

# Blacksmith's Banjos Sold Around The World

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BEDFORD (Bedford Co.) —

Bob Rock is a household word among Bedford County farmers. Today, few people work at blacksmithing as a trade. Bob Rock is proof there is a great need for his trade. Without his expertise, a lot of farm machinery or tools might have to be thrown away.

He's been making tools for 58 years. Even major agricultural tool dealers, like John Deere, send people to Bob when particular or unusual parts are needed.

Recently, Penelec was delighted to find a real live blacksmith still at work. "We were able to get knives sharpened that we would have otherwise have had to throw away," says a spokesman.

At 84, he's not about to retire. "I know most people consider retirement around the age of 65," Bob comments. "But, I don't plan to quit until they start digging a hole."

It's difficult to visit Rock without having customers or visitors interrupting. Some stop by to have a tool fixed or a part for a machine mended. He'll take time to fix a

wagon for a little boy or just to chat with a farmer on a rainy day.

Bob is well known among Bedford County farmers for his "Rock wagon," and his thriftiness extends to creating some tools or knives out of scrap steel.

In more recent years, his fame has spread to the world of music. Bob can play the banjo, and, in 1960, he began making them to sell. Today, he has banjos all over the world including seven in Ireland and five in Norway.

Believing in keeping things simple, Bob keeps his orders under a rock and his paid receipts fastened together with a clothespin. He never advertises. He doesn't have to, orders pile in much faster than he can fill them.

Rock remembers the first time he ever heard banjo music. Growing up in a log cabin near the farm where he lives today, Bob had gone to Lutzville with his father for groceries. Someone was playing a record of banjo music and, he couldn't get it out of his mind.

"I kept it in my head for the next couple of years," he recalls. "And, finally made my own instrument. That banjo was fashioned from a lard can lid, some shaved out wooden pegs, and dynamite wires were used for the string."

Rock played the instrument completely from memory. It was in the 1950s that he got serious about playing a real banjo and set out in search of a good instrument.

Packing up his wife and son, Bernard, he headed for Boston, Massachusetts, where he wanted to buy a Bigler instrument from the factory. He was disappointed when, upon arrival, he discovered the factory was no longer making a five stringed instrument.

"We were ready to leave," he recalls, "when my son looked up and saw a banjo for sale in a music store. It was second hand, but was a good instrument. Some lady had played it on the radio."

Bob bought it and came back to Bedford County to help start a string band which played for square dances and fun events at

Camp Sunshine for the next 14 years.

Then an old friend, Ralph Karns, began pestering Rock for his banjo. He sold it and ordered another for himself.

Growing impatient waiting for the new instrument to arrive, he decided to make his own. It was such a success, he wished he wouldn't have ordered one.

When it came, his wishes were increased. "It was just a piece of junk," he says. "It was such poor workmanship that I just stuffed it under a bed and left it there. Several years later I sold it for \$75, which was much less than I had paid but I just wanted to get rid of it."

It didn't take long for word of Rock's banjo to spread. An owner of a local store stopped by to see if she could buy it for her son. "I told her it wasn't for sale," he remembers. "But she persisted. And, I decided if I made one, I could make another."

"Then," Rock recalls, "someone saw that banjo and came to me for another. It just kept growing that way."

Somewhere over the next few years, he did find time to create an instrument for himself which is quite special. The neck is fashioned from walnut and the drum from sassafras. His special banjos known as, "Big Chief," include an Indian painting designed by a local artist, Rita Popelish. "She does excellent work," Rock says. "She's an asset to my banjos."

The heads of the banjos are always made from a special type of plastic. "They used to make them from calf skin," he comments. "But no one wants them any more."

Rock's final touch is to decorate the neck with abalone inlays.

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Bob Rock playing one of his banjos.

"The cost of abalone has increased so much in the past few years that it's almost getting prohibitive," he says. "When I started making banjos, it was \$85 a pound. Now it's more than \$300."

"The quality of the music depends on the tone rings," Rock comments. "I've tried making them from steel, brass and aluminum. Aluminum seems to work the best so that's what I'm using now."

Rock attends banjo rallies. The man he considers to be the best banjo player this country ever had, Lloyd Longakers, saw the Rock banjo and wanted one. When that order was complete, he continued to place orders until he owned a total of five.

Rock has squirreled several instruments away for his great-grandsons. This was after furnishing his son and two granddaughters with banjos for a country music group which they have established. Some of the wood for these family banjos came from the Chinese chestnut tree Rock planted on his farm more than 50 years ago. He has also used wood from butternut and walnut trees grown on the farm.

Bob continues to play with a local group of string musicians. They entertain at nursing homes and senior citizen events around the county.

Rock says playing the banjo is easy for him because his fingers have hardened from years and years of blacksmithing.

Not one to neglect his physical health, Rock runs on a regular basis. Several years ago, he had to leave his car at a garage about five miles from his home. When the mechanic offered him a ride home he declined. "No thanks, I'll just run home," he remember saying.

"No one believed I actually

meant run," he laughs. "Were they surprised when I took off down the road at a near trot?"

He does admit to shortening his work hours in recent years. "I used to always work until midnight," he says. "But recently I've been quitting about 9 p.m."

Bob also finds time to care for his wife who is seriously ill.

He would like to find more hours in the day to do some work with his metal detector. "I guess I should just stop taking orders," he says. "Because once I have an order, I always feel I have to fill it. I always keep my word."

Only six days of his weeks are filled with work. On the seventh, Rock rests. "It's a promise I made to myself a long time ago," he remembers. "I had a good job at a local quarry. They asked me to come in one Sunday and I explained that it was against my principles."

Well, they told me that principles or not, I would either come to work on Sunday or not work. I chose the latter and started my own blacksmithing business. I've never been sorry."

For a time Rock's son, Bernard, helped his dad with the blacksmithing. "Then people started bringing him radios to be fixed," he remembers.

"Bernard didn't know much about radios, but he fixed them anyway. Then, it was television"

It wasn't long after that that Bernard realized how bad the television reception was in Bedford County and he, a friend, and his father started the first television cable system in the area.

It was Bob who climbed the trees to string the wires for the system. "I was the only one who wasn't afraid," Bob laughs. "I was the monkey in the group."

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