

Paul Rice, Obray Ramsey Featured In "Handicraft Revived" Article

By Manly Wade Wellman
Raleigh News & Observer

Yandro — Up in this bosky, peaky part of West Madison County, past Asheville toward Tennessee, a handicraft so old that it's sort of new is about to get cracking again.

Here at Yandro, your mountain friends are putting a cabin together for you. That name is to do Carl Sandburg, the Good Gray Poet with the forelock, what he should take as a favor. More than 40 years back, the first song in Sandburg's AMERICAN SONG BAG — it was "He's Gone Away" — had a mention of a North Carolina mountain called Yandro: "Look away, look away, look away over Yandro . . . I'll go build me a desrick on Yandro's high hill . . ."

Nobody in West Madison, or in East Madison either, ever heard of a Carolina mountain called Yandro, and it's an even money bet that nobody but Sandburg the Good Gray ever did. Around here, mountain folks suspect that somebody was putting Sandburg on. They allow that Yandro's how to say yonder, look away over yonder on yonder high hill. So you and they agree to give this part of Walnut Mountain the name of Yandro, so that Sandburg's illusion in "He's Gone Away" will be correct.

Ways Of Talking

If Sandburg and you and other outlanders hark, you'll hear many special ways these people talk. Not just heard for heard and feller for fellow. You can't spell how they say there — all you can do is say it rhymes with how they say brdar. But your talk sounds funny to them, and they politely ask you to tell things over just to enjoy your lowland trick of speech. They purely love to hear a man talk funny.

Be glad these friends of yours aren't enemies. They can climb higher, hide snigger and shoot straighter than any folks you ever saw. Tall or small, they're a strong set of men, and their women are the sort of women they'll kill or be killed for, if necessary. Not that killing is necessary very often. Oh, back a while somebody tried to bust up a West Madison

church service, came in with his gun in his hand to stop it. All he got was something started. In 30 seconds he lay weltering in his blood on the church house floor. The doctor took nine stitches in his scalp.

They look back to an old skill that's new again because it's needed:

Blame it on how folk-singing, including lots of phony folk-singing, has grown big. Factories are sold out of banjos and guitars and middle-priced fiddles. They haven't the time to fix damaged instruments. Not even to write back to folks who want to send their instruments in for repair.

Going To Philly

"Got to have a new neck to this banjo," allows Obray Ramsey, cradling it to him. You don't know what ails the neck his banjo has now. What he does on that banjo is fit for archangels to hark at. He can ring bells on it, sing birds on it, he can play "Steel Guitar Rag" on it better than the next man can play it on a steel guitar. It's possible Obray's the best banjo hand in the known world. "Got to have a new neck set in, and that right quick," he says. "Before the Asheville festival in August, before I go to Philadelphia, Pa., in September."

Because they've sent for him up there, got a chunk of money to make the trip easy for him to come and sing. If anybody's in Philly that night, drop over and listen. You've never heard a banjo picked better, no matter where you've been.

And here in this hidden home of folk music there are craftsmen, old and not so old, beginning to do such things as extra banjo necks. Why not? They build their own houses, shape out their own axe handles, whittle lovely toys for their children. It's not beyond the man with the skill and the will. You've seen a grizzled old musician show around the fiddle he made himself, the wood still raw but the tone sweet as honey. Other old fiddlers passed the thing from hand to knowing hand, changed the tuning to play "Billy in the Low Ground" or "Laurel Lonesome" or "Cumberland Gap." Trouble is, the men with the old skills are getting burdened with

instrument repair, too. New men are learning.

"I'm having Paul Rice to do it," Obray tells you.

Old Family

Paul Rice is of a family old in Madison. It was Joseph Rice who killed the last buffalo thereabouts, either in the late 1790s or the early 1800s. Paul Rice could kill a buffalo himself, if one came past. He's built as snug as a cat, he's a good shot, he can make most things that can be made of wood. You've seen the curly grain, the graceful lines, of a Paul Rice gunstock. You've seen the third of the tall grandfather clocks he's built, out at his Bull Creek home.

The wood for Obray's banjo neck, after rejection of seamed or wind-shaken pieces, is of cherry wood. The grain's chosen to suit the pitch of the neck's shape. A fine-line cut seam shows where a steel rod will be fitted through, end to end, so that neck will be just solid enough, just brave enough, for the five silver-voiced strings. And it must be shaped just right, finished just right, smoothed just right, mounted accurately with finger board, clamped truly in place, to make the banjo what Obray must have, though you and many another think his banjo's first-rate the way it sounds now.

"Takes me back to my young days," allows another of the men, lean and grizzled. "We made our own tack-head banjos then."

"Tack-head?" you repeat, and he explains. First a hoop of the right wood, soaked and steamed and shaped into a ring and clamped. Stretched over this, a fresh groundhog hide, also soaked in a stew of wet ashes till the fur could be scraped off outside and the grease inside. Tight the hide was drawn over the hoop, and tacks driven in all round to hold it and the loose ends trimmed away. Drying, it got drum tight. On that was set the bridge, with a whitened neck fretted with wire loops, and strings maybe of steel, maybe deer gut. The right hands on it could play your heart out with.

"The birds were a-singin' in the morning. The roses and the ivy were in bloom . . ."

But these men of skill and science don't make tack-head banjos.

The banjo neck now in the works must be as good as anything from any high-priced factory. It's a challenge, maybe, but no real frustration to somebody who can sole his own shoes, stock his own rifle, build his own clock and set in the works so they don't gain or lose a minute all month.

"Carve your name on the neck, Paul," Obray directs. "I'll let folks read it there in Asheville and Philadelphia. They'll be a-coming to you with instruments to fix."

"Shucks," Paul says. "I don't reckon I'll suffer for work to do, if I want I can do it."

"The world'll get around," a friend agrees him.

About Finished

Your cabin's just before getting finished. Tight and solid, with a rain-shedding roof and a door with a lock. All that's needed is pipes to fetch water from the spring high up, wires to bring electricity from REA line down on the highway.

"I swear," you swear, "I don't know how to pay you for doing this for me."

"Who's askin' for pay?"

"Well," you persist, "I don't know how to thank you."

"Who's askin' for thanks?"

"At least, when the can's ready we'll cabin-warm it," you promise.

"I want you, Obray, and Paul, and the Hunter brothers and a bunch more."

"We'll all show up."

The banjo again, bringing the song with it:

"I'm a-goin to leave this country. Goin to travel round this world. I'm a-goin to leave this country. For the sake of a faithless girl . . ."

But nobody here looks as if he's about to leave this country. Far off, misty-blue peaks; nearer, tree-green ridges. A distant dog voices its zeal to climb a hundred-foot poplar and fetch down a squirrel. Your friends lounge against the wall, or squat on their heels with their backs to it, and you and they listen to the music, and you and they join in:

"Don't you hear that lonesome sound? Don't you hear that lonesome sound?"

Don't you see that pretty gal, so lovely, Standin there on the cold, cold ground? . . ."

CHESTNUT TREES AVAILABLE AT AGENT'S OFFICE

In 1910 chestnut blight first started in the vicinity of New York City. It was brought in on some imported Chinese chestnuts. By 1920, it had spread south into Maryland and Delaware and north into Massachusetts. By 1930, it had covered all of the New England states and south through Virginia. By 1940, it had affected the chestnuts in Western North Carolina. Besides chestnuts and chinkapins, chestnut blight will also attack some oaks. It has been known to kill the post oak. It has been found on hickories, maples, and sumac. The blight fungus grows mainly in the bark of the tree forming a mass of flattened thread like strands. These feed upon and kill the bark tissues and grow through the bark much as a plant root grows through the soil. These thread like strands when they encircle the limb or trunk seal off and kill that portion of the tree above it. The disease spreads by spores, tiny microscopic wind spread seeds, they will stick and adhere to insects, birds, and other animals, which have been known to carry them for long distances. As early as 1918, the United States Department of Agriculture started searching for a blight resistant American chestnut, but none were found. Even though some of the old roots are still producing sprouts, no large chestnut trees can be found at the present time.

The United States Department of Agriculture sent an expedition to Asia to try and find a chestnut which was most like the American chestnut but resistant to the chestnut blight. Hundreds of specimens were brought back and tried out in experiment stations and there is a very vigorous program going on at the present time of crossing American chestnuts and blight resistant chestnuts, to get a hybrid with resistance. One variety of the Chinese chestnut designated as PI 58602 has more of the characteristics of the American chestnut than any other. It has small sweet nuts and will, with proper care, produce timber. The county agent's office is offering for sale this variety of chestnuts for fifty cents per tree. They are two year old seedlings and will be delivered in the middle of December. Anyone interested in purchasing these seedlings may contact the county agent's office.

ACP HELPS CITY SPORTSMEN

City sportsmen who take gun in hand and head for the woods and fields in North Carolina this fall have a real stake in the Agricultural Conservation Program, according to A. P. Hassell, Jr., State Executive Director of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service.

With the number of hunters increasing each year, there's more and more pressure on wildlife supplies, Hassell points out. And since about 85 percent of our wildlife is produced on privately owned farmland, hunting success depends pretty much on how well farmers have done in providing wildlife food and cover areas. For this reason, conservation practices carried out by farmers with cost-share assistance from the ACP have played a big part in maintaining and improving the game supply on over 90,000 farms in North Carolina each year.

For example, farmers have improved or established over 200,000 acres of permanent cover crops and over 400,000 acres of annual cover crops during the past year with the ACP sharing about half the cost.

Both the permanent and annual cover crops provide excellent nesting cover and food for a variety of wild game, Hassell pointed out. Many farmers carry out practices that are specifically for wildlife.

Sportsmen have also benefited from the wildlife produced on acreage farmers have diverted to conservation use under the wheat and feed grain programs, Mr. Hassell emphasized.

Not So Scarce

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FHA CREDIT STRENGTHENS FAMILY FARMERS

More than 8 Madison County family farms and the rural communities where they are located were strengthened during fiscal 1965 by Farmers Home Administration's ownership loan program, W. E. Hill, Madison County Supervisor, with offices at Marshall, reports today.

He said that approximately \$67,000 was loaned 8 families to buy, enlarge or develop farms or to finance debts and that an additional 68 farm families continued to use Farmers Home Administration credit obtained in previous years.

"This supervised loan assistance — tailored to the individual borrower's needs — was made only to family farm operators determined eligible by local farmer committees, but unable to obtain reasonable credit from other sources," Supervisor Hill explained.

Included in this credit total were some 8 loans for \$40,940 made to farm families last year for purchases and improvement of needed land and construction or repair of farm buildings. About \$46,500 in supervised credit was extended to 5 established farm families needing assistance for improvement of land or buildings.

Some 4 loans for \$26,000 were made to Madison County farmers in financial difficulty — mainly because of causes beyond their control — who needed long-term credit for financing debts and developing their farms.

Supervisor Hill pointed out that most of these 8 farm ownership borrowers might otherwise have been forced to leave the land and migrate to the cities had they not received Farmers Home Administration credit. He also noted their contribution to the economic growth of Madison County rural communities.

Those using this supervised credit program were primarily young farmers having a sound farming knowledge, but lacking capital to acquire resources needed for success.

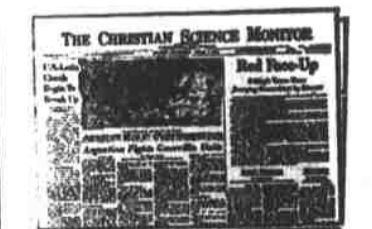
"Madison County rural communities benefited through strengthening of family farms," emphasized the Madison County FHA supervisor. "Viable family farms strengthen tax base supporting community institutions and increase the cash flow along Main Street."

POOR POSE

Critic: (eyeing a statue) "Isn't that an odd posture for a general?"

Sculptor: "That isn't my fault. I had the statue half finished when the committee decided it couldn't afford a horse for him."

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