



The Music Man

Introducing the Eagle Scout Behind America's Largest Banjo Company

By Mark Ray

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Folk musician Pete Seeger knew firsthand the power of the banjo. On the head of his five-string instrument, he inscribed these famous words: "This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender."

What Seeger didn't realize is that the banjo can also kill zombies—at least according to the 2009 film "Zombieland."

Greg Deering didn't realize that "fact" either until a couple of years ago, even though his business, the Deering Banjo Company, is North America's largest banjo manufacturer and has turned out more than 100,000 banjos since 1975. Fortunately, the Distinguished Eagle Scout is also Scoutmaster of Troop 355 in Spring Valley, Calif. At an annual New Year's Eve breakfast for his patrol leaders' council, his Scouts were happy to educate him; one even pulled out a smartphone and showed him a clip of Woody Harrelson using a banjo to attract—and then kill—zombies in a grocery store.

"All of a sudden, it dawned on me that we should do a Zombie Killer banjo," Deering says. "Right there at the breakfast, I'm drawing pictures of the Zombie Killer banjo on my napkin. By the NAMM [National Association of Music Merchants] show three weeks later, I had a prototype. It went over real well, and we've sold hundreds of them already."

A Start in Scouting

The Zombie Killer, which retails for \$1,013, is just the latest example of how Scouting has influenced Deering's career. In fact, he credits the program with launching his interest in the banjo in the first place.

After joining San Diego's Troop 170 in the early 1960s, Deering became close friends with Chris Bailey, a Scout he already knew casually from junior-high band. One day, Bailey played him a Kingston Trio album and—wonder of wonders—picked up a guitar and started playing along with the music. "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven," Deering says. He looked at his friend, looked at photo on the album cover and decided he had to get a banjo, the other instrument the Kingston Trio featured. "At 13 years old, I spent a whole month's worth of paper-route money and bought a banjo," he says. "There's a good likelihood that I would have never become a banjo person without having been in the Boy Scout troop with Chris."

(A year later, when Bailey moved away, Deering convinced another troop member, Tom Stahl, to learn the guitar. They later built instruments together, and they still play music together today.)

Building a Company

Deering moved from picking to production while studying industrial arts at San Diego State University. He wanted a nicer banjo than he could afford, so he built his own. Then he built another and another, and before he knew it, he was in the banjo business. "I'm still working on making that banjo that everybody can afford," he says.

In the early 1970s, Deering worked at the American Dream in Lemon Grove, Calif., a cooperative shop that spawned at least three other instrument companies, including Taylor Guitar in nearby El Cajon. In 1975—40 years ago this summer—Deering and his wife, Janet, founded their own company. He was 25, she was 21 and they had a contract to build instruments for Stelling Banjo. A year and a half and 600 banjos later, that deal fell apart, so the couple moved their equipment into their home garage and began building banjos under their own name. "By the summer of 1978 we were displaying our banjos at the big national trade show in Chicago," Deering says.

The first year, the Deerings (who added a single employee late in the year), produced about 280 instruments. Janet delivered many of them to retailers throughout California, mostly so they could get paid quicker and avoid bouncing any checks. "It took a lot of determination for us to make it through those beginning years," Deering says. "It wasn't always certain that we'd have enough money to put food on the table every week."

One way Deering economized was by making some of his own machinery, using skills he'd learned from his dad, an aircraft engineer. Early on, for example, he built a pin router to carve holes for mother-of-pearl inlays. "That whole machine was made out of scrounged parts," he says. "When I needed some way to control the up-and-down movement of the router, I came across an air-brake pedal from a bus. It turned out to

be the perfect thing.” Now more than 30 years old, the jury-rigged pin router is still in use at the Deering factory.

Deering Banjos Today

Of course, production of Deering banjos long ago moved out of the couple’s garage. Most recently, the company opened an 18,000-square-foot factory in 2001, where its 100,000th banjo was produced in January 2014. The company’s 48 employees busy, but the factory is no sweatshop. Eagle Scout Mike Lo Vecchio, a former Deering employee who now works on the BSA’s Content Management Team, says, “You didn’t go to work; you went to fun. Everybody is friendly, cooperative, helpful. It’s amazing. It’s a good place to work.”

According to Deering, that’s partly because his employees understand that the company is really selling magic, not musical instruments. “Everybody here knows that we’re doing more than just sanding a piece of wood and making it look pretty,” he says. “We’re making something that gets to be part of the magic of the music. That’s different than just having a job.”

The company’s 129 models range from the \$499 Goodtime banjo to the \$63,719 Deering Banjosaurus™ Long Neck, which features a dinosaur-age mural on the fingerboard made of “mother of pearl in white, gold and black, coral, turquoise, cactus, abalone, malachite, several kinds of soap-stones, koa, taugua nut and rosewood,” according to the Deering website.

The Banjosaurus banjo was designed, appropriately enough, for George Grove of the Kingston Trio. Other prominent customers have included Steve Martin, Bela Fleck, Taylor Swift, the Elton John Band, Winston Marshall of Mumford and Sons, Taj Mahal, Rod Stewart, Keith Urban, Jens Kruger, Andy Rau, Eddie Adcock and the late John Hartford.

But the company’s banjos are also popular with students and amateur musicians. In fact, Deering introduced the Goodtime line in 1997 to offer an American-made alternative to cheap imports. “[Chinese manufacturers] have banjos that are less expensive than ours, but they’re not very good banjos,” Deering says. “When you get a Chinese banjo that plays as well and sounds as well as our banjo, you’re probably going to be spending more.”

More Lessons from Scouting

Deering relishes the challenge of competing with overseas manufacturers, which perhaps stems from another experience he had in Scouting. When he first became a patrol leader, his patrol decided it wanted to win a camporee, which meant beating other patrols in such competitions as fire building, log hauling and tent pitching. After practicing for a while, Deering and his fellow Scouts realized they needed to work smarter, not harder. For each competition, Scouts took on specific roles and worked more or less simultaneously. The results were impressive. With tent pitching, for

example, they trimmed their time from two minutes to 32 seconds. At the camporee, they would often complete a task while other patrols were still trying to get organized.

“Needless to say, we won every single event, and we won the camporee,” Deering recalls. “It was not that we were special or better than anybody else; we were just fortunate enough to have hit upon a formula on how to really excel. It was an amazing learning experience, and I’ve carried that through with everything we’ve ever done.”

But Scouting taught Deering much more than just how to beat other patrols—or other banjo manufacturers. He credits the program with teaching him values and leadership skills and with prompting him to strive for excellence in everything he does. “Scouting is just an incredible foundation for all of life, not just business,” he says. “I can’t imagine what life would be if I hadn’t had the foundation of Scouting and the influence of Baden-Powell.”

Mr. Scoutmaster (sidebar)

If running America’s largest banjo company weren’t enough, Deering has served as Scoutmaster of Troop 355 continuously since 1987. Following the example of his own Scoutmaster, Bob Lawrence, he encourages the Scouts to run their own program. “We all have a really good time,” he says. “The boys do a good job of running the troop, and most of the time the adults have a lot of really wonderful fellowship all on our own.”

Deering has also been active on the San Diego-Imperial Council’s executive board, High Adventure Team and Eagle Scout Alumni Association. He served as jamboree Scoutmaster in 1993 and 1997 and as the council’s jamboree contingent liaison in 2001. For the 2010 National Jamboree, he coordinated transportation for the council’s five-troop contingent, even driving an equipment truck across the country.

Janet Deering is a Scouter in her own right. The couple has served together on the council’s Strategic Planning Committee and hiked together at Philmont Scout Ranch. (Janet took along a banjo, which they’d play in camp each night.) Their son Jeremiah is an Eagle Scout; their daughter Jamie coordinates artist relations at Deering Banjo.

For his Scouting service, Greg Deering has received numerous honors, including the Silver Beaver, the Bronze Pelican and the Scoutmaster Award of Merit. In 2011, he was named a Distinguished Eagle Scout.

What the Artists Say (sidebar)

“I love my Deering Banjos, and I’m proud to be able to rely on the company for its products and service because not only does Deering make what I feel are today’s very best banjos, but also because Greg and Janet Deering are the highest quality human beings I could wish to be associated with.”

Eddie Adcock

Member, International Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame

“I’ve known Greg ever since the early 80s when I bought my G.D.L.[Greg Deering Limited], only the fifth one made. He has always treated me like family. I admire him not only as a person, but as the finest banjo maker on the planet. He and the entire team really care about making the banjo world accessible to every person.”

Andy Rau
Progressive Bluegrass/Americana Musician

“I have open back banjos, resonator banjos, ones with no tone ring and ones with big heavy tone rings. I have an Irish tenor and a Seeger long neck thrown in the mix, too. They all come out of the Deering factory because I know that I’m getting consistent and excellent American craftsmanship. In 25 years I’ve never had a single quality issue.”

Rik Barron
Folk Musician