

MARKETPLACE

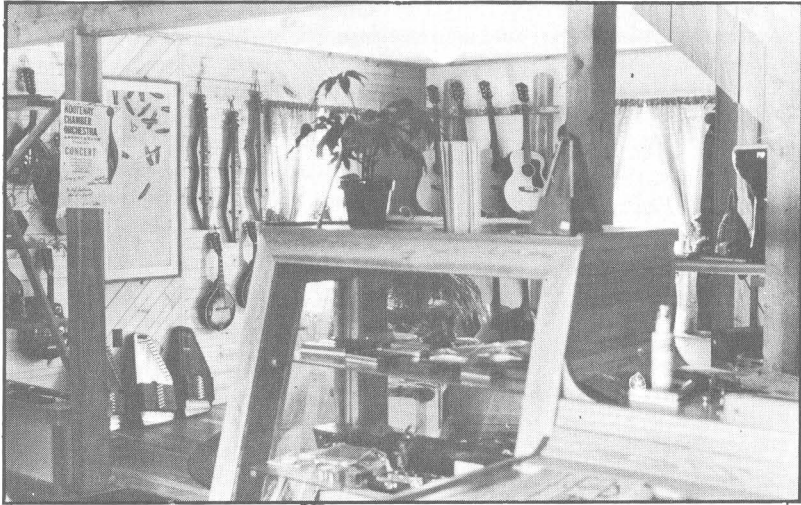


photo: courtesy of Guitar's Friend

GUITAR'S FRIEND

One of the aspects of the traditional Canadian way of life in rural areas has been the use of the mail-order system. Reprints of the catalogues from around the early 1900's reveal that the various mail order stores supplied almost all the needs of the rural Canadian. Instruments available included guitars, banjos, fiddles and autoharps. Many of these old mail order instruments were very fine indeed, made by such companies as Washburn, and S.S. Stewart.

The mail order instrument system still thrives, but does so in more specialized areas than in previous times. Any reader of *Pickin'*, *Mugwumps*, or any of the many publications devoted to bluegrass or acoustic music of one kind or another, will see many advertisements

offering "brand name" instruments at discount prices. This writer has in the past, for no good reason save an unfounded scepticism, tended to shun such organizations. However, one such organization has such low pressure and sincere advertisements that an effort was made to learn more of the background services, sales methods and personalities involved in "Guitar's Friend".

"Guitar's Friend" is based in Sandpoint, Idaho, which makes it fairly convenient for readers in at least the three western provinces to visit. The organization is primarily a mail order service but there are many added attractive features, including a beautiful show room and a shop where guitars and dulcimers are made by both local and transplanted luthiers working in conjunction with the "Friends". The operation is the

creation of Lawrence Ostrow, a very dynamic, knowledgeable and (most important of all) community minded individual. Originally Lawrence was based in Michigan, but he wanted to move to a more vibrant, energetic location where he felt he could help to shape the direction in which the community was moving. Sandpoint, a logging town, seemed to fit the description and fulfill the needs.

A visit to the store was very revealing. The instruments in stock ranged from new "brand names" to antique collectors items. At the time of writing there is for sale a beautiful 1930's Martin 000-45. Most of the well-known guitar, banjo and mandolin lines are carried, but possibly the most interesting feature of the store is the availability of very fine, hand-made instruments built by local instrument makers. This I believe sets "Guitar's Friend" apart from the run-of-the-mill mail order stores and also illustrates the direction in which the organization is going.

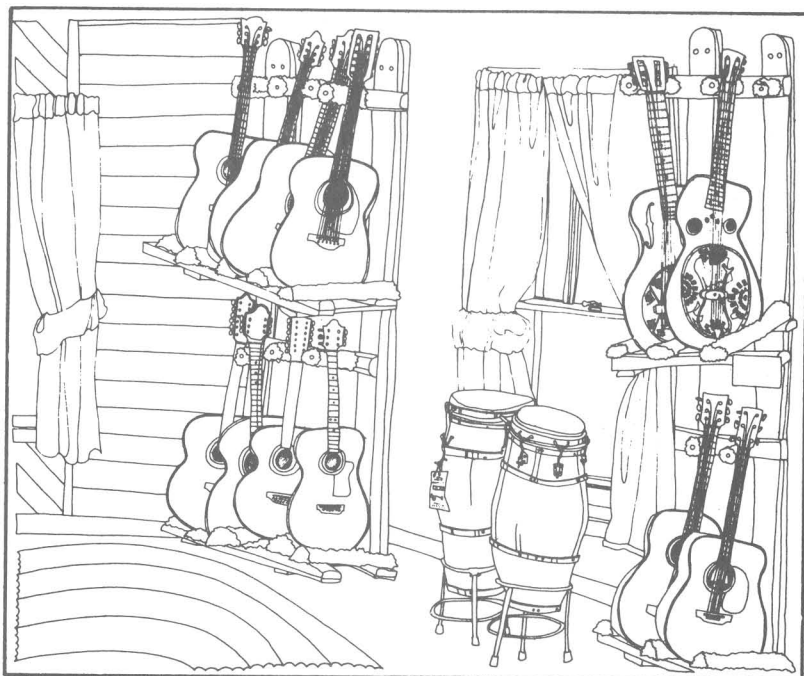
Lawrence has gathered around him a team of talented individuals with abilities which cover all aspects of the trade. Each person is a specialist in a relevant area whether it be in commercial art, business accounting, instrument making, or record engineering. There is no doubt that Lawrence is the "man at the helm" but the joint efforts of all concerned are just as evident.

To the writer the most interesting and exciting aspect of the organization is the fact that excellent guitars are being made in the adjoining shop and plans are afoot to build a guitar centre which may house different luthiers, all working in accord but within their own particular specialist areas. Three

instrument makers are already working and selling their instruments through "Guitar's Friend"—Bob Givens, well known for his bluegrass mandolins and guitars, Franklin Guitars, and a local luthier, Bob Brooks, provide a source of first class instruments. It may be that small groups of co-operating luthiers will be the answer to the great N. America v. Japan guitar war. The immediate effect of the small co-operative effort is to provide another source of very fine instruments at competitive prices.

There are over 2,000 guitar manufacturing organizations in N. America at the present time. This means that for a luthier to break into the category of, for example, Gallagher Guitars, the product has to be consistently excellent. "Guitar's Friend" with their involvement with such instruments as the Franklin guitar, are providing such a first-class source.

The Franklin guitar was created by Nick Kukich, a young luthier with many years of building and over fifteen hundred major repairs to his credit. It was through his work as a repairman of high repute that he was able to make a detailed analysis of the older guitars, especially the Martin OM models. The fact that he was chosen by Sherry-Brenner of Chicago, one of the leading importers of Spanish classical guitars of the Ramirez quality, to perform their repair and warranty work reveals the standard of his workmanship. Nick had been associated with Lawrence prior to the move to Sandpoint, and was persuaded to head west to take up the job of creating Franklin Guitars. Nick and his partner Tom



Ruthenberg are housed in a small shop in the grounds of "Guitar's Friend". At the present time the shop is set up to produce a limited number of guitars. It takes a large amount of capital to equip a shop to the point where each stage of construction may be carried on consecutively and without having to use the same hand tools for a number of operations. It is to Franklin Guitar's credit that they are producing excellent instruments in less than excellent facilities. Nick says that the acquisition of more versatile and heavier duty tools will enable the shop to produce a larger number of instruments without any sacrifice of quality.

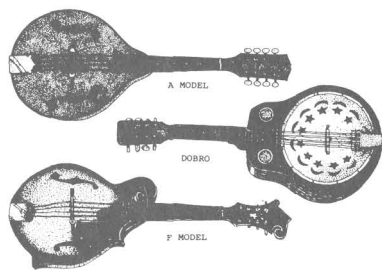
At the present time one model of guitar, the Franklin OM, is being produced. The OM signifies that the guitar is based on the famous

Orchestra Model produced by the Martin Guitar Company in the latter part of 1929. The OM was the first 14-fret neck flat top model produced commercially. In 1933 Martin made a slight alteration to the guitar by changing the effective string length, or scale, from 25.4" to 24.9": the Om was then designated 000. These models are available up to the present time. Thus the OM models are, by virtue of the fact that they were manufactured for a very short time, quite desirable, both from the point of view of scarcity and from the fact that they do seem to have a special kind of tone wanted by finger-style guitarists as opposed to bluegrass or flat-pick guitarists. Martin Guitars are again offering the OM model, but at the top of the line level, the OM-45.

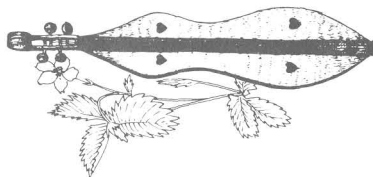
One indication of "Guitar's Friend" faith and pride in Franklin Guitars is the fact that in their showroom a Franklin OM is placed alongside a Martin OM-45. The Martin is much more ornate, of course, but when both guitars are played the prospective buyer might well think twice about paying more than double the price of the Franklin for the Martin. The tone (that elusive and immensely difficult-to-describe aspect of the guitar) of each instrument is very satisfying.

The personnel involved with Franklin Guitars will point out that they are not merely replicating the original OM, but like other first class builders, they are putting into the guitars their own small structural or sound-influencing alterations. They will also point out that they are constantly searching for minute changes of detail in their quest for as perfect a guitar as can be produced with mainly hand methods and hand tools.

The best technology is worthless without the best possible raw materials. With over two thousand guitar manufacturers on the continent, this puts a premium on choice woods. Franklin guitars are constructed with Brazilian rosewood and German spruce for the tops. The search for such wood is a constant struggle because of its relative scarcity. Each Franklin guitar is a unique instrument, different in looks from every other. The high quality sound, however, is constant. Prospective buyers are encouraged to visit the shop so that their own particular tastes may be built into the guitar, for a truly custom-built instrument.



This article would not be complete without mention of the mandolins and dulcimers built in Sandpoint and sold through "Guitar's Friend". Mandolins have experienced a great revival in recent years with the consequent search for the original "greats". High demand and small supply has meant that the prices for the best models are out of reach for all but the devoted rich! The positive aspect of the revival is that mandolins are being built again by very skilled craftsmen, of whom Bob Givens and Bob Brooks are fine examples. Both "F" style and "A" style mandolins are available through "Guitar's Friend". Traditionally the "F" style mandolin was used primarily for bluegrass, while the "A" models were used for other forms of acoustic music. This is of course a very general statement. Both the Givens and Brooks mandolins compare very favourably with the earlier Gibson mandolins, the measuring sticks of the mandolin construction movement. Bob Brooks also builds a mandolin based on the Martin mandolin. There is therefore quite a large selection of different types of mandolins available.



Jean Ritchie is probably the most well-known of mountain-dulcimer players. The fact that she has "Musical Tradition," the dulcimer company at "Guitar's Friend," making dulcimers for her own sales service indicates the quality of those instruments. They are solid wood construction and exceptionally sweet sounding.

"Guitar's Friend" has been well accepted into the business fraternity of Sandpoint. They have recently presented folk music concerts featuring well known performers with excellent response from local people. They have also involved local people in their venture and plan to further deepen their contribution to the community. They have gone beyond the realms of a strict business venture and are at the stage of shaping their environment.

In retrospect, what lingers on after a visit to "Guitar's Friend" is the enthusiasm and driving force of Lawrence, the dedication of Nick and Tom in their efforts to produce a consistently high quality instrument, and the general impression of a group of relatively young people with a very mature approach to the business of providing a service to others. All in all it was a very inspiring and eye-opening visit. The writer would have no hesitation in recommending this organization to readers of CFB. "Guitar's Friend" has a beautifully produced catalogue illustrating their lines. Interested people are invited to write to:

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83864 USA
Tel. (208) 263-7640

Mansel Davies

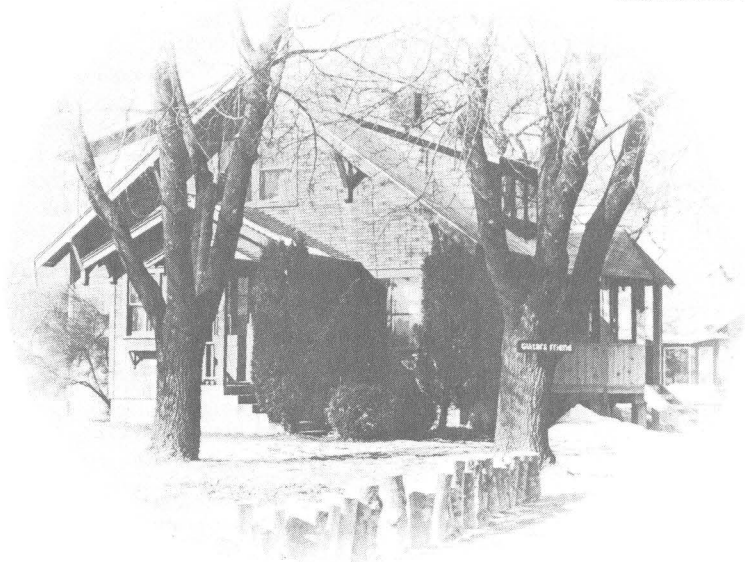


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