

The launch of the F-5L Mandolin

A turning point
in the history
of Gibson's acoustic
string instruments



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There is little doubt in the world of bluegrass music that Gibson raised the standard of excellence with the development of the F-5 Master Model mandolin in the early 1920s. While this instrument was originally designed for classical and concert music, its adaptation in 1945 by Bill Monroe (1911-1996), coupled with his playing style, put the voice of this instrument in a category of its own. Interestingly, Monroe didn't care that Lloyd Loar developed the F-5, and Gibson and Loar didn't envision that Monroe would ever play an F-5, especially the way he did. What transpired was just a matter of wondrous circumstance.

After three and a half years at Gibson wearing many hats, Lloyd Loar's interest in acoustic guitars, mandolins, and mandolas was dwindling. His mind was going too fast for him to stay in one place too long, and in October of 1924 he left the company and ventured into the world of electrically amplified musical instruments.

While Gibson's interest in the mandolin wasn't fleeting, the public's interest in mandolin orchestras was dwindling, and the company's loss of Loar – its heralded acoustical engineer – left it a bit stranded in supporting its Master Model line (named after Master Loar, as he was known by those at Gibson). To make matters more difficult, in the ten years following Loar's departure, Gibson began weaving its way through the Great Depression (ca. 1929-1935). Although the sales of mandolins were important to the company's bottom line in the early 1900s, the expansion of Gibson's guitar models in the 1930s and 1940s became the primary focus, and the mandolin became Gibson's lowest priority.

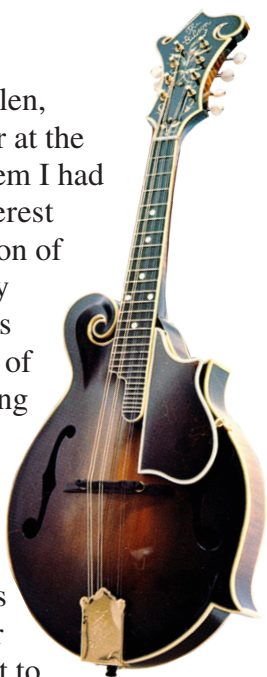
Over the years, the F-5-style mandolin went through several iterations, with higher-numbered models featuring an array of structural and cosmetic changes. By the early 1970s, the company's F- models had gone through so many design, manufacturing, and structural changes that they bore little physical or acoustical resemblance to their original counterparts. Sadly, they were virtually unplayable from an acoustical standpoint.

In the mid-1970s, the story took a marked turn, and if you enjoy Gibson and Loar history, the development of the F-5L mandolin is an interesting tale. It is one I have wanted to share for some time but have hesitated to do so because I knew that so much of it would read like an autobiography. The fact is, not only was I involved, I championed the project, and there is no way for me to avoid using first person in telling the story. So, at the risk of appearing boastful, I would like to ask that you disregard the "I did's" and allow me to share the story of the launch of the F-5L mandolin with you.

The launch of the F-5L – a turning point in the history of Gibson's acoustic string instruments

In mid-1973, I met with Bruce Bolen, Gibson's Artist Relations Manager at the time, to show him a truss rod system I had designed that I thought might interest Gibson. Intrigued by my description of the idea, he invited me to bring my prototype to Gibson's headquarters in Lincolnwood, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, to spend a morning talking about the attributes and possible implementation of my design.

Within a year, Gibson licensed my truss rod patent, and I found myself involved in several projects with the company. I also had other design patents that were of interest to



Gibson and, before I knew it, I was consulting on a fairly regular basis making monthly and sometimes weekly trips from my home in Morristown, New Jersey to Gibson's headquarters in Lincolnwood or to the plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan.



One persistent idea that was always at the forefront of my mind was that Gibson should re-introduce some of the original instrument models that made the company famous – the instruments that I saw as Gibson's heritage. And, my particular focus was on the original Mastertone banjo line and on the first version of the F-5 mandolin that Lloyd Loar designed.

Meeting with various folks, as I had the opportunity to do on my frequent visits to Kalamazoo



The “old building” at 225 Parsons Street, Kalamazoo, Michigan. The mandolin builders, prototype shop, and engineering department were on the first floor.

and Lincolnwood, I was relentless in my pursuit of the re-issue idea, and I continued to talk about the importance of Gibson’s heritage. Almost every time I met with Bruce, I spoke about the “tap tuning” of Gibson’s Master Models and about some of the stylistic features of the early F-5s and L-5s. And, I was somewhat verbal – as I could be in the role of consultant – reflecting on how the arched-soundboard acoustic instruments “we” were building at the time just weren’t up to expectations. Bruce always listened with interest. “Gibson” was in his blood. He is an unbelievably great guitarist with an equally great ear for music and sound. He was interested in the premise of tap tuning, but I don’t think he really grasped exactly what it meant, let alone how he could implement it in the plant.

Aside from the marketing and artist relation folks in Lincolnwood, I also shared my thoughts with some of the people in Kalamazoo. I bent the ear of Julius Bellson (former Gibson employee and historian) each time I saw him, but excited as he was with the

idea, he was retired then and didn’t have the power to affect a change at Gibson.

Tom Fedders was the plant manager at the time, and I made a few efforts to spark his interest. Unfortunately, Tom was more of a furniture guy than a musical instrument guy, and my ideas fell on deaf ears.

I clearly remember a discussion with Gibson’s president, Stan Rendall, which ended in him reading me the riot act on how I was “way off base” and how “These mandolins...” as he picked up an F-12 by the scruff of its neck from a stand behind his desk – “are the finest ever made!” So, I kept pushing Bruce, but clearly backed off of Stan.



Julius Bellson in his home (ca. 1975) with his Gibson style A-4 mandolin.

At some point along the way, Stan resigned as president, and within a month or so Carl Spinoso replaced Tom Fedders as plant manager. “A new regime, I thought.” Over the next many months, I presented my ideas a few times to Carl, but he appeared to be uninterested. Another dead end.

Several months later, Jim Deurloo replaced Carl as plant manager. Jim was a prior Gibson employee who left to become Guild’s plant manager in Rhode Island, only to be brought back to Gibson in 1974 to manage the expansion and transition to Gibson’s new facilities in Nashville.

Then, several things happened in quick succession. One day, I was in my shop in New Jersey and UPS

dropped off a large carton. In it was a new blonde-bodied Citation guitar (L-5 style with *f*-holes, arched soundboard and backboard) – factory and warranty tags attached but marked as a “second” – with a note from Bruce taped to the case saying, “Tap tune this!” I called him and said, “You know, I’m going to have to pull the backboard and this is a brand new guitar.” All he said was, “Okay, fine. Call me when it’s TAP TUNED!” In essence, put up or shut up.



Left to right: Bruce Bolen, Roger Siminoff, Jim Deurloo in Jim’s office on the first floor of the old (1917) building, ca. 1976.

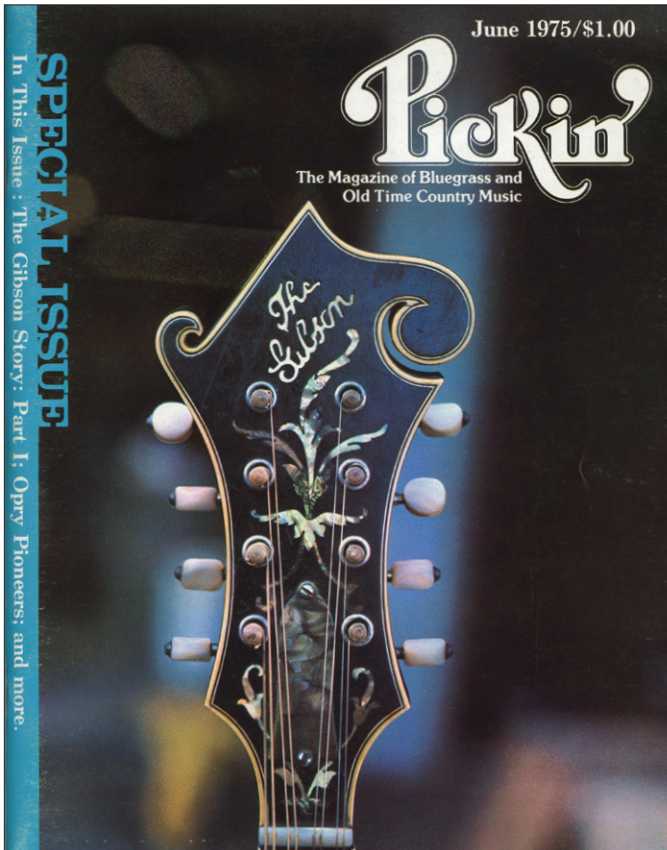
So, I did. I pulled the backboard, removed the tone bars, regraduated the soundboard and backboard from the inside (I didn’t touch the outside), reinstalled tone bars in their correct asymmetrical positions like the early L-5s, tuned the parts, and glued the guitar back together. By the time my work was done, I had removed a lot of wood, and I thought it sounded better, but I didn’t play it long enough to be really sure. And, I didn’t have the guitar in my possession long enough to really *know* the guitar, and more importantly, I didn’t play guitar well enough to put it through its paces.

Bruce was doing a lot of clinics at the time, dashing from music store to music store. He was scheduled to be at a store in Philadelphia and asked that I drive down to meet him so he could hear the guitar. When he was done doing his demo of some of Gibson’s latest models to the rather large group of customers assembled at the music store (he really knows how to wow an audience and bring the best out of a guitar!), he waited for the crowd to clear and then he opened the case. He took out the guitar, with his back to me and facing into a corner, played some

of his *Amazing Grace* licks. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the look in his eye when he slowly turned and said, “No shxx!” I hoped that meant he liked it, but he made no further comments one way or another. He told me had to run to the airport, thanked me for driving all the way down to Philadelphia, asked me to send the guitar back to him, and off he went to Chicago. Guitar in hand, and a bit uncertain of what was next, I took a deep breath and headed back to my home and shop in New Jersey.

By then, Bruce had begun to work more closely with Richard Schneider, a stellar luthier who lived in Kalamazoo at the time. Richard built magnificent classical guitars. Richard wasn’t just a luthier – he was an artist in the truest sense. Richard had begun some acoustical developments with Dr. Michael Kasha, and they were very focused on building acoustic guitars with tuned tone bars and air chambers (which were to become Gibson’s Mark Guitar series). Bruce invited me to Kalamazoo to meet with he and Richard to talk about my tuning ideas to see just how practical they were for production, and if my ideas were at all similar to the ideas Richard had. It was a great meeting, but apparently another dead end regarding my F-5 reintroduction ideas.

About a month later, I learned there would be yet another meeting at which time I was asked to talk about what was so special about the “Loar-signed F-5s,” the mandolin market size and scope, ideas on how to address the market, and who I thought the target market really was (i.e., who was the ideal potential buyer). In August of 1977, a meeting was held at Billy Finn’s Place (a restaurant in Kalamazoo) during which time I delivered my presentation to Jim Deurloo, Bruce Bolen, Tom Pooton (marketing manager), Julius Bellson, Bill Halsey, and Abe Wechter. (Bill was a designer-draftsman then and now makes violin bows and mandolins in Michigan. Abe was a contractor who managed several developmental projects at Gibson; he now builds guitars under his name in Fort Wayne, Indiana.) I had a Kodak Carousel projector loaded with about 30 slides that included some text on the features of the original F-5, a bit about its history, some background I had at the time about Lloyd Loar, and a bunch of photos of a fern F-5 that was owned by my friend, Fred Severud (and was pictured on the June 1975 cover of *Pickin’ Magazine*) and of a flowerpot F-5 I owned. I had a list of features we



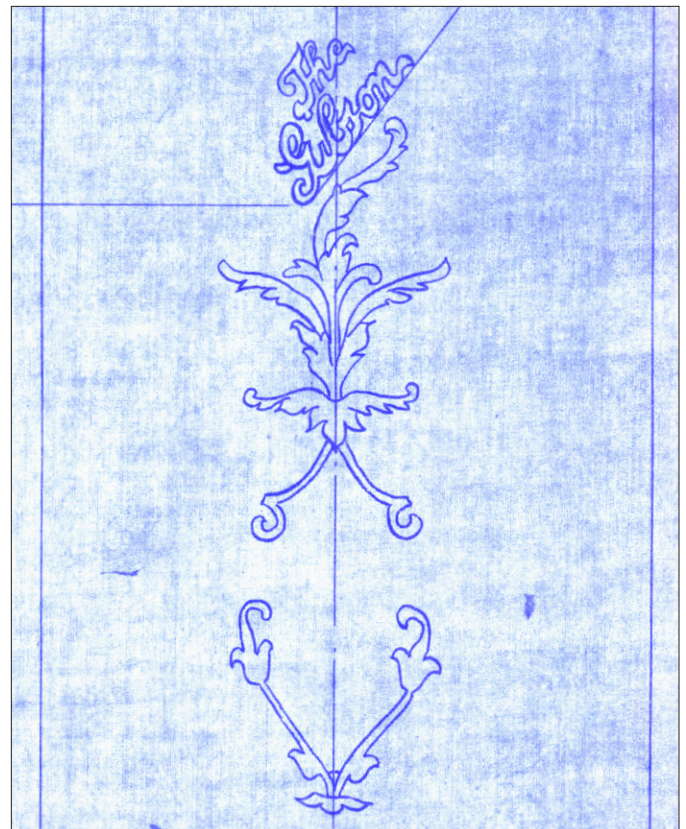
This fern-model F-5 (owned by Fred Severud) was used to describe the features of the fern inlay until the original drawing was found. (The June 1975 issue of *Pickin' Magazine* featured a story I wrote on Gibson's history and also included a fold-out poster of this F-5 peghead.)

should include and suggested that we needed to do some serious re-tooling because the patterns being used in Kalamazoo for F-5 soundboards and backboards weren't up to original specs. I asked Jim to have one of Kalamazoo's soundboards available at the meeting, and I brought along one of my carved soundboards so they could see, hear, and feel the difference. I offered the idea that we could call this "new" instrument the "F-5L" – the "L" in honor of Master Lloyd Loar. I also had a few slides on the market size and scope from marketing information we developed at *Pickin' Magazine*. It was a good, positive meeting. At the end of the meeting, Jim chatted for a few moments alone with the Gibson folks and then said, "Well, let's get going!"

Jim charged Abe, Bill, and me to work together to build three F-5Ls for the June 1978 NAMM (National Association of Music Merchants) convention in Chicago. I was to be the "mandolin guy," Abe was to be the project manager in the plant, and Bill would turn all of our ideas into drawings and get everything down on paper.

If my memory serves me correctly, the project took the better part of eight or nine months. Much to our delight, Bill scrounged through Gibson's drawing files and found a few early mandolin drawings that helped us confirm we were on the right path. Abe worked with the three mandolin builders inside the plant – Wilbur Fuller, Aaron Cowles, and Dick Doan (Dick is the luthier who was assigned to rebuild Monroe's broken peghead in 1980) to ensure they accurately followed our specs. Drawings and parts went back and forth in the mail, and I was flying back to the plant about once every two or three weeks. I carved some prototype soundboards and backboards on my pattern carver (the same one I'm using today) from wood provided by Gibson, and before long, we had three bodies and necks in process. In addition to finding the original fern inlay drawing, Bill used the fern inlay on Severud's F-5 as reference for the inlay drawings, and we used an F-5 I owned at the time as a color master. When the bodies were assembled, I headed off to Kalamazoo to tap tune them.

We were working in the original Gibson factory building at 225 Parsons Street on the first floor, where the original F-5 mandolins were built. Every



With some diligent sleuthing, Bill Halsey found the original drawing for the F-5 fern inlay.

time I was in that building it proved to be an awesome, mystical, and somewhat spiritual experience. And, it was then we learned that trying to tap tune those bodies in the presence of all the nearby shop noise was virtually impossible. In fact, after the first



Three partially assembled bodies, with oversize tone bars, await the tap-tuning phase.

three instruments were made, I set about to develop the “deflection tuning” method (described in my book *The Art of Tap Tuning*) that enabled us to tune instruments in a noisy environment. Working from the basic ideas of a prototype deflection machine I designed, the machinists at Gibson built an incredibly sturdy deflection device. The soundboard that was to be tuned could be mounted to a 3/4” aluminum plate with a large oval hole in the center. When



The tap tuning process is again brought back to Gibson’s old building. Peterson model 400 strobetuner at right.

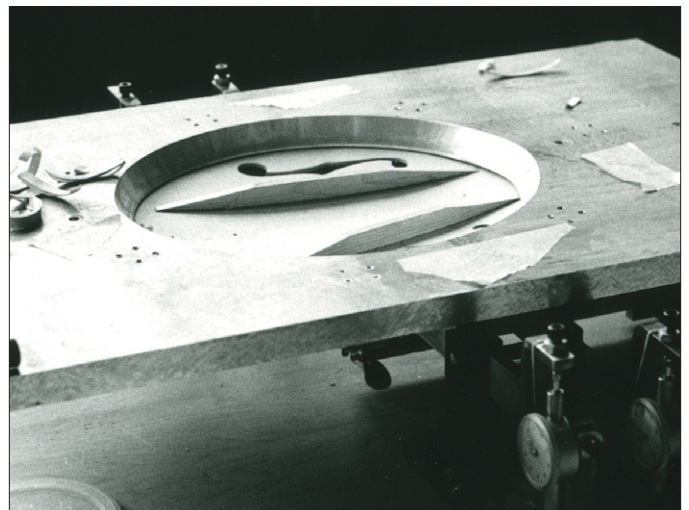


Photo by Tom Pooton, Gibson Marketing Manager

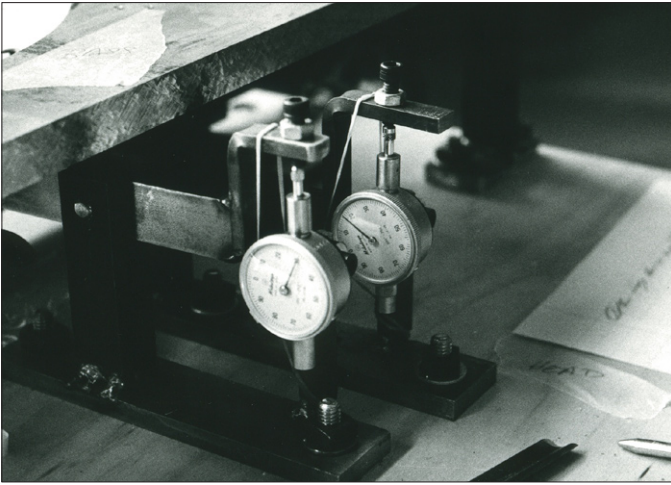
During the process, I learned that the ambient noise in the plant was too great for the tap-tuning process. This led to the development of a deflection-tuning process.

the plate was flipped over, the soundboard came in contact with four dial indicators located at strategic points along the two tone bars. To simulate the load of a bridge with strings at tension, a 40-pound force was applied to the center of the soundboard, and the tone bars could be shaved until the desired deflection measurements were achieved. To know what the proper deflection measurements should be, we used one of my tap-tuned soundboards as a deflection master.

On one trip, I demonstrated some hand-shading and grain-contrast-building techniques on an unfinished F-5 mandolin that was in process and left it there



The deflection fixture featured a 3/4” aluminum plate with an opening to access the tone bars. The soundboard was clamped to one side of the plate and then the plate was turned over to bring the soundboard into contact with four dial indicators (two on each side of the fixture), which showed the deflection, under load, of the two tone bars in four locations.



The two dial indicators on the right side of the fixture revealed two deflection values of the bass tone bar.

as a color master for the F-5Ls that were soon to be finished. When they were finished and strung, we were comfortable that we had built three nice-looking mandolins that sounded even nicer.

June rolled around and off we went to NAMM in Chicago. I was invited to introduce the F-5L to the various sales teams during the two meeting days that preceded the NAMM show. The Gibson guys were pranksters, and Tom Pooton, Gibson's Sales Manager, and Bruce always had a bit up their sleeves! During one of the presentations when I went in front of the sales team, the mandolin wasn't on its stand. Tom walked up with the mandolin case and said, "Here, sorry," and when I opened it, I found a sandwich instead of a mandolin! Then, with a big grin on his face, in front of a laughing sales team, he walked out with the mandolin in his hand.

During the main sales event preceding NAMM, Bruce and Tom invited me to the front of the room. Tom said, "Which of these three would you pick as



Photo by Tom Pooton, Gibson Marketing Manager

Roger presenting the new F-5L to the sales team.

the very best one for us to put on the show floor?" I played them and looked them over for a moment and said, "This one." Then, Tom and Bruce, thanking me for my help and asking for a round of applause, said, "Well thanks for your great efforts in bringing back one of our earliest models. Put it in its case. We want you to take this one home!"

After the presentation, I went to Tom and Bruce and said, "I really appreciate the gift, but this is the one we need to put on the show floor – it's the best of the three and that's why we're here!" Tom warned me that "It will get dinged out there!" to which I replied, "I don't care – it's the one we have to show." (Fortunately, after three days of folks playing it on the show floor, I took it home without a ding or scratch.)



The F-5L finally gets to the show floor, NAMM, June 1978.

Prior to the show, I went to the marketing folks and asked if they had any intentions of creating an ad for the F-5L for *Pickin' Magazine* (a bluegrass and old-time music publication I started in 1974). I was hoping to have an ad in the edition that we would be distributing at the NAMM show where the mandolin was announced. I was told "no," and it was suggested to me that there wasn't a sufficient market to warrant the cost of producing a separate ad, let alone the monthly advertising costs. I said, "Well, what if I create an ad – one that reflects the reintroduction of this instrument along with Gibson's history?" I offered to do the photography, copy writing, and assembly of the ad for their approval at no charge. Dave Sutton, Gibson's Marketing Director, told me that it was okay to move forward as long as

we agreed that it was at my expense; Gibson would pay for the ad space if I covered the creative costs. With that, I created the “60 Years Ago...” ad and sent it to Dave for his approval. After three weeks of approvals at his end, he sent it back with a few “legal” corrections along with an insertion order to run it for six months!

60 years ago...

...Gibson announced the Master Model series of wood-bodied instruments. Instruments conceived, developed, and personally approved by the now-legendary Lloyd A. Loar — this century's most accomplished luthier and acoustician.

Now, in recognition of his masterful achievements, Gibson is going back to the original drawings, patterns, and templates to produce a reissue of his greatest work: the F-5 mandolin.

The new instrument, named the F-5L — “L” in honor of its creator — is crafted with the same techniques and to the same set of specifications as those used to produce its historic counterpart.

Only age will be the difference between Gibson's F-5L of today and Gibson's F-5 of 60 years ago.

Lloyd Loar, 1923, at Gibson's plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Seen here holding his unique 10-string mandolin.

Gibson

P.O. BOX 10087
NASHVILLE, TN 37210
EUROPEAN, MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICAN OFFICES:
GIBSON BV, OLSSENWEG 42a
3044 AK ROTTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

Gibson. Making History. Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow.

Specifications: hand-carved scrolls • individually hand-tuned and graduated soundboard and backboard • hand-tuned tone bars and f-holes (a technique used only by Gibson) • white/black/white celluloid binding • 13 1/2" string scale • 2-piece adjustable ebony bridge • Ceylon ebony fretboard with pearl position dots • hand-engraved, gold-plated tailpiece • abalone and pearl "fern" pattern • peghead inlay • mother-of-pearl nut • gold-plated tuning machines with genuine mother-of-pearl knobs • peghead veneered face and back • hand-colored and shaded "Cremona" finish • ebony endpin with pearl dot • bound elevated finger-rose • choice Michigan curly maple neck, sides, and back • perfect Sitka spruce soundboard • mahogany headblock and tailblock • length: 27 1/2" inches • width: 9 1/4" inches • weight: 2 1/4 pounds • plush-lined rectangular hardshell case •

This ad ran in *Pickin' Magazine* once and then several times in *Frets Magazine*. The mandolin in the photo is the one given to me by Gibson and is one of the three prototypes.

To say the results from the show were astounding would be an understatement. I'm not at liberty to share the details, but the F-5L outsold the company's expectations by a huge margin.

As if by magic, the one person least expected to be at NAMM came by the Gibson booth to see what mandolins were on display. Bill Monroe, who just happened to be in Chicago at the time of NAMM — with his F-5 in hand — came into the booth and picked up the F-5L. Yes, he played it. And, yes, he liked it. We talked for a while about the comparison between the F-5L and his mandolin, and the work Gibson did to bring back this instrument. I remember standing there holding his mandolin while he played the F-5L, then we swapped back only for



Mr. Bill and I spent some time at the June 1978 NAMM show comparing the new F-5L to his trusty sidekick.

him to ask to play the F-5L again — that was a good sign!

Soon, a huge crowd had gathered around us with a lot of people wanting to see who this old geezer was playing the heck out of a mandolin.

In the recap meeting following that June 1978 NAMM show, the dramatic change in mandolin sales got everyone's attention. The executive team was surprised at how mandolin sales could have



Gibson's introduction of the F-5L was of special interest to knowledgeable folks like George Gruhn (Gruhn Guitars) who took the mandolin over to a window, pulled the end pin, and carefully inspected the construction and workmanship inside the mandolin.



Bill Halsey and I took a moment to horse around at the *Pickin' Magazine* booth where we posed in front of a mock front-cover banner with the F-5L.

jumped so dramatically at this one show. All of a sudden, Gibson was back in the mandolin business – big time! But the company wasn't ready from a production standpoint. Its soundboard and backboard carving patterns couldn't be used, and since I carved the soundboards and backboards that were on the three prototypes, I was asked to continue carving boards for the first production run. (The company would send me a pallet of spruce and maple, and I'd send back carved boards – a process that continued for more than two years.)

Gibson's marketing theme at that time was centered around the company's heritage. When we started the F-5L project, it wasn't clear to me whether Gibson's motive was just to have a nice heritage instrument for the NAMM show that said, "Look, we can still do it" or for the company to really get re-engaged in the mandolin business. Regardless of the motive, the sales results raised enough eyebrows and fueled a new direction for Gibson to regain some lost territory. The F-5L marked a turning point for Gibson to begin looking back as it planned its future, and it was the event that triggered the reintroduction of other classic Gibson instruments – the next being the Earl Scruggs banjo; a project which I am also proud to say I championed.

Ten years later, when it was clear that the F-5L had gained momentum, I brought Lloyd Loar's widow, Bertha Snyder Loar Westerberg, to the 1988 Winter NAMM convention in Anaheim, California to take part in a celebration honoring the contributions of her husband, Lloyd, 60 years prior. Bruce Bolen and I had lunch with Bertha, we talked about Lloyd's contributions to Gibson, and she reminisced about the NAMM shows she walked through with Lloyd in the late 1930s.

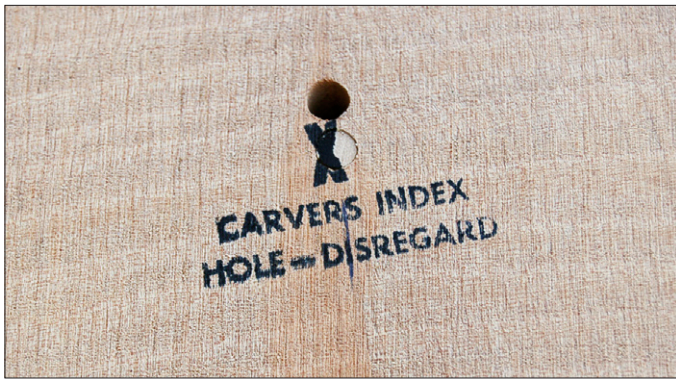


Lloyd Loar's widow, Bertha, visited Gibson's booth at the 1988 NAMM convention in Anaheim, California to pose with Bruce Bolen and me (and an F-5L) for this Gibson PR photograph. This was the first time Bertha had visited a NAMM show since she accompanied her husband Lloyd in the late 1930s.

Today, in addition to the continued interest in mandolins over the past three decades, the F-5 has heralded Gibson's efforts as an acoustic instrument maker while at the same time putting the company under the microscope. The F-5 mandolin is one of the company's most hand-intensive and most expensive products. The instrument has become an icon; a replica of its highly identifiable peghead stands almost three stories tall above the Opry Mills shopping center in Nashville to boast the location of Gibson's retail store and mandolin shop. In the late 1980s, the spirit of the early Loar-signed F-5s was kept alive at Gibson by master luthier Charlie Derrington until his untimely death in 2006. Today, the F-5 mandolin line continues to gain respect under the watchful eye of David Harvey, Gibson's Master Luthier.

Inside the early F-5Ls...

Since tooling wasn't ready at Gibson to meet the initial demand for these instruments, I was asked to carve the soundboards and backboards on my pattern carver for the initial run. While the need for my carving services was intended to last for only a short period of time, the increased demand for F-5Ls immediately following the June 1978 NAMM show required me to carve boards well into 1980. In fact, in 1979 when I was in the middle of the move from my home and shop in New Jersey to California, a truck came with a pallet of soundboard and backboard wood, which we simply slid from the floor of the delivery truck right into the moving van.

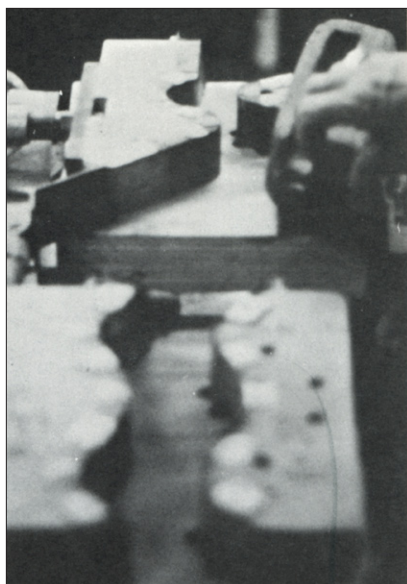


To ensure there would be no confusion of Gibson's or my locating holes, I plugged the holes needed for my carver with a 1/4" dowel and stamped an "X" along with a comment. Both holes were hidden by the headblock.

Gibson's boards came planed to the final thickness (.640") and were drilled for Gibson's two locating holes which were different from my locating holes. To avoid confusion, after I carved the boards, I plugged and identified the one hole I had added with a "Carver's Index" stamp.

As on the original F-5s, the two longitudinal tone bars were asymmetrically positioned.

The ribs for these mandolins were



Steam bending fixtures at Gibson. The form in the foreground is for bending the rib piece that goes between the two body points. The form in the background is for bending the piece that goes around the headblock. Steam was applied to the rib parts as the forms were closed.

steam bent in a series of fixtures by applying steam to the part being bent. The same steam chamber – an ancient contraption that was in use for decades at Gibson, and still located in the back of the old building – was also used for bending the maple pieces that were rolled into three-ply and four-ply rims for Gibson's banjo line.

Neck joints; somewhat problematic...

The neck joints on these instruments boasted a mortise and tenon design that Gibson was using at the time. The machining of the neck heel and one-piece neck-and-fretboard-extender spoke well for Gibson's incredible woodcrafting capabilities. Unfortunately, the neck joint didn't feature a secure locking method, and several of these instruments experienced neck joint failure and required subsequent re-sets. In his early years working at Gibson, this joint was a sore point with Charlie Derrington, and he worked hard to eliminate this method and get the F-5 line back to dovetail neck joints.



The mortise and tenon neck joint featured a single element neck-and-fretboard-extender which greatly facilitated construction and alignment.

We had wanted the mortise and tenon eliminated early on in the development of the F-5L, but the company had already prepared a bin of necks (see photo next page) and had invested a great deal in tooling to create the mortise and tenon connection.

We also sought to use an ebony fretboard extender as used on the original F-5 mandolins, but since the extender was now an integral part of the mandolin necks, the request was denied.

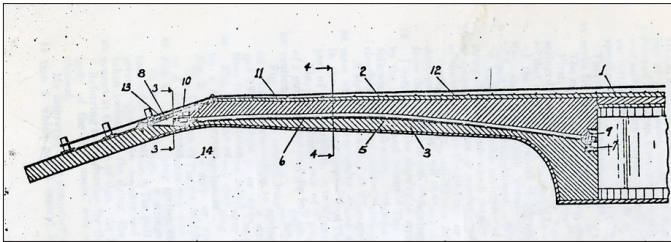
The neck joint and extender were the two main points of contention when we developed the F-5L.

Roger H. Siminoff, *Pickin' Magazine*, July, 1975

Neck construction...

The first several batches of F-5Ls featured necks that were prepared well in advance of this reintroduction. Commensurate with the company's posture of being a mass producer of instruments, and to take advantage of set-up time and tooling, necks like these were made in large quantities rather than on an as-needed basis.

The F-5 necks of this time featured a 3/16" steel truss rod embedded on the same inverted curve that was featured in Ted McHugh's original truss rod patent of 1922 even though the rest of Gibson's truss rod installations (on its guitars, etc.) had the truss rod positioned in the neck with a low center and its extremities close to the fretboard plane.



Ted McHugh's truss rod patent of 1922 featured a truss rod that was embedded so the rod was closest to the fretboard at its centermost point.

In keeping with proper practices of F-style mandolin neck preparation, the F-5 necks had a peghead scroll strengthener embedded into the scroll area to add strength to the scroll and prevent breakage.



A huge bin of mandolin necks prepared quite some time before our project began await being selected for use in the F-5L mandolins.

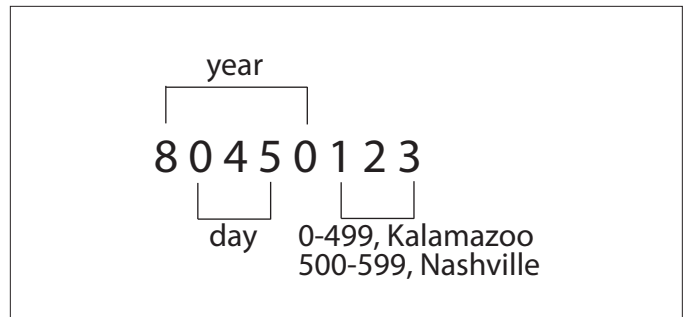
The two dimples seen in the fretboard plane (above) are locating holes for the numerous machining operations necessary during the production of the neck.

Identifying the early F-5Ls...

During the first five years of production of F-5Ls, Gibson was involved in moving its operation to Nashville – the job Jim Deurloo was brought back to manage. It was the involvement in this move, and the attention it demanded, that supported the decision for me to continue to carve soundboards and backboards rather than worry about developing new carving tools while in the process of moving.

F-5L production continued in Kalamazoo through 1983 and then the operation was moved and placed under the control of Steve Carlson at Flatiron Mandolins, who was not involved in the original production of this instrument. The change in management of the mandolin assembly process also marked a change in production techniques that were previously implemented, and such important processes as deflection tuning were eliminated. (The story of those changes and subsequent developments of the F-5L and related models is outside of the scope of this document.)

This first series of instruments were unusually fine mandolins, and they can be identified by their serial number. In the early 1970s, Gibson developed an eight-digit serial numbering system that identified



Gibson's serial number system in the period 1970-1985 was an eight-digit code. The instrument in this example was made on the 45th day of 1980 and was the 123rd instrument to finish white wood that day in Kalamazoo.

both the sequence, day, and location of manufacture. In this eight-digit system, the first and fifth numbers identify the year, the second, third, and fourth numbers are the Ordinal Calendar date (the number of the day in that year, sometimes referred to as the Julian Date Format), and the last three digits represent the sequence of that instrument completed that day in white wood (finished sanding) and ready for coloring and finishing; 0-499 was for instruments finished in Kalamazoo, and 500-999 was for instruments finished in Nashville.



The F-5L project, as I remember it...

by Bill Halsey

It was my friend Abe Wechter (then consulting for Gibson) who had asked me for input on mandolins that were caving in. That's how it started for me. For years I had been grousing over

the state of Gibson's mandolin production, but hadn't the slightest idea of how to approach them – then the door opened.

We met one morning in the summer of 1977 in Gibson's engineering department where the various production parts of the F-5 were laid out for examination. After some discussion, I was given complete access to the drawing files. I went through every drawer, drawing by drawing, but my only discoveries of interest were a rough rendering of the F-4 and some of its fittings, and a few heavily revised drawings of F-5 details. In fact, there seemed to be little recorded basis for the manufacture of mandolins, save for the usual process and routing sheets and a few specification sheets from old factory production manuals. I was encouraged to investigate the factory at large and ask questions. As I delved deeper into the tool room, I eventually unearthed the old rib moulds and a few original templates for scroll and headstock profiles. I was also very lucky to find an old-timer in the shop who ultimately vindicated my campaign for offsetting the fingerboard toward the scroll, as had always been done on the old F-models. That was a particularly hard sell to management.

That autumn, I had the pleasure of meeting Roger Siminoff, and making his acquaintance through his many visits to Kalamazoo during the following months. I was delighted that he was on board and prepared to lead the complete overhaul of the F-5, and that Gibson management was willing to give it their best shot.

With my own background in drafting and technical writing, I was retained as an outside agent to generate all of the production drawings for this effort to replicate the original F-5. Roger generously made available his own 1924 Loar-signed F-5 for this effort

to ensure historic accuracy. We met at the factory and also during evenings to discuss our mission and to resolve important details of the project.

Gibson produced three prototypical F-5L mandolins, stamped as such on the backs of the headstocks. I carved the scrolls in my own studio, Roger demonstrated to the mandolin makers how to perform the acoustic adjustments at the factory, and the completed instruments were finished with the traditional hand-applied sunburst in Gibson's finishing department. (I had just completed a Fern F-5 of my own earlier that year, which Gibson's ad department photographed as a back-up image in case the prototypes might not be available for promo materials to be printed.)

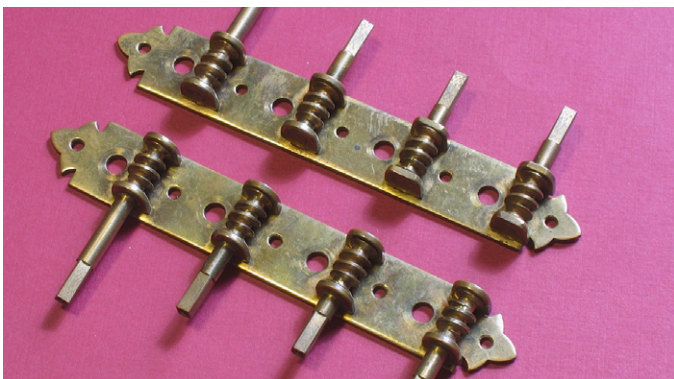
The three F-5L prototypes were completed in time for introduction at the 1978 Summer NAMM show in Chicago. I received a call from the factory that spring and had the pleasure of meeting there with Julius Bellson (longtime Gibson Treasurer and historian, then retired) who had also been invited to examine and play the newly completed trio of mando-



The first three F-5Ls had a "Gibson Prototype" stamp on the back of the peghead. The earliest F-5Ls had Kluson machines with modified posts and real MOP buttons.

lins. I was quite pleased with the results, especially considering the many changes we had made within the available time and resources. Of course, I was seeing and hearing them in the context of current market demand, which then was mostly bluegrass performance. In his own calm, gentle way, Julius (a virtuoso classical mandolinist) seemed happy with the attention given to the instrument, and was very approving of the achievements of the project (although, with a wink and a grin, he quietly reminded me of his lifelong preference for the F-4!).

Retrospectively, I'd say that Norlin (Gibson's parent company at the time) corporate management probably posed the greatest challenge to the success of the F-5L. The folk music boom had waned, and in spite of the enthusiasm and support of the managers at Gibson for the project, they were strapped with a razor-thin budget for R&D and there were significant constraints upon production times for any given operation. Thus, at least for the time being, the hand-fitted dovetail neck joint was a no-go, as was a varnish finish. Also shelved were several of the less critical trim details, such as a real wood headstock veneer, the laminated celluloid fingerrest bracket, and special tuner profile (although prototypes were made of the old-style "arrow-end" tuner plates). There was, however, an enormous talent pool in the Gibson factory, which represented an immeasurable accumulation of worker experience and skill.



Courtesy of Bill Halsey

The means were in place to make a first-rate job of the F-5L project, and we did achieve a great deal by providing examples, drawings, specifications and a bit of training, in our endeavor to revive the notion of what an F-5 had once been under the aegis of its creators.

D. Wm. Halsey, December 2009



A word on playability and tone...

by Ken Roddick

I have been very fortunate to have examined and played one of the prototype F-5Ls and had the chance to compare it side-by-side to a 1924 Loar-signed F-5 mandolin.

In addition, I have been involved in several bluegrass jams where both a Loar-signed F-5 and

an early version (i.e., 1980-era) F-5L were being played. Although these instruments were constructed 50+ years apart, they sound amazingly similar – so much so that if you could not visually see each instrument, you may have difficulty determining which instrument is which by listening only to the sound they produce. Unquestionably, the Loar has a slightly mellower tone than the F-5L but, on the one I compared, I attribute this to a Virzi Tone Producer that is installed in the original F-5. Otherwise, both instruments have virtually the same overall sound and volume attributes.

What is most amazing, and probably most important as it relates to the manufacture of the early F-5L mandolins, is the similarity of sound they have to other F-5Ls made at the time; more so than any other two F-5 mandolins I have heard side by side.

I am proud to own F-5L #80090009, which I was told was formerly owned and played by Wayne Benson of IIIrd Time Out.

Comparing this mandolin to the Gibson prototype F-5L #71598129 that Roger owns delivers an uncanny similarity of tone that I have never heard in two other mandolins. My assessment is that this similarity of tone and volume is attributed to the fact that these two early F-5L mandolins were structurally tuned during the construction process.

Ken Roddick, January 2010



Courtesy of Ken Roddick

Roddick's 1980 F-5L #80090009 was modified somewhere along the way to feature an abbreviated fretboard and large frets.



Gibson F-5L #71598129, one of the three prototypes made for the Summer 1978 NAMM show in Chicago. This instrument was built by Gibson luthier Wilbur Fuller.

Specifications (1978 issue, Gibson model F5-L mandolin):

- Soundboard: Adirondack red spruce
- Backckboard and ribs: Sycamore, curly figure (changed to curly maple in 1983)
- Neck: Northern Michigan red maple, curly figure
- Fretboard: Gaboon ebony with mother-of-pearl position dots
- Truss rod: Gibson patent adjustable, steel truss rod.
- Peghead inlay: Fern pattern, abalone and pear
- Machines: Kluson 12:1 reverse-turning gold-plated with mother of pearl buttons (Author changed machines to correct-turning 14:1 Gotoh machines with black buttons in 2022.)
- Tailpiece: Gibson style sliding cover, gold-plated, with hand-engraved "The Gibson" and wriggle border.
- Extreme length: 27-1/2"
- Extreme width of soundboard: 9-7/8"
- Weight: 2-1/4 pounds
- String scale: 13-15/16"
- Bridge, Ebony, with adjustable thumb wheels