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## Grandfather's labor of love yields 10 violins

BY LORI ZABEL  
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Ten grandchildren. Ten violins – made by hand. Over ten years from conception to completion. It sounds like a story waiting to be told. And Gene Van Alstine, keeper of stories, starts at the beginning.

The Cambridge man, known to many as the fiddle player in the popular local band The Mystery Mountain Boys, appears to relish his role as family historian.

In his “man cave” filled with old photos, antique tools, artwork and gewgaws, he points to a black and white photo of an old man with a violin at his shoulder. It’s his mom’s father, Charlie Johnson, just before he died in 1953.

“I used to sit on his lap,” Van Alstine, 72, recalled, “and I’d put my hand on his bow hand and put my other hand (under here) so I could feel the fiddle play – and he’d play “Turkey in the Straw,” and then tell me what a great job I did. I

believed that.” Grandpa Charlie was one of 10 brothers and sisters who played violins, mandolins and guitars at a meeting hall the family built in Opstead, Minnesota, north of Isle by Lake Mille Lacs.

Some of Van Alstine’s best memories are of watching Grandpa saw on that fiddle while square dancers twirled.

“They’d have a jam session every night,” Van Alstine said. “I’m not sure if the cows got milked, but I guarantee those fiddles got played.”

### GRANDPA CHARLIE TRIED

Grandpa Charlie wanted to teach his grandson how to play and bought a secondhand fiddle at a garage sale when Van Alstine was around six years old.

“I wasn’t to touch it if grandpa wasn’t home,” Van Alstine said. “About that same time he had cancer, and he went to the doctor one day, and while he was gone I took the fiddle out.”

He tried his hand at “Turkey in the Straw,” only to be overcome with frustration.



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Gene Van Alstine examines his Grandpa Charlie’s violin from the 1800s, the catalyst for his interest in music and his desire to hand-make 10 violins for his grandchildren.

“I’ve always been kind of a hotheaded screwball,” Van Alstine said, “and I played it and it sounded terrible. ... I got so mad that I jammed the bow into the E string and cut off just about half the

hairs on the bow, broke the bridge. Then I didn’t know what to do. I got my jackknife out and cut off those hairs so they were only about an inch long.” Knowing he was in trouble, he stuck the vio-

lin back in the case and back on the shelf in his mom’s bedroom closet. “As it turned out, grandpa never did come home from there,” Van Alstine said. “They put him in the hospital that

day. A few weeks later he passed away. I never said anything to mom.” Life went on without Grandpa Charlie and the violin.

SEE VIOLINS, PAGE 9

## Lorinser resigns from Isanti city council

BY BILL STICKELS III  
EDITOR@COUNTYSTAR.COM

Isanti council member Ross Lorinser has tendered his resignation from the council, effective immediately.

Lorinser said he gave no specific reason for this decision in the letter, which was dated Friday, April 19.

“My letter was very vague and gave no reason (for the resignation),” Lorinser said. “I am not ready to make a statement, (but) I will release something when I am ready.”

His resignation comes in the wake of several contentious months between him and new

mayor Jeff Johnson. The two frequently butted heads over agenda topics and city policy, including most recently the disciplinary action against now former police chief Gene Hill.

This is the second time Lorinser has resigned from the council. The previous time was in 2012 after he moved outside city limits. He was reappointed to the council in June 2016 to fill the final months of Adam Johnson’s term, who was removed from his seat after several months of



Ross Lorinser

unexcused absences. Lorinser was then elected to that seat in November 2016.

Since Lorinser has less than two years remaining on his term, which ends at the end of 2020, the remaining council has two options for filling the vacated seat. Isanti city code mirrors state statute that says if a vacated seat has less than two years remaining in its term, the council may simply appoint an applicant to serve until the November 2020 elections.

However, the council may also choose to call for a special election. The earliest a special election could be held would

be in November 2019. If the council went with a special election, they would still need to appoint someone to serve on the council until that special election was held.

Based on city code, “...the city council must publicly declare such vacancy and specify the date of occurrence of the vacancy within 15 days of its occurrence.” The code does not specify if those 15 days are business days or total days. If it is 15 total days, the council will have to hold a special meeting no later than May 4. If it is to be held within 15 business days, the council could wait until their next regular coun-

cil meeting on May 7.

For the process of appointing someone to fill the seat, whether its until a special election is held or for the duration of the term, city code states the council must accept applications for no more than 21 days from when the vacancy was declared, plus they cannot conduct interviews until at least 28 days have passed since the seat was declared vacant. The council will interview the candidates “in accordance with the state of Minnesota open meeting laws.”

Under that timeline, the earliest an appointment would be made is the beginning of June.

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# VIOLINS: More than 500 hours of labor invested in each hand-carved instrument

FROM PAGE I

## A SECOND CHANCE

Van Alstine grew up and opened his own business – VanPro Machine Shop – got married and raised a family of four children.

“I had this machine shop going,” he said, “and I worked day and night – long, long hours. There was no time for music. The machine shop just gobbled up my life.”

Then one day his mother, then in her 80s, called and asked him to come get his garage sale violin and his grandpa’s too.

“I wondered if my fiddle looked the same way it was the last time I played it,” Van Alstine said. “I pulled it out and the bow string was all cut up and the bridge was broken. My mom said, ‘Well, you little dickens! I ought to give you a lickin’.’ I said, ‘Mom, I’m 56 years old.’”

The violins had sat untouched on the closet shelf for 50 years.

Van Alstine was thrilled to reconnect with his beloved grandpa’s fiddle. He had both instruments repaired, intending to learn to play either one.

## A FAST LEARNER

With a little practice under his belt, Van Alstine remembers taking a trip with his mother to Opstead and seeing the old dance hall, now used as a township hall. He had an overwhelming desire to stand where his grandpa used to stand and play “Turkey in the Straw.”

He contacted a woman who had a key and said he wanted to spend an hour or two inside just to reminisce and play some tunes.

Her response: “Boy, Bill and I would like to come.” Other relatives got wind of the plan and said they wanted to be there too.

Trouble was, Van Alstine knew he could barely scratch out the song.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said, “we’ll do this a year from now, I told them.” He reserved the town hall for one year hence.

With his self-imposed deadline, Van Alstine said he poured his heart into learning to play by watching a teaching series on DVD, hanging around guys who played fiddles and going to jam sessions.

The following year a group of family and friends enjoyed a pig roast at the hall.

“I stood up there,” Van Alstine said, “and played ‘Turkey in the Straw’ right where grandpa used to stand.”

He said the few musicians



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The 10 grandchildren of Gene and Shari Van Alstine, ranging in age from 21 years to 8 months, receive their violins on Easter Sunday, April 21. Gene can be seen in the middle of the back row.

## Did you know?

A violin and fiddle are identical instruments – the name depends on the style of music and how the instrument is played (bluegrass vs. classical).

that came along to help out had so much fun, they wanted to stick together. They started playing gigs – and became the Mystery Mountain Boys.

“Last year we did 47 gigs,” Van Alstine said. “That’s how it all started.”

## KEEP THE MUSIC ALIVE

Over the years, Van Alstine felt compelled to keep the family’s musical history alive. He bought most of the fiddles played by his great-uncles and keeps them in a glass display case in his home, and treats his grandpa’s fiddle with loving care.

“Of all the things in the world that I have,” he said, “this is my most prized possession. If my house was on fire and there was \$50,000 on the table and this (fiddle) was over here and I had to pick one, I’d pick this.”

One day Van Alstine realized a dilemma lay at the intersection of his love for history, family and grandpa’s fiddle.

“I have 10 grandkids and only one fiddle,” he said. “How am I going to deal with that? I’ve always wanted to make a fiddle anyway. I thought, ‘I’ll just make them fiddles.’”

He began that journey by



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The youngest violin recipient, Elias Van Alstine, already shows an interest in his violin gift with (from left) grandpa Gene, mom Juliana and dad Aaron Van Alstine.

spending four or five years reading every book he could find about Stradivarius and other famous violin makers, researching everything from wood to varnish to strings.

With the mentality and experience of a machinist, he began building violins in 2012 – not one at a time, but like a Henry Ford assembly line – all the fronts, then all the backs, step by step through all the pieces of 10 instruments.

## HOW TO MAKE A VIOLIN

Van Alstine began by cre-

ating a prototype violin out of \$8.50 worth of spruce and maple wood from Menard’s.

“Every time I would move to the next operation,” he said, “I would start with this one. So I’ve had this together and apart half a dozen times, learning in the process.”

The backs of the violins are made of quarter-sawn flame maple ordered from California. The fronts are sitka spruce from Alaska, a wood known for being an excellent conductor of sound.

The cost of wood for just the

front and back of each instrument was \$150.

Van Alstine received the wood in unwieldy chunks. The graceful curves of the fronts and backs were not made by pressing the wood, but by hand-carving it.

He created intricate “purfling” around the outside edge of the front and back of each instrument – two decorative grooves cut into the wood with ebony strips inlaid. The process took days per violin.

He hand-carved the scroll on the neck of each violin, but got assistance from a friend, Doug Anderson, to create and piece together the “ribs” or sides of the instruments. Another family friend, Grant Crocker, helped mix and apply the colored dye to the fiddles.

“I’m color blind,” Van Alstine said, “so I can’t see that there are different colors (in the finishes).”

Crocker created 10 different dyes so each violin had its own unique finish – from honey-colored to deep brown – lighter to darker in order of the grandkids’ ages.

To top it all off, the varnish Van Alstine ordered is top of the line at \$98 a quart. Each violin got eight coats.

“I’ve read that an average violin would take about 500 hours to hand-carve like this,” Van Alstine said, agreeing that was a good estimate of his time. “I think that saying I worked on them 1,000 hours a year is probably true.”

## THE FINISH LINE

Van Alstine was given a nudge to speed up the process three years ago – he developed bladder cancer. He was treated then, but found it had come back last August.

“I thought, ‘I got to get these things done,’” he said, “so I just poured my heart into them and finished them.”

He’s since been given a clean bill of health, and he and wife Shari had their whole brood together on Easter Sunday, April 21, to finally give the gifts more than 10 years in the making.

The oldest grandchild is 21 years old and the youngest is eight months. Some have musical training and some do not, but all appeared thrilled to receive their gifts from grandpa – the keeper of stories and music who had now become the giver.

“I’m proud that they’re going to have the fiddles,” Van Alstine said. “I hope that they cherish them like I’ve cherished my grandpa’s, and they pass them down generation to generation.”

## Grad Band concert set

CONTRIBUTED

EAST CENTRAL GRAD BAND

The East Central Grad Band presents its 30th anniversary concert titled, “Celebrating our Heroes,” on Sunday, May 5, at 2 p.m. at Cambridge-Isanti High School’s Hardy Performing Arts Center, 430 8th Avenue NW, Cambridge.

The concert will celebrate heroes, both real and fictional. Get into the groove with Star Trek’s “Enterprising Young Men,” music from “The Aveng-

ers,” and selections from Duke Ellington. Be torn apart by the strains of “Dartmoor, 1912” from “War Horse.”

Also featured will be guest performances by ensembles from both the Cambridge-Isanti and Braham High Schools.

The performance is free, but donations will be cheerfully accepted.

For more information contact Lynn Wedlund, East Central Band Director, at 763-689-4121.

## Re-enactor to speak on Vietnam War

CONTRIBUTED

EAST CENTRAL REGIONAL LIBRARY

Well-known historical re-enactor and instructor Arn Kind will offer a free presentation called “Minnesota in the Vietnam War” on Thursday, May 7, from 6-8 p.m. at Cambridge Public Library, 244 S. Birch Street.

Kind will appear in an authentic American soldier’s uniform to deliver his multimedia presentation on what the war was about and why the U.S. got involved.

Recommended for all ages and no registration is required. For more information call 763-689-7390.

This program is funded with money from Minnesota’s Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.



Historical re-enactor Arn Kind