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### John Mickelson, Seldovia's Luthier

by Mary Glover



#### John Mickelson

How would you describe John Mickelson? I would describe him as an intellectual and unique individual who has artistic and engineering talents way beyond most people. John is a quiet man, who thinks things through. He also is in the background, not bringing too much attention to himself. John is known throughout the musical community, and not just the local musical community, -- the musical community throughout the USA. John likes being in the musical community and he said, "It gives me a chance to hang out with some really good famous musicians and I get to work on their stuff.... It worked out to be what some people call 'right livelihood' and the money just follows." He said, it was a "hobby gone astray that has become a profession."

John has a huge investment of time and money and work in his shop. His shop has numerous lathes and computer parts. He figures out his software programs to achieve a certain cut. He also told me that he has been asked to start making cribbage pins with the pins that are seconds. Another thing I noticed about John, and this seems to be a common denominator with the highly successful people, John is a perfectionist. His work is beautiful and he makes every piece as perfect as it can be and if it does not turn out perfect, then it is cast aside. John also makes these beautiful wooden display boxes that he could sell as jewelry boxes. But he is just too busy keeping up with the demand of his guitar parts business. He has a core base of 25 repeat guitar builders, approximately 1,000 retail customers and two distributors. He also makes a high end ivory handles



**Installed bridge pins made by John, the Fossil Ivory King**

John is a Seldovia success story. John is Seldovia's luthier. (A luthier is a maker of musical instruments, usually a guitar or violin.) John started out by making guitars. He now makes parts for the guitars. He has found his niche in life and he is very good at it. He told me that when there is "DISadvantage," that he just discards the first three letters and makes it into "advantage." Who can stop someone with an attitude like that! Then coupled with the fact that he is not afraid of long hours of hard work, thinking the problems through to accomplish the task, and possessing the talent to create the work at hand. This all spells "success."

John was born to Norma and Arnold Michelson in Misoula, Montana. His father was a Norwegian immigrant and his mother, Norma, was the daughter of sod farmers in Nebraska. They met and married in Hoquiam, Washington. John was one of four boys born to Arnold and Norma, John being the second to the youngest. John's father was a policeman and a school teacher. John's mother was a "mother and a nurse." John graduated from high school in Shelton, Washington and in Shelton is where he met the Lindsteads.

Now the Lindsteads are the link as to how John eventually came to Port Graham in 1977 on a trip. He returned the next year on vacation and ended up working for "an old guy, Frank Blackburn." He was just 22 years old at that time. John told me that by the time he was 22 "he had already been on a million adventures" and when he came up here (at age 22), John said, "he was slowing down by then!" Now Frank Blackburn was a relative of Daisy Lindstead. Frank had a store with his brother and ran a saw mill. Then in 1978, John moved up to Alaska permanently.

In 1979 John came to Seldovia and got a job in the cannery. Vivian was working on the slope but also had a job in the cannery. John and Vivian met at the "Jap cannery" because John was working there to make a living and Vivian was working there to fill her freezer with the shrimp. (They were allowed to have some shrimp because they were "seconds." These were the days when there were shrimp and king crab in the bay.) John and Vivian were married by a Justice of the Peace Magistrate on December 13, 1981. The ceremony was standard, but the "legendary reception at the Seldovia

for a knife maker and does custom turning work for a jeweler. He says "his machines do what they are told and they will work all day long! They are great employees!"



**Daewon on his new bike**

John and Vivian have three children and one grandchild. Their children are Daewon, Emily and Evan. Daewon, as most of us Seldovian's know, was in a snowboarding accident recently and it has left him without the use of his legs (thus far). This event has taken the family to Durango this past year to be with him and John says that Daewon is actually doing very well at this time with both his capability and attitude. In fact, John had good things to say about all his kids. Daewon is enrolled at the college in Durango studying environmental engineering and has recently taken up photography as a hobby. Emily is attending the University of Nevada Las Vegas. John says, "She likes the heat!" ( Stated like a true cold weather Alaskan!) He said that son Evan is doing "great in school and working part-time and playing basketball." Vivian has been the Title VII tutor and the Swimming Pool Manager at the SBE School. She also has a few hobbies in addition to being "mom" including gardening and knitting. She also loves to be outdoors.

Lodge" was something probably everyone who attended still recalls. John said it was "total absolute decadent drunkenness...it was fun! It was well attended."



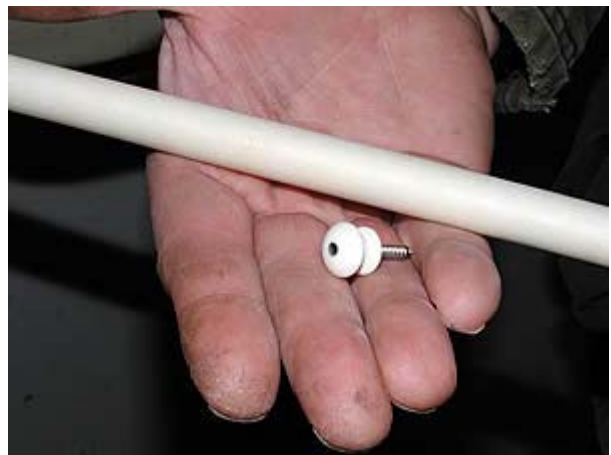
John said when he first moved to Seldovia that there was a variety of high paying jobs and stiff competition for the work. There was a logging operation, the king crab days and shrimp fishing.

There is no short answer as to how John started in his current line of work. He said had an interest in music, a strong interest in engineering, and an interest in computers. Once when there was no employment in Seldovia, John attended an economic development conference here in Seldovia. He introduced an idea of a banjo factory to a group, and when the body of people scoffed at the idea, John got the challenge. At that time when John had been collecting vintage instruments and repairing guitars in a big way. Then as time went on he started working on specialized parts. He said, "If I am a guitar builder, no one might buy my one guitar, but if I make guitar parts, maybe 200 people will buy my parts."



**Emily, Niki, Evan and baby Emma**

John said his favorite thing about living in Seldovia is that he doesn't have to drive anywhere if he doesn't want to. John is also a spiritual man. He told me that he gets comfort from "his faith." I asked John what his favorite season in Seldovia is and he said "winter" because people are "indoors." He said he likes to fish when they have visitors come to town, but he really likes the indoor winter.



**The bar above is the raw material John starts with for this project. The bridge pin is the final product**

John has a title as being known as the "Fossil Ivory King." Some of the varieties of pins are: Fossil Walrus Ivory, Amber Water Buffalo, Black Water Buffalo, Vintage Bone and Ebony. John also has written the technical part of his work on his web site <http://www.fossilivory.com> Also on his web site are pictures of his pins and other guitar parts that he makes. John has been storied before: *Flatpicking Guitar Magazine*, March/April 1997 did an article on him called "Fossil Walrus Ivory" by Bryan Kimsey. *Alaska Business Monthly* also spotlighted him in

**John's guitar pins are individually hand made and are some of the finest made in the entire world!**

October 2004 with an article called "Guitar Bridge Pins Produced for Specialized Market" by Chris Bernard.

Maybe it wasn't a banjo factory, but John definitely has made a guitar parts factory in this little city of Seldovia. Congratulations John, you deserve it!

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