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Gouging Tradition:

Musings on Fingernail Fiddle Making

BY ERIC L. BALL

I'm out in the garage. I begin by sharpening a gouge on a whetstone. Both items, like many of the hand-me-down tools I'll be using, once belonged to my great-grandfather, William P., a carpenter from New York's North Country, deceased long before I was born.

I recall hearing only two stories about him. One story, told by his son-in-law—my grandfather—concerned the frequent evening rituals of sharpening his tools, and it always concluded with a description of him doing a final check on the blade of a hand plane by making sure he could shave the hair on his arm with it. I guess that's what they mean by *razor sharp*.

The other story, told by my aunt, was about how, when she and my father were little, Great Grandpa would entertain them by taking a chair out into the front yard and jumping over it.

In addition to the tools, I have in my possession a cardboard box, entrusted to me by my grandparents, containing the only other things of Great Grandpa's that survive, apart from those he built. An inventory of the box's contents reveals:

- One school notebook. W. P.'s writings, inside dated 1898. [He would have been about 14].

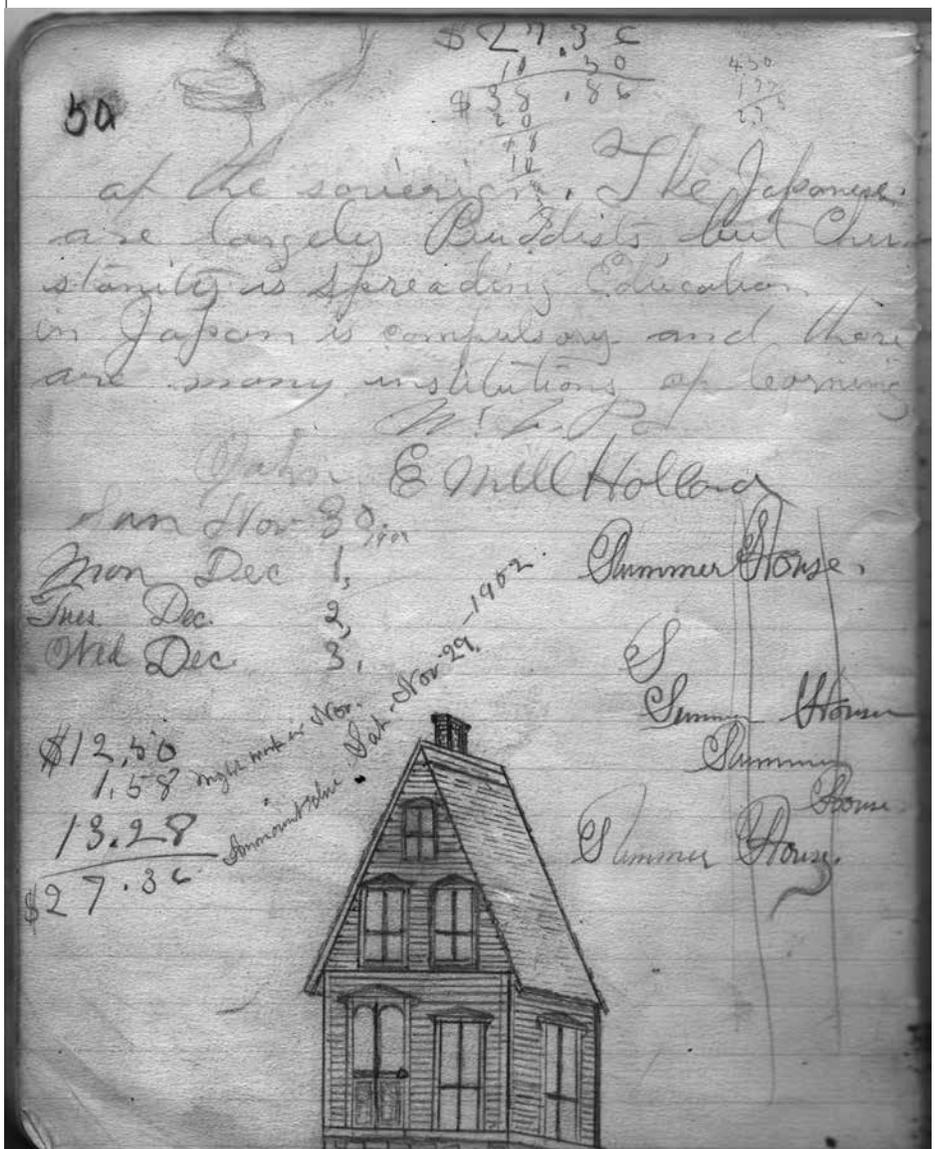
- One schoolbook: *The History of the United States; Told in One Syllable Words* (with colored [*sic*] illustrations) by Miss Josephine Pollard (New York: McLoughlin Brothers, 1884). Contains pencil inscription on inside front cover, "Willie P., Saranac Lake, NY."

- Twelve leaves from unidentified book with black and white illustrations of various animals ("Saddle Horses," "Highland Sheep," "Scotch Deer Hound," etc.).

Opposite each illustration, W. P. has sketched his own copy in pencil.

- One *Holy Bible*. Masonic Edition. Ink inscription, "Presented to Brother William P.," dated 1927. Pencil marking on

title page, "I Timothy 6:17," text of which reads (with underlining in pencil as indicated): "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living



A page out of Great Grandpa P.'s school notebook, 1898 (with additional writing added in blank areas in 1902). Courtesy of the author.

God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.”

• One book: *Select Poems* by Alfred Lord Tennyson, edited with notes by William J. Rolfe, A.M., Litt.D. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1892). Gift to W. P. from sister, as per pencil inscription. Miscellaneous stanzas singled out by pencil markings *passim*, including one on page 38 that begins as follows:

Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
These three alone lead life to sovereign power.

• Eight notebooks and ledgers. Pages filled with records (dated 1912–1954), apparently tracking, on a daily basis, all hours ever worked and every penny ever made.



I take Great Grandpa’s rasp in my hands and go to work on sculpting the “back” side of a thick piece of walnut held in place by a bench vise. This piece will comprise most of the fiddle’s body, running from head to toe, and it requires the most work. My mind wanders as I’m working, and I wonder how many years the rasp was sitting dormant in his tool chest before I started using it. I wonder when and where he used it last, and what for.

Am I carrying on tradition?

Well, I’m not building a barn in Willsboro, a staircase in Corinth, or a house in Fort Edward, as Great Grandpa might have done. I *am* still living *here*, practically just around the corner from a house built under his tutelage (by my grandfather), where Great Grandpa lived near the end of his life, and the last place he kept his tools and tool chest.

I’m making a *finger nail fiddle*, which is the name I came up with in English for the (usually) 3-stringed, upright bowed fiddle known in Greece as the *hyra*. I named it that because you make different notes by pressing the flat of your fingernail against the “side” of a string that remains suspended above the neck, not by pressing it down against the fingerboard or a fret, as with most other

string instruments. Cognate instruments—also presumably descended from the *hyras* of Byzantium some thousand years ago—include, for example, the *lira Calabrese* of Southern Italy, the Dalmatian *lijerica*, and the *kemenche* of Ottoman classical music.

I’m descended from French-Canadian, English, Scotch-Irish, and Dutch people who have lived for many generations in upstate and northern New York, or just across the border in Ontario. So building an instrument like this is hardly traditional for *me*, even if it is widely considered to be *the* traditional instrument on the island of Crete, where I lived for some years when I was in my 20s. Crete was a life-changing experience for me, musically and poetically. I’ve already given some account of this elsewhere,¹ so let me just say this: when I was about 23, I wanted so badly to learn to play the Cretan *hyra* that to get money for buying one, I sold my last guitar—which seems crazy because I *really* loved playing guitar, and it seemed like it had taken me forever as a teenager to save up for my Fender acoustic, even at a good price from another kid who was eager to sell.



The sweat drips from the tip of my nose into the “boat” (or “bowl”) that I’m in the process of gouging out of the front of the



Old photo of Great Grandpa P. (right) from family photo album. Courtesy of the author.

thick piece of walnut. The driving rhythm of Cretan music, sounding from the speakers I’ve got out here in the garage, helps keep my adrenaline up, so I can power through until dusk.

I don’t know if there is a music gene, but if there is, all three of Great Grandma’s and Great Grandpa P’s children inherited it. Their oldest daughter, my grandmother, was good enough on piano that upon graduating from Fort Edward High School, some “rich woman from Hudson Falls” (as family lore had it), who thought so highly of my grandmother, bought a piano and had it shipped to her “all the way from California,” as a graduation present—the very same piano on which she gave me my earliest music lessons. Then, their youngest daughter, who had “a beautiful voice,” went off to Boston for a while to study at a conservatory, before eventually getting married and settling down with a local farmer. (I’m still hanging on to her 1940–1941 issues of *The Etude*.) Finally, my great-grandparents’ son was apparently quite the violinist. While majoring in music at Syracuse University, he played in the symphony, and he played violin at my grandparents’ wedding. After he returned from the Second World War, though, he abandoned music for a career as a professor of electrical technology instead. Relatives who knew him well—I was too young—always tell me that it’s too bad that he’s not around to see me playing my fingernail fiddles, and that he would have gotten a big kick out of seeing me make them using his father’s old tools.

But why *am* I making them?

During a 15-year, self-imposed exile from Crete, I almost stopped playing my *hyra* altogether, or any Cretan music for that matter—there was nobody around with whom to play Cretan music and so with each passing year, my active Cretan musical life receded further and further into the past. Then I made a trip back to the island. More than just resurrected, my Cretan musical life was redoubled, fueled no doubt by so many cyberspace developments—countless YouTube videos; numerous Cretan music blogs; instantaneous access to Greek government-sponsored cultural archives and documentaries; free long-distance,



Left to right: Modern Stagakis-type *lyra* by Stelios Tzanakis, two fingernail fiddles by the author, and an innovative *lyraki* by Manolis Staikos. Front: Some of Great Grandpa P.'s tools, used by the author in fingernail fiddle making. Photo by the author.

real-time video chatting with musician acquaintances in Crete; and immediate access to shops selling Cretan music and musical instruments—which made it easier than ever for a person sitting in upstate New York to keep up with and connect to myriad Cretan musical items and activities, present and past.

In time, and concurrent with developments on the island, I became increasingly attracted

to wider possibilities regarding what a Cretan *lyra* could “be.” Back in the 1930s, a distinctively modern Cretan *lyra* emerged—widely known as the “Stagakis-type” *lyra* for the luthier largely responsible for it—characterized by several innovations, including factory-made metal tuning pegs as opposed to wooden ones, a longer fingerboard, and a violin-like peg box and scroll. The modern Stagakis-

type *lyra* subsequently became the standard, and it largely eclipsed older style *lyras*, such as the smaller *lyraki*. The modern *lyra*'s many advantages notwithstanding, one disadvantage is that it can be somewhat more difficult to build on one's own without additional, more specialized equipment and materials.

By the end of the 20th century, it seemed as though non-Stagakis-type *lyras* in Crete

were destined for the museum. Then, old-fashioned-style *lyras* began to make a minor comeback. Recordings and concerts of several well-known, professional Cretan musicians (for example, Psarantonis, Dimitris Sgouros) prominently featured some older style instruments, such as the *lyraki*. Meanwhile, an innovative *lyra* with numerous sympathetic strings devised by an immigrant to Greece, Ross Daly who—involving primarily in world music and gaining increasing attention through Daly’s growing network of students and other collaborators, including Stelios Petrakis, a professional instrument maker—builds the *lyras* with sympathetic strings, as well as the smaller *lyraki* and Stagakis-type modern *lyras*. A glance at the *lyras* currently available for sale online from Greece reveals that a number of other *lyra* makers also have been experimenting recently with additional variations in design.

My “problem” was this: the more frequently I was exposed to the range of timbres produced by these different kinds of Cretan *lyras* (of different shapes, sizes, materials, and even tuning and playing methods), not to mention by *lyras* of regions other than Crete, the more passionately I desired to play on a wider range of such instruments myself—an experience not altogether different, I suppose, from when I was a teenager and eventually wound up “needing” both electric and acoustic guitars. The powerful desire that led me to sell my last guitar in order to buy a *lyra* multiplied. I longed to play several different *kinds* of *lyras*.

But how could I afford such an extravagance? Cretan *lyras*, always handcrafted, might have been inexpensive when compared with many violins, but they weren’t exactly cheap. Or, even if I could afford them, how could I justify such an extravagance? Wouldn’t it mean I was giving in to some kind of over-the-top consumerism?

One solution was to build my own. After all, the Cretan *lyra* is essentially a folk instrument. (Even in its professionally made modern form, it’s still pretty close.) Building one shouldn’t require a long apprenticeship—or *any* apprenticeship—with an actual Cretan luthier, right? As a scholar, I’d read

through ethnographic interviews, over the years, with many an old-time rural Cretan who happened to mention building his own first *lyra* out of whatever materials he had available. I began to wonder if I could ever teach myself how to do it. I filed the thought somewhere in the back of my mind, but as I continued my academic research on Cretan music, I also took note of any resources I happened upon that provided insight into the building process. Still, I didn’t really think I’d ever do it.



I mark three points, as accurately as I can, on what will be the head of the instrument. I press an awl into each one and then drill holes for the tuning pegs. I don’t have a drill press and am doing the best I can to get the holes in just the right places and at right angles to the back surface. I check now to make sure the tuning pegs will slide properly into the holes later when it’s time to put everything together. The fit is too snug. One hole is a little off. It occurs to me to use a round file to correct it, but the round files I have in the garage are either too large to fit in the holes or too small to do the job right.

I know Great Grandpa’s tool chest has many more files. I walk next door to my parents’ house and head down cellar to the workshop, where his tool chest currently resides. With outside dimensions of 38” wide, 24” deep, and 31-1/2” tall, it is a veritable piece of furniture, but also a model of economy when it comes to how many tools it can store, in a way that leaves everything conveniently accessible.

The outside of the chest is finished in light and dark shades of green paint, and every corner is protected by a bent piece of sheet metal that has been handsomely riveted over it. The top is decorated with a large rectangular board that also serves to cover two storage recesses within the top, which are accessible from the inside. This board, whose edges have been rounded (probably for aesthetic reasons), is attached by numerous round-headed screws spaced 1-1/2” apart from each other and arranged in the

pattern of a large double square. Unlatching the top, which is attached to the body by two large hinges in the back, and opening up the chest reveals that the top’s inside face has also been outfitted to hold a carpenter’s square in the bottom left corner. The chest’s inside cavity is home to six wooden trays—each divided into two to three sections of varied dimensions, everything stained and varnished—“stacked” in three levels of two trays each. Each tray runs the full inside width (33-1/2”–34”) of the chest by one-third the depth of the chest (6 1/2”). The four trays of the top two levels are 3” in height and the two trays of the bottom level are 4”. Each tray of the topmost level is outfitted with a decorative lid attached by three brass hinges, making the tray more like an oblong, miniature toolbox. All the trays/boxes can be slid front-to-back, back-to-front. Sliding them makes it possible to expose and provide access to any third of the area of the next level down which, in turn, operates the same way, as does the level below that. The trays slide effortlessly, owing to the meticulously crafted fit of each tray/box to its level, as well as to the precision planing and wax finish that makes their 1/4” runways (affixed to the left and right inside walls of the chest) almost as slippery as ice. The chest’s cavity extends down another 8” or so under the bottoms of the lowest level of trays. The front third of this “subterranean cavity” is outfitted to hold six hand-saws, accessed, of course, by sliding all three levels of trays/boxes to the back two-thirds of the chest. The other two-thirds of this underground has been left wide open for any larger tools that might not fit in the trays or boxes. Even further down, there is an altogether separate compartment in the guise of a single drawer (inside dimensions 30” x 22” x 6”) that unlatches and pulls out from the front of the chest, much like any large dresser drawer.

The cellars, sheds, and garages of my father and brother, like my grandfathers’ before them, overflow with tools and always have. For years, I was the odd one out. Even after my partner and I bought a house, I somehow got by for six or seven years—



Great Grandpa P.'s tool chest. Photo by the author.

mostly by borrowing tools from my father next door—with little more than the two toolboxes that I'd been lugging around from one apartment to the next since college.

I could have gotten more tools a lot sooner, and for free. For years, my father had been telling me I should go over to Grandpa's old house to take whatever tools I wanted out of his garage. I kept putting it off, but eventually, one fine Saturday morning, my brother, my father, and I went over and divided among ourselves all the hand tools, power tools, toolboxes, fasteners, and other odds and ends. Some had been my grandfa-

ther's and others, Great Grandpa P.'s. As the one of us most in need of tools, I took the most home. At long last, I knew I had in our garage most of (what I considered) the basic woodworking and other kinds of tools that I'd been missing for most my adult life, as well as some of the more (to me) "exotic" and "old-fashioned" kinds of tools (calipers, woodturning tools, etc.) from Great Grandpa that I'd never used before.

Knowing I was outfitted with almost every tool I'd need for building a *lyra*, and having collected whatever relevant information, photos, or videos I'd come across, I also got

to thinking: wouldn't it be neat to put my great-grandfather's carpentry tools to use again after all these years, especially to make something like a *lyra*?

Neat? Well, I suppose I had this sense that I'd be communing—that's not exactly the right word for it—with various pasts. First, I'd be communing with my own younger self—a kid out in the garage learning from his grandfather the right and wrong ways to measure, to mark and make cuts, to drive and pull nails, to sand, and to paint, as together they built birdhouses, benches, all kinds of yard decorations, and household items. Second, I'd be communing with a guy from a generation with which I'd never had any living contact (everyone from my great-grandfather's generation was deceased before I was born), someone who was professionally involved in woodworking, and whose kids were among the most musical people in my family. Anyway, it just seemed like these imagined (or imaginary) connections would somehow add to the meaningfulness of taking on such a challenge.

And so at last, I had more reasons *to* try building a *lyra* than *not* to try.

I also had the audacity to think I'd probably succeed. Sure, I knew I still remembered whatever I'd learned about woodworking as a kid, but that wasn't all there was to it. I also grew up watching my grandfather and my father, too, constantly building things without any plans. Maybe such plans didn't exist or weren't easily accessible. Maybe it was the pleasure of figuring something out for yourself. Maybe it was a healthy skepticism regarding "official" expertise. All I know is that I remember Grandpa looking over something he wanted to build and then, in the process of building it, constantly stopping to figure. He'd think about it this way and that, always trying to anticipate how one move might affect or interfere with another move he'd need to make later on. Occasionally, he wouldn't quite succeed but then learn from a shortcoming or mistake, such as when he made a chair and hadn't considered an appropriate angle for the back to meet the seat in

relation to its other dimensions, resulting in something that was virtually impossible to sit in comfortably.

I didn't have plans or a pattern to follow for my fingernail fiddles either. I had access to plans for a modern *lyra*, but that wasn't what I wanted to build, and anyway, it would have required tools, materials, and wood of dimensions that I didn't have handy. That's the other thing: again, like my grandfather, I wanted as much as possible to get away with using relatively simple materials that I could easily and inexpensively acquire. And that meant I had to come up with something like a hybrid design, cobbled together from my knowledge of various actual *lyras* and tentative new ideas all my own. I didn't want to build a modern *lyra*, but neither did I want to build an entirely "authentic" old-fashioned kind. I intended from the start to use metal mandolin tuners that I could easily purchase and which, as a musician, I find very convenient for actual tuning.

When I made my first fingernail fiddle, I took things very *s-l-o-w-l-y*. It paid off—though, for all my own stopping and figuring, I had overlooked something critical about one of the *lyras* I was taking as a partial model. That led to my less-than-ideal shaping of the instrument's head and placing of the tuning pegs, which made it hard for me to get the strings to stay in the right place. I eventually came up with a work-around and, having learned not only from my oversight but from the different things I'd tried out as remedies, I was even better prepared to think about future designs—for I had no intention of building fiddles the same size and shape twice.

With each fiddle I built, I'd get ideas about something else I wanted to try on the next one, or the one after that. In time, I experimented with adding a fourth string to extend the instrument's range. That way, when friends or family wanted to get together to play some American or other non-Cretan music, it would be easier for me to sit in by relying on sheet music intended for the violin or other instruments, without having first to transpose or arrange everything. (Around the

same time, I discovered that some 4-string *lyras* were being built back in Greece, too, for presumably different reasons.)



So, where is *tradition* in all this?

I drew eclectically on a variety of traditional resources (Cretan traditional music, my Anglo-American family's woodworking traditions, and DIY sensibilities) to build a Mediterranean folk instrument, modified in response to the resources I had readily and inexpensively available to me locally in upstate New York. I did so, in part, because I was irresistibly drawn to particular qualities of the instrument itself (the timbre, the feel in the hand while performing, even its appearance) and, in this sense, the *traditional-ity* of the instrument was merely incidental. Yet, it seems unlikely that my attraction to the instrument's qualities would have been quite so powerful, had I not been immersed in Cretan music culture in the traditional ways that I was when I lived in Crete.

Interestingly, it was my love of the *lyra* that led me to develop or discover my love, as a listener, for the violin and viola as well. Had I experienced musical euphoria comparable with what I experienced participating in everyday music-making in central Crete somewhere else with *violins* first—in eastern or western Crete, say, or in French or Maritime Canada—perhaps my attraction to the violin would have been just as strong. Who knows?

In one sense, my activities were *more* traditional than those who consciously strive to uphold traditions, precisely because I had not set out to maintain or revive a tradition in some static, ostensibly pure, or authentic, let alone blatantly caricatured way—out of a preservationist nostalgia born of modern alienation, say, or in pursuit of identity politics.

In another sense, my actions were typically modern, insofar as I was making extensive conscious efforts to look far beyond the many accessible, affordable musical options readily offered to me by the mass commercial culture in which I'm immersed in everyday life (for example, guitars; everyday

life music *consumption* over nonprofessional, everyday life music *making*). Unless, that is, we consider the very act of *making* such an extensive conscious effort *itself* to be somehow traditional at another level.

As long as we acknowledge that traditions tend to be discontinuous as well as continuous, and that (dis)continuities tend to vary with respect to both sociohistorical context and what is "visible" to whoever is observing them *as* traditions in the first place, then I suppose I could consider my activities to be quite traditional indeed.

Then again, how far can we stretch the meaning of *tradition* before it ceases doing any useful work as a concept?

While none of my activities were, for me, a matter of politicizing any particular tradition, they were in another way very political, in that I was (or am here) striving to hold up to anyone else listening—against the grain of many of the most powerful commercial and "public" interests—the value of remaining open to certain lesser-known practices and attitudes with significant roots in the past. Not value in some grand, moralizing sense, but more in the spirit of: maybe we don't know what we're missing.

Personally, I might have missed out on the pleasures of playing a variety of fingernail fiddles and—yes!—sweat and blisters notwithstanding, even on the pleasures of building them. I might have missed out also on certain insights, which remaining open to all this can lead to.

I wrote before that *communing* wasn't quite the right word. Though I was intuitively attracted in a way to such a notion, I was also being ironic, or at least metaphorical: I never for a nanosecond believed there was any *literal* communing going on. Still, I have grown confident that there is value in allowing oneself the luxury of pursuing an attraction that seems at the outset merely naive, quirky, or romantic, so long as that pursuit is tempered by, or left in tension with, a kind of critical thinking that resists surrendering to the many concomitant, *romanticizing* implications and oversimplifications likely to eagerly present themselves along the way.

Wednesday Sept 15

Sun	17	
Mon	18	8-hrs
Tue	19	10.7 "
Wed	20	8. "
Thu	21	8. "
Fri	22	10.7 hrs
Sat	23	8. "
		52.7-hrs
		11-28-35
		31.09-
		Inc 25¢
		30.84-
Sun	24	12-hrs
Mon	25	8. "
Tue	26	8. "
Wed	27	8. "
Thu	28	8. "
Fri	29	10.7 "
Sat	30	10.7 "
		57.4-hrs
		12-5-35
		33.87-
		Inc 25¢
		33.62-
Total		64.46

Thursday Sept 16

Dec		
Sun	1	12-hrs
Mon	2	8. "
Tue	3	10.7 "
Wed	4	10.7 "
Thu	5	
Fri	6	
Sat	7	8-hrs
		49.4
		12-12-35
		29.15-
		25¢
		28.90-
Sun	8	12.8 hrs
Mon	9	8. "
Tue	10	8. "
Wed	11	
Thu	12	Father died
Fri	13	8-hrs
Sat	14	
		36.8 hrs
		12-19-35
		21.71+
		Inc 25¢
		21.46
Total		50.36

Two pages from Great Grandpa P.'s records. Courtesy of the author.

Knowing so little about Great Grandpa P., it was especially easy to plunge into the "romance" of familial communing, focusing on his impeccable craftsmanship and my place in such lineage. I could readily feel innocent, proud, happy, and special.

But then what about all those notebooks and ledgers of his? Forty-two years' worth of work recorded, day by day, dollar by dollar. I can understand why he might have needed to do so whenever he was working for himself. Still, he mostly tracked revenues and rarely recorded any expenses, so could it really have been for business purposes? I suppose so—he might have needed something on which to base writing up a bill, or even just a way to keep an overall eye on exactly where he was making money and how much. But what about all the times he was wage-laboring at a local mill? Why track

that in so much detail? Maybe he thought it wasn't prudent to rely on his employers—better to keep detailed records of his own work on the off chance a discrepancy arose come payday. But then why keep track of all the days he *didn't* work? Perhaps, if he hadn't, he might have wondered later if he'd simply forgotten to write down how long he'd worked that day. Okay, but then what about all the detailed records of paying board to his own children? I can see a logic to paying board, but was it necessary to keep track of it in such painstaking fashion? Maybe he worried that if he didn't, he might lose track at some point and shortchange a loved one.

Scattered among the hours, dollars, and cents, there are a few—very few—miniature diary-like moments in these records. Some seem just as pragmatic: throughout 1934, he records, next to hours worked, any injury

he sustained at the mill that day ("hurt toe with truck," "hurt finger driving coupling on Press roll #3 mach.," and "hurt finger," adjacent to which he later added, "infection set in"). There are at least eight such entries that year and none in any prior or subsequent years, so he must have had some practical reason for keeping track at that particular time. Other diary-like moments seem more personal and suggest anxiety over major life events: for a short period he seems worried about his wife ("Bessie sick," "Bessie operated on," and "Bessie came home from hospital"). During the Second World War, there are numerous records tracking his son's university- and military-related travels (for example, "Took Ronald to Syracuse," "Ronald was inducted into the Army at Syracuse NY"). An entry in 1935, *sans* hours worked, states, "Father died."

I'll never know for sure what Great Grandpa's reasons were for keeping such detailed records of his working hours and income, but two things strike me: first, my grandparents not only hung onto these notebooks long after he'd passed away, but they made a point of showing them to me on more than one occasion when I was a child—clearly impressed (*how* exactly I can't recall, though certainly not negatively) by what they took to be his unusually fastidious recordkeeping. Second, even if Great Grandpa's reasons for such recordkeeping were ultimately mostly unremarkable, it still seems significant that he bothered to keep these notebooks his entire life! Surely by the 1950s, there was no *pragmatic* reason to hang on to logs of hours worked and dollars made in 1912! His reasons were almost certainly psychological. It's almost as if carefully measuring the dimensions of his work and hard-earned income with the same attention to detail that he gave as a carpenter to every board, every line, every angle, and every cut, was part of an unconscious project of crafting the ultimate tool chest of his *life*.

Which brings me to this: what about the fact that one of my motivations for building fingernail fiddles was *saving money*? I'm no psychiatrist, but what if the biggest thing Great Grandpa P. and I ultimately have in common is a tendency to engage in certain "compulsive" activities—however innocuous—as a way to deal with the particular economic anxieties of our respective lives?

What if I felt such a strong need for more than one *hira* or fingernail fiddle largely as a consequence of having been conditioned to direct so much energy into walking a tightrope between an unreasonable insatiable consumerism, on the one hand, and an equally unreasonable self-abnegating frugality, on the other? Maybe what I'm mostly doing in my garage is honing my psychological endurance for walking this tightrope, when it might be better if I tried figuring out if there is anything I can do to help change the conditions that make walking it seem attractive, inevitable, or necessary in the first place.

It does seem like much of the world around us encourages us to chase shiny

objects and quickly succumb to the easy pleasures ostensibly afforded by mass culture, instead of pausing to consider what might be sitting out in the garage or in a dusty old box in the attic. But, oddly enough, it also seems to encourage some of us who open that box to treat what we find inside as an excuse for conceiving of *family* or *tradition* or *craftsmanship* as refuge from, or compensation for, the alienations of modern life. I find I'm learning that such things, upon closer examination, tend to be more ambivalent.



The last coat of finish is barely dry, but I can't wait any longer. I fasten the tuning pegs in place with tiny screws. I connect the tailpiece with a piece of wire. I open a new set of strings and put them on. With strings in place, I position the bridge and sound post.

I tune it and start playing to hear how it sounds. Our seven-year old niece is staying with us for the summer. She wanders into the garage from the garden to listen. I start making up a goofy song with a refrain that begins, "Meli... Meli... Melinda the ladybug...," which I'll hone later that afternoon when I realize she's still whistling it. She giggles at the silly adventures of a ladybug that I'm singing off the cuff.

This is as close as I ever come to jumping over a chair. ▼

Note

¹ See Ball, Eric L., *Sustained by Eating, Consumed by Eating Right: Reflections, Rhymes, Rants, and Recipes*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2013. In his book, Ball is both memoirist and food philosopher, sharing his experiences in the Mediterranean and how to cook Greek foods in the United States, while considering broader questions about family, "self," and the environment.

Eric L. Ball is the author of *Sustained by Eating, Consumed by Eating Right: Reflections, Rhymes, Rants, and Recipes* (Excelsior Editions, 2013). More about his writing and links to his music can be found through his website <<https://sites.google.com/site/filokritos/>>. He is a professor in the Humanities and Arts division of Empire State College.

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