

Ray Fought

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Ray Fought is a self-taught fiddler and fiddle maker living in Parkersburg, West Virginia.

EH: Emily Hilliard

RF: Ray Fought

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RF: And when I got done, his was the best one of the three. And I hate to give it to him, but you know, you gotta do the right thing. It was his neck and his fiddle. So I give it to him. A few months later I was up there talking to him and I said, "Glenn, would you sell me back that fiddle—I liked it." He said no darn way you're gonna get that fiddle! And that kinda burnt me the way he said it, but that's alright. You know. So anyway, Glenn died. And a friend of mine lived up there. I said go down and see Mrs. Smith and see if she'll sell me that fiddle—I'd like to have it back. He went down and she said no, that fiddle went to North Carolina. Well, I just forgot about it. Setting here about 2 months ago, telephone rang, and I could almost not answer it because somebody wanting money all the time! I mean I get a load of it! Well anyway, I went and answered and, and said... this is a lady, said I live in North Carolina and my sister-in-law had a stroke and she can't even talk and never will be any better and I have a violin here that belonged to her and I wonder what you think it would be worth. Said it's a masterpiece!

Well I started laughing in a way you know. She said it's a masterpiece—it's beautiful! I said, well I wouldn't know unless I'd seen it. She said, well I'd like for you to have it back in your collection, would you give me 50 dollars? I said I'll have 50 dollars in the mail, the first thing in the morning. She said if you do that I'll mail it out in the morning if I can find a box. Well the next morning real early the phone rang. She said Mr. Fought, I put your fiddle inside of a pillowcase and wrapped a rug around it and I put paper in each end and I hope it won't be damaged when you get it. Well, 2 days later, here's it come. Mail lady come a-carrying me this box. I couldn't wait to open that thing! There was a sound post come out of there, and she had a little note tied to it and said I don't know what this is, but it's a part that goes to this fiddle! (coughs) So it was a real nice pillowcase and a nice rug, so I just mailed it all back to her and I gave her a little extra money 'cause she had to pack and send it you know, but I was really glad to get it back and it's an outstanding fiddle. And I want you to play it before you leave.

EH: Okay, I'll give it a try.

RF: I just figure you're a pretty good fiddler...

EH: Well, I try.

RF: I bet you, I bet you... well all of them girls up around there at Elkins when I go up there, they're all outstanding fiddle players. They'll get in a circle and it just sounds like one fiddle going. Their timing is so perfect and right together, you know.

EH: Do you know Emily Miller?

RF: Who?

EH: Emily Miller?

RF: No, I don't believe.

EH: She runs... I think she runs the ensemble for the students. She's Gerry's daughter-in-law.

RF: Yeah?

EH: She's really good.

RF: There's a girl from Cross Roads that teaches music I think at—she could almost buy that one with the head on it up there. She couldn't raise the money that afternoon and she was trying to—she... but she didn't buy it and I'm kinda glad she didn't in a way, cause that's the only one I got that, that's shaped like that. 'Course I could build another one if that goes.

EH: Well I might ask some of the questions over because I hadn't had the recorder on. (laughs) So I might ask you some of the same questions.

RF: You didn't have it on?

EH: it was on a standby.

RF: Huh?

EH: It was on—it was just flashing so it was on standby.

RF: Oh (laughs)

EH: But just for the tape, could you introduce yourself and tell me when you were born?

RF: Yes, I'm Ray Fought and I was born November the 10th, 1928.

EH: And where were you born?

RF: I was born in Wirt County.

EH: Could you tell me again how you started making fiddles?

RF: Well, I... a fellow brought one out here and wanted me to repair it—he thought I was handy with tools and... and so I knew before I could repair it I'd have to talk the top off. And so I steamed it and took the top off and fixed it and I thought—I just felt like I could build one and so I did. I built one for my son—put his name in it, and then I through well, shoot, I ought to build one for my other son, so I built another one! And then I thought well, I ought to build one for myself! And then people got to encouraging me and playing and I was trying to learn and I was just trying to improve 'em all the time. And I just kept going and I was improving 'em as I went.

5:27

I played—made a lot better violins after I was at it a while. I got me a router, and I got one of them copy machines and that router brings her down pretty fast and I can put sandpaper on it and shape it up pretty good. And I enjoyed building there for a long time. Sometimes I'd set the tools up so I could cut out four and do four, three or four at the same time. And I'd just go and order me a bunch of strings, so I've made a lot of tailpieces you know, sometimes I didn't have any, I'd just make 'em. See here?

EH: Oh yeah!

RF: I've made a lot of tailpieces and now—and I've made a lot of bridges here lately.

EH: Really?

RF: Yeah, I run out of bridges and had a lot of them stubby ones that don't account for nothing, so I just went out there and ripped me out some and made me some bridges.

EH: Nice.

RF: And I put some of them notches inside just like I bought one. I've got some of 'em here I can show you.

EH: Okay!

RF: There's one shorty I made.

EH: Oh that's nice! I like the heart in the middle.

RF: Let's see here... (rumbles in door)

EH: There's another one.

RF: I put a heart in most of 'em. I just started making' 'em.

EH: Those are neat.

RF: Now I made one out of aluminum...

EH: Whoa!

RF: ... and that's a tough one—you can't hardly do much through there.

EH: Oh yeah, wow—how'd you cut that out?

RF: It wasn't easy!

EH: Yeah.

RF: Out of aluminum (chuckles) But I don't... I'm not...I'm not sold too much on metal bridges.

EH: Yeah, but anyway. And you said you first started making them with chisel and...

RF: Yeah. I got a little saw out there and I just—see that was made—it's not a heart, but I just designed different things. I got some more in there some place. Down there! There's one I'm working on.

EH: Oh yeah! That's nice.

RF: Them things are getting expensive anymore.

EH: Yeah. And what kind of wood is that?

RF: Maple.

EH: Okay.

RF: That's hard wood.

EH: Yeah.

RF: You know some people thins her out—their bridge down too thin. And that E string will cut down in the crotch, and it—that'll deaden the sound. I found—a guy had that almost razor thin and... but I like a little bit of wood there... and then I like to put that rubber tip over it.

EH: Yeah.

RF: And it makes it better.

EH: Could you tell me again how you first met Senator Byrd?

RF: Well, yeah, I built my first fiddle and I heard he was gonna be up at Camp Barb, up in Wirt County there across the river from Newark, so I went up and he was eating cornbread and soup beans there at a table, and when he got finished, I walked over and I said, Senator Byrd, would you care to play a tune on my fiddle I built? Boy he said sure, get her! I walked over to get her and I already had her tuned up. So I handed it to him and he started playing it. He played 2 or 3 tunes on it and he said, I think you need to take a little more

wood off of it. So I took her home and I thinned her down from the outside. And so after that—and then later on I got to where I could play pretty good and got a band going and we played for him when he would come to town. You know Janet Fraser, she was Bob Mullahand's secretary for years and she knew Robert Byrd real well. And she had me playing for the senior citizens here in town? And she'd call me up and wanted me to come up to the fairground or over to City Park and play for Senator Byrd. And we'd go over and play for him and when we... we'd play our show and then he would make his speech and then after his speech he'd say now, Ray go down there and get me that brown fiddle. He liked that fiddle that I built there. And he would play it. Yeah, he was—he come here and played about every fiddle I built. I tuned up one and he'd play it a while and I'd tune up another one, and he was here about 2 hours a head, I'd say, and he enjoyed the... he enjoyed himself.

EH: Did he have a favorite?

RF: Huh?

EH: Did he have a favorite of your fiddles?

RF: Well, he liked that brown one that I—he played it a lot. But no he liked 'em all. He said, boy, he said, you've got some good ones. And I enjoyed him coming and we played for him several times when he'd be running... and I played for Donna Bowley too—she's a Republican, but I played for her too.

EH: (laughs)

RF: (laughs) It wasn't nothing.

EH: That's right.

RF: I was kinda happy with the way the election went this year. Maybe I... I think we's going in the wrong direction. I think we're gonna do better now.

EH: I hope so.

RF: I'm hoping so. Yeah. But anyway, it's a... it's just nice to be living in the United States and have the freedom that we have.

EH: True.

RF: And we need to protect it. But I'm telling you, these colleges, they're teaching a lot of socialism to our children. And these professors is doing it. You know, look how many followed Bernie. 20 years ago, he wouldn't have had 10 people. Look at the kids following him. Their signs and pushing him and...

EH: Well, I have to say, I like him! I used to live in Vermont and I thought he was a good guy.

RF: And he said he was a socialist!

EH: Democratic socialist.

RF: Yeah! Democratic socialist.

EH: (laughs)

RF: Now you know the difference between a socialist and a communist is only the way it's spelled.

EH: (laughs)

RF: That's a fact! When you get full socialism, you get communism.

EH: It can be a slippery slope.

RF: Huh?

EH: It can be a slippery slope.

RF: (laughs) Yes sir! That's the reason we need a free enterprise system and keep our freedom. Be free!

EH: (laughs)

RF: All of them people that's burning our flag, if they don't like it, why don't they go back overseas where they come from or leave the country. I tell you—there will be a law against them burning the flag. I think there is a law against it. But anyway, we won't get on politics.

EH: (laughs)

RF: But I'm gonna tell you something, the Heart brothers over in High was a real good band and they had a sister that come here with a fiddle that belonged to her grandfather and it had a great big hole in the top and it was all jagged. And she wanted to know—I said no I can't fix it. She said now I was told if anybody can fix it, you can fix it! I said I don't want to tackle that one, I just don't want fool with it. Well she begged and she left. And it wasn't 2 or 3 days here she come again. She said now I know that you can fix this fiddle and I want you to fix it! I said well, leave it here. It had a redwood top on it. And I went out in the shop and luckily enough I found a piece of redwood that looked just exactly like it, so... I took a blade out of my little jigsaw and I went in with my fingers like that with that saw and I cut all the jiggered stuff out that I could, and I still had the darndest puzzle you ever looked at! But I thought this is the best I can do so I went on the inside and held that down there and drew a... draw it all the way around it and then I went to work and held over about oh a good 8th of an inch bigger. Then I sloped that all the way around and I shoved that down in there and I'd look at the sky. If I could see the sky anyplace, I'd take off a little bit more. Take a little bit off here. I got to where I couldn't see through it. I put glue all the way around it and shoved it down in there and I let that set overnight. So the next day I went in there and took fast-- cutting sandpaper on my electric motor and I scooped that out so it was smooth in there. Then I cut the top off. The lid was smooth and boy it just looked like it grewed there!

EH: Wow!

RF: I mean you couldn't hardly tell it! Only just... well, boy it looked nice to me. I was surprised and felt good about it. So I picked up the phone and I called it and I said boy, I fixed this thing and it's-- I done the best I could and I... you can come and get it. So here she come. And when she looked at that her mouth fell open and she said My land! Well you made that perfect! She just went on and went on. Well, she said now I'd like to finish it. And I said well take it and go ahead and finish it. And you know in a week or so she come back carrying that fiddle. She said I wanted you to see this. And she put the finish that and I'm telling you you couldn't hardly tell it.

EH: Wow.

RF: And she was tickled as ever. But here about a month ago, I'd run across, I'd run across one of the Heart Brothers and he told me she'd passed away and he's got that violin now. So, but anyway, she was happy. Oh, I've repaired a lot of 'em. Some of 'em wasn't worth carrying home.

EH: (laughs)

RF: No bass on 'em you know, little buzzing bass, some of these...it was... yep.

EH: Could you tell me again about your band The Country Travelers?

RF: Yeah, we formed a band way back there and probably on towards the last of the 80s. And we played a

lot of shows. I...we never made big long--we'd play over in Ohio at the fairground over there--Barlow Fair and places like that. And well we played out at Clarksburg for the Veterans Administration one time. But most of our shows was just, you know, around here. And reunions and things like that you know and at... years went by, well you know, we just kept losing members and I'm the only one left of the original Country Travelers. We got new ones coming in all the time, you know, all down through the years, and right now I've probably got one of the best bands I've had for a long time. They can really...they're really outstanding singers and they're good musicians. And I'm very lucky to have them. This guy he can, he can pick that lead. And he does a real good job.

18:20

EH: Is it mostly old-time?

RF: Huh?

EH: Is it old-time tunes, bluegrass, country?

RF: It's mostly country, gospel, very little bluegrass. I play a few bluegrass tunes once in a while out there but we're just... it's mostly country. And gospel. We do a lot of-- good bit of gospel. And when we close out, why, I generally call on Lonnie to close our show with a prayer you know, and they all like that.

EH: Do people dance?

RF: Huh?

EH: Do people dance to it?

RF: Oh yeah, we got a lady that puts it on and she's 94... no 96! 96 years old and she still makes the coffee and she'll get out there and do a little dance once in a while. Not very much. She used to dance a lot out there! And sometimes I get itchy feet too when I'm playing that fiddle! I'll be playing the fiddle and dancing at the same time!

EH: (laughs)

RF: (laughs)

EH: I've done that before!

RF: Huh?

EH: I've done that before.

RF: (laughs)

EH: Do you flatfoot?

RF: Huh?

EH: Do you flatfoot?

RF: I don't know what I do, I just do it! I cut-- I just... I just love to dance. That fiddle music will... gets me started. Yeah. And sometimes when I'm not playing, I got a good tune on mandolin. Banjo-- I can dance to that. But I like to-- I used to like to kick the rug, I'll tell you.

EH: And you said you used to square dance a lot growing up.

RF: Oh yes, yeah I did. I went the old Civil Grill out there 3 years in a row never missed a Saturday night.

EH: The Civil Grill?

RF: Yea.

EH: What was that?

RF: It was a-- that place there where they square dance. Oh, they'd call 5 or 6 sets at the same time. They'd do-- they'd grapevine twist and we'd go outside. Make a big circle and come around come back in.

EH: Oh, I love that one.

RF: Yeah. Inside there and the outside there. You dance here and I'll dance there, and... forward the center and back and round that couple and take a little peek, back to the center and swing your sweet.

EH: (laughs)

RF: I've, I've called for a few dances, but...

EH: Sounds like it!

RF: But I'm not a caller, I... I did it in a pinch when somebody else didn't show up they'd have me to. I usually called them a little too fast, boys, I... (laughs) I'd have 'em a movin'!

EH: (laughs)

RF: But you got to slow it down some. We had a lot of fun, though. I think square dance is a lot of fun. A lot of exercise.

EH: It is, it's a good workout.

RF: Yep.

EH: Could you tell me about some of your different styles-- so I see you have some oversize ones, you have some geometric shapes...

RF: Yeah, that one's octave shaped up there, then I got this one it's more or less on a Russian-style. That's, well the Russians, there was no overhang on the sides on the Russian-style, but they built some similar to that, that body-style. I think. Then that one up there I call it an octave shape but I don't know what you would call it. Fought shape, I guess! (laughs)

EH: And then the bedroom fiddle like you said before.

RF: I'm telling you, if you ever want to go with Senator Byrd played one of them and took a liking to it and I said Senator you like that thing? And he said, I sure do! I said, take it home with you. So he took it home with him and I had 2 other ones left. But I got one there with-- got a football, West Virginia football on the end there.

EH: Yeah, I like that. I really like the um, I guess, are they ram's heads? These two with the horns?

RF: Which one?

EH: With the horns--the sheep or ram's heads?

RF: This one here?

EH: No, these two.

RF: Oh, them two?

EH: Yeah. With those--are those sheep or rams?

RF: Them's ram heads, yeah.

EH: Yeah, those are neat.

RF: Now, I'm gonna tell you something about those heads. You see, if I'd make that out of wood, that would break right off. So what I do, I take two, two, get me a-- you can't break that at all. What I do, I take a clothes hanger and bend that and put it down in his head. Drill a hole and put glue down in there, then I take sawdust and glue and mix it together and make a paste and make him a set of horns and then when that gets dry and hard, sand it off.

EH: Okay!

RF: And you couldn't, well you can't knock 'em off with anything.

EH: No way.

RF: Now if that was wood, that would've snapped right off.

EH: Yeah. And your pegs, do you buy those-- have you ever made 'em?

RF: Well I have made--I've made some. One some of these I've got heads and things on it's hard to get to that 4th string, so I'll open the back up and I'll stick my string in there, took it down, I can have it tuned up when I'm fooling around going the other way. (plucks strings) Yeah.

EH: Well do you...

RF: I've got several with the backs opened up like that.

EH: That's neat.

RF: You don't see them anywhere do ya?

EH: No, I don't think so.

RF: (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

RF: That's my style! Yeah, you do things different.

EH: Do you want to play some?

RF: Huh?

EH: Do you want to play a tune?

RF: I've gotta hear you!

EH: Well we can swap.

RF: (coughs)

24:42

I bought me a double case fiddle but I like this one I built than I do it.

EH: You made this one?

RF: Yeah.

EH: Nice.

RF: Yeah, I built that. I built another one like that. It's up there in the garage/music room. You know what I do?

EH: What's that?

RF: I don't use horsehair! Daggone horsehair just breaks and I use artificial hair and I rub it with sandpaper.

EH: Oh look, that's got a blue side.

RF: (tunes) I'm gonna let you.

EH: You're gonna let me play?

RF: Yeah.

EH: Okay. Let's see-- I haven't played in a while.

RF: Now there's a good bass on that fiddle.

EH: (tunes) Oh cool. I'm gonna tighten it up a little bit. (Tunes) Oh, do you mind if we put that in...

RF: Does it need to be tuned?

EH: Well I was just wondering if we could just tune the G string up to an A so I could play a D tune.

RF: Sure!

EH: But I might have you do it. Cause you know, I have machine pegs at home...

RF: Now you want that what?

EH: The G string tune up to an A.

RF: To an A!

EH: Cause I have those machine pegs and I don't really use the friction pegs much.

26:40

END OF TAPE