

"Kentucky style" dulcimer pattern

"Uncle" Ed Thomas

Many dulcimer makers credit Mr. Thomas as the premier dulcimer maker of Kentucky to this day...

Thomas' legacy is large and important. The "Kentucky style" dulcimer pattern, with an hour glass-shaped body and heart-shaped soundholes, became the best-known form of the instrument during the post-World War II folk revival. Nowadays, everywhere in the world, when most people think of dulcimers, they think of the beautiful pattern that Thomas developed long ago in Knott and Letcher Counties.

It is reported that Thomas began to make dulcimers in 1871. Fortunately for us, he numbered and dated his instruments. The numbers show that Thomas made many dulcimers over a long period of time. He was one of the first, or the first person ever to do so. The oldest Thomas dulcimer thus far recovered is Number 469, dated January 10, 1891; the latest is number 1380, dated January 26, 1927.

No-one knows how or from whom the young farmer Ed Thomas learned to make dulcimers, or how he developed his distinctive design. Thomas' answer to the question, "How did you learn to make dulcimers?" would have shown a flood of light into this corner of Appalachian history, but there is no record that anyone ever asked him.

In addition to being an excellent craftsman, Thomas was a fine player. According to a neighbor, Thomas would often sit on the porch of his log cabin, playing to his heart's content.

Homer Ledford

Homer Ledford (1926-2006) of **Kentucky**, considered to be a legend and master craftsman of the instrument. Homer has maintained the Appalachian dulcimer design in the Cumberland Highlands lineage of "Uncle" Ed Thomas and Jethro Amburgy. He learned his trade through oral tradition, John Campbell Folk School and at Berea College. Homer returned to Berea for a summer job demonstration carving, 1955

One of Homer's inventions has since become the standard on almost all dulcimers, adding the fourth string to the top melody string. His shop, a will-worm, black handled pocketknife.

Homer Ledford Dulcimer top & back overhang the sides, as on a fiddle & end block. Changes include unreason the width of the dulcimer body, broadening the fingerboard, even with these modifications, Homer's design remained perhaps most resembles J. E. Thomas. His favored wood was black walnut, custom work, mother-of-pearl inlay. He notch end block for balled end of strings, like Barringer and Warren May (who both have the top and back overhang the sides as a fiddle) and both have black walnut.

Homer Ledford & Warren May

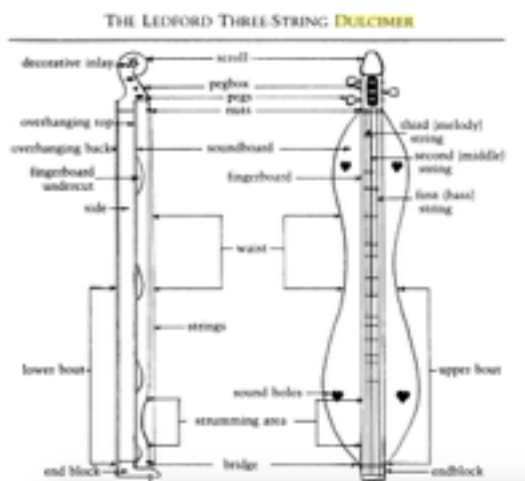
Homer Ledford & Warren May were best of friends & Homer was Warren's mentor. When Homer died, his wife called Warren up for him to come get all of Homer's wood & tools to continue making the traditional Ky style dulcimer, as Gayle (from Warren's shop) told me.

524. Appalachian dulcimer, curly cherry with rosewood tuners

ROBERT MIZE

Blountville, Sullivan County, Tenn., 1992

A native of Rabun County, Georgia, Mize learned wood-working from his cousin, McAllen Myers. However, he borrowed his dulcimer design from Kentuckian Homer Ledford, one of the first revivalist makers, who took his pattern from an instrument by J. E. Thomas. The Delrin plastic bridge and nut on this example are the modern equivalent of the bone used on early dulcimers.



Warren May

Warren May, grew up in a pre-Civil War cabin in Carroll County, Kentucky, May says, "I always had a pocketknife and was whittling. Warren has been making the original Kentucky dulcimers for over 40 years, with significant improvements while maintaining the traditional dulcimer. Warren May shop is in Bera Ky. Homer Ledford and Warren May time making dulcimers overlap for many years.

Robert Mize

Robert Mize of Blountville TN became interested in building mountain dulcimers after his son came home from a craft show with a dulcimer kit. The kit-maker, Homer Ledford, gave Bob a pattern and encouraged him to build more instruments. Homer Ledford's pattern comes from Jethro Amburgey (1895-1971) which came from Uncle Ed Thomas (1850-1933).

Bob began his production of dulcimers in 1967, for 36 years he made over 3,800 instruments. The combination of a hardwood on back and sides, with softer wood for top, gives a good mellow sound. I make a combination of wormy chestnut (I use a lot of wormy chestnut with walnut. The color, grain, and worm holes make a nice looking top, and also a good tone.), butternut, gum, California redwood or sassafras for the top, and all other parts from black walnut.

Bob Mize died in June 2003 at the age of 82. His obituary states Bob was "a world-class dulcimer maker"

Larry Barringer was a mentor to Terry McCafferty

Terry:

Larry's work was derived from his relationship with the late Bob Mize, one of the most highly regarded dulcimer makers.. Terry's hourglass and pick'n stick designs were derived from Larry's work and continue to evolve.

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First off, I do not take credit for this basic design. It was first shared with me by the late Larry Barringer. I don't know if Larry came up with it but I suspect he did for the following reason. Larry had a relationship with the late builder Robert Mize and **Larry's design is a "derivative" of the Mize design.** However, Mize used the traditional box style scroll peghead and Larry's is a cross between a scroll and a flat peghead.

Mize, Larry's, and Bob's dulcimer design came from the Kentucky style developed in the 1800's by JE "uncle ED" Thomas. Those dulcimers and a very large portion of early traditional dulcimers had the scroll head and wooden pegs much like a fiddle.



Four Generations

Margaret Wright sent me this photo long ago. My dulcimer design is about six generations removed from JE "uncle Ed" Thomas. These are the latest four generations. From left to right, the dulcimers were made by Homer Ledford, Bob Mize, Larry Barringer, Terry McCafferty