

# The Mandolin

*By Gene Lock*

I always headed for the closet, where the junk box was, in Grandpa Reinkemeyer's upstairs spare room. That's where the strange musical instrument was, more or less discarded. Whose was it? How did it get here --it looked like some Middle East lutelike thing, at least there was a picture like it in the big dictionary downstairs. Certainly, in rural Central Missouri, there was no one who could name it, much less play it. It looked sort of like a mandolin, but with a rounded water melon bottom in pale and dark brown striped wood. It smelled of camphor. It was down to one string. A finger pick, of black and turquoise bakelite, clicked and rattled inside it as in a dried gourd. The fretboard had inlaid mother of pearl, with a neck worn down by years of music. It must have had a story, but no one ever told me, until I brought it to Grandpa, one rainy afternoon, when the rain drummed on the tin roof of the porch. Grandpa said his uncle bought it on the day "old" uncle sold his homestead down on Linn Creek. The old uncle's dad had been a teamster, small t, when it meant a man who marshalled the power of oxen and mules over the Santa Fe trail, where it hooked up with Mexico. The mandolin story began in Galveston, Texas, in 1835, with my great great grandpa. Now my own grandpa unfolded it, as he and I perched on the hickory-caned porch chairs.

Many years back, Gustave Reinkemeyer, late of Boethen, Rhineland, debarked from the New Orleans packet boat, with his wife Mathilde, two children and two trunks of all worldly goods. This is according to the tidy shipping inventory of the Bremerhaven, Germany records in the New Braunfels, Texas, History Museum.

What happened next was not written tidily, but handed down the generations of these German immigrants.

Upon arrival on the mud flats of Galveston, Gustave bought a team of oxen and a wagon, intent on escaping the coastal mosquitoes, to travel the well worn trail north to the Missouri, where land was free for the axing. And asking.

English-speaking Texans were more than willing to trade gold for a team. The problem was, the oxen knew their commands in English, not German. For this, one had to retain the services of a "Schwartz", a black slave whose master readily rented him out for a week, so to guide the oxen until new owner and

animals spoke the same team lingo. The black boy was lanky Assagai, whose ancestors, too, had come by sea, but unwillingly. He jumped on the wagon's wood seat, armed with a jute tuck bag of belongings, and a melon shaped mandolin, acquired from yet another teamster slave who said he found it near a snoring Portuguese dockman.

The family walked up the hill country three days, aside the team, avoiding the jarring seats of the iron-shod wagon.

Assagai led them to understand that the occasional white men with long rifles who intersected their path were not good news. The truth was, the local slave owning settlers did not look with favor on the northern migrating Germans, who were proven to vote antislavery. The fewer Germans, the better.

The fourth evening, as they camped by a small scrub-fed fire, Assagai pointed to a mounted observer, silhouetted in the west. Pointing first to the mounted rifleman, then to the family, and finally to himself, he picked up two pieces of firewood, and pantomined the planting of a cross in the dirt. Gustave and Mathilde understood, though the children did not. The fire was left burning, but the family and its animal entourage moved up the steep draw, under short linden trees. Gustave uncoiled a hemp rope he had bought from the steam packet's pilot, and he motioned to Assagai to tie his end around one tree, about seven feet high, just upslope from the fire. Gustave did the same, 30 feet across the ascending draw. Assagai then fed the campfire, putting a flat stone upright behind it, to blank the glow from illuminating uphill. In the stone's shadow, they waited. In two hours, two armed horsemen galloped up the draw, toward the fire and their Prussian prey. Their last earthly view was of fire, shuddering tree branches and streaking stars, as the unseen rope pulled taut across chests, then snapped chins, necks, and boots skyward.

Assagai and Gustave first pulled the limp bodies under the wagon cover, as Mathilde comforted the heaving horses. The fire was extinguished, the rope recoiled, and the trail rejoined north until two hours before day break. Stopping at a ford on a rain-swollen stream, Gustave collected seven gold coins from the dead riders' vests, then sent the bodies floating south. The two horses went free, as if wandered from a camp.

The coins he gave to Assagai.

Gustave was unaware that it was almost enough to buy freedom for the boy and his mother back in Galveston. "Aufwiedersehn" said Gustave, motioning

toward the way south to the boy. Gustave and Assagai both knew that a slave boy, heading south after his driving task, would attract little attention. Both hoped the family would be as lucky. Assagai, gold coins tightly wound in a homespun kerchief, gave Gustave the mandolin, with a tearful bow. "Danke" and "Thank you" ran together, as both turned, one north to Missouri, one south to freedom.

Galveston tax records show that one Agnes, Negro slave about age 32, and son Assagai age 14, were bought to freedom by William Blake, freedman blacksmith, of Galveston, in 1836. No further information can be found.

In 1995, in the hill country near Comfort, Texas, a monument was entered into the US National Registry. It honors 21 German settlers who were ambushed in the early 1800s. They were on their way to a meeting to register their disapproval of Texas' petition to become a slaveholding territory.

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## **Sydney's Best Day**

Her wide eyes scanned the canyon walls. Sydney, after all, is a Blue Merle Australian Shepherd, and this is Desert Mountain Sheep country. She is tall in the passenger seat as we crawl off Highway 395 and up into the Eastern Sierra's Lunday Canyon. Lunday is north of Mono Lake, but shoved hard against the peaks. It is lots of places: Miners camp, once; a drop off spot for trailheads to lead the sore-footed up through Yosemite's backdoor; salad bar for beaver and bear; and one building--the Lunday store. Rough pitchpine boards, charred by desert sun, rusty roof. The open porch floor is big handhewn planks, pulled from one of many landslides now covering gold rush mines up the canyon walls. Sydney takes cautious steps around floor cracks as we check out the leafy vines that shade the one rocking chair. It holds a woman in her late 40s maybe, hair a dusty tan-gray, eyes green. Birkenstocks, shirt and cargo shorts, normal high desert business attire. A lightly sun-seamed round face smiles. "They're hops vines", she says. "Miners here made homebrew from mule and horse feed, and grew hops to give their beer a bite. 'Miners probably froze, but the hops are still with us." She and her husband, an LA cop, own the store, and she runs it summers, with his help when shift work allows. Beer, Slim Jims, fly fishing stuff, maps, canteens. An old cooler groans in the corner, and I

take a beer, pay the woman, as Sydney sniffs the one room store over. She and I spend summer days on this side of the Sierras, walking creeks, peering down cliffs, mostly just enjoying the silence that sticks to high desert gorges and meadows. But a store! Here are scents of old fish bait, dropped food, spilled beer, a feast of blooming flora. Sydney's nose goes to Shop Vac mode. I chat more with the woman, and view browning photos of Lundey winters, of fish, of bearded, tired men with hopeful eyes.

Sydney is gone only a minute or two. She comes through a door from another room, living quarters, maybe --some old tables and chairs, salt shakers, I think. She's shifted into her sneak-up-on sheep gear, head and tail low, eyes on mine. Her gold-furred face clamps a cold pork chop. It is going with us, her eyes say to mine. The woman doesn't notice, and I think it not a good time to tell the cop's wife that shoplifting is in progress. Sydney goes first, waits at the getaway van's passenger door, then vaults onto her seat, grinning around the pork chop. I drive away slowly, like it says in the thieves' manual. About a mile down the rocky road, we park under creekside cottonwoods, and Sydney eats the best pork chop ever stolen. Even the next day, her pink tongue reaches far out onto her cheeks, to savor the moment. She catches my eyes and we laugh the way good friends do. I hope Aussies are still welcome back in Lundey Canyon.

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