

## **MARTIN (MARTINUS) BERGAN by Midge Kjome**

During the recent spring house cleaning at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, a violin was found in the back of a cupboard. A few of us old-timers remembered that back in the early days of Good Shepherd a gift of several musical instruments, violins and violas, was given by one of our members, Martin Bergan, with the intention that any young person who had an interest in learning to play a stringed instrument might be offered one to learn on. Unfortunately, some of the instruments were not very good to play on. And it is still a mystery what became of them. Perhaps there is someone who remembers something more about these instruments or someone who has one, or had the opportunity to learn on one of Bergan's violins.

Bergan was a quiet unassuming fellow who kept to himself. But he had a hobby that was unusual: he made violins and violas. During his lifetime he made over 100 violins.

It all started with a gift from a Luther College friend back in the 1930s. At the time Bergan was the night custodian at Luther College. The gift to Bergan was the top and bottom of a violin his friend had intended to make into a musical instrument. Bergan told Dave Norris of the *Decorah Journal*, back in 1961, that he didn't exactly know what he would do with the pieces, but thought he would keep them. He said he had always been interested in violins. Bergan worked with the pieces and made his first violin in 1936. He estimated it took him 10 days or 100 hours to make a single violin. The work included applying and rubbing down 11 coats of varnish. The last coat he rubbed in with his bare hands. The most difficult piece to make was the curly-cued end of the violin. He used 15 different tools to shape it properly. He said he used spruce wood for the top sounding board and maple for the rest of the pieces. He used redwood in place of the spruce if the grain was just right. To make all of the 52 wood pieces separately he needed about two dozen different tools, many of which he made himself.

Bergan, who had retired from the Luther maintenance department in 1944, began seriously building violins when he built a pair, a violin and a viola, for each of his sons. At the time, two of the sons, Kenneth and Allard, were in the military, while Haldor was music director in the Fort Dodge high school. Music had always been important in the Bergan family home and all the boys had learned to play a musical instrument.

Bergan did not let anything go to waste. He recycled old furniture, pianos and organs, into new furniture. The violins were made out of the wood from the sounding boards and other parts of old pianos. He carved canes, and even invented burglar-proof screen window latches and wind-proof self-locking garage doors. Another gift to Good Shepherd was a music stand that he made out of recycled wood.

Bergan was also a musician. He started playing the violin when he was 15 years old and played in many orchestras in the area. He was a member the Luren Singing Society for many years as well. According to his granddaughter, Ruth Anderson, he had over 200 violins in his collection.

Bergan was born March 17, 1876, in Locust, north of Decorah, to Hans and Tone Bergan. The family moved to Harmony, MN where he grew up on a farm. In 1907 he married Louise Nelson and they raised three sons, Haldor, Allerd, and Kenneth. When they moved to Decorah, Bergan and his family lived on Ohio Street, in the "stovewood" house. Later he built the house at 606 Iowa Avenue where he lived out his life. He passed away January 23, 1968. Funeral services were held at Good Shepherd and at Greenfield Lutheran. The Luren Singing Society sang at both services. He was buried at Greenfield Lutheran Cemetery in Harmony, MN.

