

THE SOONER TUNER

Newsletter of The Oklahoma Chapter 731 of the Piano Technicians Guild, Inc.
June 2008

COMING EVENTS

JUNE - There will be no local chapter meeting this month. The National PTG Conference is in Anaheim California.

JULY - Cookout at the Bonhams. July 12th at 4:30. More about that in the July newsletter.

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Mel Brooks quotes:
Humor is just another defense against the universe.
I only direct in self defense.
If God wanted us to fly, he'd have given us tickets.
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The Great Piano Bonfire

By Charles Huether - September 1974 NJM&A
Good Vibrations - RI PTG Chapter Newsletter

Atlantic City is famous for many things in its long history as a resort and convention center, but did you ever hear of the "Great Piano Bonfire"?

In 1904 the Convention of the National Association of Piano Dealers was held at the great resort city. The turn of the century was also a crisis time for the piano industry. The modern grand and upright had reached their peak in development. Scale and action design were as such a stage of refinement that all instruments of earlier design were obsolete. And that meant principally the old "square grand."

Piano manufacturers were abundant in this country during the 19th century. Every city of any importance had at least one piano builder and large cities such as New York, Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia each had many factories. The total output accumulated through the years as most people seemed to feel, then as now, that pianos never wear out.

But in 1904 the manufacturers were building the modern upright and grand and they had to get rid of the old squares and the problems of taking them in trade. The piano owners were anxious to buy the new instruments but resisted the notion that the old squares were worth very little as practical musical instruments and even less as trade-ins.

To the fore stepped Harry Edward Frenund, Editor of the "Musical Age." With grand rhetoric he presented and pushed for his plan, which was to collect as many square grands as possible and make a bonfire of them. And so, one thousand pianos were collected from all of the country, piled high on the beach at Atlantic City and, as a great climax to the Piano Dealer's Convention, put to the torch.

It was a great sight and the publicity was tremendous. Reports were in papers from coast to coast, not a small achievement in those days before wire services and TV. Harry Edward Frenund, with typical flourishes of the day said, "What has occurred is, I think, typical of the American spirit – to destroy that which has become

useless.”

It hadn’t been easy to get the bonfire organized for even as long ago as 1904 there were people who just couldn’t understand the problems of business. When word went out of the planned fire, Mayor Story of Atlantic City was deluged with letters from people protesting and asking for the instruments for themselves or for some charitable institution.

Further, the possibility of the fire getting out of hand and spreading to the city was a major concern for there had been an extensive fire just three years earlier. The Mayor said, “No!” Harry Edward Frenund and his supporters protested. They threatened to take their fire to another neighboring community, a number of which were eager to participate for the publicity. And that tipped the scale. The Mayor relented, and with the fire department and a squad of police on hand to keep things under control, the fire was set.

At 10:10 p.m. on May 24, 1904, Harry Edward Frenund, put the torch to a pile of one thousand kerosene-soaked square grands and the flames leaped to the sky. Thousands of people came from great distances to witness the conflagration, and it was reported to be seen twenty miles out at sea. The Piano Dealers joined hands and danced around the fire and sang songs.

Symbol of the squares to be destroyed was an instrument painted white and exhibited at the Convention as “The Dealers; White Elephant.” It was brought to the meeting by Frank P. Anderson of Brooklyn, and in addition to being painted white, had “verses” lettered on its case.

A few samples:

Of all the words of tongue or pen
The saddest are these “I am a has been.”

Another:

From Brooklyn I came
Anderson is my name
The Boss didn’t give a dame
If I do go up in flame.

And yet another:

No longer the dealer will tear his hair
Nor gnash his teeth in wild despair
My days are done poor old square
I’ll feed the flames by the salt sea air.

It is hoped that Mr. Anderson was a better Piano Dealer than a poet. So add another claim to fame to Atlantic City’s long list. And if you ever wonder where all the square grands went, why they went to Atlantic City and went up in smoke.

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Elayne Boosler said:

**My ancestors wandered lost in the wilderness for 40 years
because even in biblical times men wouldn’t stop and ask for directions.**

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STICKY KEYS IN GUYANA

At the request of the Guyana Music Teachers Association, I, along with Tulsa Symphony board member Dr. Erv Janssen and pianist Donald Ryan, went to Guyana in South America last October.

The purpose of the trip was to work on as many pianos as I could and to perform a kickoff concert to relaunch a national music festival for young people.

I landed in Georgetown at 11:00PM. When I stepped on to the tarmac, the first thing to hit me was the very high humidity. Air conditioning is not readily available in Guyana. All I could think about was lots of key easing.

My first project was to make sure there was a piano that could be used for the concert at the National Cultural Center. When I arrived I had to decide between a Steinway B and a German Ibach of the same size. The Steinway appeared to have too many problems at first glance, so I chose to work on the Ibach.

I had tuned the temperament and had made it up to A5 when I started running into many notes that would not repeat. The problem was not with the keys, but very gummy flanges. There is a reason why we use specific lubricants made for the piano industry. In Guyana these lubricants simply are not available.

I had brought a second suitcase full of tools and strings. I had also smuggled in my luggage some shampoo type bottles with McLube and Protek in them. However, since Protek did nothing for these flanges I ended up doing a lot of repining. In the end though I was able to get a working piano.

In Guyana, if you want to get anything done such as a national music festival it helps to get politicians behind your effort. So, I worked on “political” pianos. One piano was a Steinway M located in a literal thatch roofed hut made by the Amerindians from the Interior of Guyana. This hut was a few hundred yards from the ocean. You might imagine that rust would destroy this piano. Not so. A tiny little worm was literally eating the wood of the piano just below the veneer. The veneer was soft to the touch. This Steinway’s days are numbered.

Donald Ryan and I were privileged to perform a violin and piano concert in the US Ambassador’s home. Ambassador David Robinson and his wife Donna had a pristine Baldwin grand in the residence. It was so “untouched” that I had to pull off a factory inspection sticker that was rubbing on the damper underlever lift tray. It was making noise when using the sustain pedal. After three tunings (it was so flat) the piano was good to go.

The kickoff concert at the National Cultural Center was a success. In attendance were the Prime Minister and the Minister of Culture. Between this concert and the US Ambassador’s concert we were able to garner support for the music festival. As of last week the festival plans are still under way with repertoire decided and music being distributed. Festival culmination will be around Easter of 2009.

I left Guyana pleased and frustrated at the same time. While the mission of the trip was successful there were still many more pianos that I was not able to work on. Unfortunately, the last indigenous piano technician in the country died. It was an honor to serve the people of Guyana with two very unique skills that they needed. My hope is to return in the future to fix sticky keys in Guyana.

Greg Lynch

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