

Craftsmen

Lost Chords Found By Dobbs' Repairs

By DAVE PEYTON
Herald-Dispatch Staff Writer

Dennis Dobbs tenderly cradles a 10-year-old Martin guitar in his arms. He adjusts the clamps on the guitar body where he has repaired a bullet hole.

"Just think. The story this guitar could tell if it could talk," he muses.

The Dobbs brothers, the owners of a new store in Huntington called the Fret 'N Fiddle, 524 14th St. West, are in an unusual business which they say has been profitable so far. Some say they seem to perform miracles on ancient and not-so-ancient guitars, banjos and fiddles brought to them for repair.

STRINGED INSTRUMENT repairmen are few and far between. But both Dennis and his brother, Joe, believe there are more "pickers" per square mile in this area than nearly anywhere else on earth. And, they say, that means more damaged instruments.

"I'd estimate that half the families in this area have Grandpa's fiddle or guitar stored away in the attic," Joe said. "And half of those instruments are broken. Some of them have been shot like that guitar. Some of them have fallen apart with the years. And I'd say that 95 per cent of them can be repaired."

Repairing stringed instruments is not something you learn from a book, the Dobbs brothers say. For example, Dennis, who recently moved here from Louisiana, was the manager in the string instrument section of a music store

and took courses in electronics, which helps him with electric guitar repair.

Joe, on the other hand, learned the business by working with repairmen as far away as central Kentucky.

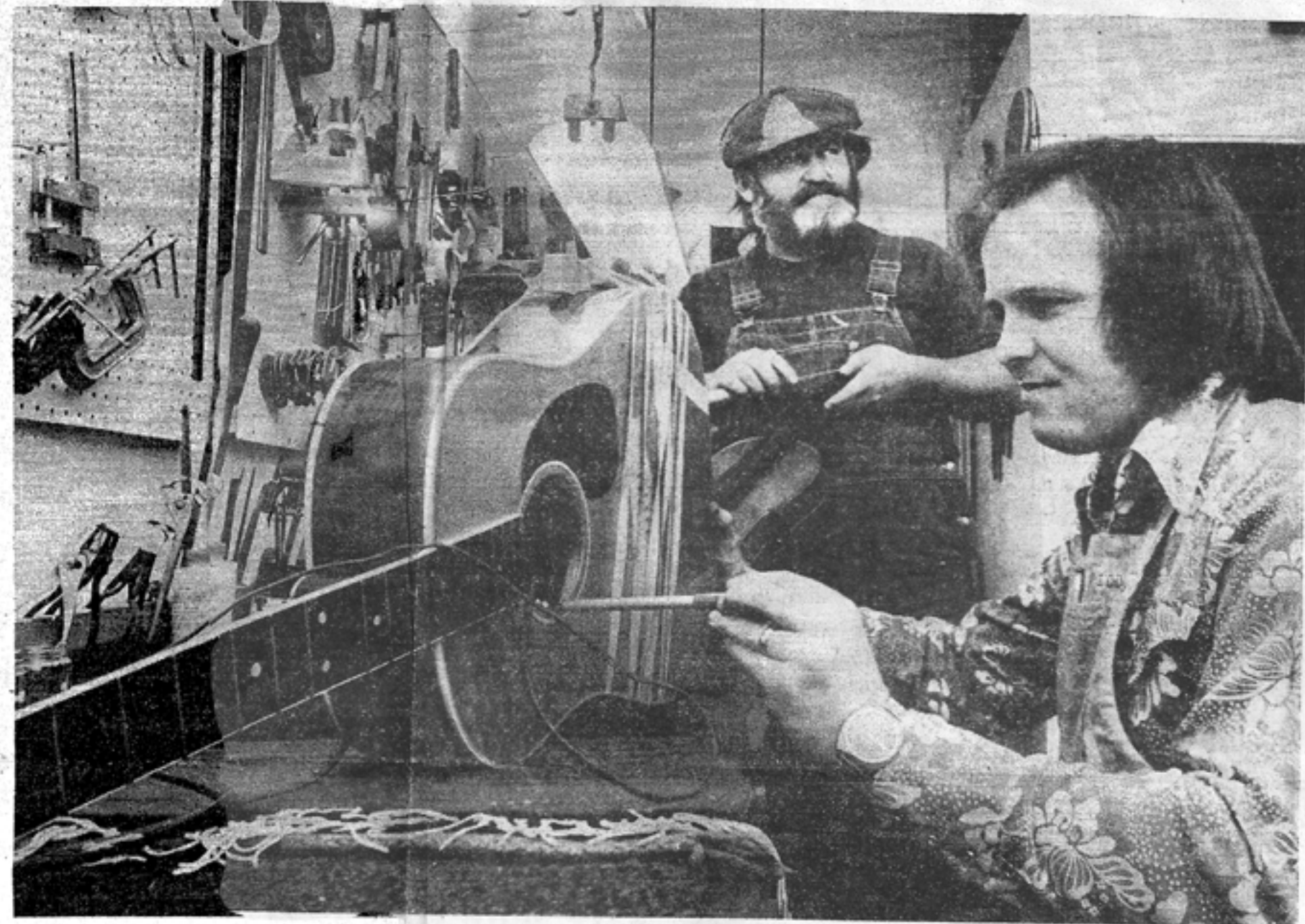
"I'M AFRAID a lot of people have thrown perfectly good guitars and fiddles away because they came unglued," Joe said. "If they only knew that it doesn't make any difference. In fact, I'd rather work on an instrument that had come apart at every seam than one somebody had tried to glue back together."

If an amateur applies the wrong kind of glue to an instrument, it can ruin the tone and make it impossible to repair, Joe said.

"Fiddles, for example, are made to pop open so a repairman can get inside the instrument. The wrong kind of glue can seal it forever and make it sound awful," Joe said.

The reason instruments come apart, Dennis said, is probably because they were stored in the wrong place. "Instruments need a constant temperature and pretty high humidity. I'd never store a stringed instrument in an attic or basement where the temperature changes. It's better to store Grandpa's fiddle in a bedroom closet. And it should be in a case."

DENNIS SAID he has been amazed at the fine antique instruments brought to the shop for repair by people in this area.



Herald-Dispatch Photo by Frank Altizer

Dennis Dobbs, in foreground, patches a bullet hole in a Martin guitar while Joe Dobbs works on a viola.

"I've seen instruments I never saw in Louisiana. I mean museum pieces." He pointed to a guitar on the wall. "That's a 1931 Martin guitar. Not only had I never seen that model before, the only place I had ever seen a picture of it was in a museum."

Joe pointed to a mandolin. "That instrument sold for \$35 in 1933. Today it's worth four times that much, or maybe more."

But that doesn't mean all old instruments are good instruments. "I've seen some old instruments that are just terrible. And some

of the newer instruments are well made," Joe said.

BOTH OF the Dobbs brothers have been professional musicians. Dennis played guitar professionally and Joe once played fiddle in Texas and Louisiana. Today, however, they're both in-

fatuated with Appalachian mountain music.

"We're not out to make a whole lot of money," Joe said. "We think 'pickers' are the finest people in the world. And there's no better way to meet them than to repair their instruments."