



Rhoda Kemp (right), 89, of Roanoke, feels for any imperfections while sanding the neck for her banjo, as Mac Traynham helps in his wood shop in Willis.

Photos by HEATHER ROUSSEAU | The Roanoke Times

The music maker

89-year-old Rhoda Kemp builds her first banjo.

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WILLIS — For just about all of her life, Rhoda Kemp has made beautiful music pour out of her banjo. But on a chilly day in March, the only sound her banjo made was the repetitive raspy scrape of sandpaper on wood.

Scuff, scuff, scuff ...

At the age of 89, and after eight decades of playing traditional mountain music, Kemp got the idea that she wanted to build a banjo from scratch. So, with the help of her friend Heather Krantz and the Floyd County master musician, carpenter and instrument maker Mac Traynham, she set out to do just that.

“I did not realize how hard it would be,” Kemp said, as a coating of light sawdust frosted her sweat shirt while she sanded away in Traynham’s wood shop. “But it’s fun. I’m enjoying it. I don’t know what I’m doing half the time.”

Kemp, a Roanoke native who lives in the Oak Grove neighborhood, is a legend in Southwest Virginia’s old-time mountain music community. She is best-known for playing banjo and autoharp in the Original Orchard Grass Band, an outfit that prefers old songs and up-tempo square dance instrumentals. She joined that group in 1980, when she was 50 years old and had raised her seven children while working at General Electric in Salem.

See KEMP, 3



Sanding, sanding and more sanding. Making a banjo can be time-consuming and tedious work. “I did not realize how hard it would be,” Kemp said.



Kemp blows off sawdust after drilling pin holes in the rim.



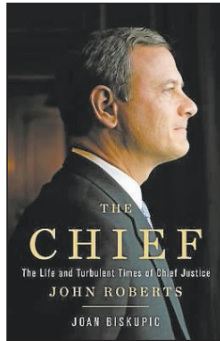
For video and more photos, visit this story at roanoke.com.



Kemp’s finished banjo is not as loud as her other banjos, but she likes its mellow tone. And she wants to pass it along to her children.

BOOK REVIEW

‘The Chief’ details John Roberts’ trademark persistence



biography

THE CHIEF. The Life and Turbulent Times of Chief Justice John Roberts.

By Joan Biskupic. Basic Books.
432 pages. \$32.

By Michael L. Ramsey
MICHAEL L. RAMSEY is president emeritus of the Roanoke Public Library Foundation.

“You wonder if you’re going to be John Marshall or you’re going to be Roger Taney. The answer is, of course, you are certainly not going to be John Marshall. But you want to avoid the danger of being

Roger Taney.”
— John Roberts, *Chief Justice, Supreme Court of the United States*

John Roberts presides over the Supreme Court of the United States. He is the 17th person to sit as the court’s chief justice. Is he a conservative or a moderate? Or is his goal to reaffirm the court’s position as a neutral arbiter of the law of the land?

Joan Biskupic explores the personal and professional history of The Chief and puts into context his actions as leader of the Supremes. Biskupic is uniquely positioned for this work. She has covered the Supreme Court for The Washington Post and for USA Today. Also, she has written books about other justices: Sandra Day O’Connor, Antonin Sca-

lia and Sonia Sotomayor.

John Roberts’ academic credentials are impressive. At age 13, he wrote a letter to the head of La Lumiere, a newly established Catholic boarding school in northern Indiana, to request consideration for admission. He was accepted, and graduated first in his class. He was La Lumiere’s first graduate to be accepted to Harvard University.

During his address to his fellow La Lumiere graduates, his words of wisdom focused on the importance of persistence: “...unlike many other keys to success ... persistence is entirely, entirely within your control.”

See ROBERTS, 3

KEMP: She started playing guitar when she was 6 years old

FROM 1

The band still plays gigs from Roanoke to Floyd, where Kemp can often be spotted playing during Sunday afternoon old-time jam sessions at the Floyd Country Store, the venerable capital of mountain music that's owned by Krantz and her husband, Dylan Locke.

It was Krantz, in fact, who inspired Kemp to build a banjo. Krantz had taken a weekend banjo-building workshop that Traynham taught in Galax. When Kemp saw Krantz's finished product, she said that maybe she, too, could build a banjo.

"I just want to say I made one," Kemp said. "Wouldn't that be neat for my kids to see a banjo I made?"

So, eight months before her 90th birthday, Kemp stood before a bandsaw for the first time in her life, holding a block of wood that she hoped one day would make sweet mountain music.

Banjo builders

Kemp started her project during the winter, when Traynham's shop was warmed by a wood stove. Her son, Barry Kemp, drove her from Roanoke to Willis, and dropped her off for a banjo-making workday that would last about four hours. Working one day a week, she hoped to have her banjo built by spring.

She was assisted by Traynham, a longtime musician and builder who has made more than 125 banjos in 30-some years. He befriended and studied veteran instrument-makers that included Kyle Creed, Wayne Henderson, Arthur Conner, Olen Gardner, Albert Hash and other Southwest Virginia music makers. "After that, you've got to learn by doing," he said.

Skeletons of banjos and pieces of banjos hung on the walls like carcasses in a meat locker. Some of the old instruments possibly can be repaired; others aren't even worth the parts holding them together.

"That one's got so many problems, it's not worth fixing," he said, motioning to one broken-down banjo. He pointed at another. "That one got run over by a car. They're good for decorations."

Kemp was also joined in the shop by her friend Krantz and by 14-year-old Hannah Cantrell, a young musician who has been playing banjo barely a year and is already quite good. Turns out that she's a good banjo builder, too. That meant that Traynham had two first-time instrument makers in his shop, separated by 75 years in age.

His plan was to help Hannah and Kemp build simple wooden banjos. (Krantz, having already taken Traynham's banjo-building basics class, was working on her own banjo project off to the side. Another young man, Taegon Morgan, worked on his own banjo, which included coins inlaid into the fretboard.) Having made so many instruments over the years, Traynham had several banjo molds and patterns he had designed himself to standardize the carpentry process.

"I don't know if it's the best way," he said, with a touch of typical humility.

Kemp started by cutting a block of wood into the shape of a neck, which she would then sand into a glassy smoothness. A few times, she thought she had sanded the wood as smooth as it could be buffed, only to have Traynham point out a bump or rough spot.

"He's having to help me so much, I don't think I'm doing so good," Kemp lamented.

After a couple of days of work stretched out over two weeks, Kemp applied a black fretboard to



Photos by HEATHER ROUSSEAU | The Roanoke Times

Rhoda Kemp, 89, jams with her children in her Roanoke home every Tuesday. She is playing the banjo she built in Floyd County, while accompanied by her son, Barry Kemp (left), 61, of Bent Mountain, and daughter Gail Elsea (right), 64, of Buchanan. "It's good to play with my kids and know they are interested in the music, and we just have a good fellowship," Kemp said.



Kemp (center) is pictured with the Original Orchard Grass Band in the 1980s. She still plays in the band today.

the neck, made from a hard, composite material of recycled paper. The fretboard is the part where the fingers of her left hand would form chords across the taut strings. Next, she marked places on the fretboard where in-laid dots would be set. The dots are markers that help musicians quickly identify which fret they're playing over.

The builders turned their attention to the round body of the banjo, called the "pot." With Hannah's help, Kemp used a frame to drill holes in the side of her banjo's pot, which would hold the tension screws that would tighten the plastic covering, called the "head," and keep it in place.

By the end of the second week, Kemp had the pieces that looked like a banjo.

Family band

Kemp has spent most of her life playing music. She started playing guitar when she was 6 years old, sometime in the mid-1930s, so that she could play in a family band with her older brothers Jewell, Marvin and Elbert "Ebo" Clifton. The Clifton family grew up on a road on the outskirts of town that eventually became Clifton Street in Northwest Roanoke.

The Clifton family band was an informal group that mostly played around home. Most days, little Rhoda tossed her school books aside, did her chores, then played music at night in the house.

"Sometimes, I didn't get my homework done because I wanted to play," she said.

She switched to banjo, then adopted the old-timey clawhammer style after hearing the likes of Grandpa Jones and Dave "Stringbean" Akeman on the radio. She still has her first banjo, a model called a Musketeer, which she brought to Traynham's shop one day for a demonstration.

The Cliftons made an album of old-time and folk tunes for the old Rocky Mount-based label Outlet Records in the late 1970s, then she joined up with the Original Orchard Grass Band, which eventually included her older sister, Iva Stilwell, on bass.

These days, the Original Orchard Grass Band includes her son, Barry, her daughter Karen McPeak, and Gary, Jackie and Jerry Ferguson. Sometimes, her son and daughters come by her Roanoke townhouse for weekday jam sessions. Music is still a family affair for Kemp after more than 80 years.

"Queen of Old-Time Music"

In early April, Kemp gave Traynham a crown pendant from a necklace one of her daughters bought at Macy's. She wanted him to glue it on the peghead, the piece on top of the neck that holds the tuning pegs. She owns a Wayne Henderson-built guitar that includes the inscription "Queen of Old-Time Music." Now, she has a crown on her banjo.

Over the final work sessions, Kemp drilled more holes, sanded, buffed and sanded some more. "You've got to have muscles," she said.



Kemp (right) inspects her work on the banjo she built as Mac Traynham (center) looks on in his workshop in Willis. Hannah Cantrell (left), who attends Springhouse Community School in Floyd County, plays a tune on her friend Heather Krantz's banjo, which was the model for the banjos she and Kemp were building.

A slight setback occurred when she dropped the neck off a drill press, causing a dent in the wood. Traynham, veteran woodworker that he is, showed her the trick of getting a divot out of the wood by heating up an iron and placing it over a wet paper towel laid directly on the dent. The divot came right out.

She glued the dots onto the neck with epoxy. She pounded the wire frets into the grooves she had sliced into the fretboard. She dabbed the neck with a deep, dark cherry stain the color of tobacco juice. The stain brought out the grains of the wood. If the banjo sounded as good as it looked, Kemp would have a nice instrument.

She picked up Krantz's banjo, the one built with Traynham's help. She strummed an old tune.

"So this is the way my banjo is going to sound," Kemp asked.

"Yep," Krantz replied.

"Well, good for me!"

Pickin' party

On a recent Tuesday afternoon in the Oak Grove neighborhood, Kemp sat in a big, soft chair and tickled the strings on her home-made banjo.

She finished the instrument in mid-April, with the turn of a screw to fasten the neck to the pot, and by tightening five strings across the fretboard.

"I thought I did pretty good for an old lady," she said.

Cantrell, who recently turned 15, finished her banjo, too. Her

accomplishment is even more amazing when you consider that, at the same time she was making an instrument, she and her classmates at Springhouse Community School in Floyd County were building a 22-foot sailboat that they recently sailed on the Chesapeake Bay.

As Kemp cradled her new instrument, she confessed that her simple little wooden banjo was not as powerful as her Vega banjos, which popped and rang loud enough to be heard over the taps and clacks of dancers. But she was proud of her new instrument, just the same.

"It's plain, like me," she said with a laugh. Sitting in the chair, her head ennobled by a crown of white hair, she truly looked like the queen of old-time music on her throne.

"It's a note-y banjo," she explained. "It's mellow. I'm more of a driving type banjo player."

Kemp was accompanied by Barry, who has been learning fiddle the past year or so, and her daughter Gail Elsea on banjo. The family trio picked and sawed through a mess of tunes, from "Soldier's Joy" to "Cumberland Gap." After playing music with her children, Kemp reassessed her new instrument.

"I like this bassy sound," she said. "It sounds good in a small group."

In other words, the banjo sounded perfect in a family band. Kemp called out another tune, her children fell in with her, and the music went on and on.

ROBERTS: Author provides insight into workings of the court

FROM 1

Biskupic follows that theme throughout the biography, showing how Roberts persisted at La Lumiere, during his undergraduate years at Harvard, during his years at Harvard Law and during his profession of the law in his political life beginning in the Reagan administration and leading to his being appointed Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

Roberts' statement about Marshall and Taney is enticing, and Biskupic helps understand where the Chief falls between those two by providing accounts of many of the cases heard by the court during Roberts' tenure. While her accounts are in-depth, they are easily understood by those who are not trained or practiced in the law.

To provide a brief description of the benchmark by which Roberts expects to be judged, Marshall was a Federalist who believed that the Constitution prescribed a strong federal government and that it was his duty to guide the court, which made it a disinterested arbiter of cases at law pertaining in some way to the Constitution. He succeeded in making the judiciary branch of government an equal partner with the legislative and executive branches. The Constitution and legal precedent were his touchstones.

Roger B. Taney's political views were different from those of the Federalists, and his leadership and decisions show that he put his own political opinion ahead of precedent and made uncommon suppositions about the letter and intent of the Constitution. He

tried to subvert the Lincoln administration during the War Between the States because he sympathized with the states in rebellion.

Biskupic's portrait of the private John Roberts (from childhood to now) reveals the extent to which she researched her subject and a clue to why the justices respected her enough to give her a level of access that must be rare.

To lead the reader through the discovery of the "real" Chief Justice Roberts, Biskupic provides unprecedented insight into the workings of the court and the interactions among the nine justices. Her descriptions of the mechanics of the court reveal her high level of access to the members and the understanding of their mission and the political pressures put on them, most recently by the president of the United States, who

characterizes judges in partisan terms.

When Donald Trump labeled a judge who had ruled against the administration as an "Obama judge," Roberts issued this statement:

"We do not have Obama judges or Trump judges, Bush judges or Clinton judges. What we have is an extraordinary group of dedicated judges doing their level best to do equal right to those appearing before them. That independent judiciary is something we should all be thankful for."

Biskupic has crafted an excellent prelude to the future of the Roberts Court at a time when we will begin forming opinions about where John Roberts falls on the Marshall-Taney scale of jurisprudence. The book also can function as a primer for anyone looking for a career in government.