

# Vintage Kay Guitars

## The Story of Kay Guitars

- We have quite a significant personal collection of Vintage Kay guitars- As far as we can gather it is probably the only one in the Southern Hemisphere although if you think otherwise we would love you to get in touch.
- With its roots going back to the Groeschel Mandolin Company of Chicago Illinois in 1890 the Kay Guitar Company emerged to become one of America's musical instrument giants.
- During the next 75 years it remained probably Americas second largest instrument manufacturer until finally succumbing in 1965 when it was sold Jukebox manufacturer Seeberg. In 1967 it was resold to Valco, parent company of National and Supro,
- Over the years Kay offered guitars bearing the names Groeschel, Stromberg, Kay Kraft, Kay, Kaywood, Lark, Kamico, Arch and Arch Kraft.
- They also built guitars for S.S.Maxwell, Old Kraftsmen ( Spiegel Catalogue) Recording King, (also made by Gibson), Orpheum, (Wards Catalogue) Supertone and Silvertone for Sears, also National, (El Trovador), Recording King, Concertone, Airline, Truetone, Penncrest, (a J.C. Penney brand), Alden, Rex, (Sold through Gretsch) B&J Serenader, Dobro, Custom Kraft, Hollywood for Shireson Brothers as well as Oahu .
- After undergoing a name change to Stromberg-Voisinet in 1921 (Mayflower guitars and banjos) the company was joined in 1923 by young Henry Kay or 'Hank' Kuhrmeyer.
  
- Henry became company secretary in 1925. It was during this period that the company began to make a solid reputation for itself building high quality guitars, banjos and mandolins often with pearloid lavishly applied. Many of these were destined for Montgomery Ward under the name Concertone. Also Kuhrmeyer oversaw the production of guitars for Buegeleisen & Jacobson's line of Serenaders. Known today as B&J.
  
- Always an innovator, Henry introduced lamination on some of their models as well as 'Mother of Toiletseat' in 1924 - Fake Pearl Trim. In 1926 he hired Joseph Zorzi and Philip Gabriel, two luthiers from Lyon and Healy to refresh model range. Their innovations included the wonderful two point Venetian guitars and mandolins which are much sought after today.
- Built in both Flat top and roundhole Archtop configurations they featured two large internal wingnuts securing the heel bolts which allowed the neck angle to be changed in seconds to adjust the action between the extremes of Hawaiian style slide or fretted playing. It has been reported that Ry Cooder favours his high end model which featured pearliod covering the headstock face, fingerboard and the entire body as the ideal guitar for the traditional roots music that he is so highly regarded for.
- Henry bought the company in 1928 and in the same year began producing the worlds first electric guitars and amps. Although these were introduced with much publicity, in the end as few as 200 were made. Remember this was still several years before former National executive George Beecham got together with Paul Barth and Nationals metal parts supplier Adolph Rickenbacher to create the cast aluminium 'Frying Pan' which many people have wrongly credited with being the first production electric guitar. It was released to the public in 1932 and later that year a small number of Spanish flat tops also appeared with 'Electro' pickups.
- These all appeared under the name Ro-Pat-In Electro which in 1934 became the Electro String Instrument Corporation with the Brand being Rickenbacher Electro. Interestingly, Beecham and Barth with colleague Harry Wilson had come up the a wooden 'Frying Pan' electric while still working at National but the board rejected the idea in 1931 provoking the two mens departure.
  
- Back to Henry, In 1931 he became company President and the Kay Kraft brand appeared in the same year. It is worth noting the the Kay brand first appeared in 1928 on German Kreuzinger violins marketed in the US by Stromberg Voisinet. Also in 1931 the name became Kay Musical Instruments.
  
- In 1933 the company began to build a a new factory at 1640 West Walnut St Chicago Illinois which opened in 1935 and shortly after Henry Kay announced that they were building 100 000 instruments a year.
  
- Kay began production of Double Basses in 1937 and were marketed under the K Meyer brand as well as the home Kay brand which had been introduced across the whole line in 1936 or early 37. Kay company literature of the time announced they had gained 20 per cent of the American bass market in that first year.
  
- The Stromberg name had been phased out in 1932 while the Kay Kraft name finally came to an end in 1937.

### References:

The Official Vintage Guitar Price Guide. Alan Greenwood and Gil Hembree. Vintage Guitar Books, Hal Leonard Corporation. ISBN1-884883-17-6.

The Blues Guitar, an Illustrated History. Rick Batey. New Burlington Books ISBN 1-86155-619-5 Gruhns Guide to Vintage Guitars. George Gruhn and Walter Carter. Backbeat Books ISBN 0-87930-422-7 Acoustic Guitars The Illustrated Encyclopedia. Merchant Book Company. Compiled by Dave Hunter. ISBN 1-904779-15-8

50's Cool; Kay Guitars by Jay Scott. Seventh String Press. ISBN 1-880422-01-81  
Library of Congress Cat No 91-066215.

+

More coming soon