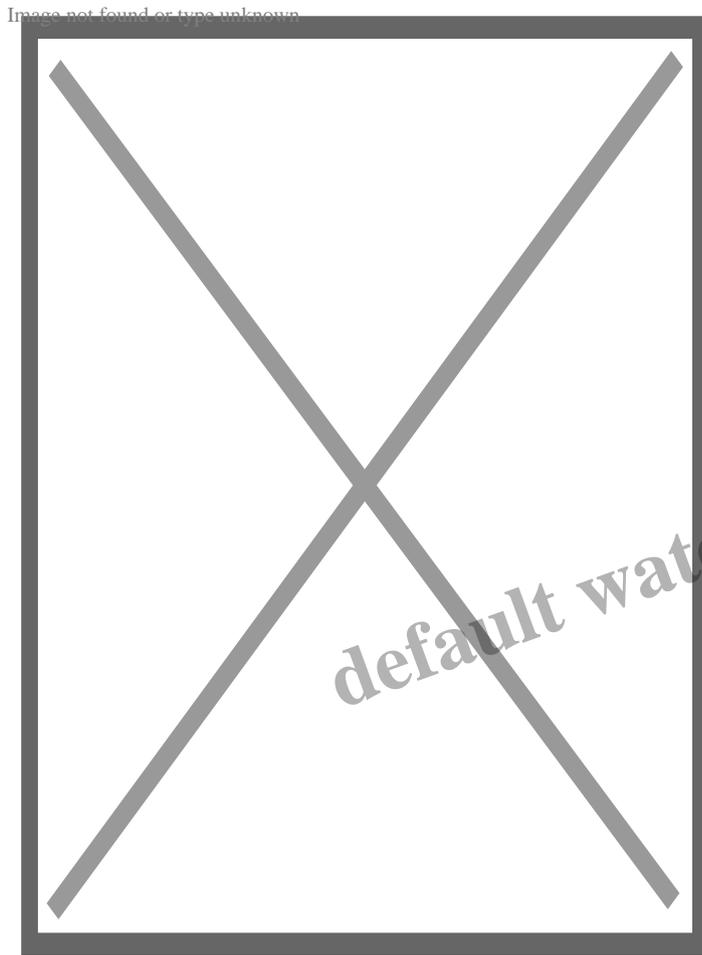


Admiring imperfection: enjoying “ordinary” treasures

Description



Two Oscar Schmidt Stella guitars from the 1920s-30s

Cheap Stella guitars from the 1920s-30s were made from local woods, were played by many well-known blues artists, and show the value of ordinary things.

(Extra)Ordinary Nature

I've been lucky to be able to travel to some amazing places and see some of the iconic natural places in the world – places like the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, the Galapagos, and the Kimberley of Western Australia. As well as that, I've been fortunate as an ecologist to be able to visit many out-of-the way and lesser-known wonders while visiting colleagues around the world.

But I've also come to realise that I appreciate the little bits of nature that are in my own neighbourhood. When I go for a walk from my house, I walk down a cycle way edged by native bushland – admittedly, it's pretty scruffy and full of weeds in places. But it's also home to quite a few species of birds,

including a Boobook owl who rests up for the day in a Melaleuca tree overhanging the path.

The cycle path continues down the coast through more bushland that is home to beautiful splendid wrens and [quenda](#) (one of our native digging mammals). It's also at the western end of a [community-led urban conservation project](#) that aims to link the coast with valuable wetlands further inland. Places like this may seem to be just "ordinary", but the more you look the more extraordinary they become.

These and other places nearby are little havens for native wildlife as well as people seeking time out from their city existences. They're not Yosemite and they're far from pristine. But they're *there*, and are enjoyed by many. And I don't have to get on a plane to go visit them – a factor that's grown considerably in importance during the pandemic.

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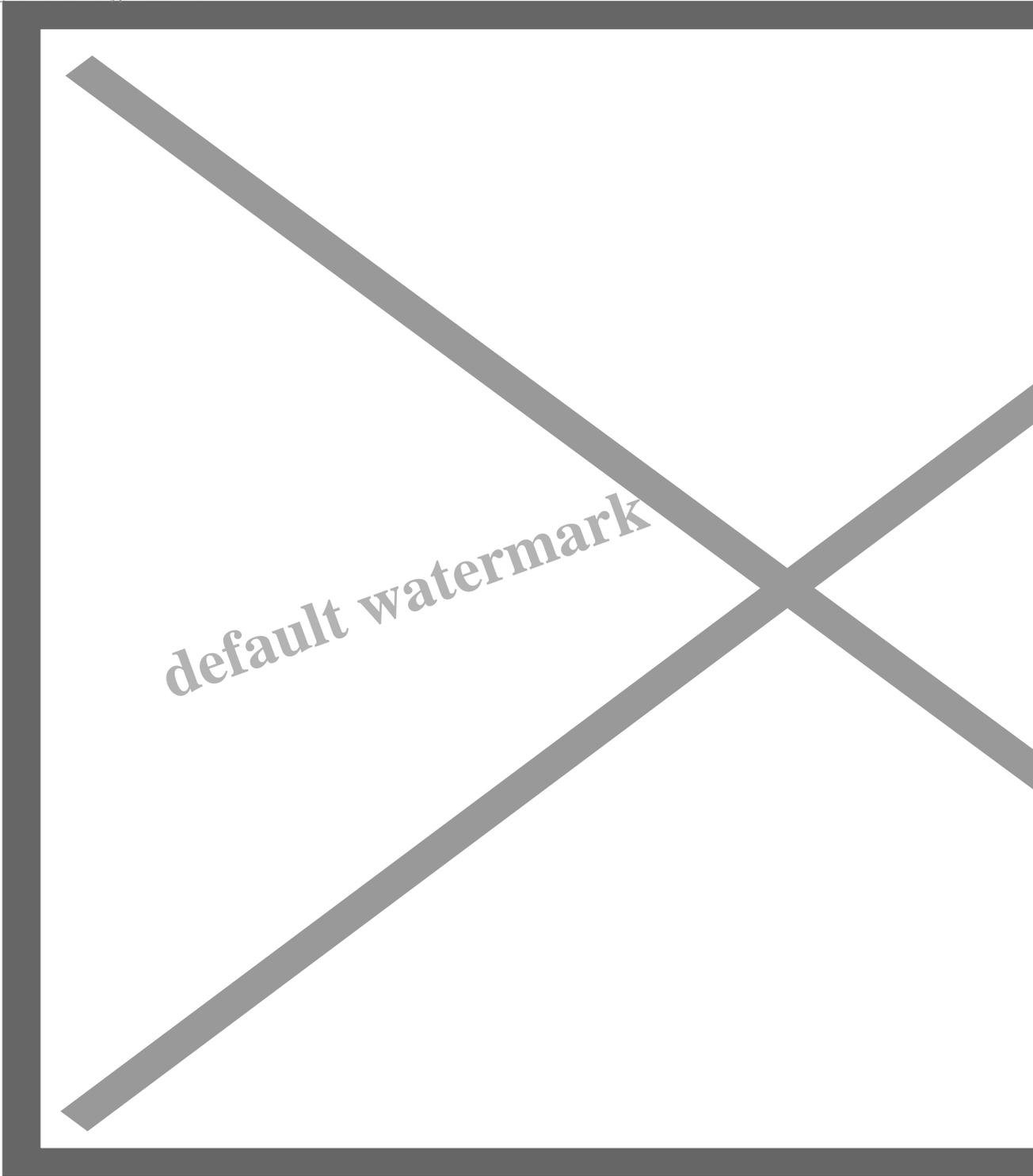


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Yosemite National Park in California and my local cycle/walking path

I've been similarly lucky to be able to visit some of the most accomplished guitar makers in the world and to play some of the most amazing guitars ever made. Most guitar makers aim to achieve as high a standard of instrument as they can produce. Like [Stradivari and his violins](#), they seek perfection in their craft. Whether the perfect guitar has ever been produced is an interesting question – who would even decide on that? But some guitars must come pretty close. It's certainly a real thrill and privilege to be able to pick up a guitar made by a master builder – past or present – and feel and listen to how that thing plays.

But, as with the scruffy bits of bushland near my house, I've also come to appreciate guitars that certainly aren't perfect but which have their own special charm. While there are certainly plenty of crap guitars about, particularly mass-produced and poorly constructed instruments for today's mass market, there are still gems amongst the dross. And the mass-produced guitars of earlier days are often the guitars that people could afford and hence were played by a lot of folks. Like the local bits of bush, they are valuable in different ways from the high-end instruments.

In this post, I'm taking a look at the Oscar Schmidt Stella guitars from the 1920s and 30s.

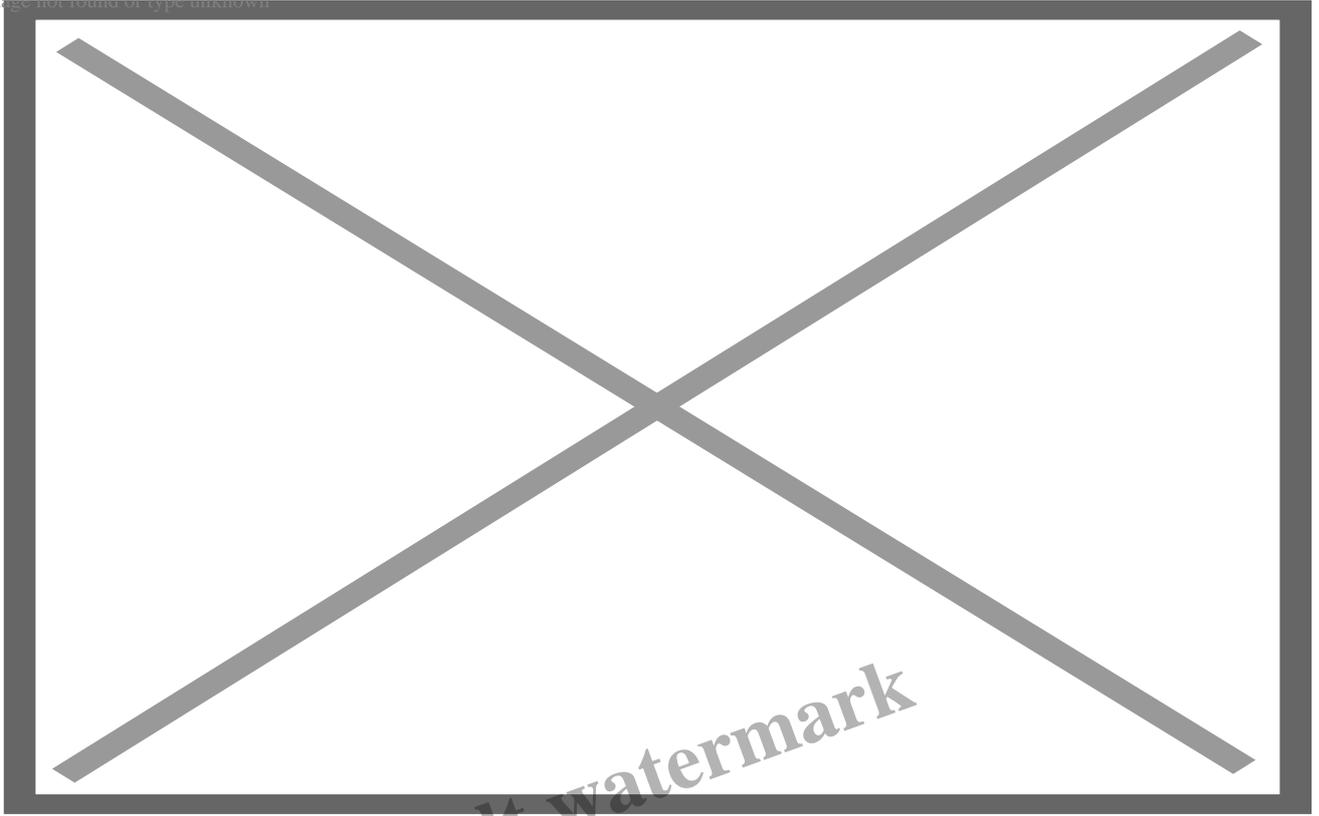
Oscar Schmidt Stella guitars

When you delve into the world of vintage guitars, you encounter a lot of chatter about a few brands, particularly Martin and Gibson. Fair enough too – Martin have been producing guitars in the US since 1833 and Gibson since 1902. Their early guitars pretty much set the standard for everything that came since then. And their guitars from the early 1900s have often stood the test of time and remained in good condition – hence they make up much of the market in vintage guitars dating from the first part of the 1900s.

But you can also find a variety of other brand names regularly popping up from that era. It can be quite hard getting a handle on who actually made what brand where back in those days, and the genealogy of a particular guitar can be difficult to work out. Here, I want to focus on one particular brand – Stella guitars made by the Oscar Schmidt company.

Oscar Schmidt was born in Germany in 1857 and came to the US at an early age. The Oscar Schmidt company was founded in the late 1890's and incorporated in 1911. Starting with zithers and then moving on to mandolins and guitars, the company grew rapidly and was soon producing large numbers of instruments at their New Jersey factory. By the 1920s they were one of the largest producers of guitars in the country.

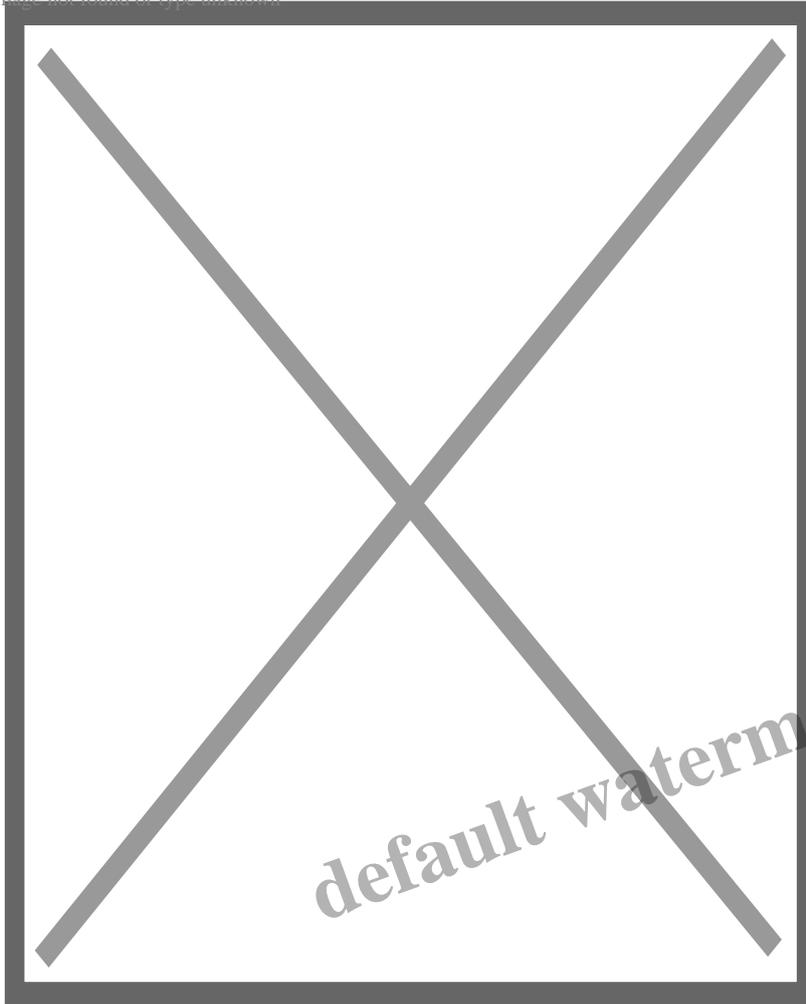
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Oscar Schmidt Factory 1910, Ferry St, New Jersey (Jersey City of To-Day, 1910). Source: Leavingthisworld.com

They made guitars with the Stella brand, but also Sovereign and La Scala and a number of others. Oscar Schmidt was one of the first to add decoration to guitars, using colourful decals, termed “Decalomania” in catalogs. [Decalomania (from the French *décalcomanie*) is a decorative technique by which engravings and prints may be transferred to pottery or other materials. Today, the shortened version is “decal.”] Some of the decorations were highly ornate and flamboyant.

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Early 1930s Stella decalcomania. Source: [Gbase](#)

Good times, bad times

The rise of Oscar Schmidt's guitars coincided with the [spread of blues music](#) throughout the American South. The Oscar Schmidt Company sold their instruments in many rural parts of the southern United States, making them available in general, small town furniture stores and even gas stations. Availability, affordability and reasonable tone and volume made the Stella guitar popular. Of course, many different types of guitars were used to play the old, rural blues, but a quick look through [the list of instruments](#) played by prominent blues players reveals quite a lot of Stellas in there.

[Shawn Lee of Stay Gold Guitars](#) in Santa Fe, New Mexico has this to say about Stellas: "Stella branded guitars are iconic American instruments. Initially built by Oscar Schmidt, Stellas are often associated with early 20th century musicians such as Charley Patton, Leadbelly, BBQ Bob, etc... who played them. They are true treasures of American roots music."

Leadbelly playing "The House of the Rising Sun" on his Stella 12 string, with his wife Martha Promise on vocals (yes, it's his song originally).

Frank Laubner, who runs a [website](#) devoted to vintage Stellas suggests: “The sound of a modern x-braced guitar is far away from the guitar sound you can hear on many Pre-WW II era blues recordings”. That sound often emanated from the inexpensive ladder-braced Stellas that were available at that time. If you want to know more about ladder bracing versus X bracing, have a look at [this article](#) from Reverb.

The 1920s, often referred to as the “[Roaring Twenties](#)”, was a period of economic prosperity and social, artistic and cultural dynamism. The success of Oscar Schmidt instruments rode on the back of this. The 1930s, in contrast, was marked by the [Great Depression](#) brought on by the Wall Street crash of 1929, the subsequent effects of which lasted almost a decade. The era was characterised by high unemployment rates, low demand for goods and services and great social hardship.

In the midst of this, instrument sales plummeted and the Oscar Schmidt Company, like many others, fell onto hard times. They continued to make guitars, though. The company merged with Hoboken’s International Musical Corporation in late 1931, and changed hands in 1935 to become Fretted Instrument Manufacturers before falling into bankruptcy. In 1939 the [Harmony Company](#) in Chicago purchased rights for Oscar Schmidt trademarks, including Stella, Sovereign and La Scala. Stella guitars continued to be made by Harmony into the 70s, although these later Stellas were quite different to the Oscar Schmidt-made guitars of the 20s and 30s.

Bill Collings on re-creating an era

[Bill Collings](#), founder of [Collings Guitars](#) in Austin Texas, attended Ohio University as a pre-med student in the early 1970s, but dropped out to work in a machine shop for five years. At the same time he built his first guitar. In 1975 he moved to Houston, Texas, where he worked as an engineer with a pipeline and oil field equipment company by day and a guitar builder by night.

From humble beginnings in the early 1980s, Collings Guitars went from strength to strength, producing excellent guitars. In 2014, Bill decided to start making guitars that revisited the Depression-era design. Dubbed an “ode to an era”, [Waterloo guitars](#) are “a look back in time to when there was a genuine need for soulful tone that could be coaxed from simple instruments. The blues, country, and folk music played on these instruments was made in heartfelt response to the hard times of the depression era. It was music heard in work camps and barn dances, kitchens and honky-tonks, porches, street corners and churches. These musical styles became the roots of popular American music for decades to come.”.

Here’s an excerpt from an interview with Bill Collings:

AN INTERVIEW WITH BILL COLLINGS.

What was the inspiration behind Waterloo Guitars?

BC: I've always been infatuated with guitars. Guitars of all kinds. Not just the expensive ones. When I first started working on guitars, there was always the holy grail. It was usually a mid-30s Martin or Gibson that people were after. It was never the ladder braced guitar or the off-brand guitar, but there was always something intriguing to me in those cheaper guitars from the 20s and 30s. You could pick them up and they had character. The problem was that they rarely played well. If they had played well, a lot of them would still be played today. But since they didn't, these are the guitars that got put in a closet or shoved away in an attic somewhere and forgotten about.

Where do you think all of these great guitars from the 1920s and 30s ended up?

BC: Most of the guitars fell out of existence because they fell apart. Weather and environment were a big part of it. People didn't understand how hard they could be on guitars. Also, the less expensive guitars didn't usually come with good cases. If a company's main brand guitar was \$70 back in the day, the off-brand guitar might have been \$15. The person buying the \$15 guitar was not going to spend \$15 for a case. They spent \$2 for a cardboard case. Then they went and lived somewhere in the world where there was no air conditioning in any house anywhere. That was the 30s. The guitars most likely ended up in a harsh environment in either the winter or the summer. That's horrid on guitars, especially if there's no case to protect it. Most of them just dissolved and the guitars that did survive all ended up needing major repair work. Some of them probably ended up as firewood.

Not all of today's players have seen these old guitars. Not everyone is searching for them, so they're not finding them. I think people are missing out on something unique and different. Some of the originals are out there, but they are really hard to find in good shape. So much so, that you will usually have more cost in the repair work than the cost of a new guitar. So having this guitar at an affordable price allows you to get some of that Americana history in a newer instrument that will last a lifetime. The lifetime of most of the originals is over, unfortunately.

Source: [Waterloo Guitars](#)

Other guitar makers have also decided that the early 20th century guitars are worth emulating with modern manufacturing methods. For instance, [Fraulini Guitars](#) are handmade by Todd Cambio. The Fraulini Guitar Company is dedicated to providing traditional musicians with instruments that are modeled after the classic designs of the true Golden Era of guitar construction, the early 20th century

Guitars made from birch and other local woods

The range of guitars produced during those times is astounding. What's particularly interesting to me is that a lot of the wood used for these guitars is local to eastern North America. While Martin and Gibson were using predominantly exotic tonewoods from the tropics, such as Rosewood and Mahogany, many of the less expensive Stellas used birch for the top, back and sides. Some had birch back and sides and spruce tops, while others used cherry or maple. More expensive Stellas used oak and there were

some that used mahogany. Many of the Hawaiian guitar range were made, appropriately, from Koa from Hawaii. While some higher end models had fretboards made from ebony or rosewood, the standard materials for more the expensive Martins and Gibsons, most Stella fretboards were made from birch or maple and stained black. (Source: [VintageStellaGuitars](#))

[Birch, cherry, maple and oak are all species found in the eastern deciduous forests](#) of North America. The forests [vary across the region](#), with different tree species dominating in different locations and topographies.

From the little documentation that remains today, it's virtually impossible to determine exactly which species of tree were used and where the wood was likely to have come from. [If anyone can shed light on this, let me know!]. There are several different species of each of these types of tree, but the most likely species are white oak (*Quercus alba*) and red oak (*Quercus rubra*). The birch used is likely to be yellow birch (*Betula alleghaniensis*) or paper birch (*B. papyrifera*), the maple is probably sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), and the cherry is likely black cherry (*Prunus serotina*).

Interestingly, most of these species are more common in recent times than they were at the time of European colonisation – the eastern forests were extensively logged and cleared, and much of today's forest is secondary, or regrowth as a result of various types of human disturbance. For example, David Foster and John Aber give a detailed account of changes in forests in New England since colonization in their book "[Forests in Time](#)"

That they are not "pristine" or "primeval" does not detract from their ecological value or their beauty. Who cannot be entranced by the fall colours for which the region is famous?

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Deciduous forest tonewoods?

The attraction of using the woods that were abundant in the surrounding regions seem obvious – they were readily accessible and inexpensive, and transport and trade costs would have been low. But how do they rate as woods that make good guitars? Maple and cherry are actually both seen as good guitar tonewoods – different in character from the tropical imports, but certainly OK or better.

We'll look at cherry in particular in [another post](#). We've already met oak in earlier posts, with [Elle Henderson](#) using local oak for a stunning guitar, and white oak making its way to a guitar via several iterations as [bourbon and whisky barrels](#). It's still a long way away from being a standard tonewood, though, even if it stacks up as one – perhaps part of an ongoing bias towards the traditional tonewoods. As one guitar maker commented in a [discussion on the tonal qualities of oak](#): “I do like making oak guitars. I hate trying to sell them. Maybe if people would stop listening with their eyes so much that would be easier: everybody loves the way the oak ones sound.”

And birch? Opinions are decidedly mixed about birch too, as for example in a [discussion thread](#) titled “Why doesn't anybody build guitars with birch anymore?” It's a fast growing “pioneer” tree (one of the first to grow in an area after a disturbance), and hence the [wood qualities](#) are very different from slower

growing species.

It often grows in cold climates, though, where growth rates are slower, and [some species and varieties produce](#) really nice tonewood

It's generally accepted, though, that birch isn't top of the list of go-to tonewoods these days. But back in the early 20th century, it obviously didn't matter that much to the folks who were buying the guitars. And, indeed, it can be argued that the use of birch, together with the other characteristics of the guitars from that period – such as ladder bracing – give the guitars their “authentic” sound.

A tale of two Stellas

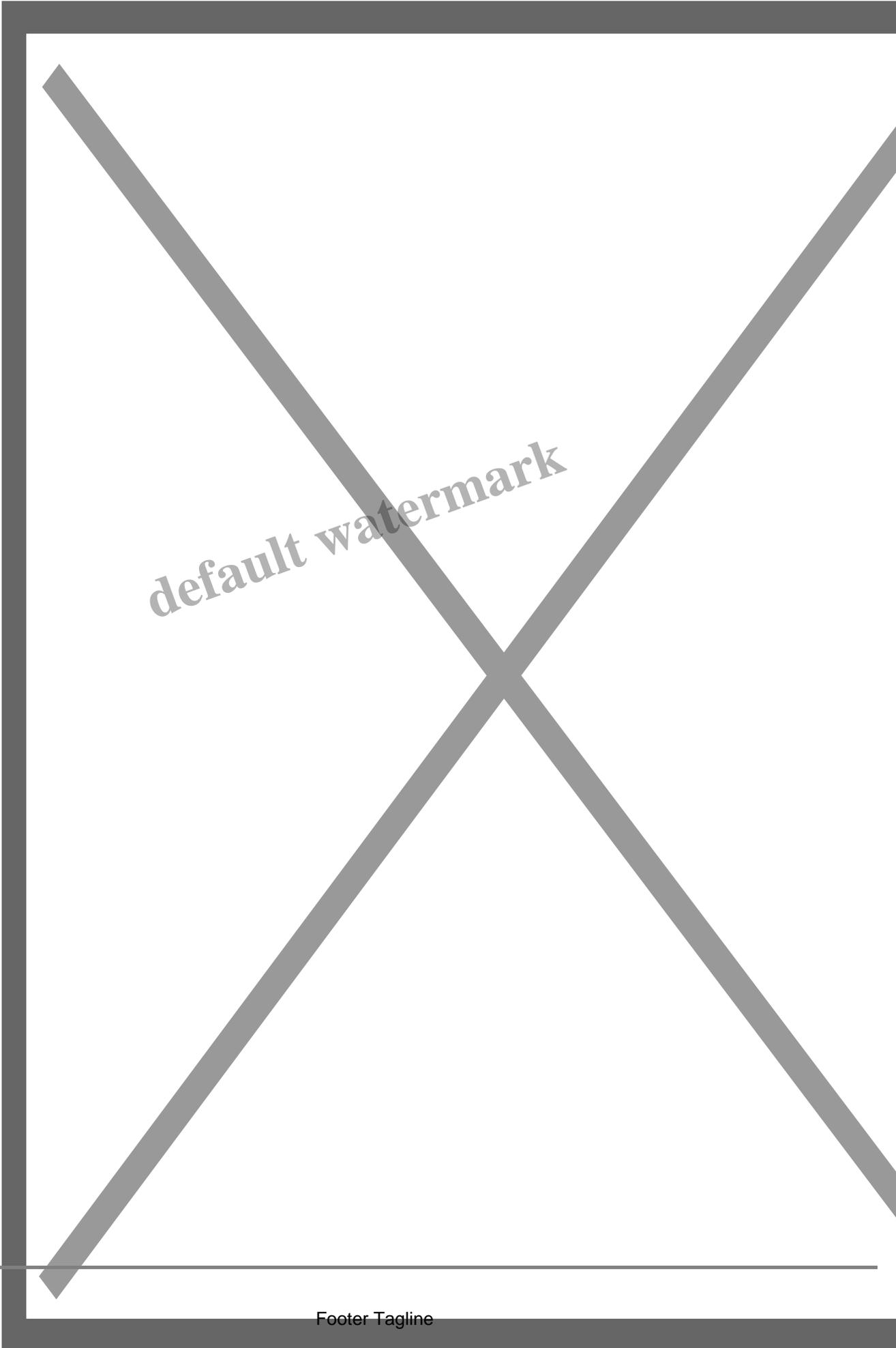
Let's look at a couple of Stella guitars from the 1920s-30s. Although it's clear that many or most of the guitars manufactured by Oscar Schmidt and others in the 1920s and 30s didn't make it, they can still be found today. I've discovered that I particularly enjoy the depression-era guitars, I guess for the same reasons that Bill Collings wanted to emulate them in the Waterloo series. I've been lucky enough to find some amazing guitars from that era – some in great condition and some that need a lot of attention (more on those in another post).

The two I'm focusing on here are quite different from each other in a number of ways. I shipped them both from the US (in the days before COVID pushed shipping costs to absurd levels). Both cost a fraction of what a Martin or Gibson from that era would fetch. The first was advertised as a “Totally Original 1923 Oscar Schmidt Stella Decalomania Parlor Guitar”. The ad stated: “Overall condition of this incredible time capsule is Very Good+ to excellent showing the light player wear and for being nearly 100 years old it has withstood the test of time, no cracks whatsoever and the neck joint is as tight as the day it was produced”

The second was a “Stella parlor guitar 1920-30s, oak back and sides”. The ad stated: “The guitar has been completely refinished. It had a neck reset at some point. The fingerboard extension has been reinforced with a small piece of Ebony and there is some reinforcement around the soundhole as well. Some glued top and back cracks round out the repairs. Original Nickel 3-on-a-plate tuners. Replaced Bone nut with a width of 1 15/16 inches. Maple neck with 25 inch scale length and a vintage Vee profile. Replaced Ebony fingerboard with 19 frets and a nearly flat radius. Replacement Ebony Pyramid bridge with bone saddle.”

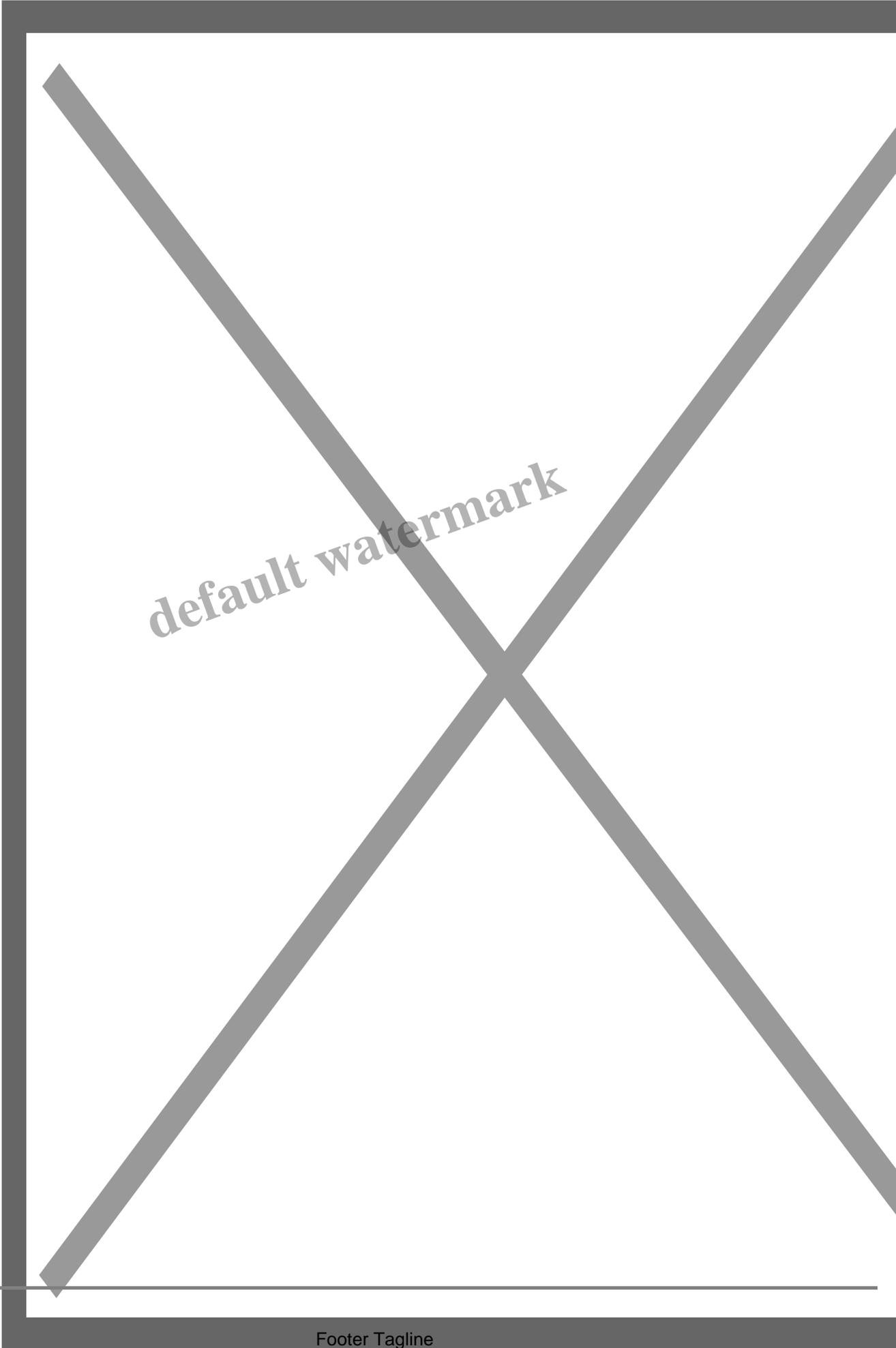
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Two Oscar Schmidt Stellas – all birch on the left and spruce/oak on the right

So, two guitars in very different states. One completely original, with no replacement parts or repairs, and one with just about everything replaced and repaired! And one has birch for top, back and sides while the other has a spruce top and oak back and sides (meaning that the second guitar was probably more expensive).

But the thing is that both play well and sound amazing. Just picking one up makes you want to play the blues like those guys from the 20s and 30s. They do sound different – as might be expected, the spruce top on one lends greater depth, but even the birch top performs much better than might be expected if you listen to folks who put birch down as a tonewood.

And the fact that they are both going strong after 90 or so years is nothing short of amazing. Even if one is virtually all original and one has had serious work done to keep it going. Is one better than the other? Well, define “better”! If you’re a purist in terms of originality and authenticity, then the birch guitar wins out. If you’re someone who enjoys seeing old guitars brought back to life by careful repair and replacement of parts, then the spruce/oak guitar is a winner.

For me, both are really nice guitars with different stories to tell.

Dating Stellas

A quick addition to these stories, though. You may recall that I mentioned that the birch guitar was advertised as being made in “1923”. When I asked the seller how they fixed the date at 1923, they said it was because of the label, which placed it within a bracket of a few years. My research background has taught me never to take anything at face value, and I did some further looking in to this.

Stellas, as with many guitar brands, are often difficult to date exactly. There’s no serial numbers to go by, unlike some brands. Martin, in particular, kept meticulous records and had a systematic [serial number system](#) in place since 1898. Gibson had [a less straightforward progression of numbers](#), moving from Factory Order Numbers (FONS) from 1902 onwards to a variety of serial numbering systems that, with some work, can usually give you information on when and where the guitar was produced.

Trying to place an exact date of manufacture for a particular Stella is, however, more tricky. Especially given that if you type something like “dating Stellas” into Google, you are pointed to a selection of sites for finding your perfect partner or about who is currently dating supermodel Stella Maxwell. “Dating Harmony” gets you deeper into that kind of territory.

So, assuming that you finally get a suitable search topic that directs you to guitars rather than romance opportunities, you can start to piece together relevant bits of information. In the case of Oscar Schmidt Stellas, about the only clue you get is from the paper label inside the guitar’s sound-hole. Sometimes these labels are long-gone, and sometimes they’re pretty beaten up. But as long as there is something there, you at least get a clue of when the guitar might have been made.

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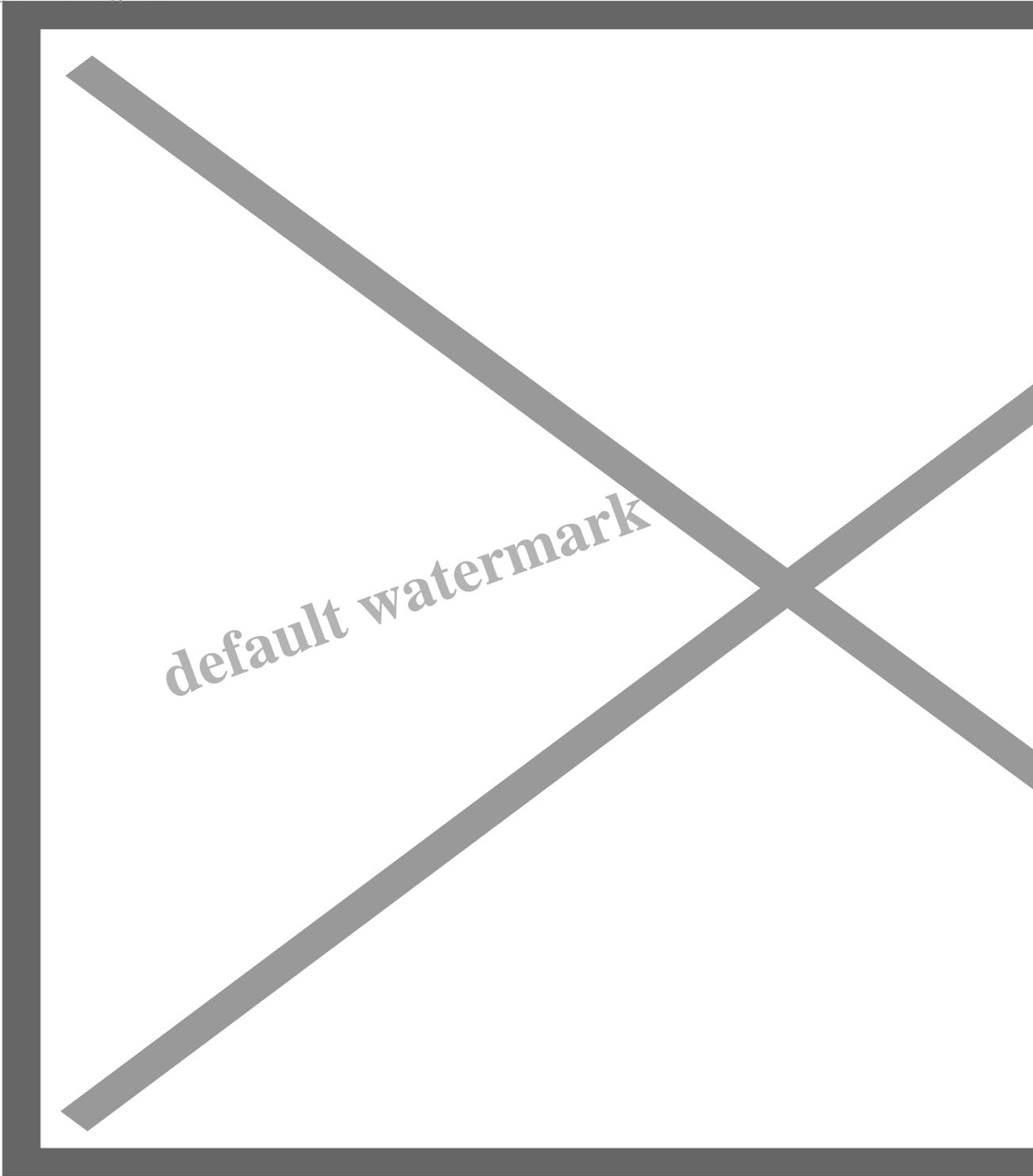
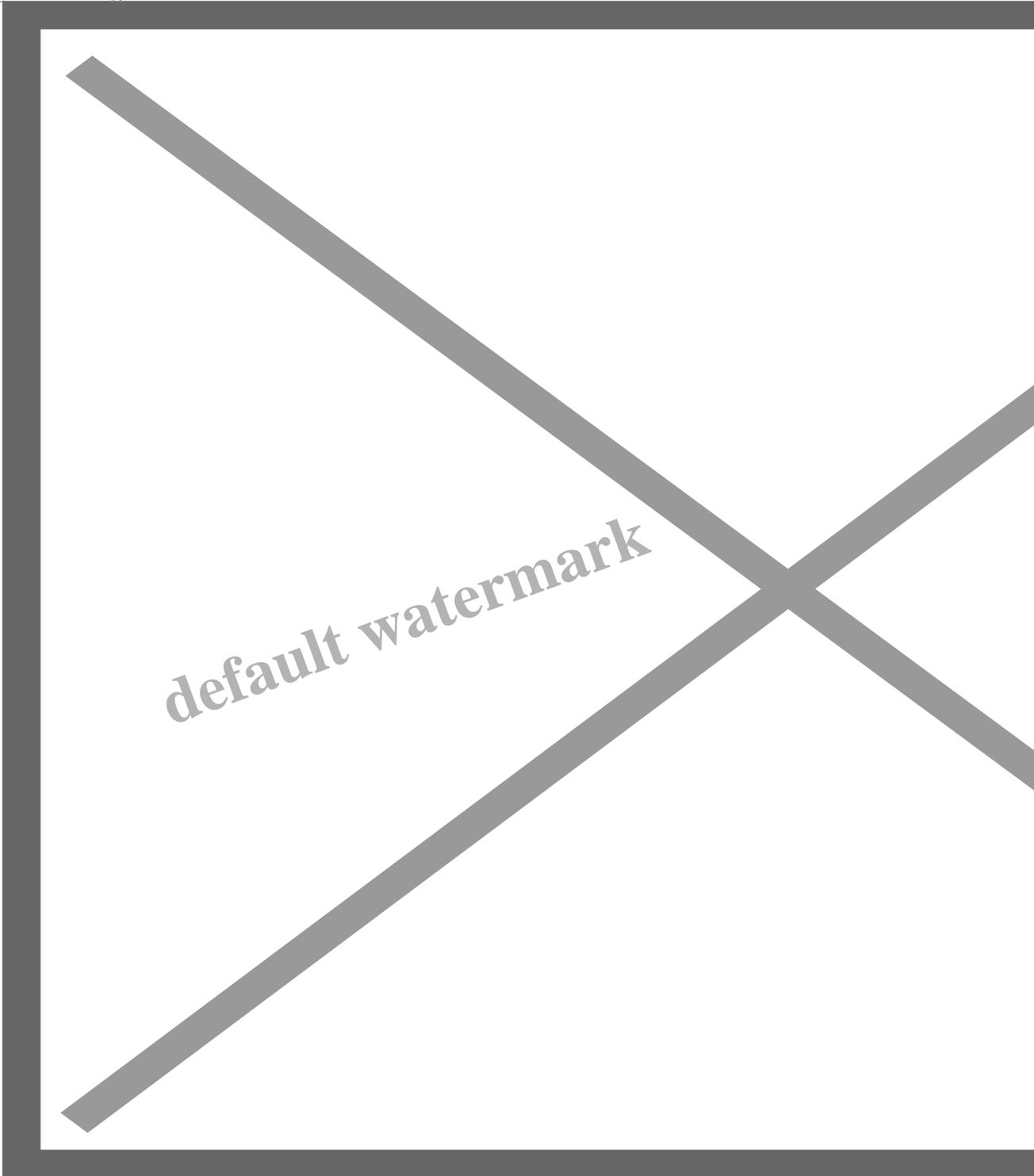


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Labels inside the all-birch Stella (left) and the spuce/oak Stella (right)

Neil Harpe's "[Stella Guitar Book](#)" provides examples of labels from broad periods during the 20s and 30s. It turns out that the "1923" guitar can actually be placed pretty conclusively in the period 1935-39, because that was the time that the company had been renamed "Fretted Instrument Manufacturers". Conversely, the oak guitar has a label that indicates it's probably from the 1920s.

Perhaps nobody particularly cares about this apart from me – blame my biological background and the need to accurately name the species I encounter! But sometimes getting the year of manufacture pinned down can make a big difference to the perceived value of an instrument. And, besides, I think it's a fun kind of detective work that keeps me amused for hours.

Original or modified? Circling back to conservation

The two Stellas I've described reminded me of the broader question I've touched on a few times in [previous posts](#). How much should having everything authentic and original be valued over having something that's quite modified from the original but still works pretty well?

My fascination with this topic stems from my professional experience in ecology, conservation and ecosystem restoration. In those arenas, much store is placed on maintaining places and ecosystems in as natural a state as possible. Where things have changed away from that natural state, the objective is often to get it back there as quickly and effectively as possible.

The natural state is usually taken to mean the set of species and the environmental settings that characterise a particular place or system in the absence of substantial human modification or disturbance. Things that push a system away from the natural state include the loss of native species, the gain of invasive non-native species, or changes in environmental parameters such as water availability, soil structure and the like. Usually these changes are the result of human activities of one sort or another. Reversing these changes is what ecological restoration is usually all about.

Sounds fairly straightforward, right? Not always. What, really, does "natural" mean? Where in time and space do we locate the reference point for this? What about the many "natural" systems in the world that have evolved with humans as an integral part? What about situations where non-native species have taken up residence and actually benefit the native species? What about climate change? What about situations where reversing the changes may actually be practically impossible and/or incredibly expensive, or may end up making things worse? And what about the relative value of the scruffy bits of nature close to my house versus the big grand bits of nature in faraway national parks?

The bottom line is that there are no simple cookie-cutter answers to these questions, and instead lots of contingencies – and different points of view – to consider. And this makes decisions a lot harder to make: it's much simpler to follow a simple formulaic set of rules than to have to consider every situation in a context-specific way.

So, this is the world I inhabited while I was working in restoration ecology. As I morphed more into the world of guitars and how they are made, I found many fascinating similarities in the decisions that are made around what makes a guitar “good” or “valuable” and whether keeping things original and authentic is more important than focusing on functional questions of stability and playability.

The two Stellas are a nice case in point.

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