

Where Do Magical Banjos Come From?



Lon Roberts

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Come From?**

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— Dedicated to Asher —

May your passion for music help you
discover throughout life the magic
that is possible when you dream big
and then act on your dreams.

"Oh! Oh! I wish I had a banjo," said Little Billy Brady to his best friend, Frankie Farnsworthy, as they hopped,



skipped,
and
scoted
their way
to school
one day.

"A banjo would be a delightful thing, indeed," said young Farnsworthy in reply, "but surely you are much too small to fret the frets and strum the strings and other such things. I suggest," he said, "that you buy a

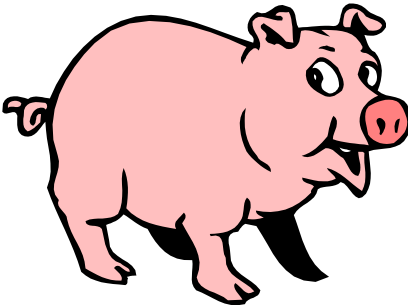


little lute
instead. If not
a lute, then
maybe a flute,

for a flute will play
Es, Fs, and Gs every
time you sneeze."



"Not so," said Little Billy Brady, "you
have to be able to pucker or a flute



won't toot,
it'll only
squeal like a
pot-bellied
porker.

Besides," said he, "I don't want a lute

or a flute you can toot . . . a banjo, a banjo, it must be!”

Although Little Billy Brady was certainly certain he wanted a banjo, he began to think about what Frankie Farnsworthy had told him. Maybe he was a tad too small, after all, to strum a banjo. Perhaps it would slide off his knees; perhaps he couldn't turn the keys. And yes, he must confess, it



would be a test to make music on a thing that looked like a

lopsided lollypop with strings.

But Little Billy Brady was not about to let a little doubt destroy his dream. He knew that some day soon he would



have his very own banjo and that Frankie Farnsworthy, his good friend, would see that he had meant what he said when he said it. He just needed a



scheme, a plan it would seem, to help him achieve his dream.

So he thought and he thought and he
thought a
lot until
his head
felt like
a spinning



top that would first flip and then flop
and then come to a stop, with nothing
more to show for
the effort.



Soon it became
clear to Little Billy B. that thinking
alone would not make his dream come
true . . . he needed an ounce of
inspiration! "I'm going for a walk,"

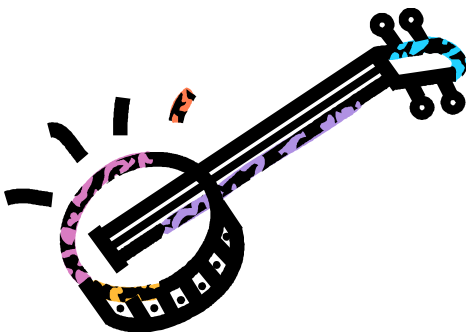
said he to his poppa
who was poring over
his morning paper.



Scurrying out the
door he hurried straight for the store
that was owned by Mr. Otto J.
Stengo. Hanging there in the window,



for all to
see, was a
beautiful
banjo, the
one he



saw every day on his way to school.
Opening the door he went in the store

and walked straight up
to Mr. Otto J. Stengo.



"My name is Billy
Brady and I would like
to buy that beautiful banjo, the one in
the window," said he with a grin. "Ah,
that is a very fine banjo indeed," said
Mr. Otto J. Stengo, rubbing his chin,

"but it costs so much my young friend.
How much money can you spend?"



"I have only
66 cents,"
said Little Billy B.

with a look of concern.

"Tell me, please tell me that that is
enough!"

But, of course, it was not enough, as
anyone who knew the price of a fine
banjo would surely know. Yet, seeing
how much he wanted the banjo, Mr.
Otto J. Stengo didn't have the heart
to tell Little Billy Brady that 66 cents



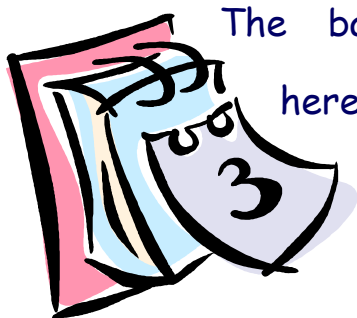
was not nearly enough, not even a start.

I'm a very old man, thought Mr.

Otto J. Stengo to himself, *and I have made more money than I can ever spend.* "Tell you what I'll do," said the wise and compassionate old man as he bent to stand, "If you will learn to play me just one beautiful song, I will sell you that fine banjo for nothing more than the price of joy your music will bring to my heart." And, then he added, "Come



back when you are ready to play me
your beautiful song, but not before.



The banjo will remain
here for one full year,
but not one
moment more."

Little Billy Brady dashed out the door
of the music store feeling both happy
and sad altogether.

Mr. Otto J. Stengo
would sell him the
banjo for the mere



price of a song, but how would he ever
learn to play a tune if he didn't have a
banjo to learn on? He wished he had

asked Mr. Otto J. Stengo before rushing out the door of the store, but now it was too late. Mr. Otto J. Stengo had told him not to come back until he was ready to play his song.

Little Billy B. knew he would have to figure this out on his own.



So, back at his home, on his bed all alone, he now had a new problem to ponder. What could he, should he, would he do? He didn't even know

anyone who had a banjo that he could borrow to learn on.

And then like a light, and much to his delight, he had a flash of insight and



thought of a simple solution! I'll build one of my own, he thought, from this

and from that, a collection of things I am able to find here and there.

So off he went on a scavenge hunt, looking for things he might use to make his makeshift banjo.

Into the sack he carried on his back he would toss



whatever he found that looked like it might be useful. When passersby asked him what he was doing and why, not one to be shy, he would simply say with a sigh, "I'm building a banjo, do

you have anything you'd like to toss in the pack on my back?"

By the end of the day, Little Billy



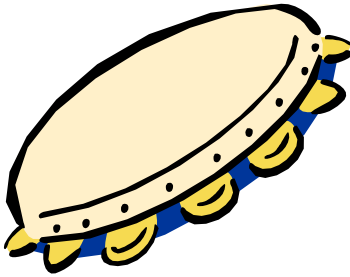
Brady had a jam-packed backpack. So he headed home to sort through his

assortment of treasures.

There were lots and lots of rusty nails, a Frisbee that wouldn't sail, a yellow umbrella, a mushy marshmallow, a



broom with no bristles, and even a couple of snails. But there was one thing among all these things that caught his eye: an old, tattered tambourine. If it only had a neck and



was strung with a few strings, it would at least

look a bit like a . . . a BANJO!

Now things were finally starting to look up for Little Billy Brady. Like a tiny seed that grows into a tall, tall weed, he at least had a place to start. The

tattered tambourine would become the body of his banjo.

Next he needed a neck so he searched for a stick he could stick on the end of the tattered tambourine.

Looking about he exclaimed with a shout, "The stick

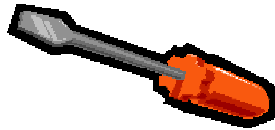
from that bristle-less broom should just do the trick!"



So, he sawed and
he hammered and
he drilled all the
next day until he
had something



that looked like a
banjo with a long
scrawny neck. It
was not like any
banjo he had seen
before but he was
proud of his homemade banjo
nonetheless.



Just one problem remained: he needed
strings, as any banjo worthy of its

name would need. But nothing, not one thing, had he found in his search that looked anything like a silvery string.

"I've got an idea," said he aloud, "I can use my 66 cents to buy a fine set of



strings!" So he asked his poppa, who was headed out the door, if he would stop by Mr. Otto J. Stengo's store, to purchase a set of four shiny new strings for his little banjo.

All day long he waited for his poppa to come home with the shiny new strings. But when his poppa arrived home and came in the door, he was sad to



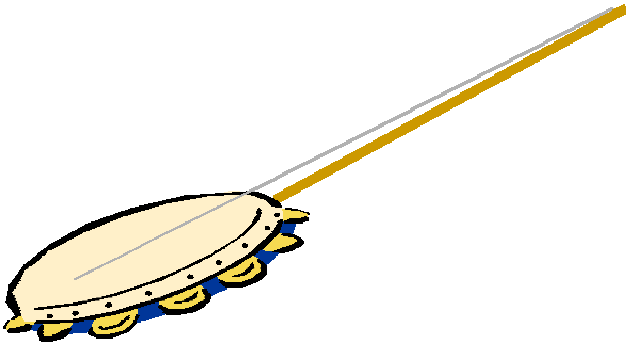
hear that 66 cents was only enough to buy a single new string, not four.



Little Billy Brady was sad, for sure, but he decided to do the best he could with a banjo with one string. In any case, as we all know, it would have

been hard to put four strings on a banjo with a broom handle neck.

After he had strung the one string tightly over the skinny neck of his little banjo, Billy B. was at last ready to test his new instrument. It certainly wasn't very pretty, as banjos



go, but he was plenty proud of it all the same.

At first it went PLINK and then PLUNK and then it went PLINKETY-PLUNK. It did not sound in the least like any banjo that would bring joy to your heart . . . especially the heart of



Mr. Otto J. Stengo, who knew a lot about banjos and how a real banjo should sound.

But, as we already know, Little Billy Brady was not the kind of boy who was easily discouraged. Night and day he would practice on his one-string banjo. Where ever he went he took it with him so that he could practice a bit

here and a bit there before the end of a year.

Before long Little Billy Brady noticed that something wonderful began to happen. Like magic his little banjo began to make some rather pleasing sounds, not just a bunch of PLINKS or PLUNKS. People even began to listen



and applaud rather than laugh at him and his little banjo when he practiced in the park. Surely it must be a magical banjo, he thought. How else could anyone explain how such a silly-looking, one-string banjo could make such beautiful sounds? And, amazingly enough, the more he practiced the more magical his little banjo seemed to get!



Almost before he knew it, a year had passed and time was running out for him to return to Mr. Otto J. Stengo's music

store. Little Billy Brady was afraid to go, and why he was afraid he did not know.

Do you know why? Well, neither do I.

Finally, with one hour remaining his best friend, Frankie Farnsworthy,




convinced him he should at least go and show Mr. Otto J. Stengo what he had learned to do so well on his magical banjo.

Outside the store he stood, staring through the window at the beautiful banjo that would be his for the mere price of a song . . . a song that would bring joy to Mr. Otto J. Segno's heart. But Little Billy Brady had waited too long and his opportunity was now gone.



When he came to remove the banjo from the window, Mr. Otto J. Stengo saw Little Billy B. standing outside on the sidewalk

looking in. "Come in, my dear friend," said Mr. Otto J. Stengo. "You have waited a bit too long to play me a song but I will make you a new offer. For the price of a song that will bring joy to my heart and in exchange for your skinny-necked banjo, I will give you the beautiful banjo you adore that was hanging in the window of my store only moments before you walked in the door."

With a tear in his eye, though he didn't know  why, Little Billy Brady began to play his one-string banjo. As he played

slowly, to make the moment last, his



little banjo seemed to become more and more magical than ever before.

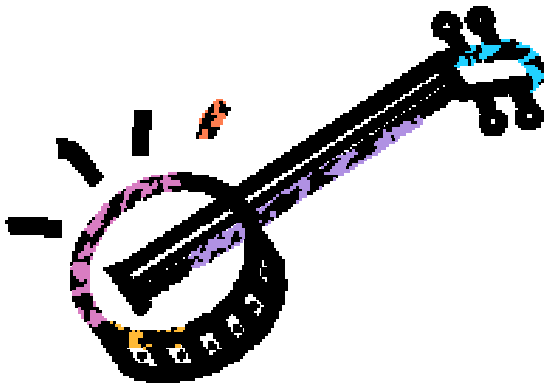
The sweet sound from his little banjo soon filled the air all around. And, as he played Mr. Otto J. Stengo

swayed and kept time by tapping his toes.



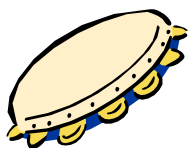
"Well done, you have brought much joy to my heart," said Mr. Otto J.

Stengo when Little Billy B. had finished the song on his little banjo. Without hesitation Mr. Otto J. Stengo reached for the beautiful banjo and said, "Your music has indeed brought joy to my heart, and now I will do as I promised. This beautiful



new banjo is yours in exchange for that funny little one-string banjo you have made."

But Little Billy B. was now not so sure he was ready to trade the banjo he had made for the one that Mr. Otto J. Stengo now held in his hand. Yes, indeed, he had practiced hard for a year to play a song that would bring joy to Mr. Otto J. Stengo's heart, but why would he trade a magical banjo—



though it had been made from a tattered tambourine and a bristleless broom—for an ordinary banjo that just happened to be beautiful and shiny and new?



"Thank you, but I think not," said Little Billy B. "I may never be able to buy a shiny new banjo but the banjo I now have is better than any that can be bought. So he headed for the door, on his way out the store, believing he had made the best choice and taken the right course.

"Wait just one minute," he heard Mr. Otto J. Stengo say as Little Billy B.



made his way for the doorway. "You have passed two important tests on this fine day. First you brought joy to the heart of another person and then you showed loyalty to a friend—that skinny-necked banjo you now hold in your hand. Both for this and for that you have earned my respect. Please take this shiny new banjo as my gift to you and then, perhaps, one day it will become magical too."

The End.

