

Bill Smith's Art

- Dean Petrich, RPT -

For years Bill Smith worked alongside Frank Hopfinger at Sherman Clay, the largest piano store in downtown Seattle at the time. Later, he left there and set up his own shop in West Seattle. He attended every meeting at the Seattle PTG chapter for as long as I knew him. Susan Willanger and I began tuning around the same time in 1973, and we learned that Bill was an invaluable resource to us as we progressed in the development of our businesses. His shop was always open to us if we ever had any questions or needed any technical assistance.

One day I called him with a puzzle. I was repairing a square grand piano, and one of the hammer flanges was broken. Yes, I knew how to re-pin a standard flange, but this was an antique flange made with a leather hinge. I had no idea how to fix it, so I took it to Bill.

He greeted me at the door and shook my hand. I will always remember Bill's handshake, because while most people shake a couple times and let go, Bill would always shake firmly and would hold on for 30 seconds to a minute, with eye contact. This first time I shook his hand, I felt a little awkward because I was ready to let go, but as we stood there shaking, I understood that this was a sincere greeting showing that I was deserving of his attention and he of mine. Ever since then I made a point of making my handshakes last longer. Often when he shook hands, he would place his left hand on the person's right hand – which created a strong feeling of trust, care, sincerity, and bonding.

When I showed him my broken piano part, he smiled and immediately commented that back then they used premature lamb's hide to serve as flange hinges because it was supple, strong, and durable over time. My heart sank because where was I ever going to find premature lamb's hide? Before I could say anything, Bill said, "You know, I just happen to have an old wallet made out of premature lamb's hide." He rummaged around and pulled out an old wallet.

"Here, let me see your flange." He pulled out a small saw with a thin blade, asking, "Do you have one of these saws? You can get them at hobby shops. They are very handy because they come with multiple sizes of blades that are all thin and strong." He set one half of my flange in a vice and proceeded to remove the remaining portion of hide from the slot with the saw. Then he placed the other half in the vice and did the same.

With care, he cut out a rectangle of hide from the wallet to use as the hinge. It was slightly larger than we needed to facilitate handling; later he would slice off the excess. He dipped an old shank into his pot of hot hide glue, dabbed the hide and the slot, and pulled the hide down until it was seated at the bottom of the slot, which held it in place quite snugly. "That was the easy part. Now we must be careful, because the other piece must not only be equally snug, but the wooden parts must be nearly touching as well as in line and straight." He took it out of the vice, added some glue, and, with his fingers, he pulled the slot on the hammer section of the flange onto the hide until the wood touched the flange. "These have to be straight so the hammer travels well, and there must be slightly enough play so that the hide simply flexes without over-stretching or breaking."

He had glue on his fingers and wiped it off on the front edge of his workbench. "That's how I clean off my fingers." I looked a bit more carefully at his workbench and noticed that the entire front edge of it was lumpy and completely covered with hardened glue from years of

wiping. I decided to adopt his practice in my own shop. The top of his bench was all scratched up from cutting who knows what – probably felts, shanks, modified wood parts, I guessed. In the back of his shop were labeled cardboard boxes full of different piano parts, and shelves of more boxes. Above his bench were small drawers full of various hardware and parts, and hanging on the walls were many tools and jigs. Clearly, he was equipped to do just about anything, and in my mind, he probably had already done just about everything.

We were done in less than five minutes, and I was amazed. He had fixed a part that I thought would be irreparable. With time on our hands, I started asking him questions about his shop. It seemed that he had everything – he had created a local piano supply shop, complete with sets of hammers, packages of shanks, flanges, backchecks, knuckles, keytops, punchings, felt rolls, and more. “If you ever need anything, give me a call; I probably have it.”

One of his biggest regrets was turning down an offer when he first started his store. Somebody had offered him hundreds of boxes of bridle straps, and at the time he did not think he had any use for that many. Since then, he received so many requests for bridle straps from local technicians that he lost count.

Over the years Bill helped me with numerous other unusual requests. He showed me how to customize ivory heads for uniquely shaped keys, techniques on shaping extremely angled hammers, short cuts and tips for regulating actions, and ways to modify pedals to fit odd configurations. He was a rare and invaluable asset to our chapter. Bill was always ready to help, he listened attentively and proactively, he was patient, kind, and generous. In fact, he was so generous that whenever a technician visited him for advice, help, or parts, just as it was time for the person to leave Bill would always stop the person by saying, “You know, I have something for you.” He would then reach into his bag or pick something up off his bench and say, “Here, take this jig that I made,” or “This little tool might come in handy for you. I made it the other day,” or “This special piece of felt might be just right for your pedal issue.” To this day I treasure several special tools that Bill made and gave to me.

One chapter meeting Bill was speaking about re-pinning flanges. For his demonstration he reached into his big bag and pulled out a foot-long hammer flange pinned to an impressively long shank that he had made. Everything was in proportion – the flange, the felt bushing, the center pin, even his giant shank. Of course, everybody laughed, but it made his discussion easy to see and was quite the conversation after the meeting. Our discussion about that flange lasted for more than an hour and a half. At another chapter meeting, he narrated the history of ivory, and for this session he brought a cube made of ivory heads glued together, weighing one pound. As his cube was passed around, he commented that for every pound of ivory a human life was lost. That presentation is on video in our chapter library.

Bill also made several other enlarged piano parts for future presentations, but one meeting was unforgettable. For six months he had been working on his trophy for the Golden Hammer Award to be presented at the national convention. When he showed it to us, we were astounded at the care and beauty of his artwork. It got passed around so that each person could personally study, touch, and admire it. For several years thereafter, Bill created unquestionably the most distinguished, captivating, and painstakingly detailed Golden Hammer trophies the Guild has ever seen. Each trophy was uniquely different, and the recipients were extremely proud of the honor to receive them. While most of these trophies are in the homes

of the recipients, at least one is in the PTG museum. Pictures of them merited being on the covers of the Journals.

In his later years, Bill stopped working on pianos but continued with his shop. One chapter meeting we found out what he had been doing with his spare time. He brought a small box and started talking about hammers, felt consistency, how felt can be hardened and softened, and ways of cutting and shaping it. Then he opened his box and took out some exquisite sculptures that he had made. With a sharp knife he had peeled portions of the hammers, shaped those protrusions, and starched them to keep their shape. He had made hammers into birds, flowers, fish, pigs, and more. He had drawn expressions on them, glued little eyes on them, cut slits and inserted small pieces of hammer felt into the main hammer, and sometimes glued on small pieces of colored piano felt to add expressions. He passed his miniature sculptures around the room so we each could hold and marvel at them.

Bill continued to create more hammer sculptures, and, one by one, he gave them all away. There are a few lucky technicians around the country who are fortunate enough to be in possession of some of Bill's artwork. Bill was soft-spoken and always modest. As a passing comment he would ask if we might want to see something, and then he would show us something amazing that he had spent countless hours making. Even when he spoke to us as a group, it felt as if each of us was the only one in the room and he was talking directly to us. When talking personally after his presentation or during meeting breaks, he would ask meaningful questions because he sincerely cared about each person he spoke with. I, for one, know that Bill not only cared about me but also understood me. I believe he made everyone feel the same way because he truly did care about people.

For fun Bill liked to fly kites. He invited me several times to join him at the beach or at a park, but I was always too busy and never did. In retrospect, I finally know how important such simple things as kite flying are on the broader scale of life and personal relationships. If he were to ask me now if I would like to fly kites with him, I would drop or reschedule whatever I was doing and I would go fly a kite with Bill, because that would become a memory to cherish.