

COVER SHEET

TRANSCRIPTION NUMBER: 14 OF 17

Transcriber: Amanda Fickey, PhD, Independent Contractor
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Interviewee: Frank Neat
Interviewer: Bob Gates
Cinematographer: Sean Anderson
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Transcription Notes:

BG: Bob Gates

FN: Frank Neat

SA: Sean Anderson

In some cases, words such as “um”, “uh”, “and”, “so” and “yeah” have been excluded.

Time notations have been included at approximately 2-minute intervals.

... Indicates pause, delay in conversation, or, weak transition/no transition in themes.

The names of musical and banjo styles are capitalized throughout the transcript.

Attempts were made to verify the names of all musicians and geographical locations referenced throughout this interview.

0:00

BG: We are at Frank Neat's shop here in Russell Springs?

FN: Right.

BG: It's a great shop.

FN: Thank you.

BG: I was asking you questions earlier, but I'd like to ask you how you first got into building banjos.

FN: I lived in Indiana and in '65 I bought a new Gibson banjo. I was playing with a band. We were playing staff at Bean Blossom, and I met a guy over there who was playing in Indianapolis who told me that he could take it and make it sound better. When I got it back, I tore it apart to see what he had done to it. Then I got better acquainted with him. At that time, he was doing work for Earl Scruggs and J.D. Crowe and some people like that, and through him I met Ralph and met Earl and met J.D. and a lot of the top banjo players. Then I started doing the necks like he was doing and I would get most of the material from him and buy the fingerboard from him, and it had already been inlaid. So I kept doing a little more and a little more of it until finally I got started doing all of it. In '75, I asked Ralph about building him a banjo.

BG: Ralph Stanley?

FN: Ralph Stanley, and so I built him one and he called me a couple of months later and said if you'll build these, we'll call these the "Stanleytones," I'll sell them. I started doing them in '75 and within a couple of years I was working second shift in the factory, he was selling so many that I couldn't keep them built. I moved back down here in Kentucky, and started doing it full time in March '80.

1:56

[Interruption – fan]

2:02

FN: I moved back here to Kentucky and started doing this full-time in March '80, building full-time.

BG: Were you born in Kentucky?

FN: I was, born over in Adair County. So I moved right out of Dunnville and started building them. Then Ralph, he would sell all that I could build. In '90, I moved over here because it was a better location and easier for the people out of Nashville to find me and all of that, and I've been here since '90. We've done banjos for Raymond Fairchild, we've done them for Sonny Osborne, Ralph Stanley, and we've done a few for J.D. Then we do a little Roy Lewis banjo, and it keeps us busy, it keeps the two of us busy.

BG: Two of us, your son?

FN: My son and myself. Yes.

BG: How did he get started?

FN: Whenever he was small, he was real small whenever I bought the first banjo.

BG: What's his name again?

FN: Ricky. He grew up with it. Then he wanted to try his luck at something else so he went and worked in Tennessee for a while and came back here and worked for a while and then he decided to do this. He's been with me now for about fifteen years. Then I started him cutting the inlay, he likes doing that, and he does all of the inlay work, does all of that, and most of the finishing work.

BG: When he was little, did he hang around the shop?

FN: He did. He hung around the shop a lot. Yeah.

BG: Did he learn much then?

FN: He learned some things, but he wasn't really interested in it until after he tried his luck at a few other things. Then he decided that he would like to do this.

BG: So it's still in the family? Is he the only one in the family that still does it?

FN: I've got a son that lives in Tennessee that will do it a little bit from time to time. He's helped me do some guitars. We did some guitars a while back a few years ago.

BG: You did?

FN: Yeah. He helped me do some guitars, and he liked doing that too, but he's working in Tennessee instead of doing this.

BG: How did you get... you were born down here in Kentucky, right?

FN: I was born over here in Adair County?

BG: Did your mom and dad have a big family?

FN: Yeah, I've got ten sisters and six brothers.

BG: So how did you get into music in the first place?

FN: I got interested in it whenever I was a teenager. We lived up, there was a guy that we lived close to that played banjo and I got interested in it through by him playing. And then whenever I moved to Indiana I was playing some and then there was a guy from over in Adair County, Bryant Wilson, who came to me and wanted me to play with him in a band. So I got...

BG: So you went to Indianapolis?

FN: I went to Columbus.

BG: Columbus, Ohio?

FN: Columbus, Indiana.

BG: Where's that?

FN: It's North of Seymour. South of Indianapolis.

BG: Ok.

FN: Anyway, I worked there for eighteen years in a factory.

BG: What kind of a factory?

FN: I worked for Arvin Industries. We made mufflers and tail pipes. I was doing that whenever I started working on banjos, I was working there.

BG: Was there a Bluegrass scene in that area?

FN: Yeah, Bean Blossom, you had Bean Blossom there, and of course, that belonged to Bill Monroe. That was a big Bluegrass area through there. A lot of the people I work for I met while I was at Bean Blossom. I met a lot of the people that... Ralph Stanley, Larry Sparks, and J.D., and all of them at Bean Blossom.

BG: What was your role at Bean Blossom? Were you the house band?

FN: We were the staff band there.

BG: Staff band.

FN: We were the staff band there for three years. They had Sunday shows.

BG: Ok.

FN: We would open the show for the entertainers that would come in there.

BG: And that was kind of your part-time job?

FN: We did that, I worked second shift in the factory, and then we played music on the weekends. Then I got into building necks and I would do that during the day and then work second shift in the factory. But it was my part-time, I had a part-time job. It started out as a hobby, something I wanted to do, but I got acquainted with the guy in Indianapolis, Jim Falkner, and he was doing that and it was something that interested me and I started doing it.

BG: Jim Falkner?

FN: Yes. He showed me the basics.

BG: He was a pretty good banjo maker?

FN: He did some necks. He never, I think he only made a couple of banjos. He made himself one, made Earl Scruggs one, but he did more necks and was replacing the tenor and plectrum necks on a lot of Gibson banjos.

BG: You know Tom Adler, don't you?

FN: I do, yes.

BG: He just finished a book on Bean Blossom. Did you get to read it yet?

FN: No, I haven't gotten to read it. In fact, Tom plays one of the Osborne Brothers Chief banjos.

BG: The Osborne what?

FN: The Osborne Chief that we make.

BG: Ok. So those are models that you make?

FN: Yes.

BG: Yes. Ok. So you work with these famous musicians to make models?

7:13

FN: We do. We'll work them and they'll tell us what they want. We'll make them and they'll put them on the market. They'll play them and sell them, and then they'll order more. We've never stocked our instruments in stores. We've always worked for individuals like Ralph and Sonny and people like that.

BG: So if you want a Neat banjo you need to...?

FN: You can contact us. You can contact Sonny or anybody that we work for like that. But the ones we do for Sonny we put Sonny Osborne on them. We put the Osborne Chief on them.

7:49

[Interruption – videographer stops filming]

7:53

BG: We were talking about Bean Blossom I guess, and was it exciting to be there in those days?

FN: It was. They had the Sunday shows. Of course, we got to meet the Stoneman Family. That's whenever they were big and on televisions. We got to play music with a lot of people out of Nashville and the people that once played on the Opry and all of that. We got to meet a lot of those people.

BG: I think a lot of people who were looking at this may not know what a banjo, what makes up a banjo. I guess, first of all, how did you, why do you like the banjo so much? Why did you pick that as your instrument?

FN: Whenever I heard Earl Scruggs play, there is just something about his playing that I liked, I liked the way it sounded.

BG: Yeah.

FN: And I don't know why I liked it so well, but I did. There's something that stuck out to me more than anything else did. I just really liked the way it sounded.

BG: And you heard him on records and so on?

FN: I heard him on records and then I got to see him one time in Columbia. I got to see him there at the theatre in Columbia. I got to see Lester and Earl down there.

BG: Columbia, Kentucky?

FN: Yes. In fact, I bought a book that he had; I think probably fifty cents at that time that showed the chords and all of that in it. That's where I learned the chords.

BG: So even then, the guys who were playing in these bands would sell books and instruments?

FN: Yeah. They would sell their pictures and they would sell books. They had a lot of things like that that they would sell.

BG: so, Gibson made banjos for a long time, right? Can you give a little bit of history about that?

FN: I think they came from Africa to start with, but anyway, Gibson was making the banjos in the '20s and the 30s, which you had other companies that were too. Back in the day, you had Vega and a lot of other companies that were making them, but the Gibson was more sought after for the Bluegrass musicians. They liked the sound of the Gibson for the Bluegrass music. Basically, I guess, probably because Earl Scruggs played one. It was made in the '20's and the 30's, before the war, and they made a lot of what they called the tenors and the plectrums, which the tenor is four strings and has got the short neck, and then the plectrum is the four strings with the twenty-two fret neck, same as a five stringed.

BG: Does that make the neck longer?

FN: It makes a longer neck.

BG: But it's still a four string?

FN: Yes.

BG: Ok.

10:25

FN: So, what we would do, we would take, you could find them in the pawnshops at good prices, and we would take them and people would buy them and then I would put a five stringed neck on them for them. I have put necks on a lot of them.

BG: That was part of why you got into the business?

FN: That's the very reason I got into it, because I was doing the only necks to begin with.

BG: In Indiana?

FN: I started doing that in probably '67 & '68, and the only thing I did was make necks up until '75 when I built Ralph his first complete banjo. That's the first one I built was for him.

BG: How did you make that step from...?

[Interruption – skip in DVD]

11:04

FN: A lot of them to do... Of course, the area I was in, I didn't advertise. I converted about all of the banjos that were around the Indianapolis area.

BG: About forty or fifty or a hundred?

FN: It would have been over a hundred. Probably close to two hundred. So I didn't have much to do doing the necks so I thought, I'll see if I can do the whole banjo. I checked with Ralph and yeah, he wanted me to build him one and then whenever he called and said ok, you make these and I'll sell them, then I got acquainted with Jimmy Cox, the guy that's in Maine that made all of the hardware and made all of the wood rims and the resonators, and all that, and started working with him.

BG: And he's in Kentucky too?

FN: He is from Kentucky, but he's in Maine.

BG: In Maine?

FN: Yeah.

BG: Oh ok.

FN: But he is originally from Kentucky, but he has been in Maine for several years now.

BG: And he made what you called the hardware?

FN: He makes the hardware, and then he makes the wood rims and the resonators. And then, of course, the wood rims, you have to have the good Hardrock Maple to make a good sounding banjo, and he's up there where he can get that, up North where you can get the good Hardrock Maple.

BG: Is that why he moved up there?

FN: No. He was in the Air Force.

BG: Oh ok.

FN: That's what got him up there in the first place, and then he married a girl up there and he stayed.

BG: It just happened to be where you got good Maple wood?

FN: Yes.

BG: Ok.

FN: Yes.

BG: So you worked with him for years, and you still work with him, right?

FN: I still work with him, although he doesn't do much work anymore because he is way up in his seventies now. But we still, I'll do finish work for him, and we trade work back and forth, and we've done that for a long time. He makes the wood rims and the hardware that we use. He makes everything but the tuning pegs. He doesn't make those.

BG: And those are metal?

FN: They are metal and they have the gears in them and all that.

BG: Who makes those?

FN: Stuart MacDonald has some. I don't know, there is a machine shop that makes them for them, but I don't know who does it.

BG: Oh ok, but you get yours from...

FN: Yeah, I get mine; I buy mine from Stu Mac or some place like that.

BG: Ok. Can you show me kind of what you are talking about? You have some pieces right behind you of the elements of a banjo, right?

FN: I do. **[FN begins to pick up pieces to demonstrate].** This is a tone ring here. This is what we call the flange. And this is the wood rim that they fit on.

SA: Can you hold that up a little?

FN: We get these in the rough and of course, I have to turn them and make everything fit them.

BG: And there is a rough one back there, that big one there.

FN: That's one with the Monroe flair [**Uncertain of transcription**]. We get them like that.

BG: So you get from the Cox guy?

FN: Yeah, we get them from Jimmy Cox like this, and he bends the wood and glues them together. It is three-ply Maple is what they are. They are made out of three pieces of Maple.

BG: Ok. And you take this piece...?

FN: I take this piece and put it on the turning lathe and turn it to where it will fit, turn it like this where the flange will fit on it. This is the flange.

BG: Where do you get the flange?

FN: This came from... Jimmy Cox makes them. He makes those too.

BG: He makes flanges? Ok.

FN: And he makes the flanges, so it fits on like that. And then the tone rings. Now this tone ring, this one is made up in Ohio by Bill Blaylock, up there in Grafton, Ohio, that makes the tone rings. He puts my name on the tone rings. They've got, it's got my name in there on it, and it fits on like that.

BG: You had to cut down the, what's it called...?

FN: I had to cut down the rim to fit all of this to it, yes.

BG: So there are different depths that you have to cut?

FN: Yes. You have to cut this one here for the tone ring, and then you cut a different one for the flange.

BG: Ok. And you pick out the color somewhere along the line?

FN: The color, yeah, you can make them any color you want to, but we try to stick with the colors kind of like what Gibson used in the 30s.

BG: Ok.

FN: That's what everybody is used to, something like that, and that's what we like to stick with.

BG: So your innovations are not so much in, I mean, the models you use are pretty much based on what Gibson made, right?

FN: It is. We copied what Gibson had done back in the '30s when they were doing them back then.

BG: But the artwork of it, you add to it as inlay...

FN: The inlay, and then the shapes of our necks and the woods that we make the necks out of and things like that, we do all of the neck, in fact, I've even bought logs from saw mills and cut them into pieces and then made necks out of them.

15:57

BG: I saw over in your area you have a whole rack of wood that you use for that.

FN: I do. I cut the neck blanks and usually I'll date them when I cut them out because I like to leave them at least a year or two years before I use them. Although they are dry when I cut them, when I saw them out, I still like to lay them up and let them...

BG: Why?

FN: A lot of times, if you are using a piece of Maple, it will, Maple is pretty bad to bow and if you cut it out and lay it up for a year or two if it's going to bow it will and then you can sand it straight and it will stay straight then.

BG: Ok. So how'd you learn all of that about how the wood behaves?

FN: By doing it.

BG: Those other guys didn't teach you?

FN: No. This is all I've done over the past thirty-one, thirty-two years and so I learned that by doing it, but experimenting with it and...

BG: You didn't go down to Gibson and see them?

FN: I've been to Gibson and they showed me through their factory, but as far as learning anything from them I was already doing everything and I've had Gibson come in here and ask me to show them things.

BG: Really?

FN: Yeah.

BG: Tell me about that.

FN: Well, they were making Curtis McPeake a banjo once, and Curtis wanted them to come up and have me show them how I turned the rims and the type of fingerboards we used and the way we did them. They came up here with Curtis and spent the day. I turned a couple of rims for them while they were here, and we did some fingerboards for them, for his banjos, and then I don't think they made any of them because they said it was too much handwork and they couldn't get their machines to do what we were doing. It was too much handwork so they just dropped the project and never did finish it out.

BG: And Curtis is a banjo player?

FN: He's a banjo player, yes.

BG: So they came up to see some methods that you were doing because they didn't do it anymore that way.

FN: Right. Yeah, they didn't know how we did it.

BG: Now if you go to Gibson today, is most of their stuff done by a whole bunch of different people?

18:03

FN: It is, you know, they contract it out. I know the guys in Louisville were doing their necks for them and turning their rims for them, so you know, they have different people over the different areas. One will do one job and somebody else will do a different job and they send it all to Gibson and they basically finish it and put it all together. But they aren't doing any of it now. They don't do banjos now.

BG: Oh, Gibson doesn't do banjos now?

FN: No, not since the flood went through Nashville, they've not done any.

BG: When was that?

FN: Three years ago.

BG: What does the flood have to do with it?

FN: They got up in their factory and they had to destroy most of their material and everything. The flood, once the floodwaters got into their material and all that they had to throw it away and they never started back doing it.

BG: Just banjos. They still make guitars, right?

FN: They make guitars, but they don't do mandolins and they don't do banjos. Of course, the water got into the...

BG: So has that given you more business?

FN: Not that I can tell. No. I still do necks and people are still coming up with the pre-war Gibsons that were made in the '30s and they'll send them in and we do put necks on them and things like that, like I've done for all of the time.

BG: How do people hear about you?

FN: I'm on the Internet. If you go to the computer and punch in "Frank Neat" that's what shows up – banjos.

BG: Banjos.

FN: Yeah.

BG: If you punch in “banjos”...

FN: Then Frank Neat will show up.

[Unable to transcribe comments due to laughter]

BG: So, a lot of the people we’ve been interviewing are guitar makers or mandolin makers. A lot of what they make is from scratch because they don’t need the metal parts and other things, right? But it’s not unusual in banjo making to get these different manufactured parts...

FN: Well, like Jimmy is set-up for doing the wood rims. I’ve got the equipment to do them with, but he’s already set-up to do them and I can do finish work for him. I’m set-up to do that, and it speeds the job up. If he does part of it, like the wood rims and the resonators, and then I shape his necks and finish them for him and things like that, because I’m set-up to do that.

BG: Even though you are going a little faster because you can do faster things, do you feel like the quality suffers at all?

FN: No I don’t. I think we’ve watched that close. If anything we do is something that, if I was buying myself then that’s what I would look for, and if it doesn’t come up to my standards then we don’t put it out there.

BG: That’s the test for you, huh?

FN: Yes.

BG: And on that right there you have a board.

FN: This?

BG: Yeah. What’s that thing called?

FN: This is a neck blank. It’s just a neck blank that I’ve cut out.

BG: You cut that out.

FN: I cut that out and then I put the date on it. Then I lay it up and I let it lay there for a while.

BG: You don’t know what banjo that’s going to go with at that time.

FN: No I don’t. It’s just a piece of Mahogany wood that’s cut into a neck blank.

BG: And you said the pieces on the back there go on the sides?

FN: This here are the pieces, they call them the ears.

BG: You have another piece over there...

FN: I have a piece here that's already got them on there. This piece of Maple already has the ears on it. This is what Gibson did back pre-war, they did this same thing, because it would take a piece of wood that would be over three inches wide if you didn't put those on there, so you'd have a lot of waste down there.

BG: Oh I see, so you are putting those little sides on.

FN: You put those little ears on and it saves you a lot of wood.

BG: So that's been standard for a long time?

FN: Standard. Yes.

BG: And then you...?

FN: Then I put the rod in it, which is a truss rod.

BG: And that's like a guitar, it keeps it straight.

FN: It does. It will bow it, this rod will bow it, if it bows up you can straighten it, and if it bows back then you can bow it the other way, it will bow it either way.

BG: Ok. So why is there a piece? It's not flat.

FN: You cut your groove for the rod to go down in. Then this is a filler stick that you put over the top of it and I've sanded this down flat.

BG: You've sanded it down.

FN: Yeah this gets sanded down even with the wood.

BG: So that takes a lot of carving to do the head.

22:25

FN: And we glue, once we get this sanded down then we glue the piece of Ebony wood on here and we shape the peg head on it...

BG: And that's Ebony wood?

FN: ...which is like this one that's been shaped out. And that's got a piece of Ebony wood. This is Ebony wood that's glued on there.

BG: And that's a chunk of it behind you isn't it?

FN: Yes. This is a chunk of the Ebony that we've got. We cut these caps out of this...

BG: Ok.

FN: ... and make those.

BG: So the Ebony wood is on there, and next you are going to drill out the holes?

FN: What he'll do next is cut the inlay and lay the inlays down on there and cut the holes and put the inlay in.

BG: Oh ok.

FN: Then we will do the fingerboard. We will cut the inlays and put them on the fingerboard, then we will glue the fingerboard on it.

BG: It looks awful thick. How do you get it thin?

FN: Do you mean this?

BG: Yeah.

FN: Once the fingerboard is glued on we saw it down with a bandsaw and close, and then I've got a shaper back there that I'll run it through and then I'll finish it up by hand.

BG: And it looks like that?

FN: And it looks, and you know, it rounds it out and all that.

BG: You've got a finished one back there?

FN: We've got, yes, that's a finished one there. One we did for J.D. It's "The New South."

BG: It says New South on the top.

FN: Yeah, and J.D. Crowe down here.

BG: Is that the way you always put the, right towards the bottom there you put the name of the model on it?

FN: They, we do that because Gibson, when they were doing them, they put "Master Tone" down there. They put Gibson up here and Master Tone down there. Banjo players want them to look like the Gibson did. That's the reason we put the name down there on them.

BG: Does that bother you that you have to copy the Gibson so much?

FN: It doesn't. No, because I hadn't seen anything that I felt like was better than what Gibson had done then, and until I see something that I feel like is better it doesn't bother me to copy them.

BG: What makes it a Frank Neat and not a Gibson?

FN: Whenever we do ours. This here, this particular one here has got J.D.'s name on it, but we cut our inlay just a little bit different than what Gibson does now. They do theirs with a computer and we don't, we still do ours by hand.

BG: You do, ok.

FN: And that makes it a little bit that makes it different. Then we pick out the real nice pieces of wood, then we get the shape of the neck, we do them different than about everyone else does. We've got a real good shape that everyone that plays likes.

BG: What do you mean? It's thinner?

FN: The shape of the roundness of it. The back of it here, the roundness of it, we try to fix it to wear it will fit your hand.

BG: Individually or just anybody's hand?

FN: Just anybody's hand.

BG: Ok.

FN: If somebody wants one a little wider or a little thicker we can do that, but we've got a standard size that we build and it seems like most everybody likes that.

BG: Do you get a lot of comments on that?

FN: We do. Yes.

BG: Well that's nice. How did you find that shape?

FN: J.D.'s help.

BG: Really?

FN: Yeah, he used to come down and he would come down and spend the day with me and he would take the necks that I had built and he would says, "This needs a little bit taken off of it here," or, "It needs a little bit here," and so I kept working with until I got one that he said, "This is what you need." So whenever he did that I made a cutter that would cut that shape neck and that's what we get.

BG: Maybe later we can go over and see that cutter, right?

FN: It's back there on a...

BG: That actually... so do you kind of have the dimensions of that in your head or do you have a template?

FN: No, I've got the dimensions in my head. I know what the, with a bandsaw, I know the thickness to saw it so that it comes out in the right thickness.

26:09

BG: And if somebody comes in and says, "I'd like a thinner one than that."

FN: Then I can make it a little thinner. If they want one a little thicker, I can do that. All I have to do is leave a little more wood or take a little more wood off when you saw it with a bandsaw.

BG: So next to a Gibson, this would be a thinner neck than the Gibson.

FN: It's about the size that the Gibson pre-war necks were. It's a little bit different than what their size was, but it's close to the Gibson pre-war necks.

BG: Pre-World War I, or II?

FN: World War II.

BG: So did things change at Gibson after World War II?

FN: Oh yeah. After the '40s, up and around '50 when they started back building them it was completely different.

BG: Not as good, or good, or...?

FN: Well, no, really, I don't think they were as good. The better ones were made in the '30s. That's when they made their best instruments.

BG: Really?

FN: Yes.

BG: Why do you think so?

FN: Probably because of the material they had to use. There was good wood that they had to use, and they had a good combination of the tone ring, I can tell you what all of the professionals looked for is something that sounds like the Gibson did in the '30s. And a lot of them have those banjos, but those that don't have them, that's what they are looking for.

BG: I know making instruments is kind of dependent on who is buys them and what they want.

FN: It does. Yes.

BG: So you get the same thing from professional musicians who are buying your stuff, they want a certain a sound.

FN: They do. Basically, there are a lot of different things you can do to make one sound different by changing bridges and the tightness of the head and things like that. What the professionals want is something that stays in tune good and plays good. Something that will play, that feels good in their hand, and will play easy and all, they like that.

BG: And staying in tune, how do you make that happen?

FN: Well, by making sure that everything fits together well and little things like that. You cut the heel of the neck cut to fit the body really good where there is no play in that, and then good tuners. You have to have that on them to stay in tune good.

BG: So you've had J.D. Crowe being kind of a consultant unofficially right?

FN: Yes.

BG: For years?

FN: This was back, about the time that I started doing it full-time in '80, long into the '80s he would come down and help me, and I worked with him a lot to try to get the sized neck that he wanted and we were doing some necks for him at that time. He helped me a lot to get the shape of the neck that we've got.

BG: And he would just come down here because he wanted to?

FN: Yeah, he liked this. He said he'd like to be able to do this.

BG: Yeah. Why didn't he do it with someone else who was closer to Lexington or something?

FN: I don't think there was anyone else at that time that was doing it. I was about the only one doing this work at that time because back then there just was not a lot of people who did it.

BG: And they knew you?

FN: Yes.

BG: Was there a point when you knew these guys and you started building them that you could feel that you were getting famous or getting well known?

FN: Yeah. When Ralph would sell them, he would play them on stage and then tell the audience who made them and where I lived and then he would sell them and he sold a lot of them. He sold them as fast as we could make them for several years.

29:42

BG: How did he sell them?

FN: Just to the individual, to the individual that was out in the audience.

BG: Right after the show though, right?

FN: Yeah. He would play it and then sell it.

BG: Wow.

FN: He would play it on his show and then turn around and sell it.

BG: What kind of show was that?

FN: On his regular shows that he does.

BG: Oh, you mean on tour? So he would take a bunch of them with him?

FN: He would take them with him and anytime we would go out west he would take them with him and he usually had one or two with him at all time and he would sell the one he was playing and then he would get another one and play it.

BG: So he must have been making a little profit on it, right?

FN: Oh yeah.

BG: Yeah?

FN: Oh yeah. He did well on them too. But without him I probably could have never been doing what I'm doing because he did do all of the advertisement for me and told people where I lived and how to contact me.

BG: So what started happening? Did people start...

FN: They started calling me and wanting me to do work for them, and wanting me to do repair work for them. I do a lot of that. Then of course, the banjos that I had done for him, they would want me to do the work on them as they played them.

BG: We were talking to Cathy Currier in Richmond and she doesn't make instruments so much as sets them up...

FN: Yeah, does repair work on them.

BG: How important is the set-up and repair to making a banjo sound good?

FN: Well, to repair one, a lot of times after you put one together the neck will come up on it so you have to adjust that, and then, of course, the frets will always wear.

BG: Oh they do? I didn't realize that.

FN: Yeah, they wear. You have to replace them with, some people, Leroy Lewis; I think I replace his once a year.

BG: Wow.

FN: But anyway, you have to do that and all of that goes with the set-up that is on them. You have to keep them up and in shape just like an automobile and keep it up if you drive it.

BG: Do people come to you to do set-ups?

FN: They do. Basically, in setting on up, you make sure that the neck is set right, it's straight, and the head, sometimes you have to change the head on them to get them set-up. Then the bridge, you have to make sure it's setting in the right place and things like that.

BG: Well we were talking a little bit about the Alvis [**Uncertain of word**], the parts, can I bring that one over to you and you kind of show it.

FN: Well I've got it here.

BG: Oh you've got it there. Ok.

FN: Yeah, I've got it here.

32:11

[FN goes off screen to retrieve banjo]

32:17

BG: So all the parts that we were talking about, the neck and the...

FN: Ok, the neck is this part here. This one is inlaid. This is a fingerboard with inlay on it.

BG: What's that made out of?

FN: The fingerboard.

BG: What is it made of?

FN: Rosewood.

BG: Is it always Rosewood or...

FN: Rosewood or Ebony.

BG: Ok.

FN: And the neck is Maple. It's what they call a Fiddle-back Maple. This piece of wood here actually came out of Maine from Jimmy Cox. I got it from Jimmy.

BG: You call, that particular neck is a “Fiddle-back”?

FN: It’s what they call a Fiddle-back Maple.

BG: Because it’s got those lines it?

FN: Because it’s got lines in it. Yes.

BG: That’s very pretty.

FN: And then the resonator is the quilted, it’s a quilted resonator, it’s “Quilted Maple”.

BG: That’s pretty amazing. Do all of yours look like that?

FN: The quilted ones do, yeah. And then you’ve got all the hardware on it. You’ve got the flange, you’ve got the tone ring...

BG: Now what’s a flange?

FN: Here’s the flange. This is the flange here.

BG: Ok, and that keeps it away from the wooden part?

FN: Well, it helps; your hooks go through the flange to hold the head down. You know, you’ve got your tension hoop up here, it holds your head down, but your hooks also go through the flange and when you tighten it up it holds the head.

BG: I never realized it, but that piece of wood that goes through the middle there, that hoop, what do you call that?

FN: The rim.

BG: The rim is inside there.

FN: Yeah.

BG: Can you see that?

FN: That’s the only part that you can see when you get it together.

BG: Once you’ve got it all together that’s the only part you can see?

FN: That one part right there, that’s all you can see.

BG: Oh ok. But why do you have to have wood in there?

FN: Well, you have to fit the wood; you have to fit all of the hardware to the wood. You have to have something to hold the tone ring and the flange and all of that apart.

BG: And does that help resonate it to?

FN: It does.

BG: Ok.

FN: It does.

BG: So you've got that piece of wood and then you've got the flange, now what's the part on top that holds the head?

FN: This is the tension hoop.

BG: Tension hoop. Ok.

FN: This is the tension hoop here.

BG: Ok.

FN: Then you've got the armrest here and the tailpiece.

BG: So what are all those screws coming down and forward?

FN: Those are the hooks. They call them the hooks. On the bottom side of them you've got nuts on them. The more you tighten the nuts, then the tighter the head gets on it.

BG: How do you get back in there to tighten those?

FN: You take the resonator off. There are four screws that take the resonator off of it.

BG: Oh ok. So that resonator comes off?

FN: It does. There are four screws... I'll take it off here in just a minute.

BG: I don't want to ruin anything.

FN: Nah, we can put it back. It will just take a minute to take it off.

BG: Those four screws hold that, a resonator?

FN: You see, and here's the nuts, and you tighten them against the flange, and then that pulls the head down and that puts the tension on the head here.

BG: And the head, what is that made out of?

FN: Plastic.

BG: Plastic? Ok.

FN: And then, these rods there hold the neck on. Those two coordinator rods? That's what holds the neck on the body.

BG: You showed me before; there were two little screws...

FN: Well yeah, these screw up on the screws. Those screws come through two holes on the body and then these screw up on the screws.

BG: Ok, I see them now. And there are screws in the bottom too?

FN: Yes.

35:40

BG: And that holds it all tight together?

FN: Yes. And then you've got those wall lugs that hold the resonator on.

BG: So how does it all make it sound good?

FN: Well, it sounds, this resonates the sound, the resonator does. A lot of guys will play without a resonator on them because if you are doing the old-timey Clawhammer type banjo... See the way it sounds there? **[Demonstrates on banjo]** Now when you put the resonator on it...

BG: It's louder.

FN: Yeah, and it resonates it out.

BG: Oh ok. So now I understand. So some people don't even use the resonators if they are doing the Clawhammer?

FN: Right. So if they were doing the Clawhammer old-timey like banjo playing, they would rather have it with no resonator on it.

BG: Why?

FN: Because they don't want them real loud.

BG: Oh ok.

FN: It sounds better if it's not real loud.

BG: Like Lee Sexton, he plays Clawhammer a lot?

FN: Yeah.

BG: Does he not use a resonator on the back?

FN: I don't know about him, but I know a lot of the guys that play Clawhammer don't want a resonator on the banjo.

BG: Do people buy it with a resonator and then take it off for different...?

FN: Normally, if they buy it with a resonator, the people that are doing the three finger-style picking, they want a resonator on it. And the ones that are doing Clawhammer they don't want a resonator on it to start with so you use a different set-up on this so that you don't have the flange and all that on it if it doesn't have the resonator.

BG: Could you show me a Clawhammer versus a three finger?

FN: No, I can't do the Clawhammer. I know they just do it just...

BG: Wailing away?

FN: Yeah. Just, you know, like that.

BG: Ok, so show me a three finger then?

FN: The three fingered... **[Demonstrates on banjo]**

BG: And that's how most Bluegrass musicians play?

FN: With your thumb and two fingers.

BG: You don't use your other fingers at all then?

37:40

FN: No, you just set them down and... **[Demonstrates]**

BG: You do all that... **[Difficult to transcribe due to demonstration]**

FN: You put picks on. They put picks on.

BG: But you get all of the melody out of those three fingers. It takes a lot of learning how to do that, doesn't it?

FN: Yeah, it does. It takes a while just to train your fingers to do it.

BG: And you used to be a player in a band so you...

FN: I played for a long time in a band, yeah.

BG: So you know what it should sound like.

FN: I do, and I know the way they should play. I know whenever they are playing right, and when they are ready to play on stage and all of that, I know all that, because I've done that.

BG: Are there instrument makers who have never played?

FN: Yeah, there are some. I know of a few that have never played professionally. They may have played a little bit, but they haven't played much.

BG: Well I've head of people who just say, "Well, I took it apart and I put it back together and that's how I learned to do it." It seems like they wouldn't really learn what you know.

FN: The only thing you learn by taking one apart and putting it back together is just how to put it back together. That's about the only thing you learn. It takes a long time to learn what changes the sound of them and what really makes the difference in the way they sound and you can put a different neck on this and it might sound different than this one here does because of the different piece of wood. See, your wood has a lot to do with the way they sound too.

BG: Let's talk about this particular one here. This is a Frank Neat.

FN: Yeah, it's just a one piece built up special. It's just a special. This is the only one we've done like this.

BG: Oh really?

FN: Yeah, it's got the gold Mother of Pearl in it instead of the white. And then it's got some Abalone pearl in it. Then we put, we even put the, anymore you can get gold frets. We put the gold fret in this.

BG: You can't get them anywhere?

FN: We can get them, yeah, we can get them. They are harder to work with, but we put those in this one. We built this one up special because we just wanted to do something that nobody else had done and that's what we did with this one.

BG: So the special part of it is...?

FN: The difference in the inlays and...

BG: And the amount of gold in it I guess?

FN: Well yeah, this is just gold plated.

BG: Oh I see. Ok.

FN: The hardware is all just gold platted.

BG: So can people buy this?

FN: Yeah it's for sale.

BG: This is a Frank Neat model.

FN: Yeah, it's for sale, and we could make one if somebody wanted one like it then we could make them like it too. That's the reason we did this one because if somebody did want one then we could make it and we'd have this one to show.

BG: This is your showing one?

FN: Yes.

BG: Cool. So as an artist, which I think you are, what makes that a piece of art to you?

FN: The way that all of it is fit together, and then this inlay work, it takes an artist to do this inlay. Like it is up there with our name on it and all of that. See? **[Holds up banjo]**

BG: Yeah.

FN: There's an art to that, and especially when you do it by hand. That's the way that Ricky does it, he cuts it all by hand.

BG: Do you guys sit down and say, "This is what I envision it looking like?"

FN: I normally do that. I normally tell him, "Let's do this, or let's do that." Then I'll pick out some inlay and I've had him to cut it and I've told him, "Can you cut this and make this a little finer." We work together like that.

BG: Does he get mad at you?

FN: No, no, in fact, he likes me to do that because he learns from it.

BG: I can't imagine working with my dad unless...

FN: We get along good.

BG: Do you?

FN: Yeah, the two of us. We really do. We get along good.

BG: Ricky came up to the History Center (Kentucky History Center) and he talked about you that one day and that was great, and talked about how you guys work together.

FN: Yeah, we've worked... we didn't, when he first stated this before he went out and worked at a few other things it was a little bit rough working at times, but nothing real drastic, but since he went and worked at other places and came back here and worked we get along real well.

BG: When we talked to some mandolin players and makers, they talked about the wood having certain sounds.

42:09

FN: It does, but now, especially with guitars and mandolins, it has so more than with banjos. The wood does make a difference in the way the banjo sounds.

BG: It does?

FN: It does, but you can, it's the wood rim and the neck that makes the difference. And then, of course, this resonator, the bow you've got in the back of that will make a difference in the way it sounds. The wood that you use on the inside of the resonator will have a bearing on the way they sound, but you've got the hardware, you've got all these metal parts that you are dealing with too.

BG: I was wondering, how do you, that factors into the sound too...

FN: I does. It takes a while to figure out what sounds good with the metal parts and the wood when you put it together to make a good sound. It takes, really, about the only way I know to do that is by experimenting and several years of doing it.

BG: And how do you remember which one sounded better?

FN: When you get one that really sounds good you'll remember it. It's no trouble remembering.

BG: So, then you say, I'm going to do all of these like that.

FN: Yes, and there is a certain way that you do them and everything, and so it works out fine.

BG: Did you find it?

FN: Yeah it's, well I'll find it later.

BG: I think I see it on this side...

FN: Yeah...

BG: It's underneath that big...

FN: Yeah, there it is.

BG: So, where do you sign your stuff? I know you've got your name there. Do you sign it too?

FN: I've signed it on the inside of the resonator, and then we take it and put a number on the inside of the rim you know, a serial number in it and we only make the one with that number and this one here we put the date that we made it and put the number one on it because this is the first one of these like this that we've ever made.

BG: And this one is all tuned up and...

FN: Yeah, its... **[Demonstrates]**

BG: Can you play something for us?

FN: I don't play a whole lot. It's not easy just to quit work and start picking.

BG: Yeah, you really have to practice on a banjo don't you?

FN: Yeah, you have to limber your fingers up some.

BG: Why do I hear so many jokes about banjo players in bands?

FN: I guess, probably because banjos players are bad to tune. They want to tune all of the time and that's because most of them have never learned how to keep their banjo that they got in tune, or they don't have one that will stay in tune. You have to, when you are playing you have to learn what will work with each individual banjo, what will make it stay in tune and what you don't need to do.

BG: What do you mean, what will make it stay in tune?

FN: You know, just like when you are putting a capo on you are tuning, there are different little things that you can do that will help you to stay in tune, but banjo players, it seems like most of them want to tune all the time.

BG: It gives the rest of the band members a headache.

FN: That's the reason why they have so many jokes about them.

BG: Do you know any?

FN: No I don't.

BG: I just remember something about what's different between a boat anchor and about five banjo players, and there's no difference.

45:32

FN: No, about the only one I've heard, something about a guy going through customs one time with a banjo case and the customs official opened it and he had a machine gun in there and they said, "Oh, well you're alright to go, we thought you had a banjo in there." That's about the only one I know.

BG: So, tell me a little bit about the difference between a four string and a five string, how that happened.

FN: You know, I don't know. The only thing I know is that a four string, with the tenor you've only got, some of them had sixteen frets, some of them eighteen frets, and I don't know why they did that, but I know they played the four string with a pick, a straight pick and they played the Ragtime music on them. That's the reason they made them. Because when you were looking for these, the best place to find them was a river town.

BG: Oh really?

FN: Because where they had played the Ragtime music on the riverboat.

BG: So what does a fifth string do? Is it a bass string?

FN: No, it's a G. It's tuned as a G. You've got a D, a B, an E, G, and D, E, and G.

BG: It's the same G as the third string?

FN: But it's just an octave higher.

BG: Ok.

FN: And then your fourth is a D and the first is a D. First is an octave higher.

BG: And what does that allow you to do tuning wise?

FN: That's the way, you know, that's they way that they tuned them when they played the Bluegrass on them and there are different ways you can tune them. This is a G tuning, and then you can tune them in C, and tune them in D.

BG: I'm a little used to guitars and with a banjo you aren't playing chords, right?

FN: You can play chords on one, yeah.

BG: Ok.

FN: Yeah, you've basically, you've got two major positions with the chord and that's that one **[Demonstrates]** and that one, those are your two main ones. Then you've got your bar chord, but your major position is that one there, and that one there.

BG: That's all?

FN: And the rest of it you know, pieces of chords that you do, like your bar chord.

BG: Ok, so that bar is just a straight bar?

FN: Well yeah, you can do that, you know, just like, the banjo is in G, and there's A, and B flat, and on down to B, and then C, you just keep going.

BG: That seems logical.

FN: Yeah, but I learned that from the Earl Scruggs book that I bought that time. All of that was in there.

BG: Sounds like you've been in love with the banjo for a long time.

FN: Oh yeah I have, ever since I was probably eleven or twelve years old, whenever I first heard one and I really liked the way it sounded.

BG: Do you like it by itself, or do you always like it with other instruments?

FN: No, I like it by itself, but I like it with other instruments too.

BG: And what's the function of it in a Bluegrass band?

FN: Well it's a lead instrument. In a Bluegrass band it's a lead instrument, but you also do back-up work with it too, you know, you try to compliment when someone is singing and you do things to compliment their singing you don't try to take anything away from them, you just try to compliment what they are doing. Same way with the other instruments, if you have a mandolin taking the lead then you just try to compliment what they are doing with the banjo, and that takes some learning and you have to learn to do all of that.

BG: And you learn that early, right?

FN: You learn that whenever you are learning to play.

BG: Ok. Wow. You were showing me that there are little black things, pins in there that help you...

FN: Yeah, if you put a capo in A, then you put that there underneath that pin so it will be in A too. Then there's one there for B. Earl Scruggs came up with that back several years ago.

BG: So you just use a pin, huh?

FN: Yeah.

BG: Yeah. Wow. Did Earl Scruggs make his own banjos?

FN: No, he played a Gibson.

BG: He played a Gibson.

FN: Yeah.

BG: So Gibson doesn't make them anymore...

FN: They aren't making them, they might start back, but as of now they're not making them. They haven't made any in about three years.

BG: And the banjos you make are similar to the pre-war ones.

FN: Yes.

BG: Ok. So if somebody wants a really good sounding banjo.

FN: If they want one that plays... There are a lot of professionals that play our banjos, the ones that we've made, so it's, we make a quality banjo that a professional can play, that they do play, that's what we make.

BG: When I first heard about you, I think it was Roby Cogswell, he's a folklorist that lives down in Tennessee, in Nashville, he said, "You gotta go see Frank Neat because everybody in Nashville buys his, lots of people in Nashville buys..."

FN: I do a lot of repair work for them and fret work for them and a lot of things like that.

BG: Do you have to go down there when you do it?

FN: No, they usually bring them here.

BG: That's a pretty good trip for them, isn't it?

FN: Well it's only two hours and half, three hours to Nashville.

BG: Oh ok.

FN: It's not that bad.

BG: So a professional musician, how many banjos does he have when he's on tour?

FN: Normally just the one.

BG: Really?

FN: He would just take one with him on tour, but most of them have three, four, or five at home.

BG: What happens if he breaks it or something?

FN: Well, if he does, he can borrow one from somebody. There is always somebody there with a banjo or he has others at home that he can get and use them.

BG: What kind of sound do people want out of banjos?

FN: It depends on the player. Some want a brighter sound, and some want a duller sound, a deeper tone. It depends on the player.

BG: And you can make that happen by doing...?

FN: You can by doing different parts on the banjo and make it sound different, but then the player has a lot to do with the way it sounds too.

BG: Oh he does?

FN: Yes. They do.

BG: He does?

FN: Yeah.

BG: How's that?

FN: Well, some players, the way they hold their hand and the way they pick, the way they attack their playing, it depends on the sound you really like, and then what you have to do as a player is learn how to get that sound from the banjo that you've got.

BG: So they have an ear for that sound?

FN: Most of them. Yes.

BG: Do they come in here sometimes and try to describe what they want to you?

FN: The professionals don't, they know what they want, but you'll have people that are playing that will try to describe to you what they want, but they'll usually, normally use a professional. Like for example, they'll say, "I want this banjo to sound like J.D.'s," or, "I want it to sound like Earl Scruggs," you know, or something, or maybe Gene Mills is who they want it to sound like that way.

BG: So they are listening to records?

FN: They are listening to other pickers and that's what they want theirs to sound like.

BG: And then you have to make them sound like that?

FN: You can get them to where they sound close, but still it depends on the player and how well they can play.

BG: So if someone came in and they said, "I want a new banjo made by Frank Neat, made just for me, that would sound like J.D. Crowe," you would know what to do.

FN: If I could get them to play some for me and see how they play, well then I can usually figure out what it would take to get the sound they want.

BG: Really?

FN: Yeah.

BG: What are you looking for when they play?

FN: The way they play. The different players, they get different tones from a banjo so you have to figure out what tone they are getting before you can really know what they want, before you know what it takes to get the sound they are wanting.

BG: That's an art right there it sounds like to me.

FN: Well yeah. You don't learn that over night either. That takes a while.

BG: So if somebody came in and said they wanted to sound like J.D., but they didn't play like J.D., you'd have to make the instrument different than J.D.s right?

FN: You do. I have told them before, I have told a few people, they've called me and said, "I want you to make this sound like J.D." and I've said, "Well you'll actually have to have J.D. play it then." That's a lot of time, that's how it works too.

BG: Do you ever tell them you'll need to change your style of playing to make it sound like that?

53:52

FN: I try not to tell them that. I've encouraged them to play different than what they do sometimes, but I don't teach playing so I think that would come in under if you were teaching banjo playing that would come in under that.

BG: But I guess being a craftsman there are always this part of you that you have to sell things.

FN: You do.

BG: You have to know your audience.

FN: And it helps to be able to play in order to be able to sell it too. If somebody comes in here that can't play then I'll try to play and show them what they sound like.

BG: And also try to get them; try to figure out how to make it sound the way they want it to sound.

FN: Try to get them to play and show me how they play and I can try to figure out what they are wanting and what they are looking for.

BG: How long does it take you to figure that out with somebody?

FN: Normally not long if I can get them to sit down and play it. I like to have different banjos. I like to have three or four that sound different and then let them try different ones and let them see what they like the best for them to play on.

BG: You keep them in your safe?

FN: I do. Yes.

BG: I saw a safe out there. Is that what that's for?

FN: It is, and then to keep the ones that I'm working on. If someone brings one in that's valuable, it's an expensive banjo for me to do repair work on it then I keep them in there.

BG: Does that have a humidifier in it and everything?

FN: No, it doesn't, it's just a safe that would protect them from fire.

BG: Yeah that's important. I guess you need a lot of insurance too.

FN: You do. Yes.

BG: How much, when somebody ask you to make something, how much custom inlay do they often ask for?

FN: It will vary. Most people will want something that Gibson has done. They'll want an inlay that Gibson did back in the '30s. The biggest part, I'd say ninety percent of the people want that. Once in a while you'll find someone who wants something different, and if they can draw it up for us then we can do the inlay and we have done that from time to time you know, we've done things that were different, but ninety percent of the time people will want something that Gibson has done.

BG: Now are these professional musicians?

56:10

FN: Yes.

BG: So why do you think they want something that Gibson did?

FN: Because of the sound that Gibson got back then, and that's what they're used to. They like, these guys that play for a living, they get used to one thing and that's what they like.

BG: So did most of these guys start with Gibsons and then they break and then you fix their necks?

FN: I'll repair the necks, fix them and replace the necks, and things like that.

BG: Is the next step then, they say, "Well, I want you to build me one"?

FN: Well, yeah, you'll get that sometimes, but you'll have some people who can't find a Gibson that wants you to build them one and make it sound as much like a Gibson as possible because they can't find one for sale.

BG: But when they get it from you they are actually getting a different kind of neck?

FN: Well it's basically what Gibson did, but the necks that I do are shaped a little bit different. My fret spacing is little bit different that what Gibson did.

BG: The actual space between the frets is different?

FN: Yeah, a little bit.

BG: Doesn't that change the tone?

FN: It changes where the bridge sits.

BG: Oh ok, so you get your intonation from where the bridge is.

FN: Yeah.

BG: I see.

FN: But the professionals like the scale that I've got because it plays real well and it's easy to tune it and if you put a capo on it doesn't pull you out of tune that bad and it seems to work and that's what they are looking for. Someone who is a playing professional is wanting something that works and that they don't have to put a lot of effort into making it work.

BG: You said that Bobby Osborne...

FN: Sonny Osborne.

BG: Sonny Osborne...

FN: Yeah, Bobby's brother, Sonny. Yeah, we've made him several. He calls them the Osborne Chief banjos. He will gather the tone rings and bring them to us and a lot of things like that and we'll finish them all out and make the necks to put in them and put his, we do the inlay work that he likes on them. We put his name on them.

BG: Does his name go on that little space there?

FN: No, well, his name goes up there too.

BG: Oh ok.

FN: Yeah, his name goes here. We've got his signature that goes there.

BG: Oh, the signature.

FN: Yeah, his signature goes there, he's actually signature goes on that.

BG: Oh ok.

FN: But then his name goes up there too.

BG: Wow. So underneath that little bell on there, is that where the truss rod...

FN: That's where the truss rod is at, the little, that, right there, that's what's underneath there.

BG: Do you ever do, instead of the inlay being, what is that called, that inlay?

FN: This is just a custom inlay that we do here.

BG: I mean, what are those little things, little symbols?

FN: Oh they are just little, well, you know, some of them, I don't see any spades on here, they are just little things that they've worked out you know, that looks good.

BG: Over the years, symbols...

FN: Yeah. I don't really know what you would call them.

BG: Have you come up with any new ones that you make?

FN: Oh yeah we have. We do, with the Osborne Chief we do a lot of arrowheads on those.

BG: Oh because it's a chief, ok.

FN: We do a lot of arrowheads, and one of them has tomahawks crossed on it.

BG: Oh really?

FN: Yeah, and things like that on them.

BG: Cool. Do people put their names across?

FN: They do. We have put names all the way up the fingerboard on them, yeah.

BG: So those people don't care about it looking like Gibsons.

FN: There are some people who don't care anything about the Gibson, they want something different than what Gibson did, and they'll usually come down and tell us what they want and the inlay they want and that's the base, that's the big thing that's different, is the inlay on one.

BG: Do you sometimes do inlay on the back on the resonator too?

FN: We have done a few, but not many. You don't do very many.

BG: Does that affect the sound?

FN: It doesn't. No.

BG: So what's the purpose of the binding on the resonator?

1:00:15

[Interruption – videographer changes tape]

1:00:33 – End Track 1

0:00 – Begin Track 2

FN: Carl Story, back when he was living, we made him ten Carl Story guitars.

BG: Carl Story? I don't know him.

FN: He was Bluegrass Gospel; he played with Bill Monroe at one time. Then he had his own band for a long time. He went by "Carl Story and the Rambling Mountaineers." But we made him; back in the '90s we made him ten guitars.

BG: Did he sell them?

FN: He would sell them and I don't know where he sold them. He lived in South Carolina, so I don't know where he sold them. I know he passed away and I hadn't heard anymore from the guitars and then we got to where we were doing so many banjos I didn't have time to do the guitars so I quit doing that.

BG: The guitar is completely different than a banjo.

FN: It is. It takes completely different jigs and different wood and everything.

BG: Yeah. Did you like doing it?

FN: No, not like I did the banjos.

BG: Why didn't you like it?

FN: Whenever we did the guitar, I've got a son, Leon, he's my son, he lived in Texas at that time, and he liked doing the guitars, so I would send everything down and he would put it together and we would finish it.

BG: Ok.

FN: He did basically most of the guitars because he liked fooling with the guitars and I like fooling with the banjos.

BG: Yeah. So your true love is really the banjo?

FN: It is, yes.

BG: What kind of feeling do you get when you are finished with one?

FN: Well, I've done so many of them so really, whenever I'm finished it's just another one done, but back whenever I first started doing them it made you feel good seeing somebody on the Opry playing one of yours or something like that, but it's something you get used to.

BG: Could you see it on TV, the word "Neat"?

FN: You could see it, I've seen them like that, and I've even had, I've had people to mention on the Opry that they were playing one of mine. I've had that happen and it's a good feeling when it first happens, but it is something that you do get used to.

BG: Have you ever had instruments where you are working on it and you just say, "I don't like this, it's not going to work," and you just throw it away at any point?

FN: No, I've never run into one that I couldn't do what I wanted to do with it. There have been some that I wouldn't tackle to start with, I've seen some of those where I would have people call me, today, I had a guy call me today and wanted me to do a job and I told him I don't want to do it, I can't, I'm just not set-up for doing that.

BG: What was he asking you to do?

FN: Add more wood to the heel. Somebody had cut it wrong and he wanted me to basically go and fix somebody else's mess up is what he wanted me to do, something that somebody had messed up, he wanted me to fix it. So I try to steer away from that.

BG: Why is that?

FN: Well it's hard to fix-up, some things you just can't fix. You can take more off, but you can't add back on it when it comes to wood. If somebody's cut too much off or something like that, well then there's not a lot that you can do.

BG: I imagine there are so many parts that work together in this thing...

FN: There is.

BG: ...that you can't just add to it and make it feel good.

FN: Well, I've seen behind the neck and things like that I've seen shims that people have put in there and things like that, but when you do that you don't get a good sound, you don't get a good solid sound like you do if you don't use shims.

BG: Is there any glue in this?

FN: The rim, the wood rim is three-ply, it's glued together.

BG: But everything else is...

FN: And the filler stick, right there, that's glued into there. And then you've got, this cap up here is glued on, and the fingerboard is glued on.

BG: We interviewed a fiddle maker, and he would glue things with a certain kind of glue so you could unglue when you had to. Sometimes you have to do that with instruments.

FN: Well I glue it with glue that you can unglue it.

BG: Oh you can?

FN: Yeah, well you know, from time to time I have seen, I have changed fingerboards on necks because they will eventually wear out if they are played enough, so I glue it with a glue that you can get lose, it will come apart if you need to take it apart.

4:24

[Interruption – cut in film]

4:27

BG: What do you fish for?

FN: Crappie, mostly. Mostly crappie, yeah.

SA: We're rolling.

4:37

BG: I guess I was going to ask you; do you have a story about one of your favorite instruments that you made?

FN: I guess one of the, you know one of the best memories I've got in this, back four or five years ago my wife got Earl Scruggs to come up for a birthday party.

BG: Your birthday party?

FN: Yeah, of course he played one of my banjos and then later that summer she got Earl to come back, and J.D. and Little Roy Lewis and you know, we had a bunch of them and had a good jam session over at the house. Then I took a banjo down to Lizzie Long that I worked on for her, and Earl was there at her house and he wanted us to come over and spend the night with him. So, you know, he told us stories about when he and Lester was with the Beverly Hillbillies and he can tell you some good stories, but to get to see him sit and play one of my banjos, it really meant a lot to me because he really liked them and he's been here in the shop and set here and talked to me.

BG: Did he die a few years ago?

FN: He died about, back a month ago, a little over a month ago. He was 88 years old.

BG: So that must have been an honor to have him come.

FN: It was, and it was an honor to get and go spend the night with him because it was just something that nobody gets to do. He showed us his awards that he had won down through the years and it was really nice getting to do that.

BG: What did he think about being on the Beverly Hillbillies?

FN: He liked it. There were things about it that he really liked. He had a lot of stories that he could tell you about that to.

BG: That's when I saw him first. I was a little kid and I didn't know who he was.

FN: They enjoyed doing all of that. Of course, it helped their career a lot too them doing that.

BG: So why did these kind of banjos become the Bluegrass, the resonator ones?

FN: That's because when Earl started playing with Bill Monroe in the '40s that what he was playing, the banjo, the Gibson banjo, and he was the one that brought the three fingered picking to the public. A lot of the playing that everybody had heard was the Clawhammer, and then it took the three finger playing and it seemed it fit the Bluegrass music really well. It's a combination that came together back in the '40s with Lester and Earl and Bill and that's where the Bluegrass...

BG: But he wasn't Bill's first banjo player was he?

FN: No, String Bean was playing with Bill, but String Bean, String would only play the Clawhammer, but Earl was the first banjo player that Bill had that would do the finger picking.

BG: And that was more, you could do more rhythm...?

FN: You could do more with it, it sounded better with the Bluegrass music.

BG: I know a lot of those bands would play around one microphone when they...

FN: They did, yeah, and the only thing you had to do, we did that at Bean Blossom when we had to play as staff band there and you just have to learn when to move in and out.

BG: Did you have to hold your banjo...?

FN: You have to hold it where the mic will pick it up and you have to learn your part and when it's going to be to move in and out, get in and do your part and then get out so somebody else can do theirs is what you have to do.

BG: I've heard that people are starting to go back to that.

FN: Some, they are, some of them are doing that, yes.

BG: Yeah. You've gotten some honors over the years, haven't you? Do you belong to a luthier organization?

FN: No, I don't.

BG: You don't? Ok.

FN: I've never, the only thing I've ever made from this is a living. That's the only thing I've ever gotten from it.

BG: That's kind of like an award, having those guys come.

FN: It is. You know, they still do, they still come by, and it's nice to have them come in here and sit, they'll sit here and play and we enjoy that.

BG: Right in here?

FN: Yeah, they'll sit right here and play.

BG: Wow. Do you ever videotape it or anything?

FN: I do. I've got a videotape of Earls. I can't let it out because of his sons.

BG: His sons won't let you?

FN: Well, they'd want their share of it. They would think you were selling them, so they would want their share.

BG: I brought up the idea of being part of a luthier organization, but I just get the idea, do you know other banjo makers that you admire, or that you work with or anything like that?

FN: Jimmy Cox is the only one that I actually work with. Steve Huber has a company in Nashville in Hendersonville and I'll get him to do some gold plating from time to time, but Jimmy is the only one that I actually work it. You know, he does a good job by doing what he does and we work back and forth and we've done that for a long time.

BG: Do you learn anything from other banjo makers?

FN: You know, you can always learn some. I don't think you ever get too old to learn things, I don't learn a whole lot from them because I'm not around them a lot. There's a lot of people making banjos and I've had, most of them have come in here to get ideas from me.

BG: Like who?

FN: Well, Steve Huber for one. He used to come here a lot. Then there's a guy in Virginia, or North Carolina, Yates, his name is Yates, and he's been here. Arthur Hatfield, he's, I've known Arthur way before he started doing this, before I started doing it.

BG: Oh really?

FN: Yeah, I've known Arthur for a long time.

BG: You guys from the same area?

FN: No, I got acquainted with him because I was playing music, because we both played music and I've even played in the same band with him a few times.

BG: His banjos are different from yours I guess?

FN: It is, yes.

BG: Did he borrow any of your style making or anything like that?

FN: Not a whole lot. He will do, I've not seen Arthurs operation so I really don't know what all, I've seen some of his banjos.

BG: Do you like them?

11:06

FN: I do, yeah. They're fine.

BG: But yours are kind of...

FN: Mine are different than his are. He does his, he tries, he's got several of the guys playing his banjos and he likes to do that and I've got several of them playing mine, but I've been doing it so long, I've been doing it a lot longer than he has.

BG: So he's right down the road, and your, is that area kind of a hot bed of banjo, or just you two?

FN: No, just us two. We've got First Quality in Louisville that building banjos.

BG: Louisville where, Kentucky?

FN: First Quality Music Supply. They make banjos there. And then Arthur builds them and I build them, and Steve Huber, he builds them, you know, so we've got several people.

BG: Where is Steven Huber?

FN: He's in Hendersonville, Tennessee.

BG: Hendersonville.

FN: Yeah.

BG: Where is Hendersonville?

FN: North of Nashville, just before you get to Nashville.

BG: Oh Tennessee, just before you get to, yeah, ok, I forgot you said Tennessee. Ok. So there's kind of a network.

FN: There are several people doing it, not a whole lot, but when I first started doing it there was nobody. I was the only one that was doing it when I first started building the Ralph Stanley banjo.

BG: Is there a, you talked about I guess, you taught people, right? Your son, and then you said the other guy worked here.

FN: Yeah, I showed him some things. He worked with me a couple of years. Then he went on. I don't know what he's doing now; I don't know where he went.

BG: Well see, we have an apprenticeship program with the Kentucky Arts Council and we've given grants out to people to take on apprentices to try to teach them, we really haven't had any in instrument making. We have like Basketmakers from Highway 31W, banjo playing, like Lee Sexton did one with somebody, but it's the instrument makers that we really haven't had anybody apply for a grant. Why is that?

FN: There are a lot of people, you know, it's a different talent to build a banjo. To start with, it takes a lot of patience because when you first start this it doesn't always come out the way that you want it to, and you've got to keep trying and trying until you get it like you want it. So it takes a lot of patience. And you know, there are a lot of people that are interested in it, I don't know, I don't try to find anybody that will work here, because we don't have that much to where you could have an employee anyway, we don't have that much to do, but I don't know where you would find one if you were looking for one, to find someone to come in here and do this kind of work, you just don't find them.

BG: Because of the patience part of it?

FN: Because of your patience and if you have to, you show them how to do something and then you have to make sure that they do it right and it's easier to go ahead and do it yourself.

14:27

BG: Your son has kind of watched you.

FN: He has. He's watched me and went through it.

BG: How important was the family aspect, him being part of your family, that let you take him on.

FN: Well he was with me whenever he was small. He watched me do it when he was small, so he just grew up with it.

BG: But he didn't know how to make this stuff did he, until he came back?

FN: No. He would work with me, but until he went and worked other places, whenever it got to be three o'clock he quit. Now, if he's doing a job, he will go ahead and work until he gets it done.

BG: You said earlier that he'd get in here at 7 or something.

FN: He gets here about 6.

BG: 6? And he stays till 4?

FN: Yeah.

BG: So that's pretty dedicated, isn't it?

FN: It is. And then if he needs to he'll come in on Saturday.

BG: So there is something about doing that kind of work, I mean it seems to me if you aren't watching the clock when you're doing a job...

FN: Then you are enjoying what you are doing. Whenever you are doing it and not watching the clock you are enjoying what you are doing. That's the way I think. And he enjoys it when he is doing this.

BG: And you do to?

FN: I enjoy it. Although you know, I've done it so long that sometimes it becomes a job.

BG: Do you want to retire or do you want to keep going?

FN: I'm 71 years old. If I was going to retire I would have already done it.

BG: You make a pretty good living off it I guess?

FN: We do ok. Yeah.

BG: I was going to ask you before, how much does that Neat model cost?

FN: Five thousand dollars.

BG: Five thousand?

FN: Yeah.

BG: That doesn't seem very expensive.

FN: No, it's not compared to what a lot of the others sale for. It's not.

BG: So you have higher models than that?

FN: About the only thing you can do to make them higher is to do the engraving and just dress them up. This has got the best of everything in it that you can buy. The only thing, you could raise the price on it if you started engraving and things like that to it.

BG: That would raise the price. And how does it get to be five thousand. Is it your time that you are putting in plus your expertise?

FN: Yeah. All of your hardware cost quite a bit too. And then, just like that wood on there, it's expensive to find that. If you find it, when you do, it's expensive, so you have a lot of money tied up in it.

BG: How do you find your wood?

FN: I'm always, I've got people looking for me and I've got a lot of wood already that I've found. By always having an open ear and being willing to listen when somebody's got something and be willing to go and look at whenever they say they've got some wood. A lot of times it's nothing, but once in a while you run across something that's really good.

BG: So what do you do? Do you go to their house?

FN: This guy here, I had called him, I had bought veneer from him. He used to be in Lexington and I bought veneer from him and I called and asked him if he had anything I was looking for it and he told me he had this and I went up and bought it.

BG: What does he have, a woodshop or something?

FN: He does veneer. He sales veneer and yeah, he's got a woodshop.

BG: So he imports...

FN: Yeah he imports veneer and things like that.

BG: So you told him you were looking for something good and he said, "I've got it."

FN: Yeah, he told me he had some of it, so I went up and looked at it.

BG: Up in northern Kentucky.

FN: It suited me so I bought some of it.

BG: Let me see that again. What is that called?

FN: A Quilted Maple.

BG: What makes the wood do that?

FN: So, that's the design that's in the wood. I don't know.

BG: And you can see that when you saw the veneer?

FN: Yeah, you can see it in the veneer before it's finished. The finish brings it out better, but you can see that in the veneer before it's finished.

BG: Did you know that it was going to be light in the middle and dark on the edges?

FN: No, we did that.

BG: Oh, how did you do that?

FN: We did that with two different color stains. See, you start with this color stain here, and then you change colors and go with a brown and make it dark on the outside.

BG: How'd you radiant that so...?

FN: By doing it. You learn to do that by doing it.

BG: So you were looking for that. Is that called "Sunburst"?

FN: It's called Sunburst. Yeah, that's what it's called.

BG: It looks like clouds.

FN: Well yeah it does. It looks like the ocean, waves in the ocean, and the sun setting over it. But that's, when I found that up there I got enough of that for about twenty resonators at one time.

BG: Do you buy it in big sheets?

FN: Yeah, buy a sheet of it and he rolls it up for you. Veneer is what it is. It's real thin.

BG: So you have to put a lot of money into this?

FN: You have to put a lot of money into it and I had to send it up to Jimmy and have him make the resonators and put that on it.

BG: So he put the veneer on the resonators?

FN: Yeah, he glued the veneer on them.

BG: Ok, well that's really nice. And when you, do you put the binding on it?

FN: We do. Yes.

BG: What does the binding do?

FN: It covers up the seams where the resonators are put together. You know, you've got the sides here put on the back and that binding covers the seam up.

BG: It covers the seam up. Ok.

FN: The glue joint.

BG: I thought it protected it in some way.

FN: No, it covers up a glue joint where it has been put together. Same way with a guitar. The binding on that covers up the glue joints where they are put together.

BG: What do you do if you don't put binding on? Is there another way of covering it up?

FN: No, you could, this one here, this one up here is just there because you've got one down here and it looks better with two instead of one. You see some of the older ones that didn't have this one on it, but now you'll always have that one because you have to glue the sides to the back and they'll cover that joint up. It just wouldn't look very good if you didn't have that piece of binding there.

BG: So, when you came down from Indiana, and you came back to Kentucky, you started building these and making your necks. You're still making your necks and then you started doing the other things, was there a lot of experimentation with that as you were going along?

FN: There was some, but I did most of the experimenting when I was learning to do it. By the time I started doing it full-time I knew pretty well what I wanted to do. Although you know, I've improved some and have gotten more machines to speed the job up and things like that, but I knew pretty well what I wanted to do whenever I started to do it full-time.

BG: And you said you had another shop before you moved here?

FN: I did. I had one over in Dunnville.

BG: Dunnville.

FN: Yeah.

BG: And when you moved here you only brought three pieces of machinery with you?

FN: No, when I first started doing this I had the three pieces of equipment when I first started, when I lived in Indiana.

BG: What was that?

FN: I had the, I lived up there when I first started doing it; I had the drill press, and a bandsaw, and a sander.

BG: And that's all you had?

FN: That's all I had. That and some dremel tools and things like that.

BG: You had a dremel?

FN: A hand cutter, with dremel tools.

BG: That's not very much.

FN: No, but most of it I did by hand.

BG: So you didn't have that little belt sander, belt buffer over there?

FN: No, a lot of that I didn't have.

BG: So you were doing it all by hand then?

FN: Doing it all by hand. A lot of this speeds the job up. You don't have to have all that to do this.

BG: Do you get a different result if you hand buff it than doing that?

FN: No, not if you buff it right, it all looks the same once it's done.

BG: So what you are looking for has certain perfection in it, right?

FN: Yes.

BG: And no matter what you use, you get it there.

FN: I get it, I've got a certain thing in mind when I'm doing one and as long as I get it there it doesn't matter if it's buffed by hand, machine, or whatever as long as it's buffed like it should be.

BG: So we're going to take a little walk through here in a few minutes, but a lot of these tools that you kind of invented or you had someone help you make has speeded up?

FN: It speeds the job up. Yes.

BG: But it also gives you more precession sometimes?

FN: It does. The cutters that I use, there are different ways, you could fix up different jigs and different cutters to do the same job. This is just the way that I've fixed mine up. I've been in Jimmy Cox's shop and he's got kind of different jigs set-up rather than what I've got there in Maine. He's got a lot of jigs set-up that he does different jobs with. But there are a lot of different ways that you could do it, it's just what works for you.

BG: And that makes you feel good.

FN: Yeah, the thing that you can work with and what you can do.

BG: I wanted to bring up the fact that years ago I came and interviewed you because we were doing an exhibit with the National Folk Festival in Chattanooga, right?

FN: Right.

BG: And one of your instruments was displayed there. Did you get to see the exhibit? Did you get to go down there and see it?

FN: Yes.

BG: What did you think?

FN: It was nice.

BG: But you probably had your exhibit, have you been in other exhibits since then?

FN: No.

BG: No?

FN: No, that was the first one and the last one I've been into.

BG: Well I asked you to be in the other one.

FN: I know, but I was tied up. I sent Ricky up instead.

BG: I couldn't get an instrument for it to travel with the exhibit because you were so busy shipping them out I guess.

FN: Right.

BG: And that was the problem with the whole exhibit, any instrument we borrowed from somebody meant that they couldn't sell it.

FN: Well at one time you were selling them faster than you could get them done.

BG: Really?

FN: You know, there were people who had them on order. They would order them and wait until you had it done, so you had to let it go as quick as it was done. Over the past few years we have, I think we've got two more in there of the gold plated ones that we've just got built up.

BG: So if I did another exhibit I could borrow one?

FN: Yeah, you could just about have your choice.

BG: Just timing it I guess... When you get up in the morning and work down here what do you think about, what do you start with? How do you lay out your day for doing projects?

FN: Sometimes I figure out from one day to the next what I'm going to do, but most times I don't know what I'm going to do until I come in here because you never know who is going to call that night and what they'll need done the next morning and you know, if somebody calls me and needs a job done because they are playing well then I'll try to work them in, I'll try to do that. So I've got things that I will, just like tomorrow, if nothing else comes up there are some things that I'll do but there's nothing that I can't change. I like to be where I don't have to do it that day, where maybe I can do it the next day, or the next day.

BG: So you've got behind you there are like five heads, or, what do you call those things?

FN: Yeah, the resonators.

BG: Five or six resonators. Does that mean that you are working on six at one time?

FN: Yeah. Actually, that one there was sent to us to finish a neck in that color, that's one. Those others we are working on them, but it's jobs that there is no big rush on.

BG: So it's like, you've got jobs that you can work on as you are going along, and you've got jobs that... People will order something or send you something to do and they'll say, "There's no hurry for this. I don't want it until a certain time." Then you don't have to be in a hurry about getting it done, but you'll go ahead and work on it, if we have the time we will go ahead and work on it and get it done and then just lay it back and when they want it why it's ready.

BG: Ok, so you're not one of these guys who needs a deadline from somebody to get things done?

FN: If I have a deadline I can usually meet it, but I don't like to have one.

BG: Oh ok. Some people just can't do it without having deadlines.

FN: Yeah, I don't have to have a deadline. I don't like to have a deadline. If I do have one, well then I can work it out.

BG: So you come in and part of your business is, people come on in and wanting things right away because they are professionals and they need it done, right?

FN: Right.

BG: Other ones that you get...

FN: There's no hurry on, and then if I come in and somebody calls me and says, "Lets go fishing," I'd like to be like good, let's go.

BG: Ok, so let's go fishing.

FN: Yeah.

BG: Sounds great. So you can do all that too?

FN: Yeah.

BG: So you like the way it's going?

FN: I like the way, you know, Ricky, when he's here, he'll take the phone calls and all that and he can take care of it if I need to go take a day or two off.

BG: Do you like to play music while you are working or do you like it silent?

FN: No, I sometimes will play music, but most of the time we don't. Sometimes we will.

BG: Do you guys talk much while you are working?

FN: There are days that we do, and other days we don't say half a dozen words.

BG: Really?

FN: Yeah.

BG: That's how it goes, huh?

FN: Yeah, if you want to talk to Ricky, you start talking to him about the Cincinnati Reds and he won't shut up.

BG: Oh good. That's where I'm from so. They won last night.

FN: Yeah well if you talked to him about the Cincinnati Reds why he would talk to you all day.

BG: Well, I was so enthused last night that they won that I started listening to the St. Louis game to make sure they lost, but they didn't.

FN: They didn't lose?

BG: They came back in the ninth inning with a home run and beat the Padres.

FN: Yeah I didn't listen to St. Louis. I did watch Cincinnati last night on TV.

BG: And you can get it down here on TV? See I can't.

FN: Yeah I get FOX Sports out of Ohio.

BG: That's nice. I wish I could do that.

FN: Well I have to have Dish Network to do it.

BG: Oh do you? You've got to Dish Network?

FN: Yeah, I had to get Dish Network.

BG: How did he get to be a Reds fan?

FN: Well, I used to, I had a sister that lives in Cincinnati, and I had a brother that lived up there for years and I've spent a lot of time up and around Cincinnati.

BG: You used to go to Crosley Field?

FN: I have been there, you know, and then I've worked there some, I haven't worked there a whole lot, but I have worked in Cincinnati a little bit.

BG: In a factory there?

FN: No, I worked with a guy trimming trees there one summer.

BG: Really?

FN: Yeah. Just different things.

BG: I was a roofer for my uncle up in Cincinnati.

FN: Well, I worked with another guy up there on roofing work for a while.

BG: Oh really, we might have worked together.

FN: But anyway, this was an individual. He did it, just him and me.

BG: Yeah, my uncle had me work with my cousin, we just, that was fun. I enjoyed it.

FN: But I've spent some time in Cincinnati.

BG: Oh yeah. So it's a nice team to root for.

FN: And then Ricky spent time there whenever he was small. His grandma lived there in Cincinnati so he would go over there and spend time with her.

BG: I ate out with these people last night; I went out to Kroger and got us some Cincinnati Chili mix so they could make it at home. Have you ever made an instrument that you didn't want to sell because you liked it so much?

FN: I've made some that I hated to see go, but I never made any that I wouldn't sell because that's what I was in the business for. But I have made some that I really hated to see go.

BG: Why?

FN: I don't know, just the way, there was something about them, you know, no two turn out exactly alike and there was something about them that was special, that I really liked.

29:55

BG: We were interviewing, this was a long time ago when we were doing the exhibit, the exhibit we had was called, "Made to Be Played," because one of the people we were interviewing said, "I don't like my instruments to be hung on the wall, I like them to be played."

FN: Yeah.

BG: Do you feel that way, or does it matter to you if they play them or just hang them on the wall?

FN: You know, if they want them I don't care. Ralph has sold a lot just for an investment to people that don't play.

BG: Who did?

FN: Ralph Stanley. He sold a lot of the Stanleytones that we did just to people that don't play. They buy them because whenever he is done they'll be worth more money, so they'd buy them as an investment. So I like to see them being played, but if they aren't played it doesn't bother me.

BG: Yeah, ok. You said there are Stanleytones, that was a model you made that you still make, right?

FN: We've not made any in a while, but we have.

BG: What are some of the other models that you've done?

FN: The Osborne Chief, we did those. And the Leroy Lewis model, we did that. We've done more of those than anything. The Osborne Chief, the Stanleytones, and the Leroy Lewis model. We've done a few for J.D., but not a whole lot.

BG: And they say, J.D. model?

FN: Well, they'll have New South on them and then J.D. Crowe.

BG: So J.D. doesn't buy a bunch of them and sale them?

FN: No because his retiring after this year, so he hasn't really gotten into that. He never got into it much.

BG: Is that, buying and selling those, is that kind of an old musicians thing?

FN: Ralph started that in '75, the one that actually started that was Ralph Stanley. Whenever I built him the first Stanleytone he said, "If you'll build these, I'll sell them," and other musicians have you know, picked that up along the way because they could play them and sell them and make some extra money.

BG: I guess I'm wondering with new banjo players, young banjo players, they don't probably get into that do they?

FN: No, it would be hard for them to sell them. Unless you've got the name, the name sells a lot of it.

BG: Do you know any young banjo players that are buying your stuff?

FN: No I don't.

BG: Ok.

FN: Most of them that are young are trying to play can't afford them.

BG: Oh really? I've heard that there's kind of a young phenomenon.

FN: There are some young people playing Bluegrass music, there are quite a few people doing that, but now you don't make the money playing Bluegrass music that you do playing country, if you get to be big in country, so you're limited in terms of what money you've got that you can spend.

BG: So Country musicians buy your instruments too?

FN: Country music usually has companies to build them and give them to them.

BG: Oh really, ok. Just for advertising.

FN: For advertisement. Yes.

BG: You haven't done that have you?

FN: No.

BG: That would be a big investment, wouldn't it?

FN: The one I built for Ralph Stanley, the first one, I gave that to him. And then he said, "If you'll build them, I'll sell them," and it worked out fine for me.

BG: Well, anything else you want to say? Did I cover everything?

FN: I think so. I don't know of anything else.

BG: Your son has been doing this for how long?

FN: About fifteen years.

BG: What's his name?

FN: Ricky.

BG: Ricky Neat. Would you consider him a pretty good luthier too?

FN: Oh yeah, he's done everything. I've had him to do it all. He can fit the necks to the body and turn the rims and shape the necks, I've had him to do it all. He can do it all.

BG: When people get a Neat banjo, is it partly you and partly him?

FN: Yeah, he does the inlay. He does about all of the inlay. I'll shape the necks and then, we will finish them. Either he can finish or I can. I usually turn the rims and fit the hardware and then I'll put it all together.

BG: And you said you had a paint room here too, didn't you?

FN: We do, back in there.

BG: Is that where you do your varnish?

FN: Yeah, the finish work, yeah.

BG: What do you use for your finish?

FN: Lacquer. Just a regular lacquer.

BG: Lacquer?

FN: Just a wood lacquer.

BG: Does that, I guess you don't have to breathe when you're a banjo, right?

FN: Well, we've got an exhaust fan in there and everything.

BG: Oh I meant the wood itself.

FN: No.

BG: People talk about...

FN: Well it does, it does breathe somewhat, but not like a guitar and it doesn't have to be like a guitar. The finish, if you're doing a violin or a guitar you use certain types of finishes because of the sound and a banjo you can put about any kind of finish on it and it doesn't seem to hurt the sound of it.

BG: You've experimented with that a little bit?

FN: Not a whole lot. We have done some for Ralph and put his picture on the resonator and we had to use a different finish on those but it didn't, but you couldn't tell that it made any...

BG: So that's lacquer and it's just really pretty. Do you shine it up afterwards?

FN: Yeah, we buff it.

BG: You buff it. Ok.

FN: You put twelve of fifteen coats on it and then you when it dries you buff it.

BG: Wow. That many coats?

FN: Yeah. Normally, you put about four coats on a day and the next day you sand it and put four more on it and...

BG: Are you doing it with a brush?

FN: No you do it with a spray gun.

BG: A spray gun? Ok. Does it ever run on you or anything like that?

FN: Yeah, you have to learn you know, it takes time to learn all that too.

BG: All that too...

FN: You spray this much without it running.

BG: Yeah. It's beautiful. I think we've got enough. Do you want to take some...?

SA: Let's get some room tone.

BG: He's just going to do quiet room tones for just a second.

35:37

[Room Tone]

36:10

[Filming]

BG: And the guy who did that, what was his name?

FN: John Madole.

BG: And he did the painting on it?

FN: The lady who did the painting is Jackie Shepherd.

BG: Oh, Jackie Shepherd.

FN: And John Madole did the engraving.

BG: Yeah, let's look at the engraving again on the other side.

FN: Ok, when he gets this.

SA: Got it.

BG: And he did all this by hand?

FN: Yeah.

BG: So he's gone now?

FN: Yeah.

BG: If you were going to do that again, who would you have do it?

FN: I don't know anybody that can do it like that. That's the reason we quite doing the engraving was because you couldn't, there's a guy in Nashville that engraves, but he couldn't do it like this.

BG: And he's doing that by hand?

FN: Yeah.

BG: Does he draw it out before he does it?

FN: Oh yeah, he would draw them out. He would put a smoke print on it.

BG: Ok.

FN: He did it with a smoke print and then cut it by hand.

BG: That's amazing.

FN: I've seen him sit there with a little knife and a hammer and just peck, peck, peck.

BG: So it takes a lot of artists to make one of these things.

FN: Yeah.

BG: Do different things on it.

SA: Ok.

BG: So this is your main workbench here?

FN: Yeah.

BG: And you were showing me this thing before. What is this?

FN: That cuts the neck to fit the pot. Cuts the heel of the neck. Puts the same radius on the heel of the neck that's on the pot.

BG: And somebody invented this for you?

FN: That's the guy who did this engraving.

BG: Oh ok. Can we take a little tour of your place then?

FN: Yeah.

BG: What's going on with this?

FN: That's a rim that we are getting ready to finish, and here where the tone ring goes you don't want any finish on it so we take that part of it off.

BG: Why don't you want any finish on it?

FN: It makes it sound better if they don't have any finishing on that.

[Interruption – request for shot of rim – cut in tape]

38:25

FN: The way I am holding it... **[Holding up rim]** That's all that's for.

BG: So that's stained, but it's not finished is it?

FN: No, it doesn't have any lacquer on it. It's got the stain on it, but it doesn't have any lacquer on it.

BG: And you never put any lacquer on it?

FN: Yeah, I'll put it on there.

BG: Oh you'll put it on later, ok. And what are you doing with this guy?

FN: That's one that I've got started and ran through it through the shaper, see to round the sides of it up, and I've got to work the ends of it up, work this out.

BG: Where's the shaper?

FN: Back in the back.

BG: Ok, can we take that over and look at it?

35:06

[Film cut – FN, BG, and SA walk to shaper]

BG: Is it a router kind of?

FN: Yeah. This does.

BG: So you are routing down the...

FN: Routing down the sides of it.

BG: Ok, and these are...?

FN: This is a planer and that's a jointer, and these are all neck blanks that are ready to be sawn out. See how I have them drawn out?

BG: You draw out the necks on the blanks?

FN: I draw the necks off, and then I saw them out with a bandsaw.

BG: Inside.

FN: Yeah. This is all Mahogany wood.

BG: Some are thicker than others. Is there a reason for that?

FN: No, some of it was thicker whenever I got it you know, some of it was thicker pieces than others.

BG: And you can see in that that it's going to be the... you try to avoid waste on it?

FN: You get it in the rough, and then I have to plane it down, plane all the rough off to where it's good and smooth like that then you can see what you've got and mark them off to cut them out.

BG: Ok. So you keep some of your wood in here?

FN: I keep some of it in here. I have a lot of wood out in the other garage, a lot of neck wood.

BG: Oh you do, in the other garage? We thought the cars were in there. Not cars at all.

FN: No. There's a lot of neck wood in there.

BG: Ok. Can we go inside?

FN: Yeah.

BG: And what do you do with the planer?

40:29

[Interruption – FN, BG, and SA go to another garage – cut in tape]

40:30

BG: This is what you get, right?

FN: I get that from Jimmy Cox. I put it on there and turn it, and then I tone ring fit it, and flange fit it.

BG: These are not finished yet, right?

FN: No, those just have the vining on them.

40:46

[Interruption – cut in filming]

BG: The American design, what's going on there?

FN: That's Bureau Walnut, that wood is, that's what that is. This is wood purfling. That's something Gibson did years ago and people still want that from time to time.

BG: Purfling. What does that mean?

FN: It's a different colored wood that glued up together and it's wood so it's the same color all the way though. You can sand it, and it's still the same color. See, it's different colored wood glued together.

BG: Oh ok, and that's what's in here?

FN: Yeah.

BG: How do you bend it into a circle like that?

FN: Very carefully.

BG: Really?

FN: Yeah.

BG: You have to take that straight piece and bend it?

FN: You have to bend it. You have to cut the groove to fit this, and then put the glue in it and bend it around.

BG: Do you have to water it or something?

FN: No. If you do that it will come apart.

BG: Oh, ok.

FN: So you have to bend it around and push it in that groove as you bend it around.

BG: So did somebody order it like that?

FN: Yes.

BG: Ok.

FN: But I've made it, you know, there's a guy that has it on order, but we put these in there.

BG: Ok, that's neat. I just want to look at this one machine back here because you were talking to me about it before.

FN: Let me get this locked up. **[Uncertain of transcription]** Oh, the fret saw?

BG: Yeah, the fret saw, this thing here. If we could just get that I think... Is this the fret...?

FN: I think it's the one up here...

[Interruption – cut in filming]

42:37

FN: Neck blanks. Those are the dates whenever I cut them out. You know, some of them, the ones we did for Sonny Osborne, he wants a special kind of Curly Maple in it so whenever I'm cutting them out if I find one I put his name on it.

BG: Ok, so the ones over there that say Sonny, those are the Curly Maple ones?

FN: Yeah.

BG: And are those resonators down there?

FN: Those are resonators that are just stacked down there that we haven't done anything to.

BG: Oh ok. And you invented this?

FN: Well partly. I invented it, but there was a guy who made the shaft and all that for me to start with. You put that in there like that.

BG: Do you have to have it exactly in a certain place?

FN: Well no, you just want it to where it will cut, where you got space.

BG: You are going to cut off the excess.

FN: You are going to cut from there off.

BG: Oh ok.

FN: You cut that much of it off.

43:46

BG: And you've got your frets.

FN: It's got the frets.

BG: That's where you are going to put your frets.

FN: Yeah.

BG: And they are always straight, huh?

FN: They are always straight in some places. They are always in the same place.

BG: And then you put your frets in by hand?

FN: Yeah.

BG: And you dig them out a little bit. Are the frets glued, or how do they stay in there?

FN: No, they have a thing on them and they just drive down in there.

BG: Oh ok. And this thing here is something else you invented?

FN: I did, but we did that so we could put the lines on the back of the resonators, you know, like the lines in the back of the resonator.

BG: So you put this in. Can we see that real quick, how you put that in?

FN: Yeah. It comes off like that.

BG: So you take the resonator and put it over that.

FN: You put it over this wheel and then push this up against it so it doesn't come off, and then you can start to turn it and cut your groves wherever you want them.

BG: So where you put that...?

FN: Yeah, you cut the groves in the back of this and then you put the purfling in the groves.

BG: Purfling in the groves, ok. You would make this the size...

FN: You would make this the size of, the grove that you cut is the size of your purfling. You've got to have the cutter the size that the purfling is. Then you cut your grove then you put the purfling in it.

BG: So you used to do all of this by hand, but then you invented these little tools to help you.

FN: Works faster.

BG: Works faster?

FN: Yeah, it's faster, and easier, and quicker.

BG: Cool, but you still do the inlay by hand?

FN: We still do the inlay by hand.

BG: I know England, is that his name?

FN: Brian England? Yeah.

BG: He used to do it by hand, but now he does it a lot with computers.

FN: He does, yeah.

BG: But you'd rather do it by hand?

FN: Well, most of the people that we work for wants it done by hand because it looks more like the Gibson. If you do it with a computer every piece looks just alike, and whenever Gibson was doing this it didn't look alike, they were doing it by hand so it would vary from one piece to the other one so that's what people really like.

BG: That's kind of the aesthetics of what people want, right?

FN: Right?

BG: Well, I think we got enough. What do you think?

SA: Yeah. We're good.

BG: Great. And that's your bandsaw over there.

FN: Yeah, I've got the three bandsaws in here.

45:58

[Interruption – cut in film]

FN: I'll show you what I use it for.

BG: Ok.

FN: You fit that around through there like that, see, that's the right angle.

BG: Oh, this piece here is giving you the right angle for that.

FN: It holds this piece up here so we can slide it around and then it keeps laying the same angle.

BG: So you are just sanding it down.

FN: Yeah. It just keeps holding it in the same place.

BG: That doesn't need to be done does it?

FN: No... It's not plugged up. You just hold it and go around it like that **[Demonstrates with machine]**.

BG: Why does it go up and down?

FN: So it will sand. That's a sander.

BG: Isn't it going around in a circle too?

FN: Yeah, it's going around in a circle and up and down.

BG: Up and down, ok. Double action, ok. So next week, when they come down with the snake for the Turtleman, where do you think they are going to hide the snake?

FN: They've been talking about putting him over here some place, underneath that or some place like that.

BG: I wish we had thought of a gimmick like that when we came down.

[BG begins taking pictures – No additional interview material]

47:45 – End of Interview