

CHARLES J. HORNER

FOLKLIFE HERITAGE AWARD



Charles “Jean” Horner, now 75, still lives on the remote Cumberland County farm where he grew up. Boyhood interests in traditional string music and woodworking led him to pursue instrument-making. That was not an art for which he found much local knowledge or guidance, but through resourceful determination he was able to make it his fulltime occupation by the late 1960s. Since that time, Horner has so thoroughly mastered his craft in building violins and mandolins that the description “Stradivarius of the Cumberlands,” coined for him by craft historian Helen Bullard, seems very appropriate.

In his self-education, Horner examined instruments, sought out country craftsmen and written material, and learned through experience. As he raised and met his own critical standards, he continually gained prominence in a growing regional musical community. Seeking native figured maple for instrument backs and sides, Horner developed extensive contacts with sawyers in his area, and he earned a reputation as a source for high-quality wood for other makers, whom he often mentored. Jean is a fiddler and student of traditional tunes himself, and for decades, his shop has been a gathering place for regional musicians. His instruments and congenial company attract visits from players of all skill levels. Horner fiddles and mandolins have long been sought out and played by celebrities and top-tier professionals in bluegrass and country music, and his instruments have also gained increasing appreciation among symphony players.

Horner and his work have been widely celebrated by the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, the national Future Homemakers of America Museum, the Museum of Appalachia Hall of Fame, the Tennessee State Museum, the annual Dollywood Harvest Festival, in the Hunter Museum of Art’s 1994 “Dixie Frets” exhibit, and in the Southern Arts Federation’s 2008 “Tradition/Innovation: Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art” touring exhibit.

Horner jokes that he’s just managed a “cornbread living” from his fiddle-making. But after 50 years and hundreds of instruments, Jean Horner approaches every instrument as a new challenge, and he takes pride in knowing that his work continues to improve with each one.