

# *Mike Longworth*

## Vintage Instruments

Bell Buckle, TN 37020

May 23, 1996      Updated 3/30/02

To: Frank Schoepf

Subject: Origin of RB-4 #9639-9

I first heard about this RB-4 from Joe Drumwright, a Nashville banjo picker who was working on the Grand Ole' Opry from time to time with Bill Monroe. I was in the Air Force, and was stationed at Scott Field in Belleville, IL, just outside of St. Louis, from late 1957-mid 1958. I talked to Joe on the phone, and he told me of this fabulous banjo Earl Scruggs had. It was just like his old one (in looks), was in better condition, and sounded as good as his old one. I made up my mind that I was going to own that banjo.

When I graduated from Radio School at Scott, I was transferred to Sewart AFB in Smyrna, TN. That would have been in the summer of 1958. I went to the WSM-TV studio, as I had always done, and marveled at the banjo. Earl told me it wasn't for sale. I rode down to the Opry with him, and hounded him all evening about it. Finally he agreed to sell, but had to wait until he got his old Granada (I am not sure any of us knew it was a Granada at that point) back from repair. I think it was at Walt Pittman's house, but this is vague. I was to pick it up at Buck Grave's (Uncle Josh) home in Dickerson Trailer Park two weeks thereafter. The deal was for \$600.00, with \$300.00 credit for my old banjo, the instrument that appears on the small covers on the CD box set. That banjo, I think, now belongs to Mark Barnett, who worked for years on the Martin Show at Opryland.

Two weeks later on a Sunday I had my Aunt Willie Mae and Uncle Ed Brown from Nashville to drive me over to Buck's trailer to complete the trade. I had borrowed the \$300 from my Aunt Jessie and had paid it to Earl, and we still had to switch banjos. Buck informed me the deal was off. Earl had decided to keep the banjo, and he had my money in an envelope. I argued that a deal was a deal and I wanted the instrument. Finally Buck relented and said he had the banjo under his bed. Earl had instructed him to go through with it if he couldn't talk me out of it.

Buck was to tell it slightly differently in an interview on the subject in a Bluegrass Unlimited article on me in the 1980s. He said it was all a joke, but I don't think so. Two people never remember things the same. When we left, Buck poked his head into our car and told my folks "There are lots of people who say they have Earl's old banjo, but this is the boy who REALLY got it!"

I do not remember the exact date of the transaction. It would be in the summer of 1958, and I have a photo of me with the banjo in back of my barracks at Sewart that was taken in August of that year. At that point there was little modification from how I received it from Earl Scruggs. I had replaced a clamshell tailpiece with a Presto like Earl's, and had retained my old truss rod cover which said "MIKE" on it. This had been engraved on a fancy Gibson truss rod cover with a white border by Peacock's Jewelers on Market Street in Chattanooga. In the 1960s I replaced the name cover with one in pearl, when I found a piece big enough.

When I bought the banjo, the lower lag screw in the neck was stripped. This could have been the way Earl got it, or due to his habit of pushing the neck to lower the note at the end of some tunes. Nevertheless I changed it. I ordered a screw from Wayne Snow at Strobel's Music Shop in the Arcade in Nashville, and set about replacement. Little did I know the original lower screw was bent at greater than a right angle and installed before the heel cap was placed on the neck. I broke it off at about 1/2", and then broke it even with the neck. It was necessary to take off the wooden heel cap to get to it. Whoops! I played the banjo with a sliced off and reglued heel cap for a few months.

I had a friend, George Paul Champion, Jr. whom I met in 1955 when he lived in Virginia, in the Washington, DC area. Later Paul and his mother moved to Orlando Florida, and Paul attended Florida State University in Tallahassee. Paul would sometimes hitch a ride to the Nashville area, and would stay with me in the barracks at Sewart AFB, TN. Paul was a superb banjo player. He would go with me to see Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs' TV Show at WSM-TV on Saturday nights, and then go with me out to my gig on Saturday nights. I was playing at Hooper's Night Club, sometimes called Club 92 because the only lighted sign in front of the place was an Oertel's 92 beer sign. It was located in Una, a small community on Hwy. 41, just South of Nashville.

In the band we had a red-headed accordion player who lived in the Ross Hotel, just around the corner from the Opry. The guy who leased the Club lived in Nashville, and would pick up the accordion player at the hotel in the evening for the gig. I could visit with Lester and Earl, go down to the Opry with Earl, and eventually catch a ride out to the Club from the Ross Hotel.

In January of 1959 Paul Champion and I rode down the Opry with Earl Scruggs after the TV show, and spent some time there before going out to the Club to play. That night, in Paul's presence, Earl asked me if he could borrow my banjo for a recording session. The reason is vague after all these years, but as I recall his banjo was being repaired or was giving some problem. Earl felt he didn't have a suitable banjo for the session, and always liked mine. Needless to say, I was thrilled and agreed to let him borrow it.

When Earl asked where the banjo was, I told him it was out at Hooper's where I had left it Friday night. He wanted to pick it up that night after he finished the Coca-Cola segment of the Grand Ole' Opry, which ran from 11:00 to 11:15 PM. I agreed.

Paul was a far better banjo picker than I was, so when he was around I usually played something else like bass, and he played banjo. He was in the middle of an instrumental when Earl came in, walked around the side, and hopped up on the bandstand from the rear. Paul hit a particularly hot lick, and turned around to snicker at me like "Did you hear that great lick?", and he stared right into the face of Earl Scruggs! Paul stopped dead in his tracks. Earl just took the banjo off Paul's shoulder, shoved it into the case and left. The band leader didn't realize what was going on for a minute. When he got himself together he announced "Ladies and Gentlemen Give me your attention, please.....Earl Scruggs of the Grand Ole' Opry just left!"

My recollection was that Earl was to record on Sunday but he apparently didn't do so until the following Friday, according to the schedule. He had my banjo for about two weeks. He called me and said the head had broken, and that he would give me either a new Rogers Three-Star, or one of three sample plastic heads he had received from an outfit on the West Coast (Remo). When I asked him what he was going to do he replied that he was going to try a plastic head, so I agreed to let him put one on my banjo. It was a milky plastic instead of painted, and lasted me for many years. I finally retired it for fear it would break. I thought it didn't have a name on it, but when I saw it recently I noticed that the name Weather King had been rubbed off. I never noticed this because it was under the tailpiece.

There was one instrumental recorded during the period Earl had my banjo. This was "Groundspeed", on the January 29, 1959 session. Owing to the circumstances and the timing of the session, I am certain my instrument was used on this number. Earl doesn't seem to remember the specifics, but after all, we are talking about something that happened about forty-three years ago. Paul Champion was present during the transaction, and I would have counted on him for verification, if needed. Unfortunately, Paul died a few years ago in Florida while waiting on a heart transplant. Paul once gave me a picture of the banjo as it was played by Earl at a show, probably in Florida, before I purchased it. Earl bought and sold many banjos over the years, but this is the only one I am sure he actually used for a few months, while Walt Pittman was fixing up his old Granada.

In the summer of 1959 I was transferred to Morocco for a year. I helped maintain a Microwave system from Morocco to Madrid, Spain I didn't want to take my good RB-4 over there, so I bought an RB-100 from Joe Talbott. Joe was at that time the Manager of the Hank Snow Music Center on Church Street in Nashville, and later was on the Board of Directors for the CMA. Later he owned Southern Plastic, a record pressing firm. I ordered a new Mastertone raised ring and had a lathe man install it. I also had acquired an RB-150 neck for it. The banjo was disassembled and put into a foot locker for shipment overseas. I carried it around North Africa in a laundry bag for a year. At that time there was a lot of talk about engraved and gold plated Mastertones, but few people knew a lot about them, certainly not me. I met an engraver in Chattanooga named Jesse Martin, who lived in an apartment complex near the corner of Brainerd and Germantown Roads. He worked at Quarles Jewelers, a wholesale jewelry manufacturer and custom shop located in the old Provident Life Insurance Building on Broad Street in downtown Chattanooga. I had plans for the RB-4. The armrest was the first piece, then the resonator flange and

tailpiece were sent to Jesse Martin. He engraved them with a fancy floral pattern, unlike Gibson's Line type engraving. The neck, resonator and rim were sent to Gibson for refinishing in a cherry sunburst.

Jesse Martin refused to do the stretcher band, which was pot metal like the flange. He said the flange didn't engrave well, and could not be satisfactorily re-plated. There was a metal fabricating place across from Ortmeier Machinery on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street in Chattanooga which made a brass band for me, with Ortmeier doing the machining of the notches, etc. I took the new band to Jesse for engraving while I was in Morocco. After the engraving was finished, my Mother picked up the parts and took them to a plating company on Broad Street for chrome plating. By the time I got back a year later, everything was ready to re-assemble.

The Resonator flange was not re-plated because Jesse Martin had indicated it would be unsatisfactory. Though I didn't realize it at the time, the flange was actually nickel plated, even though the RB-4 usually had a chrome flange. The same was true of the original stretcher band. The flat tone ring was chrome, and I did not have it engraved or replated. Even at that early time, I sensed there might be a tonal problem with re-plating that key part. Also I had Gibson avoid refinishing the inside of the rim in cherry, knowing they were notorious for removing the original seal when doing such work. Therefore the original color of the banjo shows on the inside of the rim.

Another thing I did about that time was to install a geared fifth-string peg. There was no such thing as a commercially available geared peg at the time, and the old style peg was a nuisance. I took a Kluson 500 tuner to Ortmeier and had them drill and tap the knob shaft so I could install a mandolin pearl knob, which probably came from Tom or Ross Morgan.

This apparatus worked fine, and served me for the many years I owned the banjo.

I returned from Morocco in June, 1960. While on leave I reassembled the RB-4 and started playing it again. I reported to Grenier Field in Manchester, NH and was told not to unpack my bags because I was bound for the Philco Experimental Laboratory in Palo Alto, CA. There I was to attend a school on the new SAMOS Satellite tracking system, then under development. I found myself with ARDC, the Air Research and Development Command, the Air Force arm of the NASA program. By the time the business of space and satellites became really interesting I had left the program and started playing music for a living (almost starving to death in the process) while on the trip out, TWA cracked the headstock on my RB-4 and refused to take responsibility for it. I had it repaired by Mr. Jan Paul, a violin maker who owned the Acoma Music Shop on Market Street in San Francisco

I was on the team that built and installed the SAMOS Satellite Tracking System at the New Bedford Satellite Tracking Station, just outside of Manchester, NH. When I first got to the area I stopped in to see the Lilly Brothers at the Hillbilly Ranch, a country and Bluegrass Club across from the Trailways Bus Station in Boston. Everett Lilly had

worked with Lester and Earl for a time when I was hanging around. A few weeks ago (Now March 2002) I found an old photo Paul Champion had taken while Earl was using this banjo. Everett Lilly was playing mandolin in the photo. When I finished school and got back to New England, I hightailed it down to the Ranch. They invited me to visit them at WMUR-TV in Manchester the following Wednesday. They were doing the Clyde and Willie Mae Joy Show. It was at this time that Don Stover, the Lilly's banjo player, introduced me to Clyde. I auditioned for Clyde (one way to get a man to do a free show) on a show the following weekend, and stayed with him off and on for four years. Also on the show were Whitey Carrier and Judy Reed, later to be Judy Carrier. Whitey was a wonderful guy and died suddenly a few years later. I was to see Judy from time to time over the years, and finally renewed my friendship with her when she moved to the Nashville area. She met her new husband, Rens Vreeburg, on a tour to Holland. Eventually he moved to the USA.

While with Clyde Joy, I appeared regularly on their Wednesday evening TV show, and Mon-Fri on a noon time show with Clyde and "Uncle" Gus Bernier. Gus also did the Popeye Theatre. After I got out of the Air Force I roomed with a Canadian fiddler named Curly King (French Canadian name, Omer Roy, but spoke only English) at the corner of Webster and Pine in a rooming house owned by one Bernie Burke. He owned Bunny's Superette, a small but very well stocked Grocery store on the same corner. Bernie would prosper by buying out other grocery stores. He would pull in at some ungodly hour with a semi trailer full of groceries, get us out of bed, and we would spend hours unloading the stuff, after which he bought us breakfast! Finally the Burke family tore down the house in which Curly and I lived to make a parking lot for the enlarged market. The last I knew, Curly was still working for the Burke's, and fiddling on the side.

I was with Clyde and Willie Mae from 1960-1963, but not constantly. My Mother and Father had bought the two Planter's Peanut Stores in Chattanooga after Standard Brands acquired the Planter's properties.

Dad was sick with heart disease. He would get too sick to work, and I had to go back to Tennessee and run the stores. I was not happy there, and the minute he got better I would take off for New Hampshire. I returned to Tennessee for good sometime in 1963.

While I was in New Hampshire, I cut a single 45 with Clyde and Willie Mae. It was "Out Behind the Barn", and "Memories of the Wabash Cannon Ball" on the Raycraft label. It was later re-released on Sioux Records. "Memories of the Wabash Cannonball" was written by Pete Roy, about 1960-61, shortly before or after my discharge from the USAF. He later wrote "Will Someone Play Dixie For Me." Not bad for a Yankee who probably never saw the South! (More recently, Pete did show up at my home in Bell Buckle.)

I cut two LP Albums with Clyde and Willie Mae Joy. The first was "Country Folks Jamboree". I think it was also on both Raycraft and Sioux. Only Clyde and Willie Mae were pictured, but Curly King and I were mentioned on the liner notes. The second album was probably on the Soundcraft Label, and featured a color Photo of all four of us, me with the RB-4. Both albums featured me on the RB-4, and on folk lead guitar. Though I

used a D-45 often on stage, I usually used a 000-45 on record because it didn't boom so much on the bass. The only time I used the D model was, I think, on "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain".

The Gower Guitar on the second cover was mine also, one of a pair Gower and I made as show pieces. Gower sold his to Lonzo of Lonzo and Oscar and it disappeared. I gave mine to J. W. Gower many years ago for the Country Hall of Fame. I understand he never gave it to them, and instead kept it for himself. That was OK by me, but I wonder where it is today? He has a son named Randy Gower who probably has possession of it.

The 45 and the two albums were the only recordings I made with the RB-4. I did do a few commercials from the WFLI Studio and in WAPO in Chattanooga for various businesses, some of which may have had banjo. In particular I did some for Chow Now restaurants belonging to Glen Buckner who now owns Buckner's Family Restaurant somewhere South of Atlanta. Also a few for John Totten's Furniture Company, and a political spot for Sheriff H.Q. Evett of Hamilton County (Chattanooga) I can't really remember if I played bass, guitar, or banjo on this stuff.

After I retired from the "Pickin'" business, I pretty well gave up on the banjo except for a commercial once in a while. What little I did was primarily on the guitar. I cut a dub session on guitar for Fred Foster of Monument Records with Stanley Hall, Jr. (Bill Hall) and David "Fingers" Johnston. Bill had been the featured vocalist on a Decca release. The name Nicky Green appeared on the record, but Nicky wasn't singing on the only released vocal side. The back side was an instrumental, "Green Mountain Breakdown", I think, featuring banjoist Benny Birchfield. Benny visited in my home many years ago at the time of the record, and later he married Jean Shepard.

In the mean time the RB-4 was well known, and occasionally someone would come by to visit and play it. Jim Grainger, now of Sparta, TN. had his picture taken with it during Christmas 1965. Other visitors included Paul Craft, whom I had met when he was playing banjo with Jimmy Martin. As for banjo playing, I did virtually none as the years passed. After I moved to Nazareth, Pa, I almost never saw it, leaving it in storage. By then copies were all over the ballpark, and people would say "is that a Morgan neck?", and "Is that a Ryan tone ring?" I stopped bringing it out.

In the 1980s I acquired a Granada from Bill Villa of Allentown, Pa. Eventually Greg Rich of Gibson made me a neck. Finally I met Don Fisher, a Photo Journalist with the Allentown Morning Call Newspaper. Don played banjo and rekindled my interest because of his enthusiasm and desire for knowledge. When I started playing again, my style had changed, and I didn't need the tone of the RB-4, preferring the raised head Granada. The RB-4 stayed in storage most of the time, until I moved to Bell Buckle Tennessee, and met Paul Hopkins, who became my close friend and banjo Guru. Paul is the best setup man I ever saw, and I drug out the RB-4 for him to give a tune-up. He fell in love with it. I felt he and his son, David, were the best men to take my baby into the next Century, and sold the RB-4 to him in the summer of 1996.

A sidelight.... About 1994 I decided I wanted another banjo from the same set. I also had an inspiration that Curtis McPeake had one. I went to his place and said "You have a banjo from set 9639, and I want to buy it". Sure enough my intuition was correct. He had the raised head RB-4 #9639-19 ! It was a tenor with a custom neck made from an old RB-100 neck, with Flying Eagle inlay. I bought the banjo, but couldn't fall in love with it. Eventually Curtis resold it for me. The interesting item is that when I disassembled the banjo to clean it up, there was a penciled number on the top of the rim...9639-9 !!! I had an inspiration about the banjo, purchased it, and at sometime in production that rim had been intended for my banjo. Go figure!

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