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Restoration of 1958 Jethro Amburgey Mountain Dulcimer



Completed by Ron Cook

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For Nancy Mead

Background

This mountain dulcimer, by Jethro Amburgey, number 371, dated January 30, 1958, came to me in decent condition, but with a large side crack and a partially separated fingerboard. Through my researches into Amburgey's history (he made over 1000) and his dulcimer building technique, I discovered that cracks in the sides are relatively common on his instruments, since the wood is as thin as 1/16 of an inch.

Jethro Amburgey assembled his dulcimers with hide glue. Because hide glue can be "reversed", made tacky again with a little moisture, repairs are not too difficult. Because of the historical nature of this dulcimer, I, too, used hide glue in my repairs. After the following historical information, my repair log details my restoration process.

Jethro Amburgey

Jethro Amburgey (1895-1971) was an important part of the Knott County, Kentucky, music and educational heritage. He was a nationally known craftsman who also taught and coached at Hindman Settlement School, and served as Knott County school superintendent from 1940 to 1944.

As a child, Jethro attended a one-room school for the first six years of his schooling and then went to the Hindman Settlement School through high school. However, before he graduated he enlisted in the Army and served in a machine gun squad in France during 1918. He was wounded in the Battle of Argonne Forest. After returning home, he returned to Hindman to finish high school.

He worked in the school woodshop to help pay his tuition. This is where he met J. Edward Thomas, a very well known dulcimer maker who built and sold over 1000 dulcimers from around 1870 to the 1930s. "Uncle Ed" often stopped in to get supplies for his own dulcimers. Amburgey showed interest and asked Uncle Ed if he could learn to make the instrument as well.



Seeing potential competition Mr. Thomas reluctantly agreed and sold Amburgey the plans for his dulcimers at a price far greater than what they were worth.

Amburgey made instruments until a few months prior to his death in November 1971. He was one of the two most reputable and prolific dulcimer makers from Kentucky.

In the 1930s, Jethro continued his education during one or two summers at Berea and Eastern State Teachers College. In 1934-35 he attended Morehead State University and graduated. He attended Morehead because of their celebrated woodworking program. He then taught at Carr Creek and Breathitt High Schools.

Jethro Amburgey was known for his sharp wit. The unique man, described by many as a true character, is considered to be one of the most intelligent men to live in Knott County.

J. Edward Thomas

J. Edward Thomas, otherwise known as “Uncle Ed,” was born in Letcher County, Kentucky, in 1850. At the age of 21, he began making dulcimers and sold them in Letcher and Knott counties from the back of a small cart as well as in the Hindman general store. His dulcimers sold for a few dollars each or were traded for food and supplies. Mr. Thomas made more than 1,500 instruments throughout his career until two years before his death in 1933. Many dulcimer makers credit Mr. Thomas as the premier dulcimer maker to this day.



J. Edward Thomas

Valuation

It is nearly impossible to put a value on an instrument such as this one. Jethro Amburgey's dulcimers have sold on ebay for under \$100 and up in the \$600-\$800 range. This particular dulcimer has never been changed in any way over the years, and is essentially as Amburgey built it in 1958.

Jethro Amburgey is one of the two most famous and prolific dulcimer builders around that area of Kentucky (J. Edward Thomas being the other). Jethro's dulcimers are in museums and collections around the country, including the Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix. That fact, along with his simple folk-art design, makes this, to me, a historically valuable instrument, especially since it is still owned by the family that purchased it from him, and the provenance is unquestionable.

It has been my honor to restore such a wonderful historical instrument.

For some, the monetary value is unimportant. What is important is that a piece of American history is now restored and can make beautiful music once again.

Day 1: Assessment



On the first day, I always look over an instrument to see how much work is needed to repair or restore it. To me, any Jethro Amburgey dulcimer is historically significant, and this one, number 371, dated January 30, 1958, is especially important in that it is completely original, and it is kept in the original wooden shipping case, also made by Jethro.

The side crack was such that the pieces on each side of the crack were at different levels, and it seemed to have traveled nearly halfway along the entire side.

The fingerboard, near the peg head, was separated a little from the top. This might be due to the side crack, or it might be the way it's been since it was made.

A side note: there is a lot of old hide glue squeeze-out on the sides. I planned to clean this up a little while during the restoration process.

Day 2: Beginning to Dismantle



On the second day, I began to dismantle the instrument. With hide glue, a little warm water applied to a small section at a time, and a fine bladed knife, I was able to slowly work the back off. I also had to remove the small nails that Jethro added at the head and tailpiece to tack the back in place. This day, after nearly three hours of careful work, I was able to remove the back and check out the crack.

The first thing I noticed was how thin the sides are. The side with the crack was as thin as $1/16''$. The other side was a little thicker in places and ran from around $1/16''$ to $3/32''$. The second thing was that the first 8 inches of the crack were original from when Jethro made this dulcimer. There is a long bead of hide glue that he added to stabilize the crack. However, over time, the crack had spread.

Another thing I noticed was two of the braces, one on the back and one on the top, were loose. There was a lot of hide glue to remove, which will come off by rubbing it with a damp sponge.

Day 3: Beginning to Stabilize the Crack



On the next work day I spent several hours cleaning hide glue from around the crack and then getting the areas above and below the crack as even as possible and gluing the crack closed.

I used spring clamps and luthiers' spindle clamps, as well as binding tape, to hold it together.

This, and one other internal repair, are the only places I didn't use hide glue. I needed a permanent bond to help stabilize these repairs.

Day 4: Additional Crack Stabilization



Today I added a thin, 1/16 inch piece of walnut along the inside of the crack. This stabilizes the crack so it could never come apart again.

Today I also fixed the two loose bracing pieces.

Day 5: Adding Kerf Lining

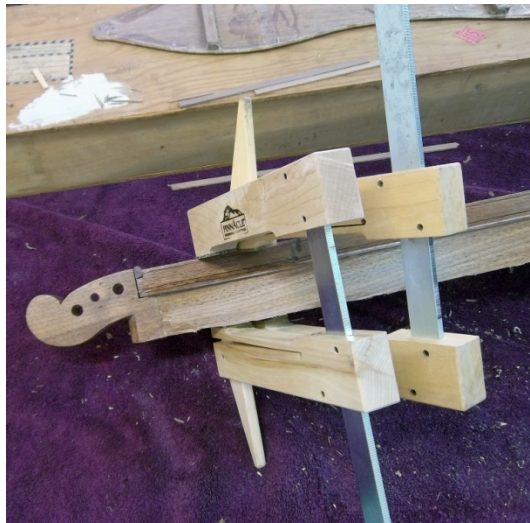


Jethro Amburgey was noted for his dulcimer's thin sides and that he did not use kerf strips for added gluing area. He did use several braces on the top and back to glue to, which helped strengthen his instruments.

On the very thin side where the crack was, I did add a thin kerf strip for a little added gluing surface for the back.

There are also two posts, one in the upper bout and one in the lower, that attach from the underside of the fingerboard to the back. One post had come loose, so I put a dab of hide glue on it and clamped it back in place.

Day 6: Removing Old Hide Glue & Fixing Fingerboard



This day I spent some time removing the old hide glue from the sides, braces, and the head and tailpieces, and prepared the area to glue on the back. I used a damp sponge to soften the glue then used a scraper to remove it.

Later I injected some hide glue in the small gap between the fingerboard and soundboard and clamped it down.

Day 7: Gluing on the Back



On Day 7 it was time to glue the back on. I put a thin bead of hide glue on all the surfaces then firmly secured the back to the body with cam and spindle clamps.

Day 8: Nails



Day 8 actually came a few days after gluing the back on. Because hide glue has a longer set time (time for it to hold securely), I left the clamps on for a day. With other projects and events happening the same time, I only had time a couple of days later to re-insert the original nails that Jethro Amburgey used to secure the back to the head and tail pieces. Since the holes were already there, they went in tight, but fairly easy.

Day 9: Touch Up



Jethro Amburgey's dulcimers are mostly made from cherry wood. The type of cherry used, or the section of wood cuts used, show a lot more grain than cherry wood sold at lumber yards nowadays. At first glance, with the grain pattern, they can be mistaken as black walnut.

Areas on the back and body where I removed excess hide glue and sanded needed some touching up. I used a cherry stain pen to touch up those areas, then wiped some more stain over the instrument to even it out. I was very pleased with the result.

Day 10a: Polishing, Stringing, Tuning



On the last day I began by applying a fine paste wax with 0000 steel wool to help protect the surface. Because these instruments have a matte finish, using 0000 steel wool does not create a highly polished surface once it's wiped off.

Then it was time to string it up.

Day 10b: Completion



As mentioned earlier, Jethro Amburgey purchased dulcimer plans from J. Edward Thomas. Jethro's instruments are very similar in shape and style, the only difference, perhaps, is a slightly wider waist than the one I saw of the Thomas dulcimer in the Smithsonian.

For such a small-bodied dulcimer, this instrument has a very sweet, pleasing tone. This is a classic piece of American history with roots that extend back to the Kentucky hills and hollers of the 1800s.

Day 11: A Little Bit More



When this dulcimer arrived at my studio, it came in the original shipping case. Inside, the padding was old newspapers from Louisville, Kentucky, dating from the year this dulcimer was made.

Originally, the lid was screwed on for shipping, but was now loose and could possibly slip in a scratch the dulcimer, which it had at some point. (I fixed and touched up these areas.) I added some small brass hinges and a hasp so the box can be kept as a good, safe storage place for this dulcimer.

This is a beautiful piece of American musical history, and I feel it should be out on display where it can be played and enjoyed.
