying, building, or both. Gardener estimates he surveyed and worked on ten to twelve area reservoirs. In addition, he did two canals that helped fill the reservoirs, one of which is eight-and-one-half miles long. The Lake Creek landscape bears the Gardener family name on a butte, a reservoir, and a road (though sometimes misspelled as Gardener).

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Nancy J. Bringhurst writes children’s books, music, and feature articles from her Ashland mountaintop. Her article on Tom Tepper appeared in Vol. 2, No. 4 of Southern Oregon Heritage.
The Medford Depot,
A DREAM RESTORED

by K. Gabrielle

Architecture can be the dominant character-defining feature of any town or city. Preserving noteworthy structures helps maintain a sense of place and can add visual and monetary value to streets, neighborhoods and districts.

Rodger Whipple saw a challenge in the 1910 Medford Southern Pacific Passenger Depot, located at 147 North Front Street. A dominant landmark in Medford’s commercial core, the Depot is the only surviving building related directly to the passenger era of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Passenger service began at this depot in 1910 and ended in 1958. Between 1958 and December 1996, when Whipple purchased the building from Railtex, the Depot was used for storage and offices. Although obscured by some modifications, most of the Depot’s original architectural elements were sound, and the character of the building intact.

The restoration project commenced in June 1997. Whipple felt challenged to help find the Depot’s new identity in the community. The challenge of historical reconstruction, according to Whipple, is to make his work and the past blend so seamlessly that the public is unaware that the structure has been restored.

Whipple’s restoration conforms to the given period in all its detail. His ability to master the details comes from a knowledge of architecture and from experience restoring buildings, including use of proper materials and techniques. Architecture, says Whipple, “is an incredibly important thread in the fabric of our society.”

The Medford Depot’s restoration needed to reflect the 1910s, yet accommodate the structure’s conversion to the Southern Oregon & Pacific Brewing Company restaurant and brewery. Keeping the history intact was the key. Whipple believes the more the history of a product or structure can be documented, the greater its value. Everything people create, including houses and architecture, comes from ideas passed from one era to the next. “We all need to know who we are and where we come from. We move so quickly in the race for prosperity and affluence. We Americans leave behind our roots, our history...we have devalued our history,” says Whipple, “still we remain entranced by it.”

For Whipple, each project is a learning experience. The Medford Depot can be characterized as belonging to the Craftsman era, notable for many distinctive architectural features. These features, such as double hung windows consisting of twelve panes over one large pane, needed to be carefully preserved or reproduced.

Whipple observed details such as cost-effective paneling constructed of half-inch flat grain fir plywood, and steel-troweled, concrete floors, formed in squares with colored borders. He then incorporated these details in the restoration. Today, the floor in the brewery is made up of small, white, hexagonal tiles true to the era. A curved, dark-stained fir ticket counter welcomes visitors into the bar.

Big game trophies, bighorn sheep, elk, deer and pronghorn antelope stare down from high on the brewery walls. Framed landscapes with scenes of Crater Lake, the Cascade mountains, and a campfire keeping the chill away draw the visitor into an Oregon before interstate highways dominated transportation. Framed bond certificates from the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis, Rail Road Company and the New York Central and Hudson River Rail Road decorate the walls along with postcards of old Medford. Outside, an inviting patio is shielded from the railroad tracks by wisteria trailing through an iron fence. As quoted in the 1910 Medford Mail Tribune, “Everything from the electric fixtures to the baseboards harmonize, the whole forming a splendid effect and one delightful to the eye.” Whipple has seen to it that every component from exterior to interior if not vintage Medford Depot, is vintage 1910.

K. Gabrielle is an entrepreneur and freelance writer living in Ashland.

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Many of us go whizzing down Highway 99, passing Rapp Road in Talent without thinking twice about it, yet the Rapps were important pioneers who contributed to the development and character of Talent.

Joseph Rapp was born in 1818 in Reading, Pennsylvania, of Dutch descent. He became a successful miner in California after coming west in 1849. He came to Jackson County in 1872, and acquired three hundred acres on Wagner Creek, south and east of what is now Talent. These acres were originally part of the James Thornton Donation Land Claim. He grew alfalfa, had a large orchard and raised livestock on the fertile bottom land of his farm. Several of his early barns are still in use on the property.

Joseph Rapp was a member of the Masons, politically allied with the Republican Party, and a member of the Lutheran Church. On January 13, 1879, in Ashland, he married Martha E. Reames. She was the daughter of Woodford and Masulda Reames who settled on a donation land claim near Phoenix in 1853. Her father came west as an employee of the Hudson Bay Company.

Joseph Rapp acquired 300 acres on Wagner Creek in 1872. Several of his barns still stand on the road that bears his name.

Joseph and Martha Rapp had two sons, one of whom (Edward) died in infancy. Their son Fred was born in the family home on July 19, 1880, where he lived out his entire life. Fred attended the Wagner school, and in 1896 continued his education at the Ashland Normal School, a teacher's college. His father's death in 1897 left him—a seventeen year old—to manage the farm. It was said of him, "Mr. Rapp is one of the most energetic and resourceful of the young farmers to whom old residents look for the carrying on of their pioneer efforts, and his personal characteristics are such as to win him friends in the present and popularity and influence in time to come."

In July 1903 Fred married Artie E. Oatman, but they were divorced in 1910. He married Linnie E. French in 1916. Her family moved to this area when she was nine, and she was a Phoenix High School graduate. This marriage produced three sons: Joseph M., Chester L., and Raymon E. Rapp.

Joseph Rapp moved to Ashland, but Chet and Ray Rapp still live on the road which bears their family name.

Lou Lyman is an Editorial Assistant for Southern Oregon Heritage Today, and contributor to Society publications. She was recently awarded "Co-Volunteer of the Year" for her work on "The Spirit of Ashland, a Walking Tour of Ashland's Historic Downtown."

END NOTES
1. Portrait and Biographical Record of Western Oregon, 1904, No. 894