Mr. Willis Pippin
And the Violin

Article by Melissa Ambrose

Mr. Willis Pippen shows Melissa Ambrose three of his violins.

Introduction

Late on the beautiful, sunny afternoon of September 20, 1988, Dr. Armstrong and I set off to explore the musical land
of violins. The owner of these instruments is Mr. Willis Pippin, who lives in a rustic but attractive white-frame farmhouse outside of Washington. Mr. Pippin has been in the violin repair and customizing business for many years now, and has become well known for his skill and accomplishments.

As we approached his house and got out of the car, we were greeted by Mr. Pippin, sporting a pleasant, glad-you're-here smile, and his dog, a black Lab. Mr. Pippin then escorted us to a separate little building behind his house where he performs his magic on the violins, or fiddles as some very prominent violinists call these instruments. There, among Mr. Pippin's many creations, we began our interview.

_Life_: How did you get into refinishing fiddles and violins?

_Mr. Pippin_: I had this violin here, and it came to pieces. It came unglued, and I couldn't find anyone to glue it back together. So I finally started working on it, and, in fact, I took the stain off of it and that weakened the glue and it came unglued. I couldn't get anyone else to put it back together, so I started experimenting with it. And when I got it back together, I started from that, as a rule.

_Life_: When was this?

_Mr. Pippin_: Well, I've had this violin since I was 10 years old. My aunt gave it to me, but I wanted one of a little bit more quality. But I didn't have the money to buy one like I wanted. I wasn't a good enough musician to buy an expensive one, so I was going to make sure it was right. So I got started in that direction, and I accumulated what you see I've got now as a result of that.

_Life_: When did you repair this one?

_Mr. Pippin_: I repaired this, I reckon, 30 years ago it is now. That's the first one.

_Life_: What kind of procedure did you go through? Did you refinish this one?

_Mr. Pippin_: Yes, I refinished this one. You take off the old stain or whatever's left on it.

_Life_: What do you use to do that?

_Mr. Pippin_: I use a wood alcohol.

_Life_: What kind of wood is that on this violin?

_Mr. Pippin_: The top is spruce pine. Most of the violins of any value to them will have curly maple sides and back and neck.

_Life_: So most of them have more than one kind of wood?

_Mr. Pippin_: Yes.

_Life_: Is the curly maple the preferred wood?

_Mr. Pippin_: Yes. Curly maple is grown in overseas forests; most of the violin material is grown in overseas forests. We have a maple in this area, but it's not as hard as this [curly] maple here is. This is almost hard as glass. Of course, it's kind of brittle.

This is a violin made in France; see, it's got a French name on it.

_Life_: What is the top of this one made out of?
Mr. Pippin: The top of this one is made out of spruce pine. Most all of the tops are made out of spruce pine.

Life: Does that have anything to do with the way the violin sounds?

Mr. Pippin: Yes, the vibrations, thickness of the wood, and tone. Most all violin makers had a pattern they went by, and most of them were set up differently. Most of them have got a different tone and quality. I redid this one, and to me it is a pretty piece of wood.

Life: Does the maker cut the “F” holes? Are they done free hand or does he have a mold or something?

Mr. Pippin: They have a pattern to go by; every violin maker has his own pattern, [Antonio] Stradivari and [Nicolo] Amati [teacher of Stradivari] who was the forerunner of the violin makers.

Life: Amati was the first one in Italy?

Mr. Pippin: Yes. Stradivari studied under him. Stradivari claimed that [Jacob] Stainer, a German maker about the same time as Stradivari, stole the pattern from Stradivari. Stainer violins have narrower ribs and thicker backs. Stainer has the name on the back. I have two of those. I tried to get a dull color, but the belly of it is a little bit higher, and the ribs are narrower than the Stradivarius. I have one that has the original stain on it.

Life: What would be the original dates on these?

Mr. Pippin: These are around the turn of the century. You see the difference in the “F” holes there and the difference in style.

Life: Now when you redo these, do you take them completely apart?

Mr. Pippin: Yes. It comes apart in pieces.

Life: How thick is the wood?

Mr. Pippin: About 1/8 of an inch.

Life: What is the purpose in the difference of the holes by the sides of the strings at the bottom?

Mr. Pippin: That’s just something to dress it up, but I really don’t know the answer to that.

Here are some pieces. See, these are ribs and necks. This one has a mummy’s head on it. I’ve got the back that goes on this one; it has a medieval castle on it. But I don’t have it put back together yet. This is the way the violin starts out; like a small child it keeps growing. And the hard knocks and accidents along the way happen just like we humans have. And if somebody with tender loving care doesn’t keep and repair them, they do like we do and the undertaker has to get them!

Life: Do you still have the ones with the flags on them?

Mr. Pippin: Yes, I still have those. This one is 101 years old. It was made by J. Murphy Carmwell in 1886. When I had the top of it off, there is his name engraved in the back of it. See, this neck has a block that extends into the case, and it’s got his name burned on there.

Life: And you put that flag on there?

Mr. Pippin: Yes. You see the grains of the wood right on through the stains.
Life: What color was it originally?

Mr. Pippin: Well, most of the stain was so near gone that I had to finish taking the rest off. See, here is another one of the rebel flags. I used the same color of varnish on this one that I did the other one. But with the different grains of wood, it came out differently. When I was doing this, I wasn’t familiar with the stains and how to get the true replica of what I wanted. In other words, I am not familiar with stains enough to get true flag [colors]. But I came up with the idea about five years before I ever transposed this onto the violins. I felt like I was supposed to do something in life, and I kept looking for it. And after I had done all this, I realized that this was what I was supposed to do. You know, you will have an idea, everybody has an idea, but sometimes it doesn’t ever get anywhere, and this is one of them.

Life: Do you make or refinish these violins to sell?

Mr. Pippin: Well, I sell one occasionally. I haven’t sold one this year. I am not in what you might say the buying and selling business. Of course, they’re so expensive now just like everything else; they’re beyond imagination, getting a good quality one.

You know when you start staining something and it doesn’t come out like you want it to, you have to pull it off and start over again. When I started staining the second color, it looked like I was going to have to do that. Fortunately, I happened to get my steel wool into some paint thinner and I started working around these stars. Whatever had gone into there wasn’t sufficient enough to go into the grain, so it rubbed right off. So everything seemed like, when I started, it fell right into place, just like I was supposed to do it. That’s the way it turned out.

I put the stars pointing up, and if you turn it around, it’s the same way. But that one’s got a good tone to it [according to] the head violinist of ECU [East Carolina University] who spent two hours with me in 1974. This is the American flag. The thirteen stripes on this are on the front, and on the back are the fifty stars. This fiddle used to be owned by a fellow that played on the Grand Ole Opry. He used to play with the Hank Stowe’s band. He played as a professional for a while. He gave me this fiddle.

Life: Who was that?

Mr. Pippin: Cecil Hill who lives in Oriental [N. C.] now.

Life: Where did you get most of your fiddles?

Mr. Pippin: Well, from asking around to different people. I’ll show you one a woman gave me four years ago. I have two of the rebel flags. You can see the different colors. Notice how the green color of the paint came out more on this one than the other one. Had I been familiar with my stains and the different woods, I would have been a little more in unison [consistent]. But, anyway, I’m tickled with the way it is.

Life: Oh! It looks nice!

Mr. Pippin: To put all this on, it takes about a year’s work. It takes three months to put one color on. I redid this one in 1983, and the top of it looked like coal tar had been painted on it, and like the mice or something had gnawed out this piece. So I put those pieces in it, and if you didn’t know it, from a distance you couldn’t tell it. I restained it in January, February, and March of 1988.

Life: All of the violins don’t have the seam down the back like this one, do they?
Mr. Pippin: No, this is what they call a two-piece back. I didn’t reglue that; it is just like that.

Life: Is a two-piece back or a single piece back preferable?

Mr. Pippin: There’s not that much difference.

Life: Can you tell a difference in tone depending on the different style of making the violin?

Mr. Pippin: Every violin maker’s tone of quality is different, and just like driving a car, you can get used to driving one particular car and get into another and it drives different. So a violin will do that also.

Life: Are all violins made by hand?

Mr. Pippin: No, they mass produce them now with machinery. Of course, there are some still made by hand, but most of the parts are made in Germany now. I have a seller [of violins] in Baltimore, Maryland, who furnished me with all the parts I need.

Life: Do professional musicians bring you their violins to be repaired?

Mr. Pippin: Well, there’s not that much work available in this area. Most of the violin repairmen are in the Greenville area. I’ve done some repair work for them in the past, but I haven’t done any lately. Now, this violin was played in the Washington theatre before talking movies came. This is a copy of the Stradivarius, of course. A ridge is dug out inside, and this is inserted in there. This has been hand-laid in there around the top. It has it on the top and back and the top of the strode and the sides. This is 160 years old.

Life: It was played in the theatre in Washington as background music?

Mr. Pippin: Yes. Of course, it has battle scars.

Life: Which one of these do you prefer to play?

Mr. Pippin: Right now I’m playing a five-string.

Life: Is there any difference in the terms “violin” and “fiddle”?

Mr. Pippin: No. Issac Stern [famous concert violinist] called the violin a fiddle.

Life: I guess if he does it, it’s all right!

Mr. Pippin: For some people, if you mention a fiddle and they’ve got a violin, then that’s not exactly appropriate.

Life: He’s [Stern] one of the best in the world, isn’t he?

Mr. Pippin: Yes, he is. Absolutely. And I enjoy seeing anyone that is a professional violin player. It will always be one of my favorite instruments.

Life: Is there a lot of difference in four- and five-strings?

Mr. Pippin: Well, I didn’t know anything about the five-string until Ricky Skaggs did a performance in Greenville about five years ago, and I was there. I got up to talk to his fiddle player, and he showed me his five-string fiddle. I had never seen or heard of one until that day. So three years ago this past August my company sent me some literature on one. They had this five-string fiddle, so I ordered it. I ordered it on Tuesday and got it Friday. So that’s pretty fast!
Here is an English fiddle, 160 years old. Speaking of how I acquired these, I worked life insurance for 25 years. I retired in 1978 and while I was with the company, a man from Washington knew about me and came to see me. He was going with this girl from Florida, whose family owned this violin. They came back to Washington when they were going to get married and brought it by and wanted to know what it would cost to repair it. So I told them. Well, he didn’t care anything about it, and I don’t think his wife did either. So he asked me what would I give him for it. And I told him my price, and he accepted it. That’s how I got this particular one. This was repaired in England in 1892. It’s got the date in it.

Life: Do you put your name in them?

Mr. Pippin: Whenever I take the top off of them, I put my name on them. I put a signpost in them. See that little pencil thing sticking up in there? I’ve got my “P” on that. I put my mark on it.

Someone consulted me about buying a violin for Christmas one year but went ahead and bought one before I could help them. Anyway, somehow or another, it was brought to me, and I put a signpost in it. Well, they were having a session somewhere, and he showed me his violin and wanted to know how it was. I looked in there and saw my name on the signpost, and he didn’t know anything about that.

Life: That was a coincidence!

Mr. Pippin: Of course, I have two violins of the Rebel flag, two of the American, and two of the North Carolina flag violins. This has the same design on the front and on the back. The colors came out a little greenish cast on this one, and the other is different.

Life: Where did you come up with the idea to paint flags on them?

Mr. Pippin: Well, you said paint, and we have been talking about stain. But that is what comes to your mind if you’re not familiar with it. Like I said, I came up with this idea five years before I started transposing it. This was completed in 1972, and it usually takes me a year to do it, so I’ll put the prospective year on there when I’m going to have it completed. So seven years before that [1965], this idea came upon me.

Life: You didn’t see it somewhere else?

Mr. Pippin: I just came up with the idea within myself. Since I have accomplished this, it seems like I am more at ease as far as looking for something to do in life.

Life: What about that little bitty violin down there?

Mr. Pippin: There are nine sizes of the violin. We have a $\frac{1}{64}$, $\frac{1}{16}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{32}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{7}{8}$, and full size.

Life: Are most of these full size?

Mr. Pippin: Yes, most of these are. This is a $\frac{1}{32}$, which is next to the smallest.

Life: Are they in the same key?

Mr. Pippin: Yes. You could still tune them, but it would take a small hand to note them.

Life: But it would be the same note?

Mr. Pippin: Yes, same note.
Life: But it’s like an octave higher on the piano?

Mr. Pippin: Yes.

Life: If you get something, like that bass you have over there, would those notes be different?

Mr. Pippin: No, they’re the same notes. It’s on the octave scale.

Life: It’s just lower?

Mr. Pippin: Yes. I’ve played the bass with a couple of musicians.

Here is the five string fiddle I was going to show you. It [violin] has E, A, D, G; and a viola has E, A, D, G, C. So the difference is that the five string has a viola C string on it.

Life: So these four strings are just like those four on the violin?

Mr. Pippin: Yes. It has a wider neck due to the fact that it has an extra string. And it has an extra peg on the side.

Life: And that peg is just for that one string?

Mr. Pippin: Yes.

Life: Is it like a suction you put to the back?

Mr. Pippin: Yes, well, the vibrations take care of it. This particular pick up is designed to go on top of the case, but I prefer it to go on the bottom. Now, if you ever look at “Hee- Haw” on Saturday night, Johnny Gamble, of the Million Dollar Band, plays the five-string fiddle. I’ve never seen Roy Clark play one, but I’m sure he has one. If you look at Ricky Skaggs’
band on TV sometimes, you’ll notice, if you look fast and extra close, an extra peg on that side. The same is true of Johnny Gamble.

*Life:* Is it more difficult to play?

*Mr. Pippin:* No, not necessarily. You just have to get used to playing with it, since you have an extra string.

*Life:* Can you play as many notes on a four-string as you can on a five-string?

*Mr. Pippin:* Absolutely.

*Life:* It’s just you would be playing them all on the same string, rather than changing strings?

*Mr. Pippin:* Yes. You know how most people will have an extra string in case one breaks? Well, one
violinist was in the middle of a performance once and broke all the strings but one on his violin. But he finished his whole performance with that one string.

*Life*: Well, he was talented! It was real grace under pressure! Of course, you see these home-made basses of only one string, and they have them coming out of a tub or something.

*Mr. Pippin*: Yes. I started out with one on a tub.

*Life*: So I guess it can be done!

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**Conclusion**

While we were talking to Mr. Pippin, he showed us through his shop filled with violins and violins parts. All the violins were very interesting, and each was different from the others. This variety can be attributed to Mr. Pippin’s own originality, which shown through on all of them. He stated, “I felt I was supposed to do something in life, and after I had done all this, I realized that this was what I was supposed to do.”

From carving and cutting to sanding and refinishing, Mr. Pippin does some of it all and enjoys every minute of it. All of his work seems to have paid off though, for his determination and commitment to the violins is truly evident in his products. It is something that everyone should take the opportunity to explore and see.