

# Instrument Makers in and around Floyd Virginia



Arthur Conner

There's a lot of talent around these parts, as most know. But recently we've noticed that there seems to be a surplus of great banjo and fiddle makers...and more. One even lives on Music Road in Floyd. Music Road!?!

A pile of broken violins near the door that never were played became a reminder that making fiddles is hard work.

We first became interested in knowing more about these unique creators after learning that a local craftsman, **Arthur Conner** was going to have a birthday party. He's in his 80s, and has made fiddles for decades. In order to preserve and pass along the story of Arthur, his methods and his techniques, local lady entrepreneur Amy Adams is working on a documentary...

There are all sorts of reasons why those fiddles were there. Sometimes, the wood split if Arthur shaved too much off, or the booked ends didn't match properly, and sometimes, they just didn't sound right. It seemed sad to me that some of them would just be used as kindling in the wood stove in the center of the room.



Billy Woods

*It Started at a Birthday Party*  
By Amy Adams

It all started one day in August 2006, when Jayn Avery, a local potter in town, asked me what I was doing that Saturday. I told her I was going to Arthur Conner's birthday party at the Pickin Porch. She said, "it's too bad no one is documenting that." Well, I thought that I could do that. So I got on the phone, talked to Scott Perry and then Arthur. That's how a documentary is born, or at least that's how it happened with this project.

Arthur loves classical music. Normally, he would listen to Izak Perlman playing while he worked on his own violin. It was as if the music went in one ear and out through his hands transferring the sound from one maestro to another. At first, I wanted to be invisible, videotaping Arthur at work like I wasn't there hoping that he would forget that I was there and I could capture him 'at his work - creating his genius.'



Tom Baldwin

When I first arrived at Arthur's house one morning in late August to begin videotaping him making a fiddle, I had no idea really, what I was getting into. Arthur showed me some pictures, his Indian arrowhead collection and then we sat and watched a video he took of Chris Sexton playing one of his violins.

Arthur didn't always talk a lot when he worked. Sometimes the only thing you would hear was the sound of him using his tools in a slow steady beat that seems to be keeping with a metronome. He had one in his shop but like everything else that wasn't used regularly, it had a nice thick layer of dust. Every now and then he would stop and examine his work and then tell a story. He told lots of stories. Sometimes they would be about fiddle making, and others would be about his time spent in the South Pacific in WWII.

A winner at past annual Old Fiddler's Conventions, you'll find his name amongst the top players, too. The Convention is held in nearby Galax each year, and many of our music lovers take a drive to listen or to "fiddle".

Finally, we went out to his shop - an old garage that had been converted to a wood-worker's den. When he opened the side door that fit snugly in its frame, we stepped into a room that was carpeted with wood shavings and dust.

After several hours, he'd put down his fiddle, turn to me and say, "Well, that's enough for today. Let's have lunch." And we did.

Not exactly fiddling, though, to make these beautiful instruments. No matter which craftsman you talk to, they all tell of a staggering number of hours to fashion these fabulous producers of melody. It takes an especially long time to form, carve and detail the certain "heads" on some of these instruments... which also makes them more rare and more sought after.

**The documentary unfolds... please visit <http://www.newvisionfilm.com>.**

Listed on [www.floydcountyvirginia.org](http://www.floydcountyvirginia.org) as a maker of violins is **Thomas Baldwin**. He's the one who set up shop on Music Road in Floyd. His instruments are hand crafted from Appalachian spruce and maple, four or five strings. He and his wife make the statement that "The Shop is open by chance or appointment, but we're usually there".

Just over the Parkway, in Ferrum, lives another fiddle maker, who is more than familiar with Arthur and others in the surrounding area. His name is **Billy Woods**.

