

# The First Gibson Banjos



by Bruce Thompson

*Editor's Note: Although Gibson "Mastertone" banjos made in the late 1920s and early 1930s are considered to be among the finest instruments ever made, Gibson's entry into the banjo marketplace in 1918 was less than stellar, finding them behind the curve in both timing and product design. Freelance writer, Bruce Thompson, offers this well researched and enlightening insight into the chronology of Gibson's first banjos.*

The first Gibson banjos debuted unceremoniously on a Gibson Price List dated October 15, 1918. It listed models TB (tenor banjo) and GB (guitar banjo). That same month, an advertisement appeared in *The Cadenza*, which touted a "new creation" from Gibson. Subsequent ads appeared in the *Jacobs Band Monthly* in March and April of 1919, and on Gibson Price lists in 1919 and 1920. However, the first generation of Gibson banjos were never listed in any Gibson catalog. Gibson factory records apparently show that the new banjos began shipping in 1919 (*Spann, 2014*).

Although five-string banjos had been produced in America for decades, the Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Manufacturing Company did not exist until 1902, producing only guitars and mandolins. Thus, Gibson was a late-comer into the banjo market. Vega had introduced their tenor banjo a decade earlier, and there were several other instrument companies selling tenor banjos. By 1918, the ragtime, tango, dance band era was in full swing, and most bands included tenor banjos (*Hoft, undated*). Banjo orchestras were also very popular. "The tenor banjo was in great demand for solo and orchestra work" (*Bellson, 1973*); "...the leading members of the Gibson company obviously were aware of the new interest in banjo that was occurring at the time, and made every attempt to get their fair share of that new market" (*www.Siminoff.net*). Although some of the story of how Gibson banjos came to be remains unknown, this article presents what is known of the beginnings of Gibson banjos.

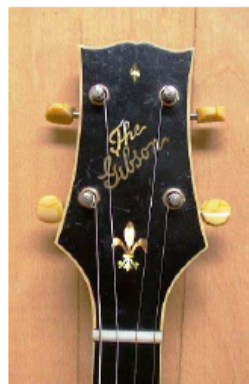
The Gibson TB was first described and illustrated in the 1918 *Cadenza* article. The photo on the right shows some of the details of a very early TB. The rim is of particular interest in understanding the development of the TBs. It featured a 12 inch diameter, double-wall, hollow rim. It had a flat-rolled steel tone hoop,





set in a routed ledge on the outer edge on top of the rim. A tubular nickel-plated brass bracket band was held in place by a ridge machined into the outer rim wall. The bracket band and ridged rim were unique features used on Gibson banjos, including the Mastertones until banjo production ceased in 2010. The unique tailpiece was nickel plated brass that hooked under the flesh hoop with 4 metal buttons for string attachment. The dowel stick-to-rim attachment used a unique tensioning

system. The earliest TBs also had a small Gibson metal plate attached to the dowel stick. The bracket nuts were of the same style as observed on many J.B. Schall and Waldo banjos from the early 1900s. The tenor neck was made of figured maple, with an ebony fret board with 15 frets, 21 1/2" inch scale with simple dot inlays, and a pearl nut. The peghead style is similar to guitars and mandolins shown in the Gibson 1917 Catalog J, although "The Gibson" script and fleur-de-lis inlays appeared on Gibson pegheads as early as 1905. There are no known Gibson five-string banjos of this style.



The TBs had a 3-digit serial number stamped on the dowel stick. Apparently Gibson started a new numbering series for their banjos, separate from their mandolins and guitars, which had 5-digit serial numbers in that year. The TBs did not have a factory order number (FON) stamp. This was the first time that Gibson had started a new number series. According to Joe Spann, se-

rial numbers provide information about when instrument was shipped, while the FON is the best indicator of when an instrument was produced. Thus, there is no information



about when the TBs were actually produced. However, there is another set of numbers on several of the TBs observed. TB (serial number 108) has the number 4 stamped on the top of the rim on the neck reinforcement block, and on the top of the dowel stick near the neck tenon. The number 4 is also written in pencil inside the dowel stick port through the rim. Similarly, TB 127 is marked X 11; TB 117 is marked A9; GB 193 is marked X 1; and an orphaned MB rim is stamped 10. The origin or purpose of these separate markings is not known. They could have been a FON-type marking added at Gibson during production, but there are no records of such FONs being used. The font style used for the serial number stamped on the dowel stick appears to be a similar font as the stamp used for the additional markings.



Along with the TBs, Gibson also produced guitar banjos (GBs) and mandolin banjos (MBs) with hollow rims and necks with the TB style peghead. These instruments also had 3-digit numbers that fit into the sequence of TBs. Records of existing Gibson first generation banjo family instruments compiled from various sources since 2009 include 42TBs, 10 MBs, and 6 GBs. Serial numbers range between 101 and 879. Assuming that the numbers on first generation banjos ranged between 101 and 900, and using the ratios of extant TBs, MBs, GBs, estimates of production for TBs is 578; MBs, 46; GBs, 8.



Changes over time (serial number sequence) and differences in some features of the early banjo family instruments have been observed:



1. Dowel stick metal tag - Gibson Decal sticker. Serial numbers 108 through 166 had only a metal tag, numbers 183-349 had both a tag and sticker, and numbers after 349 had only a sticker.

2. Tone rings. TBs with the lowest serial numbers had a rolled steel tone hoop, but later ones had no metal hoop at all. Some GBs had a hollow tube tone hoop, and MBs had a brass-skirted, rolled-top tone hoop. An inadequate number of instruments have been examined to see any trend.



3. Peghead design. The lowest 3-digit serial number banjos had paddle shaped pegheads as shown on Photo 1. However, snakehead pegheads have been observed on 7 of the instruments with serial numbers above 537.

4. Trapdoor. Three 3-digit banjos have been reported with trapdoors. These may have been added when the trapdoor models were available in 1920.

5. GB and MB rims. Early GB rims (193) were the same as TBs. GB 758 and MB 693 had the inner rim wall extended slightly above the outer rim, giving the appearance of a raised-head.



In 1920, Gibson changed the TB peghead profile to the snakehead design with the same 12 inch hollow rims as used on the original TBs. This neck style change was shown in an advertisement in Photoplay magazine in 1920. They began using the 5-digit FON, stamped on both the inside of the rim and dowel stick in 1921 (*Spann, 2011*), generally in sequence with Gibson guitars and mandolins. Some of these instruments are referred in the shipping records as TB, and some as TB-4. Some have Waldo-style bracket nuts, and some have the more familiar Gibson hex nuts. By 1923, Gibson had apparently used all of the TB hollow rims and began using laminated or block rim construction. The first five-strings appeared in 1924.

There are no records of the design and production of the 3-digit serial numbered Gibson TBs. Thus, the events that led to the production of Gibson's first banjos are not completely understood. It does not appear to have happened through careful, step-by-step planning at Gibson. Instead, they appear to have used existing designs, and possibly some parts and hardware that were available from other sources to get started. This bootstrap strategy was probably driven by the Gibson's stated desire to enter the very active banjo market.

Victor Kraske is not a name commonly associated with Gibson banjos, but it was certainly his banjo design that led to the Gibson TB. It is clearly stated in the 1918 Cadenza ad for the TB, that it was "Patented December 9th, 1902." That patent (No. 715,587) was granted to Victor Kraske in Chicago. He was a German immigrant, born in 1857, who came to America in 1880. He initially lived in Chicago, where he quickly established Kraske and Company in 1881, and began making stringed instruments. He married Marie Naerup in 1889, and established Victor Kraske & Thorwald Naerup Banjos with his brother-in-law in 1891. By 1897 he had moved to Saginaw, MI, and was the foreman in charge of building Waldo Banjos at J.F. Barrows Co. Barrows became Waldo Co. in 1901, then went out of business sometime between 1905 -1908 (*Juel Ulven, pers. comm*). Kraske left Waldo and returned to Chicago in 1901. He was by then, an established instrument designer and luthier,



with several patents to his name including a bowl back mandolin (597,352), and a banjo neck adjuster (457,996) used on Cole banjos. V. Kraske Company was incorporated in Chicago in 1901 (*Music Trade Review*, 1901). Then came the milestone banjo patent in 1902.



Kraske's 1902 patent was for a five-string banjo with an 11 inch hollow rim, tubular bracket band, and dowel-to-rim adjuster, which are un-mistakenly those used on the TB. The V. Kraske Co. manufactured his five-string banjo, and several examples exist that bear his company name stamped on the dowel stick of the banjo. Some of the hardware used on Kraske's banjos is the same, or very similar to that used on the 1918 TBs, as well as to that used on J.B. Schall and Waldo banjos from the early 1900s. Most of the Kraske parts were probably made by J.B. Schall (*J. Ulven*), who also made most of the parts for Waldo. Having worked for Waldo, Kraske probably had access to such parts for his banjos. Additionally, he resided very near the J.B. Schall factory in Chicago after 1903.

In 1907, Kraske went to work at the Gibson factory in Kalamazoo. His exact duties are unknown. He is listed as a Foreman in 1910 company records (*Spann*, 2011). He worked there through the Loar era, until 1926. He then worked as an instrument repairman at a Kalamazoo music store for several years. He lived in Los Angeles in 1930 working in a music shop, but moved back to Kalamazoo that same year and worked as a cabinet maker, perhaps at Gibson. He died at age 73 in October 1930, at the Gibson factory in Kalamazoo (*Kalamazoo Gazette*, Oct 17, 1939).

While it is certain that the 1902 patent, the V. Kraske Co. banjo, and the Gibson TB are related, there are some differences among them:

- Kraske's patent, and the 1902 banjo were both five-strings, the TBs were all tenor.
- Kraske's banjo had an 11 inch rim, and the TBs had a 12 inch rim.
- Kraske's patent specified a single hole through the inner wall of the rim; his 1902 five-strings had round holes at the top of the rim, and the TBs had square holes at the top of the rim.

There are no records of how and when Gibson obtained Kraske's patent, or when production of the TBs actually began at Gibson. Thus, the chronology of events that led to the production of banjos at Gibson is open to speculation. Based on the facts presented above, several possibilities exist.

The conventional wisdom is that TB design and production occurred at the Gibson factory during the several years before their market release in 1918. Kraske's arrival at Gibson in 1907, with his years of experience, was no doubt the key to getting banjo production started. His job as Foreman at Gibson was most likely to set-up banjo design and production. However, it has been shown that Kraske had designed key components of the rim assembly in early 1902, and had actually produced rims that had most of design features seen on the 1918 Gibson TBs. So, sometime between 1902 and 1907, a business transaction occurred between Kraske and Gibson. It is not known who approached who first; Gibson probably saw the opportunity to bootstrap getting into the banjo market, and Kraske saw an opportunity go to work for an established and successful instrument manufacturer. Kraske may have either closed down his Chicago company, sold it to another party, or sold it to Gibson. When he went to Gibson, the 1902 patent, his employment, and possibly some of the V. Kraske Co. inventory may have been part of that deal. But no record of a patent assignment to Gibson has been found. Inventory may have included rims that were produced at Kraske Co., that were intended to be used on Kraske banjos. That may explain the unconventional additional sets of numbers found on some early TBs; they could be V. Kraske Co. assembly numbers.

However, the only Kraske Banjos known have 11 inch rims, and no similar numbers have been found on them. Similarly, Kraske probably had a stock of J.B.Schall/Waldo hardware in Chicago that he may have brought with him to Kalamazoo. That would account for the Waldo style bracket nuts and the patented dowel tension adjuster that were used on the TBs. Since both Schall and Waldo had gone out of business by 1908, their hardware may not have been available in the few years before 1918.



The 15-fret tenor neck of the TBs was probably entirely a Gibson design. Since the and serial numbers were stamped only on the dowel sticks, the tenor necks could have easily been added to the Kraske rims at Gibson under Kraske's supervision. Even if some rims from V. Kraske Co. were brought to Kalamazoo and used on the first TBs, there were also many Kraske-style hollow rims produced there as well. Owing to the number of Kraske rims used on TBs, MBs and GBs after 1920, stamped with a 5-digit FON, many banjos were probably constructed at Kalamazoo.

Assuming that Kraske was hired as the Foreman in charge of banjo production at Gibson in 1907, it appears that design modifications, tooling-up, and production at Gibson may have taken up to 11 years leading up to the introduction of the TB in 1918. That time frame seems excessively long considering Gibson must have been anxious to get banjos to market. Perhaps Kraske was initially tasked with production of other instruments at Gibson, and banjo production did not start until closer to 1918. Additionally, World War I occurred between 1914 and 1918, and possibly delayed production during that period.

It is curious that the story of how Gibson banjos came to be is so poorly known and understood. The iconic and highly revered status of Gibson Mastertone banjos from the late 1920s to early 40s begs the question of beginnings. In Joe Spann's 2011 history of Gibson, very little information about the TBs is included and only lists Kraske in a table along with many other Gibson employees. But, unlike Gibson Mastertones, the TBs were short lived models, and were never heralded for their tone. Today, they are not very desirable or sought-after, and there is little interest in them.

Unless additional documentation is discovered, the chronology of events leading up to the TBs may never be known. Several key questions remain:

- Were some TB rims made at V. Kraske Co. in Chicago?
- What are the other rim markings?
- How and when did Gibson obtain Kraske's 1902 patent?
- What did Kraske's actually do at Gibson?

We do know that the first Gibson TBs were not a pure-bred Gibson creation, but adapted from Victor Kraske's five-string banjo design, and used Waldo/Schall hardware. Since Kraske's 1902 rim design led to the first Gibson banjos, it seems fitting to consider Victor Kraske to be the "Father of the Gibson Banjo," and to dub his unique rims as "Kraske Rims." Although short-lived, his design provided Gibson with their entry into the marketplace, and some features of that design have become iconic for Gibson Banjos.

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