THE FOLK musician Pete Seeger knew firsthand the power of the banjo. On the head of his five-string instrument, he inscribed these famous words: “This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender.” What Seeger didn’t realize is that the banjo can also kill zombies — at least in the world of the 2009 film Zombieland.

Greg Deering wasn’t aware of the banjo’s power against the undead until a couple of years ago — even though his business, the Deering Banjo Company, is North America’s largest banjo manufacturer and has turned out more than 100,000 banjos since 1975.

Fortunately, the Distinguished Eagle Scout is the Scoutmaster of Troop 355 in Spring Valley, Calif. At an annual New Year’s Eve breakfast for his patrol leaders’ council, Deering’s Scouts were happy to educate him. One took out his smartphone and showed him a clip of Woody Harrelson using a banjo to attract — and then kill — zombies in a grocery store.

“All of a sudden, it dawned on me that we should do a Zombie Killer banjo,” Deering says. “Right there at the breakfast, I’m drawing pictures of the Zombie Killer banjo on my napkin. By the National Association of Music Merchants show three weeks later, I had a prototype. It went over really well, and we’ve sold hundreds of them already.”

A START IN SCOUTING

The Zombie Killer, which was introduced in January 2013 and retails for $1,013, is just the latest example of how Scouting has influenced Deering’s career. He credits the program with launching his interest in the banjo.

After joining San Diego Troop 170 in the early 1960s, Deering became close friends with a Scout he knew from junior-high band. One day, Bailey played him a Kingston Trio album and picked up a guitar and started playing along with the music.

MR. SCOUTMASTER

Greg Deering has served as Scoutmaster of Troop 355 since 1987. Following the example of his own Scoutmaster, Bob Lawrence, he encourages Scouts to run their own program. “The boys do a good job,” he says, “and most of the time the adults have a lot of really wonderful fellowship all on our own.”

Deering has also been active on the San Diego-Imperial Council’s executive board, high-adventure team and Eagle Scout alumni association. He served as jamboree Scoutmaster in 1993 and 1997 and as the council’s jamboree contingent liaison in 2001. For the 2010 National Jamboree, he coordinated transportation for the council’s five-troop contingent, even driving an equipment truck cross-country.

Deering’s wife, Janet, is a Scouter in her own right. The couple has served together on the council’s Strategic Planning Committee and hiked together at Philmont Scout Ranch. (Janet took along a banjo, which they played in camp each night.) Their son, Jeremiah, is an Eagle Scout; their daughter, Jamie, is vice president of public service and outreach at Deering Banjo.

For his Scouting service, Greg Deering has received numerous honors, including the Silver Beaver, the Bronze Pelican and the Scoutmaster Award of Merit. In 2011, he was named a Distinguished Eagle Scout.
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After joining San Diego Troop 170 in the early 1960s, Deering became close friends with Chris Bailey, a Scout he knew from junior-high band. One day, Bailey played him a Kingston Trio album and picked up a guitar and started playing along with the music.

“I thought I’d died and gone to heaven,” Deering says. He looked at his friend, looked at the photo on the album cover and decided he had to get a banjo, the other instrument the Kingston Trio featured. “At 13 years old, I spent a whole month’s worth of paper-route money and bought a banjo,” he says. “There’s a good likelihood that I would have never become a banjo person without having been in the Boy Scout troop with Chris.”

The skilled hands of Jack Causey, a Deering Banjo Company craftsman, above, place the notches on a Goodtime Zombie Killer banjo (left), designed by Eagle Scout Greg Deering. The creative musician operates the Deering Banjo Company with his wife, Janet (below).

BUILDING A COMPANY

Deering moved from picking to production while studying industrial arts at San Diego State University. He wanted a nicer banjo than he could afford, so he built his own. Then he built another and another, and before he knew it, he was in the banjo business. “I’m still working on making that banjo that everybody can afford,” he says.

In the early 1970s, Deering worked at the American Dream in Lemon Grove, Calif., a shop that spawned at least three other instrument companies. In 1975 — 40 years ago this summer — Deering and his wife, Janet, founded their own company. He was 25, she was 21, and they had a contract to build instruments for Stelling Banjo. That deal fell apart, so the couple moved their equipment into their home garage and began building banjos under their own name. “By the summer of 1978, we were displaying our banjos at the big national trade
show in Chicago,” Deering says.

The first year, the Deerings (who added an employee late in the year) produced about 280 instruments. Janet delivered many of them to retailers throughout California, mostly so they could get paid quicker and avoid bouncing any checks. “It took a lot of determination for us to make it through those beginning years,” Deering says. “It wasn’t always certain that we’d have enough money to put food on the table every week.”

Deering economized by making some of his own machinery, using skills he had learned from his dad, an aircraft engineer. He built a pin router to carve holes for mother-of-pearl inlays. “That whole machine was made out of scrounged parts,” he says. “When I needed some way to control the up-and-down movement of the router, I came across an air-brake pedal from a bus. It turned out to be the perfect thing.” Now more than 30 years old, that pin router is still in use at the Deering factory.

DEERING BANJOS TODAY

In 2001, the company opened an 18,000-square-foot factory, where its 100,000th banjo was produced in January 2014. The company keeps its 48 employees busy, but it’s no sweatshop. Eagle Scout Mike Lo Vecchio, a former Deering employee who now works on the BSA’s Content Management Team, says, “You didn’t go to work; you went to fun. Everybody is friendly, cooperative, helpful. It’s amazing. It’s a good place to work.”

Deering says that’s partly because his employees understand the company is really selling magic, not musical instruments. “Everybody here knows that we’re doing more than just sanding a piece of wood and making it look pretty,” he says. “We’re making something that gets to be part of the magic of the music. That’s different than just having a job.”

The company’s more than 130 models range from the $499 Goodtime banjo to the $63,719 Deering Banjosaurus Long Neck, which features a dinosaur-age mural on the fingerboard made of mother-of-pearl, coral, turquoise, cactus, abalone, malachite, several kinds of soapstones, koa, tagua nut and rosewood.

The Banjosaurus was designed, appropriately enough, for George Grove of the Kingston Trio and can be seen today at the American Banjo Museum in Oklahoma City. Other prominent customers have included Steve Martin, Bela Fleck, Taylor Swift, the Elton John Band, Winston Marshall of Mumford and Sons, Taj Mahal, Rod Stewart, Keith Urban, Jens Kruger, Andy Rau, Eddie Adcock and the late John Hartford.

But the company’s banjos are also popular with students and amateur musicians. In fact, Deering introduced the Goodtime line in 1996 to offer an American-made alternative to cheap imports. “[Chinese manufacturers] have banjos that are less expensive than ours, but they’re not very good banjos,” Deering says. “When you get a Chinese banjo that plays as well and sounds as good as our banjo, you’re probably going to be spending more.”
Artists ranging from country, bluegrass, rock and pop appreciate the quality, style and craftsmanship of Deering banjos.

The Eagle Scout musician never imagined that his designs would be played by artists including (clockwise from left) Keith Urban, Taylor Swift, Steve Martin, Bela Fleck, Kacey Musgraves, Rod Stewart and John Hartford.

MUSICIANS

“What the artists say

“‘I love my Deering banjos, and I’m proud to be able to rely on the company for its products and service because not only does Deering make what I feel are today’s very best banjos, but also because Greg and Janet Deering are the highest-quality human beings I could wish to be associated with.’

EDDIE ADCOCK, member of International Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame

“I’ve known Greg ever since the early ’80s when I bought my G.D.L. [Greg Deering Limited], only the fifth one made. He has always treated me like family. I admire him not only as a person but as the finest banjo maker on the planet. He and the entire team really care about making the banjo world accessible to every person.”

ANDY RAU, progressive bluegrass/Americana musician

“I have open-back banjos, resonator banjos, ones with no tone ring and ones with big, heavy tone rings. I have an Irish tenor and a Seeger long neck thrown in the mix, too. They all come out of the Deering factory because I know that I’m getting consistent and excellent American craftsmanship. In 25 years I’ve never had a single quality issue.”

RIK BARRON, folk musician

MORE LESSONS FROM SCOUTING

Deering relishes the challenge of competing with overseas manufacturers, which perhaps stems from another experience he had in Scouting. When he first became a patrol leader, his patrol wanted to win a camporee, which meant beating other patrols in fire building, log hauling and more. After practicing, Deering and his fellow Scouts realized they needed to work smarter, not harder. For each competition, Scouts took on specific roles and worked in harmony.

“We won every single event, and we won the camporee,” Deering recalls. “It was not that we were special or better than anybody else; we were just fortunate enough to have hit upon a formula on how to really excel. It was an amazing learning experience, and I’ve carried that through with everything we’ve ever done.”

But Scouting taught Deering much more than just how to beat other patrols — or overseas banjo manufacturers. He credits the program with teaching him values and leadership skills and with prompting him to strive for excellence in everything he does. “Scouting is just an incredible foundation for all of life, not just business,” he says. “I can’t imagine what life would be if I hadn’t had the foundation of Scouting and the influence of Baden-Powell.”

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