



Mark Howard



— Banner Photo by Mark Howard

Don Gallagher, craftsman, strums finished product.

Gallagher Guitars — True Babe In Woods

J.W. Gallagher and Son's 1,459th product lies somewhere amid sawdust and woodworking tools on a work table in Wartrace.

It's recognizable as a guitar — just barely. The two sides have been glued together, but the instrument doesn't have a back or top yet, and the neck with the characteristic French-curved headstock and inlaid Old English "G" hasn't been dovetail-jointed into the body.

It's a trifle hard at this stage to imagine that someone is ever going to plunk down around \$1,100 for the privilege of picking on this embryonic flattop, but after spending a morning with Don Gallagher you come away believing he or she will get their

money's worth.

Don, 33, is a big man, soft-spoken, almost bashful. He laughs readily and speaks with a Tennessee accent milder than that of most of the locals he's on a first-name basis with — "in Wartrace you know about half the people and are related to the other half," he joked.

He's the fifth generation Gallagher in Wartrace, having grown up in the wood shavings of the Gallagher Cabinet Co. started by his father, John William, who died in 1979.

J.W. and Don, who holds a degree from Middle Tennessee State University, started making guitars in the 1960s. Neither was a musician.

"When we approached it, it was totally from a woodworking standpoint — all the basic principles for woodworking apply. They're the same whether for a guitar or a dropleaf table," Don said.

It's doubtful whether any six-string dropleaf table will ever sound as good as a Gallagher guitar, and Don admitted that at a certain point basic woodworking gives way to acoustic considerations.

The acoustics of the Gallagher instrument are well enough considered to attract customers like Doc and Merle Watson and orders from Western European and Japanese clients who know the instrument only by reputation.

"It's kind of flattering," said Don, a master craftsman at understatement as well as guitar-making.

Walk with Don through the sawdusty shop on Wartrace's Main Street and listen to him talk about his craft, and you get a lesson in pride as well as the basics of his art.

He knows precisely, to the millimeter, what he wants from the two-month process of building, lacquering and polishing that will end with No. 1,459 ready for its fretting owner.

He'll tell you about how the Sitka spruce, African and Honduras mahogany, and rosewood are cured for three years under controlled conditions so the moisture content is right for guitar building.

How the wood for the backs is cut so it will "book match," leaving one half of the back a shiny mirror image of the other.

How the tops and sides are sanded to thicknesses of 120-thousandths and 90-thousandths of an inch.

He'll tell you how the braces for the top are hand-formed, and how the shape and configuration of the braces was influenced by J.W.'s experience during World War II as an aircraft mechanic. J.W., it seems, used the same principles he saw in bomber wings when he got around to making guitars.

And he'll smile talking about doing the ivory inlay work on the neck using a plain old Sears router fitted with a drill bit supplied by a local dentist — "he passes them along when they get too dull to use on the patients."

Don can explain the physics of how sound travels in a guitar — either bouncing off the sides and back, causing the top to resonate indirectly, or directly to the top via the bridge and saddle, "radiating out in a circle like the ripples on a pond."

And how aside from one special saw used to cut the slots for the frets in the fingerboard, all the machinery in Gallagher's workshop is standard woodworking equipment.

"We don't have any real secrets or tricks. It just takes good materials and the time and care to do the work right. It's just craftsmanship," Don says.

There are five other workers in the shop, all of whom live in Wartrace and all but one with more than eight years' experience at their individual tasks.

"I'm the only person in the shop who can build a guitar from start to finish," Don said. "Quality control is extremely important and there are certain points at which work stops and I take a look at it and say yes or no."

Gallagher's firm will produce around 150 guitars this year — there are no plans to try and produce more next year.

"From the onset my father and I talked about the type of business we wanted and the direction we should take. To produce the quality of instrument we want to produce, it's necessary to stay small and, at a certain point, say 'enough.'"