

COVER SHEET

TRANSCRIPTION NUMBER: 6 OF 17

Transcriber: Amanda Fickey, PhD, Independent Contractor
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Duration: 31:36
Interviewee: Kenny Ratliff and Buddy Ratliff
Interviewer: Jesse Wells
Cinematographer: Sean Anderson
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Transcription Notes:

JW: Jess Wells

KR: Kenny Ratliff

BR: Buddy Ratliff

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 following names of musical genres have been capitalized: Bluegrass.

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

0:00

BR: You been in this shop here before?

JW: Yes.

BR: Have you?

JW: Yeah. Been here before it was over... Before you had this big shop.

KR: I remember one time you brought your mandolin and I started taking the top, or back, or something off of it.

JW: Top.

KR: You went in the other room because you couldn't stand it.

JW: I couldn't watch.

BR: Couldn't stand it? What do you mean?

KR: When I started hitting it with a hammer and a knife, you know, taking the top off of it.

BR: Oh yeah. Couldn't stand that...

KR: He went in the other room and held his head.

JW: Interview with Kenny Radcliff and Buddy Radcliff for the Kentucky Craft History and Education Association. July 31st, 2012. Thanks for letting us be here.

KR: Alright.

JW: I appreciate you letting us in your home. I'd like to start off and get a little bit of history from each of you. Buddy, we'll start with you. Where were you born?

BR: I was born in Martin, Kentucky. Floyd County.

JW: And when? What date?

BR: Oh, October 23rd, '22.

JW: '22.

KR: 1922... Lord.

BR: That was a long time ago. Yeah.

JW: A lot has changed since then.

KR: Yeah.

BR: Yeah, a lot changed, including myself.

JW: Ken?

KR: I was born in Jackson, Michigan. 1950.

JW: 1950.

KR: That's kind of a long time ago too, wasn't it?

JW: Not so long ago...

BR: Getting that way, ain't it?

KR: Yeah.

JW: Can you tell us a little bit about how you each got started as luthiers working with instruments?

BR: You mean luthier or playing?

JW: Both! Both.

BR: Oh...

JW: Both... Which came first?

BR: Well, I started playing, trying to play, you know, early. That's when I got a fiddle from my... my uncle's fiddle. I decided I'd see if I could play such a thing as that.

2:18

JW: That was your first mistake, right?

BR: He let me have it. Yeah, he let me have it. He gave it to me, well, he didn't give it to me, he loaned it to me. I had to tear it down and fix it. It was all messed up. I didn't know anything about that, but I did it anyway.

JW: So you reworked the very first fiddle he gave you?

BR: Yeah, the first fiddle I had, reworked it and glue it up.

KR: That's how you learn, ain't it?

BR: Huh?

KR: That's how you learn, ain't it?

BR: That's how you learn to do the job.

KR: What'd you have to do to it?

BR: Oh, it was opened up, and the back top had cracks in it. I had to glue those all up...

KR: What kind of glue did you use?

BR: Well, I was trying to remember. It was some kind of yellow glue that I had... Charlie Dean gave it to me. It was what he used.

KR: Probably Elmers.

BR: So I did it. It worked good.

JW: How many fiddles have you made?

BR: I've made about four. That's all.

KR: But he's worked on countless...

BR: I've worked on, I've rebuilt so many of them, regraduated them, made good ones out of them. Take a bad one and make a good one.

JW: What do you do when you do that? What's your process of rebuilding a fiddle?

BR: Take it apart. Take the top off and get the fingerboard and everything out of the way so you can put your gauges in there and measure and see what you've got, how much wood is there and so forth. If it's too heavy, you have to mark it. Then, I have a gauge that goes through, a size gauge...

KR: Caliber.

BR: Caliber gauge.

JW: Where do you find those?

BR: Had to make it.

KR: Find them right here.

BR: There they are. That's it.

KR: Here they are! **[KR picks up gauge and demonstrates]**

BR: There they are. They're homemade.

KR: Homemade ones. Work just as good.

BR: They're wonderful. They are precise things.

JW: Have to be, don't they?

BR: Have to be right.

JW: Such small increments.

BR: So I went in there and experimented with a fiddle or two to learn what it would take to make them sound good. I'd peck on them, and pound on them a little bit, and figure out what should be done. I'd measure around in places inside, the top and back. Finally, I got to going in there with a good sharp knife and cutting them out. It's called regrduating.

4:57

JW: Did anybody show you what to do? Did you have any training?

BR: I didn't have any training. No, I just had to do it by thoughts... Just do it. That's all.

JW: But did you teach your sons to do that?

BR: Yeah. Kenny and Stevie, I'll tell you, they were so much better than me when they got done that I had to kind of back off you know.

JW: Gave away all the secrets?

BR: Yeah, they learned all of them. They improved on things that I didn't.

JW: Ken, what's your experience? Obviously, you studied. You had a great teacher.

KR: Well, yeah. That's the first thing I remember. I was three years old. I can remember that. And he was making, carving a top for a fiddle on the kitchen table there on Buck's branch, in the kitchen. I remember him carving that top and that's the first thing I remember about making anything.

JW: Did you play anything before you were 3?

KR: I started playing when I was seven. I didn't play until I was three. No... We lived in Arizona. He ran a trading post out there on the Navajo Reservation. I remember starting to play there.

BR: He was seven years old.

KR: Yeah, seven, he was teaching me to read.

BR: I was teaching him music and everything.

KR: He was teaching me to read music.

BR: I had plenty of time to do it out there among all those Indians. They'd come in there and stand there and watch us. They'd do their little dance and thing and carry on.

JW: Were you playing fiddle tunes? What kind of music were you playing?

BR: Yeah, I was playing. Classical music is what I mostly played then. Of course, I was playing fiddle too, but fiddle tunes were harder than Classical. To me it was. To do them right...

JW: Well now, you didn't just play the fiddle. What was your first instrument?

BR: My first instrument...

JW: Yeah, what'd you start playing?

BR: Guitar.

JW: Guitar?

BR: Yeah. Chords on a guitar.

JW: Did you play with any groups?

BR: Huh?

JW: Did you play with any groups? Any bands?

BR: No particular one, just the certain ones that run up and down the road in front of the house dragging an old guitar along.

KR: Didn't you get to play with Lester and Earl though?

BR: Oh yeah, I played with Lester and Earl Flatt.

JW: Well that's nobody!

BR: Played with them a long time.

KR: That's a bunch of nobody's... running up and down the road dragging instruments around.

JW: Well, who else?

BR: Oh... Nobody that amounted to anything I don't think.

KR: I think Jimmy Dickens amounted to something didn't he?

BR: Who?

KR: Jimmy Dickens.

JW: Little Jimmy Dickens.

KR: He kind of amounted to something.

BR: Oh yeah, I played with him for a long time, that little fella...

KR: How come you aren't saying that?

BR: I forget. My mind is not like it used to be. Can't put all this stuff together...

KR: Your memory is fading huh...

BR: Mhm.

KR: Well...

BR: You get about ninety years old and your memory ain't what it used to be. I don't care how smart you were at one time.

JW: Doesn't matter, does it?

BR: You're going to lose some of it.

7:55

JW: Well Ken, what was your first instrument that you learned to play?

KR: Fiddle.

JW: Fiddle?

KR: Violin. Little old half size you know, size seven. But I never learned to play too good, I just got to making them and stuff...

BR: He learned better, he sounded a lot better than me! Had a better tone than I did.

JW: I'm glad you can both clarify the truth here for me. I've heard you play.

KR: I can play a little bit.

BR: He had a good tone. Kenny's got a wonderful tone. I concentrate on other things, you know, the other part of it. The making end of it.

JW: What did you make? You're known as a mandolin builder.

KR: I made a violin first. I was in university taking art, I was an art major. Had my master's degree, and taking a sculpture class. His name was Bill Bryant, was the sculpture teacher. He made a little trapezoid fiddle. Do you know what that is?

JW: Mhm.

KR: He said, "Everybody's going to make a trapezoid fiddle." I said, "That's what you think. I'm going to make a real fiddle. I ain't wasting my time with a silly looking thing as that." So he says, "You can't do that." And I said, "You watch me." It took me two weeks and I had a fiddle done.

JW: Two weeks?

KR: Two weeks to build that fiddle. There it hangs, right there behind you on the wall. What's left of it.

JW: Wow.

KR: I remember working on that thing. I was going like crazy. I couldn't stop! Couldn't stop! And somebody said, "What's your hurry, Ken?"

BR: He got excited!

KR: I said, "I got a concert tonight!" But I was living in Normal Hall believe it or not. Do you remember Normal Hall? It's still there I guess.

JW: It's still there.

KR: I got to where I was carving on that thing and I couldn't stop. I was obsessed with it. And I had nowhere to work, so I was working on the floor of my apartment in the corner, you know, I had the thing captured in the corner where it couldn't get away on the back and I was peck, peck, peck, you know, peck, peck, peck, with the hammer here and stuff like this **[KR shows tools]** ... and the chisel. Peck, peck, peck, peck, peck, peck, peck down the corner... peck, peck, peck.

JW: Did you have a roommate?

KR: I had a wife!

JW: Oh, ok.

KR: But I lived upstairs and I had someone living downstairs. Peck, peck, peck, peck... And all of a sudden somebody downstairs screamed, worst screaming on earth, going crazy. Then I realized what I was doing. I was driving somebody nuts. That was my first fiddle. First instrument. I didn't start building mandolins until '81.

10:29

JW: What got you interested in building a mandolin?

KR: Well I kind of got to thinking that they might be a little bit easier to get a good tone out of. A fiddle is kind of touchy, and there are so many old fiddles and stuff. I figured mandolins would be easier to sell. I was wanting to make a living at it. So I started making mandolins. I was obsessed with that too for a long time. I was right. It was a little easier to sell. It wouldn't that easier to get tone out of though. A fiddle

might be a little easier to get a good tone out of, but I'm finally come to where I can get a pretty good tone, after 328 mandolins.

JW: Wow. So, you've been able to have a good livelihood from...

KR: I've made a living, but I've done everything that I've got, I've built. The house, the shop, everything... I'm lucky enough to make a little living at it. So I do pretty good.

JW: Who are some folks that play your mandolins these days?

KR: Keith Sewell. You ever hear of him?

JW: Absolutely.

KR: Yeah?

JW: I saw him with Lyle Lovett playing one of your mandolins.

KR: Yeah, he plays one of mine. Shoot, I can't remember now who... Well now, Aubery (**unable to discern name – 11:51**) plays one once in a while, but you know how he is. He kind of buys it, and then he'll sell it in a week or two.

JW: Brian Sutton.

KR: Brian Sutton. Yeah.

JW: He plays one of your mandolins.

KR: I can't remember who else. There are 328 of them... a lot of young guys, young fellas.

JW: I saw one in Tazewell, Virginia two weeks ago.

KR: You did?

JW: A young guy playing.

KR: What was his name? Do you remember?

JW: Adam McPeak... ?

KR: I've heard of him.

JW: Adam McPeak.

KR: Seems like I remember that name. There's a Rigney boy that endorses my mandolins. He's in Tennessee. Real good player. Cory Piot? You ever hear of him?

JW: Oh yeah.

KR: He's playing them. Guy by the name of David Blood. You ever hear of him?

JW: No. I'll have to look him up.

KR: He's got a website, a [unable to discern word – 12:51] website on Facebook. You might look it up.

JW: Yeah. I'll take a look.

KR: He's got the whole list of everything everybody plays on.

JW: Alright.

KR: He really likes my mandolins. He's got three or four of them.

13:02

JW: What's unique about your mandolins?

KR: What's different about them?

JW: Yeah. Maybe, if you want to show that one...

KR: Well, that's one of my, number 41. So they've changed a lot since then and this is the top for this one and it had a center hole here which I experimented with way back then. That was in '97. It sounded really good, but the drawback with it, it was weak on the top. So I made lots of them and I've replaced the tops on maybe ten. So that ain't too bad.

JW: No, not at all. So that's what you're in the middle of...

KR: That's it right there. Starting the top...

JW: That's a new top.

KR: New top for that one.

JW: Is that Spruce? What do you like to use?

KR: I like European Spruce. That's what this is. I seem to get good results with it. I'm thinking that's going to be a good one. So, what's unique and different about mine I guess... I pretty much have a reputation of having mandolins that have a deep tone. I've always wanted to; I've always strived for that and I guess that's what I'm known for is deep tone mandolins. I don't like tin-y sounding things.

JW: Do you try to copy any particular mandolin?

KR: No. I always went my own way from the very beginning which probably was a mistake. It held me back there a long time, but I wouldn't trade that for nothing because I've learned so much my own way and that's what makes my mandolins I guess different because I didn't learn from anybody else or didn't try to emulate anybody else, you know what I mean?

JW: Sure. What mandolins do you... Are there any builders out there that you admire in the mandolin world?

14:49

KR: Yeah, I admire Gilchrist, and Mike Kimnetzer, and Dudenbostel mandolins, Don Macrostie [**verified spelling via internet**]. They all make some fine stuff.

JW: There are some great builders out there today.

KR: A lot of them today, in this day and age.

JW: Well let's get one of your more recent... I really like your distressing.

KR: This is one of my distressed models. It's made in this year, but you wouldn't know it because it's beat to death. All cracked and scratched and everything else. The finish cracks on it you know, or put on by me... I don't know. It seems like 80, maybe 90% of my customers prefer the old look as compared to the new shiny ones, and I'd rather make the old looking ones. More interesting to me. It's kind of art in itself you know, to do that, to make them look old.

JW: Do you think that affects the sound in anyway?

KR: Seems like it does, but I don't really know what it does. It might be a little bit psychological. There's one thing that's different about them, that they have less finish on them.

JW: Yeah. I hear a lot of people say they don't sound any different, but I agree.

KR: Well, they do it seems like. The less finish, the better...

JW: Let it breathe...

KR: Just enough to protect it is all you really need. That's what these have on them. Less inhibits the vibrations on this with the two or three coats as compared to eight or ten. But, I get good mandolins with eight or ten coats too, you know.

JW: True. You want to play a little bit?

KR: I don't play. I don't play very well...

16:49

[KR demonstrates on mandolin, occasional comments by BR and JW in background]

KR: I don't play too much Bluegrass see. Bluegrass is not the only type of music.

JW: Need a little misty every now and then.

KR: Yeah. You want to play one? Why don't you try it once?
[KR hands mandolin to BR]

BR: I'm not any good on the mandolin.

KR: That's what I said, but I was telling the truth.

17:46

[BR demonstrates on mandolin]

KR: He gets a good tone doesn't he?

JW: He gets a big sound!

KR: He gets a good tone. I always take my mandolins over there and let him try them when I get them done.

[BR continues to demonstrate]

18:31

KR: What is the name of that?

BR: I don't play anymore...

KR: What is the name of that?

BR: ... Uh... **[Hums song]** What is the name of that?

KR: Do you know, Jesse?

JW: I don't know that one.

BR: You've heard it, haven't you?

JW: Yeah, I've heard it. I've heard you play it... I hope I can just hold a mandolin when I'm ninety. I hope I can just hold one.

18:50-19:18

[BR continues to demonstrate]

BR: And so forth...

JW: How did you all get to Rowan County? I guess you are on the border or Carter and Rowan.

KR: Yeah.

BR: What did you say?

JW: How'd you get here?

KR: How'd we end up here?

BR: Oh, up here?

JW & KR: Yeah.

KR: I came to school here back in '72 or something like that.

JW: So you came from Floyd County?

KR: From Floyd County up here to go to Morehead State University, and just stayed around. That's what happened. In '84 they came up, my parents did.

JW: Not till '84. Ok. What about Steve?

KR: Same thing. Same story. Came to school here, and we just stayed.

JW: A lot of your family is right here.

BR: We all came down here and liked it pretty good on this mountain. We found us a place on this mountain here and liked that, so it's more like home.

KR: Been here ever since, except the time we went to Las Vegas.

BR: We spent a few years in Las Vegas. It was a long time.

JW: How long were you in Vegas?

KR: Five years.

BR: Five years we were there.

KR: Five years.

JW: What did you do while you were there? Did you...

KR: I had two little kids that were really tiny and I taught them how to play the fiddle. My sister had two little kids and they played the fiddle. We got a show on the Riviera Hotel. The show, Splash. We stayed there for five years.

JW: Five years.

KR: Yep.

BR: It was a good show. Everybody went wild over it. Those kids, they'd tear the place up.

JW: I remember seeing you on TV. What year was that?

KR: '87-'92.

BR: Is that when we played at the...

KR: You were just a kid then too weren't you?

JW: Yeah. It was a big sporting event, wasn't it? Didn't you play the National Anthem?

KR: Oh yeah, that was the Super Bowl XXV.

JW: Super Bowl XXV.

KR: Just one of the kids did that show. Seth Horton.

JW: I remember.

KR: Do you?

JW: I remember that.

KR: You can see them, you can't get a picture of them, but you can see them on the wall. Anyway, that's what we did for five years. Those kids kept themselves and us going.

BR: We all worked hard.

KR: We all worked hard and traveled all over the world.

JW: Do they still play? I know Angie does a lot.

KR: Angie wasn't one of them.

BR: They don't play like they did, no.

KR: Nathan lives in Lexington. He plays with a bunch of guys down there. That's about it. Just for fun.

JW: Any of them work on instruments?

KR: No. I guess none of them are interested in it.

JW: Not yet.

KR: Maybe they'll learn some day.

JW: Maybe Nathan will get an itch one of these days.

KR: I hope so.

JW: He's a great fiddler.

KR: Somebody needs to learn you know, some of the things that I've learned.

BR: He better get it pretty quick, too, hadn't he?

KR: Why, am I getting ready to kick the bucket?

BR: I know a lot of things that I could teach people, but I don't because they don't come around.

JW: Yeah. Well, hopefully some people will get interested, a lot of young people.

KR: Oh yeah, there are some young kids who are playing good.

BR: Young kids don't want to do much anymore.

JW: They don't want to work.

BR: It ain't like it used to be.

KR: The ones that play good...

BR: What they want to do is this... [BR demonstrates pressing a gaming controller]. They get this stuff here, they sit there and do this all day and they don't ever amount to nothing.

KR: But now, there are some who don't do that and they play.

JW: There are some great players.

KR: You go to somewhere like Spigma [unsure of location/organization referenced] or IBMA and these little kids are coming up and playing. It's unbelievable the way that they can play. There's a few out there that don't just sit and play video games. There are some that play music.

JW: Yeah, there are some smart ones out there.

23:03

[Videographer stops filming to change battery]

23:04

[Video resumes during a different conversation regarding guitar picks]

23:10

[Resume transcription]

JW: They say Django Reinhardt used a button.

KR: He did?

JW: A big tortoise button. A little too round for me, but...

[General discussion, Interviewer reviews notes]

24:02

[Interviewer resumes formal interview]

JW: I thought since Stevie couldn't be here, maybe one of you would talk about the other great luthier in your family.

KR: Yeah, he's sick. He's not doing too well with his health right now. He taught him everything that he knows about how to restore and build fiddles.

BR: You'd say that would be a whole lot, but I don't know nothing... I don't know how I did it.

KR: But he can take a fiddle that is the worst, sorriest thing that, you know, that you could think possibly nothing could sound any worse and then do the work on it that he knows how to do and it will shake the floor.

BR: Makes a good fiddle out of them.

KR: How in the world he can do that.

JW: You know, a lot of people, professional musicians are playing his fiddles today.

KR: Yeah.

BR: Yeah, he's got a lot of them out there.

KR: He does good work. I mean, it looks good. His workmanship is top notch.

JW: Do you think the three of you would be doing this if you didn't live so close to each other? Do you think your little community here is...

KR: Well, it helps, you know. We kind of feed off each other, but I think I would be doing it anyway. I have been at it for so long. I don't see why... I don't know what else I would do. I can paint, I can do paintings. I want to learn to do some more of that before I die I hope.

BR: He's a real artist.

JW: Yeah.

BR: He's a wonderful one.

JW: I was thinking you might show us the back of that mandolin.

KR: Alright. I'm supposed to be a painter and this is one of the ones I painted back in '97. A picture of an angel playing a, well, it's actually a viola da gamba. I like to paint and I figured, well, why not just do everything, all that I can do, into one thing. So I can build mandolins, and I can carve, and I can do the painting, so I'm just going to do it all. All the things I know how to do. That's another thing that makes mine a little bit different I guess.

JW: The carving is really unique.

KR: Yeah? I don't know anybody else that's doing that.

JW: Did you just do that because you learned to work with other mediums like...

KR: Sculpture?

JW: Sculpture and stuff? Working with...

KR: Yeah. Of course, the whole thing is sculpture. It's like sculpture, carving.

JW: Right.

KR: Carving and everything. But I just thought it would look really good to have a little carving.

JW: Did you ever see another mandolin builder do that?

KR: No.

JW: That's a really common thing on banjos.

KR: Yeah, Banjo necks and stuff, yeah, but I don't know why mandolins don't have that.

BR: I guess they are afraid to try it.

KR: Well, if they can do it on banjos, they can do it on a mandolin.

BR: But they don't build mandolins...

JW: Sometimes you see it on old fiddles too...

KR: Yeah, I've seen some carvings.

JW: Stevie does that on...

KR: And I don't know why mandolin makers today are not doing that.

JW: It's a beautiful touch. It's really...

KR: I think it is.

JW: It adds a lot of...

BR: You get a wonderful tone out of it.

KR: It's not really that difficult to do. You just sit down and start. I just draw them out free handedly and just start carving with a little knife. My dremel and stuff, you know. The way I look at it is, I'll work for

four hours on it, and then, when I think it's done, then I'll put another four hours in it. It just keeps refining, getting sharper, more crisp and better. Then when you put the stain and the varnish on it, it looks pretty good. That's not a bad carving for a beginner, is it? Back in '97? I don't guess I was a beginner...

JW: No... It doesn't look like it.

27:37

BR: That old angel there is playing a good looking fiddle too...

JW: Mhm.

KR: That's a viola da gamba. You know what that is don't you?

BR: Yeah, a viola da gamba.

KR: It's got those sympathetic strings.

BR: Mhm.

JW: Well what do you hope, with all this work that you've put into making instruments, what do you hope to leave at some point in time.

KR: Well, I guess when we're gone, our stuff will still be around maybe, won't it?

BR: We hope it will be around, our stuff and everything.

KR: Well some of it is bound to be.

BR: But there's too many people who don't do anything anymore. They don't understand, they don't realize the art of anything. So many people are like that. So we just have to go along with those kind.

JW: Well you certainly appreciate it, so...

BR: Huh?

JW: You appreciate it.

BR: Yeah.

JW: And you create your own art.

BR: We appreciate some like that you know [points to mandolin on table], and if people don't like it, they can lump it.

KR: So they're here, the fiddles and the mandolins that we've done. I guess they'll stay here when we're gone. I always write a little, on the inside you know, up underneath where you can't see it, I always

write a little synopsis of what's going on at the time in my life. Sometimes there have been some quire things going on.

JW: Sure.

KR: I've been through a lot of stuff. Then I've, like this mandolin here, I come back and I take the top off and there it is. A little bit of writing in there, and I'm not going to read it to you because it's private. Sometimes I'll get into them like this one I'll say boy, I remember that. Maybe someday somebody else will get into it and open it up. The reason I do that is because I remember working on old violins made back in the 1700s. We took one apart one time and there was writing inside of it in a foreign language and I thought that was interesting, about what was going on at that time. So that's why I do it.

JW: I imagine building an instrument like that is a very personal thing, too.

KR: Yeah, it is. But that's just kind of a little touch that I give them. People try to get in there and read them. I usually put it in Spanish or something. I speak Spanish too, so it makes it a little harder for them to figure out.

BR: Yeah, he speaks fluent Spanish.

KR: I used to...

BR: Did you know that?

JW: No.

KR: I don't know about anymore. I was married to a Spanish lady for seven years. You remember, Laura?

JW: Yeah, I remember Laura.

KR: Well she made 53 mandolins.

JW: 53?

KR: Yeah.

JW: Is she the only person you've worked with building mandolins?

KR: Yep.

BR: Is he still taping?

[Videographer responds – Yes, do you want me to stop?]

BR & KR: No, no.

KR: We don't care.

JW: Well, we appreciate you letting us be here.

KR: You're welcome.

JW: I think that'll be great, Sean.

30:52

[Videographer records room tone]

End of interview