

**COVER SHEET**

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Transcriber: Amanda Fickey, PhD, Independent Contractor

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Interviewee: Arthur Hatfield

Interviewer: Bob Gates

Cinematographer: Sean Anderson

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Transcription Notes:

**BG:** Bob Gates

**AH:** Arthur Hatfield

**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:** It is May 23, 2012. What are you working on now?

**AH:** I'm working on a neck for a Walnut special model.

**BG:** What's a Walnut special model?

**AH:** Well, I've got a Mahogany "Buck Creek" and a Walnut special model called "The Special" and the Walnut is called "The Celebrity".

**BG:** And this is one you are working on right now. This is a "Special" right?

**AH:** Yes, sir.

**BG:** Are these all in a catalogue or something so people can see these?

**AH:** Only on a website.

**BG:** On a website?

**AH:** [www.hatfieldbanjos.com](http://www.hatfieldbanjos.com).

**BG:** Now you said you are really busy right now, right?

**AH:** Yes sir, I'm covered up.

**BG:** Is that because you have pretty reasonable prices you think, and high quality?

**AH:** I think that's got a lot to do with it probably. That's why I am selling a lot of banjos. Price, probably.

**BG:** How did you get started in this?

**AH:** Well I've been building, trying to, since I was a teenager. I've always had interest in that, but I was a cabinetmaker and kind of went along with, then after I got about 50 **[years old]** I decided that I needed to do something other than the squatting and the crawling and all that you have to do involved with cabinets, you know, hanging heavy wall cabinets. So I decided to try this fulltime.

**BG:** At 50 years old?

**AH:** I started in 2001, fulltime.

**BG:** That's when you started.

**AH:** Yeah, I was a little over 50.

**BG:** Well when was the first time you made a banjo?

**AH:** When I was a teenager.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** I made one out of a brake drum off of a car.

**BG:** A brake drum, really?

**AH:** And an Oak neck. It wasn't very nice work, but it did play.

**BG:** Was it heavy?

**AH:** Yes sir.

**BG:** A break drum...

**AH:** Real heavy.

**BG:** Well how did you know how to do it?

**AH:** Just looking at a banjo.

**BG:** Taking one apart?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Did you make any more after that?

**AH:** Yeah, I built several. I built two or three a year while I was a cabinetmaker. Sometimes, maybe, I wouldn't build one for a year, then I'd build two or three the next year. It was kind of a hobby then. I wasn't really doing it to make money. If I could sell one and just get my money back and not lose anything. It was more or less practice.

**[Interruption by ringing phone]**

**3:04**

**BG:** So did you work for a cabinetmaker yourself or was it your own business?

**AH:** I've done it both ways. Me and another guy were partners for a while, working for ourselves. It's more worry working for yourself because you have to sit at night and figure jobs and stuff and get bids, so we decided we weren't getting rich at it anyway so we were better off working for somebody else. Less worry.

**BG:** Who did you work for then?

**AH:** I've worked for Brooks Cabinet Shop, Accent Kitchen and Bath, and Ray Jones' Builders. Building cabinets.

**BG:** That means going to somebody's kitchen and building the whole...

**AH:** We actually build them in the shop, finished them, and then took them and installed them. We'd go measure the kitchen.

**BG:** What, are they custom ones?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Ok. You worked with the customer to figure out what they needed?

**AH:** Right.

**BG:** How was that? Did you like doing that?

**AH:** Yeah. Cabinetmaking making is hard work. Nearly everything you do, squatting, crawling, duck walking, that sort of thing is bad on your knees.

**BG:** Why? Because you have to get down underneath it and get it up?

**AH:** Right. And then, when you are building you can't take a big base cabinet and put it up on a table and hardly get to it to work on it. So we always just worked on them in the floor.

**BG:** So when did you start... You said you made them on the side when you were a cabinet worker. Did you have a shop here or did you just do it...?

**AH:** No. I would just do it at home, wherever, or in the garage, or the yard. Wherever.

**BG:** Did you have all of this machinery?

**AH:** No.

**BG:** How'd you do it then?

**AH:** Just by hand.

**BG:** The whole thing by hand?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** Did you learn from anybody else?

**AH:** I learned a lot from Frank Neat, and some from Bill Sullivan and different people, you know, through just talking. I've been up to Frank's shop a lot of times and watched him.

**BG:** And he let you watch him?

**AH:** Oh yeah. Frank didn't care. Frank's a good friend of mine.

**BG:** And you played in a band with Frank, right?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** So this is kind of an area where people play a lot of Bluegrass?

**AH:** Quite a bit, but over in Frank's area it's more Bluegrass than here.

**5:15**

**BG:** Oh really?

**AH:** As you go east. Yeah.

**BG:** Ok. He's about 50 miles East of here isn't he? Or something like that...

**AH:** Yeah, it's a little farther than that probably. About 65 or 70, something like that...

**BG:** Yeah. So you guys played in a band together?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** In a couple of bands or what?

**AH:** With Harold Austin, First National Bluegrass Band we did.

**BG:** That was the name of the band? First National Bluegrass Band?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** When was that?

**AH:** In the '70s and on through the '80s.

**BG:** Ok. Where did you play?

**AH:** No particular place, just wherever Harold booked a show.

**BG:** And you always played banjo?

**AH:** No, Frank played banjo and I played mandolin when we played with Harold.

**BG:** Oh, ok, because Frank liked the banjo and...

**AH:** Mhm.

**6:00**

**BG:** And you were pretty good at the mandolin?

**AH:** Yeah, I played mandolin with Carl Story back in the early '70s. Mandolin was probably my best instrument at one time.

**BG:** Really?

**AH:** Yeah, I don't fool with it any more, but it was probably was.

**BG:** Then how did you get into the banjo?

**AH:** You mean playing or building?

**BG:** Playing, playing... Did you start playing it also?

**AH:** Yeah, well I started playing banjo before mandolin.

**BG:** Ok, so you kind of went back and forth.

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** You know, for someone like me who doesn't play very well with different instruments it's kind of amazing to me that you can jump from one instrument to another. Is it hard for you?

**AH:** Yeah, it's different, you know, but you just... When I went to work for Carl he already had a banjo player, so the only way I got the job was to play mandolin. So then I played mandolin mostly for probably 15 years instead of banjo. Then when we started the Buck Creek Band I went back to banjo.

**BG:** Now Buck Creek is your band, is that right?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** How long has that been around?

**AH:** Since 1991.

**BG:** '91. And you're the leader of it?

**AH:** Yeah, well, [unable to discern word] goes by my name, but we're all equal. I guess as far as making a decision and deciding things I think that's the way a band should be.

**BG:** Yeah. Arthur Hatfield and Buck Creek.

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** That's right. You've played a lot of festivals haven't you?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** And you're pretty well known?

**AH:** Locally, not far away. We don't go very far.

**BG:** Nothing down in Nashville much or anything?

**AH:** No. We don't do very much at all in Tennessee. Never have.

**BG:** So would you say your Bluegrass band is kind of built Monroe style or is it more progressive, more modern?

**AH:** A little bit more progressive, but not what you'd call progressive Bluegrass now.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** But yeah, its a little bit on passed, I don't mean better than Bill, but a little more progressive.

**BG:** Yeah. Ok.

**AH:** We do a few country songs and so forth, you know, that Bill wouldn't have done.

**BG:** Oh really?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Why wouldn't he have done them?

**AH:** I guess just because it wasn't his style.

**BG:** A little bit wider than what you guys do... What do you think about the banjo?

**AH:** I've always been kind of fascinated by the sound of them.

**BG:** Mhm. The "tininess" of it? I never could figure out what a banjo is doing in the band. Is it doing leads? Is it doing background?

**AH:** Both.

**BG:** Both?

**AH:** Both.

**BG:** Ok. So you liked how they looked, and how they sounded, right?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Do you, I guess I was putting words in your mouth, do you like the style of the banjo, how it's made?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** Yeah?

**AH:** I do.

**BG:** So you are working on that one now, and what are you, what do they go for?

**AH:** This one's \$2800. The Buck Creek Mahogany like this one is \$2600.

**BG:** What's the different between them?

**AH:** Just, one is Mahogany and the other one is Walnut, and there is a little more inlay in this peg head than there is that one.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** And it has a barrel resonator. Barrel Walnut. This one does, and that one's just a plain back Mahogany.

**BG:** How did you figure out these styles when you were making these things? Why do you have these different styles?

**AH:** Well, I knew that some people would want a Walnut banjo and some people want Mahogany, and some want Maple. That's just, every maker has to make all three.

**BG:** Oh, you do?

**AH:** Yeah. To be able to see to as many as you can.

**BG:** Go through those again. Walnut...

**AH:** Mahogany and Maple. Those are just the necks, right?

**10:19**

**AH:** Yeah, and the resonator will be matching wood, whatever, but it's only veneered.

**BG:** Oh ok.

**AH:** The resonator, they are a plywood back, solid wood sides.

**BG:** So the resonators you have up there, on the wall there.

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** So you take the resonators and you put, you said, veneer on them to match the...

**AH:** Right, to match...

**BG:** To match what's on there.

**[Brief interruption by videographer]**

**BG continues:** So what are your models again?

**AH:** The "Buck Creek" is Mahogany, the Walnut is "Special," and the Curly Maple is the gold-plated "Celebrity."

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** Then I make an "Aurora" model, which is also Mahogany, and I make an arch top model, a "Rocky Hill."

**BG:** A Rocky Hill. Ok.

**AH:** It's just like a Celebrity other than it's the arch top.

**BG:** If we wanted to see samples of those, you probably don't have them here, right?

**AH:** Just on the Internet.

**BG:** Ok. So we can go to that and look at those different models.

**AH:** Yes.

**BG:** How long have you been making those models like that?

**AH:** I started out with only three models in 2001. Then I've added on the others one at a time on through, but I couldn't tell you just exactly how long on the others.

**BG:** Have you experimented as you've been making over the years, trying to find the perfect necks, feel, and things like that?

**AH:** I always made the necks to feel like I liked them to feel.

**BG:** Like you liked them, right?

**AH:** [Nods head yes]

**BG:** All right.

**AH:** And I've never had any complaints about them.

**BG:** What do you mean?

**AH:** Fairly thin, like that **[Demonstrates with in-process neck]**. And the width of course is just standard like Gibson, the fingerboard width...

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** ...when I get them, but I don't like a thick neck, neither do I like one, I've seen necks that are almost square that come down pretty straight on the side. Of course they round the corners, but they still got basically kind of a square profile and they just don't feel good to me at all. So I don't think they probably would any one else, I think the neck feels bad to me; the way I always felt about it, I think it's going to feel bad to somebody else, more than likely. Once in a while somebody will order one and ask for one a little thicker. Maybe give me a measurement or something.

**BG:** They'll actually tell you what the measurement might be and the edges and everything?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Ok, but most people like the way you make them.

**AH:** They do.

**BG:** Have you had any players who have changed your style, or is it mainly what you like, I guess?

**AH:** On the neck shape?

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** Dana Cupp wanted just a little bit narrower of a fingerboard and a little bit rounder neck. So that's the way I built his.

**BG:** Do you make them for different artists? Like, Frank was talking about how he's made some for different, J.D. Crowe and different people, and then they would go out and sell them.

**AH:** Yeah, there are several professionals playing my banjos.

**BG:** Ok. Can you tell us who they are?

**AH:** Part of them, I probably can't think of all of them. I think there are about 18.

**BG:** Really?

**13:44**

**AH:** Dana Cupp, Daniel Grindstaff, Dale Perry, Jesse Baker, Carl Williams Jr., and Brian Leaver... I can't even think of all of them, but they are all listed on the Internet.

**BG:** On the Internet.

**AH:** Jason Davis, Jim Green...

**BG:** Are these all musicians who are in big bands or something, down in Nashville?

**AH:** Mhm. And Bobby Osborne has one.

**BG:** Oh Bobby does? Ok. Have you made any models with their names on them?

**AH:** No, I've never put anyone's name on them...

**BG:** So what they buy is one of your...

**AH:** Bobby's does have a block that says "Rocky Top Express."

**BG:** Oh yeah?

**AH:** At the 15<sup>th</sup>, but it's a Celebrity model. I've been asked by some to do a signature model as an endorsement banjo and build that model and other people have done that, other companies.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** But I've never done that, and the main reason is, if they decided not to play my banjo and get another one, and wasn't playing it, then here'd I'd have a model of theirs and nobody even playing it.

**BG:** So, a signature models means that you put their name on the bottom of it.

**AH:** I have put the name on the bottom, it would still be like, I think Daniel Grindstaff has "Grindstaff" on the block right here, but it's still a Stony Creek model.

**BG:** What about on a top head there?

**AH:** They all have my name.

**BG:** They all have your name.

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** So you never put anybody else's name on there.

**AH:** No.

**[Interruption by videographer – shots of head and neck of banjo]**

**BG:** So that's your standard head?

**AH:** That is, yeah.

**BG:** Hatfield.

**AH:** Of course, they can get like a Gibson pattern, a flying eagle, or hearts and flowers, or something like that if they order it. Like, the flying eagle over there I was showing you that still has a square peg head, I can get that but still have my name on it if it's one of my banjos.

**BG:** When you say flying eagle, that's a different...

**AH:** Inlay pattern.

**BG:** An inlay pattern. Ok. And I didn't realize until we talked to Frank yesterday that banjo makers often have other people do other parts of the banjo and a lot of what your art is, is putting it together and making it all fit right. So you told me earlier that the inlays come from Brian England, is that right?

**AH:** Yes sir.

**BG:** How long have you been doing that with him?

**AH:** Ever since I started. Even before I started building Hatfield banjos I'd make a neck where I'd do my inlay.

**BG:** How'd you meet him? How'd you know about him?

**AH:** I just heard about him through word of mouth.

**BG:** So you never had to do the inlay yourself?

**AH:** No. Sometimes I will cut and put in one piece or something if there is just a broken one or something like that, grind it out and replace it, but I don't even like to do that, it's too slow.

**BG:** Too slow?

**AH:** Yeah, it's too slow. Or, I'm too slow at it. Now Frank's son Ricky can carve up fast. He cuts two patterns at once.

**BG:** Oh he does?

**AH:** Yeah, if it's a standard pattern, he'll stack pearl on top of each other and cut two patterns at once.

**BG:** Wow.

**AH:** He's good.

**BG:** Now Brian England used to do it by hand, didn't he?

**AH:** He started out by hand, but he's been, as soon as he got the contract with Gibson he got a CNC because he knew he could never cut by hand and keep up with that.

**BG:** What's a CNC?

**AH:** It's an overhead router that's computer controlled. Like this pattern is programmed in to cut it out in the wood, and it's also programmed, I don't know if it's the same machine or if they've got a program in a different one because he's got several now, but it cuts the pearl and it also cuts the pocket for the pearl just to fit. I think Brian told there was 1000 mm clearance around the wood.

**BG:** So everything comes out pretty perfect when you do that, right?

**AH:** Yeah. CNC is more perfect than anybody can hand cut because it's going to be exactly the same every time.

**BG:** Now there are people out there who would rather have it not be so perfect.

**AH:** Yeah, right, because Frank owned the real valuable pre-war banjos and I tell people they are better off to get Frank Neat to make their neck even if they call me. The banjo will be worth more because they cut it like, where it's not its perfect shape because all of the old pre-war Gibson's were hand cut. They make it look just like the old ones did.

**BG:** And there are a lot of people out there that want to buy banjos that are like the pre-war Gibson banjos, is that what you are saying?

**AH:** Yeah, that's what they are putting them on. I actually bought a pre-war tenor Gibson.

**BG:** I see.

**AH:** I make a lot of those necks, but if they got a real a high valuable one, I still tell them they are better off to get Frank to make it.

**BG:** Ok. But if they say, well I don't want to pay that much.

**AH:** Then I'll do it, but that's just my advice to them on the beginning. If they've got a banjo worth \$25,000 up, I tell them they are better off to get Frank to make the neck.

**19:17**

**BG:** And what would make a banjo worth \$20,000?

**AH:** I guess the collectability of it. There are banjos worth \$150,000 if they belong to me, but if they belong to Sonny or somebody, Sonny Osborne, then they are going to be worth a lot more than that for the fact that they are Sonny's too, you know.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** Sonny's, "Grenada" is probably worth half a million, I don't know, but being his it probably is.

**BG:** What's that, Sonny's Grenada?

**AH:** It's a model Gibson made, a Grenada, an original five string. Now, if they happen to be original five strings, they are worth a lot more than come out as a ten stringed and got an after-market neck.

**BG:** Oh well, that sounds kind of complicated. All these different collectors wanting different things, and do some of these guys just get them to hang on the wall because they are something pretty?

**AH:** Probably.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** They may do it, people that have plenty of money and wants them. I'd say a lot of those really valuable banjos are not even being played.

**BG:** So when somebody calls you up and has a pre-war Gibson, but it's not really worth as much as that, they might want you to do the neck to make it a five string, right?

**AH:** Yeah, I do a lot of those. I do cheaper models, and I do expensive models, but my advice is to get Frank to do it.

**BG:** Ok, because his looks more like that, but it's still not the original.

**AH:** No, but it still looks like it.

**BG:** I see.

**AH:** Because the CNC inlay, even the same pattern, is not going to look like the old ones did, it's going to be too perfect.

**BG:** Someone can actually see difference?

**AH:** Oh yeah. You can too, if you'd seen both of them.

**BG:** Really?

**AH:** Easily. Yeah.

**BG:** And the whole idea is that it is imperfect, that's what makes it better.

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** That's interesting, isn't it?

**AH:** Yeah. Actually, if Frank's building a Neat banjo and they hand cut their pearl, it fits much closer than when they are doing one of those because old pre-wars had a lot of filler around them.

**BG:** Oh yeah. So, it seems like, talking to Frank yesterday and talking to you today, that Gibson pre-war banjos were pretty good, right?

**AH:** Yeah, they were.

**BG:** Who else was making banjos at that time?

**AH:** Vega, Paramount, there was a lot, and I think one of the reasons Gibson was so popular is because Earl played one.

**BG:** Really? Earl Scruggs?

**AH:** Yeah, I know that had a lot to do with it, I'm sure you know. If Earl had played a Vega, it probably would have been more popular. He did later on endorse Vega there for a few years, but I never did see him play it hardly.

**BG:** So that's what he was playing. Is he considered the king of banjo players?

**AH:** Yeah. Simply for the fact he started it, you know, that style of banjo playing.

**BG:** With the resonator...

**AH:** Yeah, and the three finger style with the roll that Earl has and so forth.

**BG:** Now if you go up to Muhlenberg County and you talk with these thumb pickers, it's like Merle Travis is the god of thumb picking.

**AH:** Right.

**BG:** Is that the same way with banjo?

**AH:** With Earl Scruggs.

**BG:** Nobody is taking his place, Scruggs?

**AH:** They will never, because Scruggs invented it, you know, kind of like Monroe with a mandolin.

**BG:** So what is the motivation behind these people who want to be just like him? They just, he's their hero?

**AH:** Right.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** But even like Sonny Osborne and J.D. Crowe, people will tell you that Earl was the best. Of course, even if they knew they were they probably wouldn't say that, but Earl was great and everybody knew it.

**BG:** He just died a few months ago.

**AH:** Mhm. About two or less, I guess.

**BG:** I just saw on Facebook somebody had a little cartoon and it was two angels in Heaven and one said, "Earl wants a five string lute, what do you call it, harp, because he is Heaven now," and they said, "Well give it to him, he's the one who invented it."

**AH:** There's no telling what Earl's banjo is worth.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** And it's not even an original five string now because he had the neck cut down and it twisted the original neck because it was so big.

**BG:** Oh.

**AH:** And it twisted or bowed or something, and he had another neck made for it.

**BG:** So, when you make your banjos you get your boards cut by England, Brian England, right?

**AH:** Yes sir.

**BG:** And they come in, over there on the wall there, they come in like that. Can you get a shot of that?

**AH:** They actually... [Holds out banjo neck for camera]

**BG:** They actually come like that. Ok.

**AH:** Profiled to shape. The fret slots have been sawn and the inlay is in.

**BG:** What about the neck itself. Do you cut the block out yourself?

**AH:** Well, a lot of them, I do some of them, but a lot of them I buy like this, just roughly ban sawed out in a block from First Quality Music in Louisville (KY). This is to glue ears on up here for the size of the peg head because that way they don't have to use nearly as much wood.

**25:10**

**BG:** Oh that's right, yeah; they were showing me that yesterday. So that's kind of a thing that they can do in a factory, cut it out like that.

**AH:** Yeah, First Quality has got a bit machine shop up there. They built banjos too, the Sullivan banjo.

**BG:** So sometimes you make that yourself and sometimes you buy it.

**AH:** Sometimes I'll buy it just to build it, long enough, about 3 ft. long and about this wide [Demonstrates with piece of wood] and you can turn on neck this way and turn one this way and you can get two necks out of it.

**BG:** Ok, and you cut it here in the shop.

**AH:** Yeah, on the ban saw.

**BG:** On the ban saw, ok.

**AH:** But my ban saw is really not, I like to get them like this when I can because my ban saw is not heavy enough to cut that thicker Maple.

**BG:** And those are Maple?

**AH:** Mahogany and Walnut.

**BG:** And Walnut. Is one better for playing that than the other?

**AH:** Not really, but they will have a little bit different sound.

**BG:** They will?

**AH:** Mahogany is a little mellower because it is softer wood and Maple is a little bit brighter. Walnut is kind of in-between.

**BG:** How does the neck affect that sound of the banjo?

**AH:** It does. A lot.

**BG:** Really?

**AH:** Yeah. It will a lot.

**26:34**

**[AH begins to demonstrate sound of wood]**

**BG:** Ok, that's the sound of it?

**AH:** It affects... If you get a bad piece of back wood the banjo will never sound good. See here how the sound goes up in the neck.

**BG:** Uh huh. So when you get a piece of wood like that do you test it before you even start working with it?

**AH:** I do.

**BG:** Do that again. What are you actually doing?

**[AH Demonstrates]**

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** I'm scratching the end of it.

**BG:** Scratching the end and your seeing what the sound is? What are you looking for there?

**AH:** On my banjos, I prefer one with a deeper, even like the Maple, with a softer piece of Maple it will have a deeper tone and won't be as bright and sharp sounding.

**BG:** For a banjo that you are going to play? Is that what you are saying?

**AH:** Or one of my Hatfield banjos.

**BG:** Oh ok, so the Hatfield banjos, you want them to sound a certain way.

**AH:** Yeah. If I can get them to, but not everyone does exactly what you want it to, but...

**BG:** So you are looking at the sound of that. What about the resonator? Does that have to have a certain, do you have to do the same test with that?

**AH:** No, because that's not really a choice. I have to use whatever I order.

**BG:** Oh, ok.

**AH:** But they are all poplar plywood on the back.

**BG:** They are?

**AH:** Uh huh. And then just with a veneer on it.

**BG:** Ok. So it's all just veneer on the outside.

**AH:** About 30,000<sup>ths</sup>. There's not enough veneer to affect the sound regardless of type of wood that it is.

**BG:** 30,000<sup>ths</sup> of an inch veneer? Ok.

**AH:** Yeah, and I can let you see the veneer here.

**28:10**

**[AH Provides example of veneer on banjo]**

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** And then the sides. See here? They are the same way.

**BG:** So what is the function of the resonator, just to make it louder but not to really give it a tone?

**AH:** Most of your sound comes out the back of a banjo, and if it's open on the back your body catches a lot of it. It won't be very loud. On the resonator you have the sounds, the flange around the resonator reflects the sound back out through the holes and the flanges.

**BG:** Do most of the banjos you make have resonators?

**AH:** Yeah, I've never built an open back.

**BG:** Really? Ok. How come?

**AH:** I've had a few people ask about open backs, but I just tell them I don't play the claw hammer frailing style and I just don't know enough about what they need to sound like. So I just tell them that they are better off to get one from somebody that does that and knows what they are doing about building.

**BG:** It sounds like everything you, how you make your banjo, is to please how you play, your sound, right?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** If people like your sound, they'll buy your banjo. Is that... ?

**AH:** Yeah. I've never got one back.

**BG:** Yep. Do you have customers come in and say, "I want it to sound like this," and you kind of work with them to make it sound that way.

**AH:** Yeah, they can say, "I want it brighter or not as bright and, you know, you just tighten the head tighter and we'll make it brighter, lower the tail piece and that sort of thing.

**BG:** Ok, and you do that here?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Is that before you give it them?

**AH:** [Nods head in agreement]

**BG:** So you don't keep the finished pieces in here. Do you keep them somewhere else?

**AH:** I take them into the trailer.

**BG:** In the trailer. Ok. Is that where you live?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** So do people come to you and say, "I want this to sound like Earl Scruggs."

**AH:** Oh all the time.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** They aren't going to sound like those kinds of people anyway unless they are playing with them. There's a lot to who is playing the banjo as much as the banjo itself is about.

**30:23**

**BG:** But do you try to help them sound as best as they can?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Does that also involve changing their style of playing, or just doing what you can to the banjo?

**AH:** Doing what I can to the banjo. They're not going to change their style of playing unless they want too. That's something that they have to do themselves.

**BG:** Ok. So if the headpiece is already done, you don't change much of that for people, right? Not the headpiece...

**AH:** The neck?

**BG:** The neck.

**AH:** Not if it's already finished or anything I don't.

**BG:** Well what if somebody came in and said, "I want a snake going down my, or..."

**AH:** Here on the fingerboard?

**BG:** There on the fingerboard.

**AH:** When people want some custom thing like that I tell them I'll just stay out of it and for them to work out all the details with Brian and Jason and send them over there and take care of that and then to send it to me. They can pay for it in advance and I'll take it out of the price of one of mine for the banjo, or they can send it to me and I'll pay for it and it will be added on to the price of the banjo. I've done different things. I've done one that had a rope that came all the way down it, a rope, and then Brian engraved in it and made curves. A rope, he was in the Navy or something and wanted this rope, and I think an anchor down at the bottom.

**BG:** Oh really?

**AH:** And then Brian actually engraved the pearl, where it had marks for the rope. It looked just like a rope.

**BG:** So he did that part of it by hand I guess, didn't he?

**AH:** Yeah, he did great, the engraving part he did. He uses a little chisel and scratches it and then they put black Indian ink in it or something.

**BG:** When you did that model did you tell Brian that you wanted, did this guy come in and sit down with you and say this is what I want, or did you guys work with Brian?

**AH:** He'd already worked that part out before he came down. He came down and picked his banjo up. See, when Jason Clarke does the design for Brian over there, he actually does the computer designing, that's his job and he's good at it. He will draw this up on the computer and he will email them a picture for them to approve. I've had him do things like that for me, you know, if somebody told me but I just quit getting in the middle because there is more chances for mistakes. The more people involved, the more chances there are.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** You know, to get something crossed up. That way if they look at the picture and they do the dealing themselves. If it's not what they want, it's theirs.

**BG:** So that one that you are talking about, it still had Hatfield on the top, it had a line going through it with an anchor at the bottom. So his guy was getting a Hatfield one with a custom...

**AH:** It had custom in the block there.

**BG:** Did you do anything special to the resonator or anything like that?

**AH:** No, it was just the fingerboard and I can't remember what he had done up here [**points to top of banjo**]. I think it had a big compass.

**BG:** Oh, so you did change the head too...

**AH:** Yeah, but still had the Hatfield logo just like that, but I believe it did have a compass in it up here that they had drawn in abalone, I believe, of different colors.

**BG:** Did you ever get something that you didn't like that somebody else had designed with Brian and you said, "Ah, that doesn't look too good"?

**AH:** Yeah, I've seen things I didn't like.

**BG:** What'd you do? You still made it though...

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** That's what they wanted. It was their custom thing.

**BG:** Why didn't you like it?

**AH:** I just saw that one guy had something with snakes and lizards and stuff on it, you know, in different places and I didn't care for that. But if he liked it, that's fine.

**BG:** Nothing that you wanted to touch.

**AH:** I wouldn't have wanted it myself.

**BG:** But you didn't mind having the Hatfield name on it.

**AH:** No. Because it wasn't one of my models.

**BG:** What does it mean to have the Hatfield name on it to you?

**AH:** It means the workmanship has got to be good or it doesn't leave. Builders that have their name on the banjo care. Where you find workmanship going down is where there's a place that has a bunch of employees and you know, a lot of employees don't care as long as it's good enough, if they can get by with it because their name is not on it, they are not responsible anyway, the company is responsible. I've seen that in all your bigger companies. That's another reason I wanted to build banjos because I felt I could have them a better quality than what the companies were doing. And I don't have to pay anybody, so I can spend, I don't like to have to spend a bunch of extra time, but it doesn't cost me any actual money to, just time.

**BG:** When are you happy with it? You said the workmanship is high quality.

**AH:** When I'm happy with it?

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** When that's just as good as I can get it. I feel that I can't get it any better.

**BG:** And how do you know that it's as good as you can get it?

**AH:** Well I just like to see no defects.

**BG:** No defects? Yeah. And the whole thing looks good to you?

**AH:** And sounds good.

**BG:** And it sounds good, yeah. So the sound and the looks are really important?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** Have you ever had one that it didn't sound very good and you?

**AH:** I have. I've had some, I've actually made a couple of necks over before I let the banjos go because they didn't sound good and I tried another neck on and proved it was the neck wood. If a neck wood is bad, Frank told me that years ago, and I never had any reason to doubt Frank on anything he told me, but I didn't realize it could be that much. But a bad piece of neck wood could ruin a great banjo.

**BG:** Well tell me the story then. How did you figure out that it was bad?

**AH:** By trying another neck. Because I was using the same rims and I haven't gotten any bad-sounding Jimmy Cox rims. That's all I use, and Frank uses them too.

**BG:** Jimmy Cox is the guy from...

**AH:** Maine.

**BG:** Maine. So you use rims from him too?

**AH:** Yes sir.

**BG:** Ok. So you knew it wasn't the rim.

**AH:** And I didn't think it was the tone ring.

**BG:** So what were you hearing that sounded bad?

**AH:** Just a thin sound, like all the sounds coming off the string and nothing down in the banjo. It didn't have any depth. It was just a little thin, bright kind of hard sound. It just wasn't good.

**37:18**

**BG:** And it was that one you were working on that was screwed up?

**AH:** Yep. It's a neck wood. When I hear something like that I start checking the neck wood. Of course, the first thing I'll do is change the bridges because bridges affect sound that way too.

**BG:** The little bridge that holds the string. Yeah.

**AH:** Because it's actually the main transmitter is between the strings and your hand.

**BG:** Show us a bridge.

**AH:** I don't think I have one done.

**BG:** Oh, those aren't bridges?

**AH:** Those are the blanks.

**BG:** Oh, ok.

**AH:** They aren't actually made.

**BG:** Oh ok, I see. Yeah.

**AH:** Not made into a bridge.

**BG:** And you do that by hand, right?

**AH:** There's one.

**BG:** You've got one.

**AH:** Yeah I do.

**[SA: Hold it up back there.]**

**BG:** Are there lines in that? Do you put groves in those?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** Turn it this way. Yeah, ok. So you are saying that the bridge that you made could have been bad too, it wasn't transferring the sound right. How does that little thing do anything? I mean, what is that doing?

**AH:** That's the main thing there. The bridges, they'll sound as much different, every bridge you try will sound different if it's made out of a different piece of wood.

**BG:** Oh ok. So the one that you were working on that didn't sound good, you first checked to see if the bridge was bad.

**AH:** Yeah, I always try that first before I make a neck because that's a simple fix.

**BG:** Can you look at it and say that it's bad?

**AH:** No.

**BG:** How do you tell it's bad?

**AH:** When I try it. When I listen to it.

**BG:** So there are different factors, but you have to do it one by one, you are trying to get rid. So you are trying to find if the bridge is bad. If the bridge is bad, you'll put another bridge on and see if that makes a difference.

**AH:** Right.

**BG:** And if it doesn't, you think those two bridges are...

**AH:** If you put a bunch of bridges on, and a bridge, or take a bridge off of another one and it sounds real good, then you know you've got a good bridge.

**BG:** So then you are narrowing it down to the neck wood.

**AH:** Neck wood.

**BG:** And you already did the scratch test on it, right? Early. And it passed the scratch test but it didn't pass this.

**AH:** Yep.

**BG:** What do you think was wrong with that wood?

**AH:** Hard. It was really hard and heavy in weight.

**BG:** And you didn't catch that when you were making it.

**AH:** I did, but I really I learned more about that after I made those.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** It doesn't take long to learn when something can cost you money, or cause you to make something over.

**BG:** I see. So was it a batch of wood that was bad.

**AH:** Just that piece.

**BG:** Just a piece.

**AH:** When I get wood it may not have come out of the same tree. When they get wood... I buy just about all of my neck wood from First Quality in Louisville, and I can't remember if that bad piece of Walnut came from up there or not, or if I got it from somewhere else. I can't remember.

**BG:** You said they make banjos. Is that like a factory banjo store, or do they make them like yours?

**AH:** It's a little bit bigger than what I am. They've got a lot more machinery than I do.

**BG:** Are there individual...

**AH:** They have got a couple of employees.

**BG:** I think of you as a luthier, because you put it all together and you are responsible for what it sounds like when it's done, right, and your name is on it.

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Do they have a luthier up there, or is it just a committee of people who do it?

**AH:** Eric Sullivan actually does a lot of the work himself.

**BG:** Eric Sullivan.

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** And his dad passed away three or four years ago. He was Bill Sullivan. He did a lot of things, Bill did.

**BG:** So you would consider Eric the luthier of the group?

**AH:** Yeah, he's, well he's one of the owners of the business, but he does a lot of the work himself, but he's in the shop, I mean, full-time where he can see stuff.

**BG:** Hmm. So maybe we should go interview him sometime I guess.

**AH:** Yeah, that'd be nice. He's got a, they've got a big operation up there, a big place.

**BG:** Do they just make banjos or other things?

**AH:** Well they actually sell parts and so forth. It's a big parts store. They sell guitars. It's called First Quality Music.

**BG:** I didn't know about them. Ok. So, on that particular banjo you're talking about, you just unscrewed the neck and threw it away? The one that was bad.

**AH:** Yeah. When I've got a bad neck like that I don't lose the fingerboard and the peg head overlay.

**BG:** Do you take them off?

**AH:** Yeah, what I do is I saw them off...

**BG:** You need to stand back there a little farther...

**[Videographer stops filming momentarily]**

**42:06**

**AH:** I set the table saw and saw just below this truss rod slot. I saw the back part of the neck off, right behind it. And then I'll take a little chisel, and chisel what little wood is left there over it. It won't be but about a 16<sup>th</sup> of an inch. I chisel that out, and then I grind out a bunch out here with one of those little die-grinders and I pull the truss rod out from the back.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** And I save it so I can use it over. Then I saw again right below the fingerboard, up to here. And then, before that, I saw right down below this on the peg head overlay and get it off, and then I run it through the thickness center and get the old glue off and stuff so I can use this over, I can use the fingerboard over, and I can use the truss rod over.

**BG:** So you aren't going to throw everything away?

**AH:** No, just the neck wood.

**BG:** Just the neck wood. Ok. Well that's pretty cool.

**AH:** It takes a lot of extra time, but it doesn't cost me that much extra money.

**BG:** Yeah, because you are going to be able to use everything again.

**AH:** Right. Everything but the neck wood.

**BG:** So, you were sanding on that when we were coming, when we first started. Did you finish it, what you were doing?

**AH:** No, I'm not done. I've still got some marks and so forth that look, some scratches that will have to be sanded out, but I don't like a lot of time on this one.

**BG:** You don't like a lot?

**AH:** I don't like a lot of time. It won't take me too much longer. And then I've still got to drill in this fifth string tuner hole.

**BG:** So what if people move from four strings to five.

**AH:** Earl... I guess you know Earl started. Pretty much, before Earl, that wasn't any five strings. There were a few, but I don't know, I think they said maybe six percent of the banjos built were five strings.

**BG:** And that's all you sell is five strings, right?

**AH:** Yeah. I've never made a tenor banjo. I would, if somebody ordered it, but they just haven't. I've been asked about them a couple of times, if I would, but they just never did order it.

**BG:** Ok. And what kind of wood is that right there?

**AH:** Walnut.

**BG:** That's Walnut.

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** And that's going to give you what kind of sound?

**AH:** It should give you between a Maple and a Mahogany sound; a little bit brighter than Mahogany and a little less than Maple.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** It's kind of considered in the middle.

**BG:** And that's the kind you like? Is that what you like?

**AH:** I usually play Mahogany.

**BG:** Mahogany.

**AH:** I sell a lot more Mahogany. I sell as many Mahogany's as Buck Creeks, as I do Celebrities and Walnuts combined, or almost. I don't know if it's because a lot of people do like a Mahogany banjo and I don't know if it's the price, because there is only \$200.00 different in a Walnut and a Mahogany.

**BG:** Is Mahogany more expensive?

**AH:** Mahogany is less.

**BG:** Less. Ok.

**AH:** And the Maple is higher.

**BG:** Maple is higher. Ok. Maple, isn't that what guitars are made out of most of the time? Or necks?

**AH:** No, Mahogany mostly.

**BG:** Mahogany.

**AH:** You see more Mahogany with guitars.

**BG:** I didn't know that. And the three different kinds of woods, gives you three different kinds of sound.

**AH:** A little bit. It's not a bit noticeable amount, but...

**BG:** Do you teach people how to play the banjo?

**AH:** I've got a couple of videos, but I don't have time to give any lessons...

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** ... at all... I'm asked often, "Do you give lessons?" but no, I don't.

**BG:** So those two screws at the end of there, at the end of that, how do those attach to the banjo?

**AH:** Let's see... I don't have everything; I don't have the other parts and that's not really turned, but they go through the rim like this **[Demonstrates]**. They aren't exactly lined up with that. I don't want to crack that neck. Let's see... **[AH looks through parts]** There we go. See, you've got a tone ring that goes on up here; and you've got a flange that goes on down here. Then you've got two rods here. That's a long one. One is long, and one is short, and they screw on there, and the other one is shorter and it screws on with this and that's what holds them on. You've got a nut down here too, so when your neck is pulling

you've got a washer and here, and then that screws on. Then you've got one here at the top that screws on.

**BG:** Ok. And what sticks on the end of that?

**AH:** The tailpiece bracket where you come down...

**BG:** Oh the tailpiece bracket comes down there.

**AH:** Then it gets a nut on it, right there, and that's got a hole in it so your tailpiece bolt comes down. You've got a little nut on it. Now a lot of the old banjos have open backs and stuff and they had a big wooden stick that came through and down.

**BG:** Yeah, I've seen that, instead of the metal things.

**AH:** Mhm. So the metal is what's holding those two things together.

**BG:** Right, and the truss rod is inside there, and that's, what does the truss rod do?

**AH:** Uh, I'll show you what those two things do. The banjo neck is not supposed to be perfectly straight. They are supposed to have just a little bit of bow in them this way. That's what, when you fret to string up here, then that let's it clear those frets here better where it doesn't buzz.

**BG:** Ok, so if it were straight it wouldn't do that.

**AH:** If it were straight, you would have to have your strings higher down here because it would probably vibrate on the frets on front of it. The strings are so long and so small that it vibrates a whole lot. This is called relief, but it's not supposed to be a lot, but you're supposed to have a little. I usually put about 12,000<sup>ths</sup> in them. See, you've got a little bit of clearance there in the middle, about right here.

**BG:** Oh yeah, ok. So it's bowing a little bit.

**AH:** A little bit, but with these rods like I use now, you can actually... I'll show you what they do. This block comes up to the fingerboard, right here to the bottom of the fingerboard. And if you want to put your little bit of bow in it there, I actually make my necks perfectly straight. I sand them flat on the big sander there.

**BG:** You make your necks perfectly straight first.

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** And then you put these in there.

**AH:** And this, when you turn it one-way, see how that pushed down?

**BG:** Oh yeah.

**AH:** That pushes on the back of the neck up through here and up on the fingerboard on each end. If it does bow too much this way and you want to straighten it, these are two ways that it will. Those push down on the back of the neck and up on the center of the fingerboard, so you can go either way with them. Those rods there are great for set-up. You can make a neck do whatever you want.

**BG:** Are those a new kind of rods?

**AH:** I don't know for sure when they started making them. Probably somewhere in the 80s.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** These are double rods. I used to just have singles in them, and the only thing you could do if they bowed too much this way was straighten with a single rod.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** One-way rods.

**BG:** Are guitars using double rods now?

**AH:** Yeah, everything uses them, just about...

**BG:** So that rod has nothing to do with going sideways?

**AH:** Right.

**BG:** It's just up and down motion. So when you look at one that's bowed a certain way it's either up or down. If it does twist, what do you do with it?

**AH:** Make another neck.

**51:07**

**BG:** Really?

**AH:** If it twists, yeah; if it twists badly, yeah. Up through here, if it twists over sideways and this side would get a lot lower, then you would be buzzing on the frets up here. You definitely have to make the neck over. That doesn't happen very often, but it can.

**BG:** Do you advise people how to keep their banjos from doing that kind of thing? Isn't that humidity that causes things...?

**AH:** Humidity is a lot of it. And once you finish one and put finish on it, it takes care of a whole lot of that, picking up humidity into the wood.

**BG:** The finish seals it completely? So it doesn't really breathe...

**AH:** I wouldn't think so. Not through a lacquer finish.

**BG:** Ok. We've been talking a lot about your business as being making banjos from scratch. Do you do much repair work?

**AH:** Not very much. I do a little. I do quite a bit of what they call just basic set-up, you know, as far as head tension and trying bridges and finding a better bridge and tailpiece height adjustment and that kind of thing, but like I do have people who will ask me about replacing a fingerboard or something, and I just don't do that.

**BG:** Oh you don't?

**AH:** No.

**BG:** Too much work?

**AH:** I'm not as much of a luthier as I am a builder. Those are definitely two different things. A luthier that does all kinds of repair work, you know, because building is kind of routine, over and over. Anytime you are doing repair work, you've got a different task every time. Something you have to figure out. It's time consuming. You always stand a chance that when you start pulling things off that are glued or tearing something up, and I just don't like that kind of responsibility. If I replaced a fingerboard, I'd want as much money as I did to make a neck practically, because it's as much work. And that sounds like you're trying to rob people, but it's not really if the work runs as long and it would because when you finish over the fingerboard and everything it's all sprayed together. And whenever you pull a fingerboard off, you've torn the finish up all up through here and if you don't harm the wood the only thing you can do is strip and refinish the whole neck just about because it looks patched up if you tried to spot in and do this and that. If you want it to look good, you're going to have to strip and refinish the whole neck.

**BG:** So if somebody has a bad neck, a bad fingerboard, you'd advise them to go to somebody else?

**AH:** Yes.

**BG:** Or they'd get a new neck from you.

**AH:** If I do it, it will be a new neck.

**BG:** And are they ok with that?

**AH:** Some are, yep, because I tell them, I know Robin Smith down in Gallatin, he just moved recently from Hendersonville to Gallatin, his shop, but he does replace fingerboards.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** And he might be as much to do that, I don't know about his pricing on that. He may charge as much as to do that as I do to build a neck.

**BG:** What would you charge to build a neck for somebody?

**54:32**

**AH:** \$950.00.

**BG:** \$950.00?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** That doesn't sound that bad.

**AH:** That's finished and ready to play. Fitted to their pot down here and everything. That doesn't include tuners, cause you can't give a price including tuners. You can buy tuners for \$90.00 a set to \$300.00.

**BG:** Would it have a Hatfield name on it?

**AH:** No, not a replacement neck.

**BG:** No?

**AH:** I only put that on my serial numbered banjos.

**BG:** Ok, I was wondering. Ok. What about frets? Don't frets wear out?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Do you change frets out for people?

**AH:** I do just a few, three or four; I don't do any complete re-fret jobs.

**BG:** Do you send them to somebody else?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Who do you send them to?

**AH:** Andy Todd, or Robin Smith, or First Quality... whoever. Because I don't think Frank does any re-frets either, not complete re-fret jobs. He may own Neat banjos, but I don't think he does on any others.

**BG:** What about a banjo that you made, that after it's been played by a guy after a long time and it needs its frets to be...?

**AH:** Most people, a lot of people, they'll just be three or four worn, or something like that I replace. But if they want a complete re-fret job to change size or something, I don't do them.

**BG:** So you're saying they don't usually need that many because you play up higher a lot?

**AH:** Yeah, a lot of people never even wear the frets up in here practically because they don't ever play enough on the neck.

**BG:** Is there some kind of guarantee you guys give when you sell?

**AH:** The only thing I tell people if they ask, half of them never even ask, but the only thing I tell them is that as long as I'm living and able to work, because that's as long as I can promise anything. Usually a banjo, if it's going to give trouble, it'll do it in couple of years and that's one reason I like banjos instead of mandolins and guitars because they're always submit to cracking. A banjo is not going to. The only thing that's going to give you any problem out of the banjo probably could be a rim separation, which would be to just turn another rim and put it in, or something with the neck.

**BG:** Ok.

**AH:** Unless it is misused. You can tear a resonator up, but it's not going to just tear up.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** Because it's made of plywood.

**BG:** Well that was interesting what you said about not wanting to spend your time, that you're not a repair person and that you consider a luthier as someone who does both kinds of things.

**AH:** I consider myself a builder rather than a luthier.

**BG:** Well, that's interesting.

**AH:** It's totally two different things.

**BG:** I can still call you a luthier though, right?

**AH:** Yeah, I don't care, but I don't really consider myself a repair guy. I do some small things, but nothing as major as...

**BG:** So you don't have a lot of different band people come here have you set-up their instruments for them do you? Or do you, set-up is different, right? You do set-up, right?

**AH:** Yeah, I do.

**BG:** I don't see a lot of bands around here, so when you do set-up is it someone comes in and you do it that day.

**AH:** Yeah, a lot of it is. And I've had a lot of ship-ins, but I had to quit that, as far as shipping in a complete banjo for me to do \$75.00 or \$100.00 worth of work. It takes too long to unbox and box them back up to ship out for a small job like that. Plus UPS and Fed-Ex have gotten so bad about paying claims, damage claims. You just have to fuss with them for a month and threaten them with a lawsuit and everything to collect anymore if they've damaged something and if I've done \$75.00 worth of work on a \$4000.00 banjo, and they won't pay off and it gets tore up, then what position am I in?

**BG:** Who would get set-ups from you? Somebody from Nashville?

**AH:** Just all kinds of people. I've had people to bring in banjos as far as Canada.

**BG:** Really, just for a set-up?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Tell me about that. Who did that?

**AH:** All over the United States.

**BG:** And they would drive here, that far...

**AH:** A lot of them wait until they come, maybe to Mammoth Cave, or to Nashville, or something like that.

**BG:** And they say, well, I'm going to go see Hatfield on the way and have him set it up.

**AH:** And there are a lot of people that come in just kindly banjo shopping that will go to First Quality and down to Nashville to Hubert and to Robins and Smiths in Gallatin and different places, but running Interstate 65 that will stop by. And they try to make all three.

**BG:** Yeah, they are window-shopping for banjos?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Do they usually buy yours?

**AH:** Sometimes. Sometimes they don't.

**BG:** What do they do? They go down to try all of them and then they come back here and buy one from you?

**AH:** They do occasionally.

**BG:** Or do they just call you and say I want on, I want yours.

**AH:** Some of them stop and buy them if I've got one available.

**59:39**

**BG:** That's cool.

**AH:** Some buy down there. They may stop here and not buy and go on down there and buy one.

**BG:** I didn't realize it was that, I just thought you and Frank did kind of mail order stuff, but it's really people coming in and seeing you isn't it?

**AH:** A lot, yeah. And I do a lot of mail order. I may just get email a lot of times and it will say, "I'm interested in a certain model. What's the wait time?" and if I say, "Well, I happen to have one now, why they just buy it. Most of the time it seems like that's the way it is, other than someone you see somewhere saying, "I'll be down there next week," when you are standing there talking to them and you don't ever see them. But then somebody you never even heard of just emails you and says you want to buy a certain model.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** They looked at the website, or they've seen one of the ones the professionals are playing or something.

**1:00:34**

**[Interruption by videography – tape change]**

**End of Track 1**

**Begin Track 2**

**0:00-3:03**

**[Footage of completed banjos and demonstration of work]**

**3:03**

**BG:** What are you making?

**AH:** I'm making a nut out of bone.

**BG:** Ok.

**3:45**

**[Interviewer leaves room; videographer continues filming]**

**5:00**

**[Interviewer returns]**

**BG:** So Arthur, do you think of yourself as an artist?

**AH:** Well, not really. I've never really given it any thought. Probably just somebody crazy enough to do this, that's the way I think about it. Slow as it is, as much as I do by hand.

**BG:** Do you see a lot of beauty in what you are doing?

**AH:** Yeah I do.

**BG:** Are you proud of yourself when it's done?

**AH:** Yeah. Sure. And especially to see that, that many professional banjo players like it well enough to use it.

**BG:** Mhm. Have you ever tried experimenting, you know, like Homer Ledford tried these different crazy things he made?

**AH:** No, I'm not much of an experimenter, I've always tried to just use what's always been proven and known to be good.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** I'm not saying, if you've got the time, I don't think Homer did that for a living. Maybe he did, I don't know, but maybe he did something else he could retire on, or did he?

**BG:** Well yeah, yeah he worked in the schools for a while and he did that kind of stuff for a while, and he played like you did.

**AH:** I don't really have the experimental time. There are a few things that I'd like to try, but I don't have time.

**BG:** Like what?

**AH:** Well I don't really know right off, but I'll think of something once in a while, like how I'd like to try that, but when I'm doing something else, but I just really don't have the time.

**BG:** But you have kind of experimented a little bit as you've been going along.

**AH:** With different pieces of wood, you know, having different sounds, and I don't like to make my necks out of hard heavy pieces of wood. I usually come a lot nearer to getting a sound I want by using a lighter weight, softer piece of wood. Because I like a lot of depth in my banjos and that really don't come from a hard and heavy piece of wood.

**BG:** But right now you are taking a piece of bone and you are making a nut out of it.

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** What are you looking for here, a certain height?

**AH:** Height, and then I've got to make it exactly the right length so it doesn't stick out past.

**BG:** And you can do that while your talking with me.

**AH:** Yeah, pretty good. This doesn't require a lot of thinking, just feeling.

**BG:** Just feeling?

**AH:** I can tell more anymore by feeling a lot of things than I can looking.

**BG:** Really?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** Do you remember Raymond Hicks, the boat builder we had at the Festival [**Kentucky Folklife Festival**] a couple of times?

**AH:** Yeah I do.

**BG:** He used to talk about how he could measure the boat without a tape measure. He would just use his fingers and the angle of his thumb and his fingers that was the angle of his thing. Is that kind of what you are talking about?

**AH:** Well actually, when something, when the nut is actually the exact same length, you can see what I want to feel when I rub over it, you are not feeling either one not being the same.

**BG:** Exactly, and that's your sense of touch.

**AH:** Mhm. It's hard. If something is sticking out, say a  $1/64^{\text{th}}$  of an inch, it's hard to see just a few  $1000^{\text{ths}}$  or something like that, but it's not hard to feel at all.

**BG:** Really?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** You go by your feel?

**AH:** If this is sticking out  $3000^{\text{ths}}$  past that, you'll feel it.

**BG:** Really?

**AH:** Yeah, if you rub over it, because you'll feel that little sharp corner.

**8:56**

**BG:** Have you given much thought to somebody following you?

**AH:** Building?

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** Not really. No. I may, when I get to where I'm not able to work anymore if someone wants to buy it I may sell it to them. I don't know. Probably.

**BG:** But you don't have anyone in your family who wants to learn?

**AH:** Not that I know of.

**BG:** What do they all think of you?

**AH:** They probably think I'm crazy. See, feel of that. It's not much, but you can feel it.

**BG:** Yeah, I can feel a little bit of it there. You have any grandchildren or children?

**AH:** Grandchildren. I don't think any of them would ever be interested in doing something like this.

**BG:** Earlier, before we had the camera on, you talked about the fact that you don't like to hire people to work with you.

**AH:** I don't.

**BG:** Why is that?

**AH:** Well, one of the things, if I don't have room for two people to work anyway, just walking room for one. And, plus, a lot of people don't want to do good work. You can't pay them enough to take interest. If I had anybody and paid them anything at all I'd have to raise my prices. That's one of the things for sure.

**BG:** And your prices are again? What are your prices?

**AH:** They range from \$2600.00 to \$4500.00. But I don't sell hardly any, that's just a few and you've seen that, the one with the painting on the back?

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** That's \$4500.00, that's the only one that high. That's a limited edition.

**BG:** What painting was on the back? I forget.

**AH:** Devil Anse Hatfield and Randall McCoy.

**BG:** Who?

**AH:** Randall McCoy and Devil Anse Hatfield.

**BG:** Oh, the Hatfields and McCoys.

**AH:** Yeah, it was a Hatfields and McCoys thing.

**BG:** Oh ok. Are you any relation to the Hatfields and McCoys?

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** How so?

**AH:** Well, I always heard my grandfather say that we were related, but he never said how and I never asked. And then Beverly got interested in it three, four, or five years ago.

**BG:** Your wife?

**AH:** Yeah. And she finally found it. Anse's brother Valentine was my so many generations grandfather. So Anse would have been my uncle. That many generations back. Probably about four or five generations.

**BG:** And he was one of the ones involved in the feud?

**AH:** Anse was a leader.

**BG:** Oh, and he's related to you?

**AH:** Yeah. Mhm. A great uncle.

**BG:** So how did you move out this way? Because it was up in Ashland area, right?

**AH:** My grandfather came from Jamestown, Tennessee. That's where he was from and he bought this place right here about seventy-three years ago.

**BG:** Oh ok. So you feel...

**AH:** This is the old homeplace right here.

**BG:** But the Hatfields and the McCoys, you feel a part of that too? That's why you put it on your banjo?

**AH:** Yeah, it's just a limited edition, you know, it's actually the same banjo except for the decorations as the Celebrity.

**BG:** Who paints the thing on the back?

**AH:** Jackie Shepherd. She used to work over at Custom Inlay for Brian. Her husband still does, Larry. He comes up with Brian. Remember, he's been up to Frankfort.

**BG:** Oh ok.

**AH:** With Brian.

**BG:** Yeah, yeah.

**AH:** He's the mandolin maker, Larry.

**BG:** Mhm, Larry.

**AH:** His wife.

**BG:** Sure are a lot of talented people in Kentucky.

**12:43**

**AH:** Yeah, she actually paints the picture of Ralph on the Stanley Tone that Frank builds.

**BG:** Oh, ok.

**AH:** And she paints the picture on the \$50,000.00 Earl Scruggs model Gibson built.

**BG:** So she does that in her spare time? Is that part of what she does?

**AH:** I don't know if... She used to work putting inlays in, gluing inlays in to banjos and stuff over at Custom Inlay but, with the economy got bad about 2010, I think she got laid off maybe over there, so I don't know really if painting is a full-time thing for her, or just kindly a hobby, I don't really know. It's probably more than a hobby as good as she paints; I'm sure she probably does quite a bit of it.

**BG:** So if somebody wants that special one from you, with the Hatfields on it, the Hatfields and the McCoys, are they fighting on it or something, or what?

**AH:** No, we've just got their picture and the Tug River painted between them.

**BG:** Oh ok. So you get her to paint it for you?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** You take her the resonator up there and she does it?

**AH:** Right. I have to stop and paint it whatever color is going to be outside around the painting. I stain it and put a couple of coats of sealer on it before she does the painting. That makes her a smooth surface, it doesn't soak up her paint. Then I have to bring it back and finish over it with lacquer.

**BG:** So part of the finishing is another part of the art of it, isn't it?

**14:27**

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** What do you use?

**AH:** Nitrous cellulose lacquer.

**BG:** Nitrous cellulose lacquer.

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** Why that? Why do you use that?

**AH:** Its, actually, what I get from Mohawk, it's classic instrument lacquer, but that's what kind it is. It's supposed to be, have some kind of little fibers in it, I don't know, they say it does, it helps keep it from cracking, that makes the instrument lacquer different from just regular cabinet lacquer.

**BG:** Is that the cellulose part of it?

**AH:** I think so.

**BG:** Micro-cellulose lacquer. Do you have that up here, in here?

**AH:** Mhm. I've got it over here in a five-gallon bucket.

**BG:** So I'm seeing all of this wipe on poly stuff, that's not what you use.

**AH:** No, that's not what I use. Once in a while I get a used banjo or something that's got a little nick knocked out of it or something like that, I'll use something like that only to keep from having to spray a big surface, but no, that's not anything I use polyurethane except for some little touchup case once in a while or something.

**15:45**

**BG:** Micro-cellulose, what?

**AH:** Lacquer.

**BG:** Lacquer. Why is lacquer so good? Everyone has told me that.

**AH:** I don't really know, that's just customarily what people use. I thin Frank uses, or he was, Lawrence McFaddin brand instead of Mohawk, I've been using Mohawk, but basically it's the same type stuff. Both of them make an instrument lacquer.

**BG:** So do you have a paint room where you do this?

**AH:** No, I do it right about where you are setting, between there and the stand.

**BG:** With all the dust here?

**AH:** I use a high volume, low-pressure gun. I spray with about eighteen pounds. Once the dust has settled down, it doesn't bother. I can't be sanding while I'm spraying.

**BG:** Sure, sure. And you said you use a lot of air pressure tools in this place.

**AH:** I do.

**BG:** And that helps to?

**AH:** Mhm.

**BG:** The air pressure is what you use for the paint?

**AH:** Yeah. But it doesn't take very much. If those other guns where it's siphoned out you know, where the cup is underneath, you have to spray with seventy pounds or something like that with them and they'll blow up a lot of the stuff. The gun I use I spray with eighteen pounds because it comes down from the top up, the one I use comes over the top.

**BG:** Ok. What do you do, your wife said you get up and start working around 9, and you work till about 2 o'clock.

**AH:** It just depends on how late I worked the night before. Sometimes I'm out here by 7. If I worked until midnight then I'm not here until 9 or something. I work a lot of times until 11 or 12 o'clock at night.

**BG:** Just straight through?

**AH:** Well, other than going in to eat and maybe sit around 30 minutes or something.

**BG:** Why?

**AH:** I've got that much to do. I've got to.

**BG:** Do you enjoy it?

**AH:** Not anymore. I did when first started. Just like anything else, it's a job. When we were talking about playing, I don't play much anymore, but you know, by the time you look at these all day, the last thing you want to do at night is play, or on the weekend either. Frank told me that years ago. I don't care about playing after I look at them and fool with them all day.

**18:27**

**BG:** Well it sounds like you are kind of in a bind then. You have to make a lot to make a living, but making a lot has become work for you.

**AH:** Well, one of the things too is you have to kind of, when people order things you have to roughly give them a date, a month at least, what month it will be done. They want that, and I've always tried to stay within a couple of weeks or something of what I tell them. I don't like to be six months later than what I tell them. I know of people who are talking on Banjo Hangout [[www.banjohangout.org](http://www.banjohangout.org)] about ordering something in June and here it is September and I haven't gotten it yet and they're upset you know, and they've already paid a deposit.

**BG:** Where do you hear this?

**AH:** On Banjo Hangout.

**BG:** What's Banjo Hangout?

**AH:** It's a forum where you can get on and post and talk. That's probably done more for me than anything. Banjo Hangout.

**BG:** Online?

**AH:** Yeah. They've got thousands and thousands of members all over the world.

**BG:** And it's done more for your business, and learning about what other people are doing too?

**AH:** Well, yeah, people learning about me and stuff. Word of mouth goes farther than anything, and it helps more than anything if it's good. If it's bad, it hurts more than anything.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** So that's, I try my best to keep it good.

**BG:** Do you see them talking about you on there every once in a while?

**AH:** All the time, but it's not bad.

**BG:** It's not bad?

**AH:** it's not bad.

**BG:** Do you get on there and answer them when they say something?

**AH:** Occasionally. I don't post very often, but I look at it almost every day, just to see if anybody is talking bad about me. Because there is a lot of bad talk about things.

**BG:** Do they say that somebody's banjo is bad, or that they aren't good to work with or something?

**AH:** More so than saying the instrument's not good are people not doing what they say they will or the time frame say they will. A lot of people are impatient you know, if something is a week later than what it's promised then they are upset.

**BG:** What's it called? Banjo...?

**AH:** Banjo Hangout.org. It's free. It's really a good thing because they've got, you can advertise something to sell on there. Back several years ago it had 28,000 members, so I'm sure that it's a lot bigger than that now.

**20:59**

**BG:** Well that should give you a lot of business, huh?

**AH:** It does.

**BG:** I bet they get thrilled when you answer one of their emails.

**AH:** Well they don't, most of the time they don't actually direct anything, but if they come and buy something then they'll say something about it being good, and that the service was good, and sometimes I get on there and thank them.

**BG:** Do they talk about your beard and things?

**AH:** Sometimes! And people that know how, we don't know how, you can post pictures on there and stuff. Sometimes they'll post a picture of what they've got.

**BG:** Yeah, well that's neat.

**AH:** It's called banjohangout.org.

**BG:** I might write a blog about this visit. Maybe you can put that on there.

**AH:** On Banjo Hangout?

**BG:** Yeah, a little link to it or something, if I write it I'll send a link to you.

**AH:** Ok.

**BG:** If I say something nice, right?

**22:30**

**BG:** So do you belong to a luthier group or anything like that?

**AH:** Nah, never even thought about nothing like that. I just work. Try to make a living.

**BG:** I've heard some jokes about banjo players.

**AH:** I've heard the ones about banjo players.

**BG:** Why do you think they get...?

**AH:** I don't know. They get more jokes than any other instrument, don't they?

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** For some reason. But you know way back in the old days, if you think about it, before Earl Scruggs, almost everybody that played the banjo was a comedian.

**BG:** Grandpa Jones and Pappy Taylor, did you know him?

**AH:** Yeah, I know of him, and uncle Dave Macon.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** You know, all those guys were comedians and I remember Earl saying somewhere in an interview, I've heard him say it, that uncle Dave said, "You played the banjo well son, but you're not one bit funny." See, they thought way back. String Bean.

**BG:** Yeah, String Bean.

**AH:** All of those older people that played banjo before Earl were comedians that I knew of, so I guess it was just thought you know, even after Earl started, that you should be a comedian if you were going to play the banjo.

**BG:** And be made fun of.

**AH:** Yeah.

**BG:** Part of it is being made fun of.

**AH:** Of course, Earl was a very serious type guy. There wasn't anything funny at all about Earl, but he'd say that uncle Dave told him that. When he did the Opry with Bill Monroe he said, "You play the banjo well son, but you're not one bit funny." It was automatically thought of that you ought to be funny if you played the banjo.

**BG:** I hear jokes about the banjo players, but do you have jokes about the banjo itself?

**AH:** Well I've heard people say, "Why does, something about an onion makes you cry when you cut up an onion, but when you cut up a banjo nobody cries" or something like that.

**BG:** That's good. Does that bother you?

**AH:** No, it doesn't bother me.

**BG:** Do you think of banjos as a good instrument?

**AH:** Yeah, I love them.

**BG:** So you still love them, even though...

**AH:** Oh yeah, yeah. You just get tired of seeing them all the time. You know, you get up and start that first thing in the morning, and that will be the last thing before you go to bed, they get pretty old.

**BG:** Do you think making banjos has made you a better banjo player?

**AH:** Made me a worse banjo player.

**BG:** Why?

**AH:** Because, I have less desire to play them than I did. A lot. I'm a lot worse banjo player after I started this.

**BG:** Well, I know a lot of people think you are pretty good.

**AH:** But age is not improving playing either. It just doesn't go well with fast banjo playing, old age.

**25:22**

**BG:** I saw you a couple of years ago down in Hyden at a Bluegrass festival, the Osborne Brother's festival I guess it was, and you had a tent there and you were selling instruments out of there I guess. Do you do that often?

**AH:** I go to two or three a year. I go to Spigman, Nashville in February, and I go to the Osborne Brother's festival, and I've been going to the Salt Lick Bluegrass Festival up in Shepherdsville in February. It's inside. Tommy Brown hosts that.

**BG:** And what's the idea of you going?

**AH:** Actually, I like to take two or three banjos you know, and a lot of times I don't sell one there on the spot, but I'll sell one later because of being there. But you just need to be out and be seen occasionally at places like that because it kind of keeps you in peoples minds. I would go more if I had time, but I really don't have time.

**BG:** I was just wondering if it cuts into your time.

**AH:** Oh it does, definitely.

**BG:** When we had you at the folk festival [Kentucky Folklife Festival] it was kind of a different thing. We were actually paying you to demonstrate too, and talk to people about the art of it. Did you find that fun to do or was it kind of bothersome?

**AH:** After long enough it gets to where everything is just a job. You know?

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** Playing and then building and the whole deal. When you're young, I think playing is kind of fun. When you get older, it becomes work because you don't feel the same.

**BG:** You don't feel the same. What do you mean?

**AH:** Well, you get tired easily. It doesn't take very much to wear me out anymore and going places like that and toting banjos and stuff wears me out a lot worse than working in here.

**BG:** Aren't there moments when you're on stage when you feel really good about being there?

**AH:** Yeah. Probably.

**BG:** That's what we all think when we are in the audience. We all want to be up there being you. Don't tell me that you think it's just a job.

**AH:** I think everybody, after they do it a long time, it's just becomes a job.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** Just like working. It is work, and very hard work for a length of time.

**BG:** But, if you had to do this versus another job, you wouldn't want to do it, right?

**AH:** No, I wouldn't want to go back to cabinetmaking. No way. There's no harder physical work. This isn't hard physical work. It's hard mentally.

**BG:** It is? Why?

**AH:** Well, one little bobble can cost you a whole bunch of money. It's the hardest thing mentally I've ever done, but physically it's easy. It's harder to go to sleep doing this than it is out in a tobacco patch or hay field. You know, if you go out and cut tobacco all day or haul hay, you are going to sleep come night. And if you get to think about something that doesn't suit you on this, or something, you are likely to stay awake and study on it all night. If you've got some little problem with something, that you haven't gotten figured out exactly what you are going to do about, then you'll get to studying about that and the main time you'll study about it mostly is when you try to go to sleep seems like, because you've got idle time.

**BG:** Yeah. I do that too. I gotta read something, or talk to my wife or something about it.

**AH:** Same deal here. As long as everything is going good and smooth and you are meeting schedule on everything you are supposed to do it's not that bad, but when you see you are behind and wondering how you are going to get three banjos by...

**BG:** What do you think like, when you had your banjo in our exhibit, and now many in Horse Cave, and some little kid comes up and looks at it and just gets amazed and wants to do something like that, do you feel good about that?

**AH:** Yeah. Yeah I do.

**29:43**

**BG:** Because that happened a lot at the exhibit. People would come up and say, "Wow." Kids would just look at it, adults would to, but I think that's pretty neat.

**AH:** So many people say, "I couldn't do that," but you know, they don't know they couldn't because they've never tried. It's not anything I don't think that about anybody couldn't learn. Most people don't have enough interest in it. It's easy to say I wish I could do that, but actually doing that. That's just like playing. A lot of people say, "Well I tried to play the guitar, or the banjo, and I never could learn anything on it," and I'll say, "Well how long did you try?" Well, a few hours... You aren't going to learn how to play anything in a few hours, are you?

**BG:** No. But you have to have that deep interest in it to stay with it.

**AH:** Yeah. With this, just like playing, you know.

**BG:** Why do you have a deep interest in this? Do you know?

**AH:** I always just liked, I like the woodworking part. Now I hate finish work. I hate spraying and sanding between coats, I fairly hate finishing. I always did in cabinets even. I like the way things look once they are finished, but I hate getting it there. But I actually like woodwork. Not just setting for hours sanding on a neck, but I like shaping the neck, like I can pretty much enjoy doing this when I get started on that. That doesn't bother me because I know just what I'm going to do and that it's going to turn out ok. Like, when you spray a finish on it's mercy; you don't know if it's going to blister, you don't know if a gnat is going to come and jump in it, and that you'll have to sand that out, you know.

**BG:** Or if the temperature is right.

**AH:** Yeah, and the humidity. Of course, I've got a dehumidifier in here and if the humidity in here gets over 70 percent you can figure it's going to look like milk.

**BG:** Really?

**AH:** Instead of shiny. It will look, turn kind of white. They call it blushing, but that's what it will look like. I've got a little barometer over there that I can check the humidity when I get ready to spray and I've got a dehumidifier. Of course, the air conditioner in the summer time when I run that pretty much takes care...

**BG:** Of the humidity? Yeah. Are you getting close to being done with that?

**AH:** Yeah, I don't like very much.

**BG:** I'd like to record the finish of it, but how far are you from that?

**AH:** Well, probably... Well, I've got one little place right here that, I don't think it would ever show, but I want to put some filler in that and lay it up to dry.

**BG:** Oh, ok.

**AH:** It won't show once the banjo is put together, but I'd still rather have it not there.

**BG:** Well, I think we got enough. Is there anything else you want to say?

**AH:** Thank you all for doing the interview. It was good to see you again.

**BG:** Yeah.

**AH:** It was nice meeting you.

**SA:** Yeah.

**AH:** I guess that's about all.

**BG:** All right, thank you.

**SA:** I just need to get some room tone.

**33:17**

**[Room tone check]**

**[Brief conversation afterward]**

**34:14**

**End of Track 2 – End of Interview**