

Cleaning Pianos

Bill Smith

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Bill's Background

Bill's first contact with a piano was when he was 4 years old. His parents bought a piano from Sherman Clay in Spokane. That was quite something. He thought it was a Cadillac, although it was a Smith and Barnes upright. His mother started playing piano when she was 4 years old in Germany.

When Bill was discharged from the army, back in 1946 he went to the Veterans association. One of the advisors said that someone had called in that morning from a store that has pianos. The man pulled out an adding machine strip of paper with Sherman Clay's phone number. Bill took the bus and walked up to the manager, who didn't look very favorable about him. He took him upstairs to Carl Johnson who had bent her 300 some years and didn't look too favorably at Bill. Carl had been a pilot. This was Tuesday, and they asked Bill to come back Thursday afternoon.

It took about six months for Bill and Carl to become acquainted almost like father and son. For the next four years they wrote him off. Bill stayed with Sherman Clay for 25 years. There were 42 employees at the time on the payroll. The first floor sold everything there was to do with music – records, sheet music, etc. On the second floor they sold ironers radios, electrical appliances, stores, etc. When television came along everybody started looking in the windows.

The shop itself was not very well equipped with power tools. One was a buffer and another was a long snake for cleaning tuning pins. You learn a lot without any power tools. When Carl retired, Steinway got bought out by CBS.

Anyone doing piano work for Sherman Clay worked on contract. Bill said he would work on contract as long as they paid his social security and medical. They asked, "doesn't that make you an employee?" That lasted for a couple years, after which they put him straight on contract.

Bill opened up his own shop in west Seattle in 1971. He carried parts, fixed pianos, etc. His shop was so close to his house that he could walk, so it worked out great.

Bill just celebrated his 86th birthday.

In 1972 the first national convention was in Portland. The PTG office at that time was in Seattle. Bill was asked to put together a class for the convention. He put together a class on cleaning pianos. As Bill was talking about using an air compressor, a man stood up and said that he dismantled his pianos, took them outside and sprayed them with a high pressure water hose. Then he would leave them out in the sun to dry for six hours and put them back together. Bill didn't know what to say to that.

Cleaning Tuning Pins

- Take some ivory soap and a cheese grater and make fine flakes. This will suds up. Use cheesecloth to wipe off the residue off the plate and the pins.

- Shaving cream works, but it has a strong smell that lingers. It has a bit of oil in it. It also might remove paint or finish.
- Woolite rug cleaner makes very dry suds. There is nothing in it to cause corrosion. Here is a quick procedure. Since a rug is cloth, Woolite will also clean the cloth under the strings.
 - Spray the foam over the pins. The foam will expand.
 - Work the suds into the pins with a paint brush.
 - To remove the suds, lay a single layer of cheesecloth over the pins and work it down over the pins with the paint brush.
 - Pull out the cloth and the suds and dirt will come with it.
 - Lay a second piece of cloth and do it again.
 - Sometimes this process needs to be done twice.
 - Blow out any residual with a blower. Bill showed a variable speed
 - Makita blower that can be either a blower or a vacuum.

Cleaning Strings

- To clean the single strings underneath the bass strings, Bill demonstrated his tool. He made a jig out of a square of plywood with a square of Scotchbrite attached underneath it. The top of the piece of wood has several holes for inserting a dowel as a handle.
- Steel wool is dirty and leaves lots of little strands. It also magnetizes the wire and the particles stick to the wires.
- Polita works well, but it hard over time. They are soft to start with.
- Erasers work well because they contain fine grit (dust/sand/particles). Particularly the white typewriter erasers have more grit in them.
- Maroon and gray Scotchbrite are equivalent to 000 steel wool.

Cleaning the Sound Board

- Bill makes a little solution. Bill uses Murphy Oil soap. All soaps leave a residue, so this will need to be rinsed or wiped off. He mixes the soap in some water in an open container. Then he takes a box spring steel, which is what cleaning steels are from the supply houses, and wraps tape around each end. He dips a long piece of cheesecloth into the solution then rings the cloth out, since moisture is an enemy of the piano. It is easier to work on a grand if the lid is removed. He hooks the end of the cleaning steel on the end of the steel, and with the other hand he pulls back on the other end of the cloth to keep it taut.
- Randy Rush uses a thin piece of plastic.
- A piece of Venician blind will work, but it won't last very long.
- Bill Spurlock's tools, which are horizontal cloth blades on various lengths of stick handles, work well, particularly for scraping tough spots.
- There is a technician on eBay who makes and sells a unique, long, tapered cleaning tool made with some kind of cloth like fleece wrapped around a wide piece of spring steel. This is quick and easy to use. After each use, the dirt can be vacuumed off the tool.
- Bill used to use tinctured green soap on a clean rag.
- Heather uses a cloth with window cleaner.

- Howard's RestoraClean products might be diluted linseed oil or have petroleum distillates. It leaves a very nice shine.

Smoke Damage

- Charcoal briquets will absorb the smell. Leave some in the piano for a while. Any kind of charcoal is very absorptive.
- Baking soda also absorbs smells.
- Smoke smell is in the wood and the cloth fibers. The smell can even come through a coating of lacquer.
- Tincture of green soap can clean and remove mildew and mold odors.
- Grandpa's pine tar soap smells terrible.
- Ozone works for removing smoke smells. Cover the piano to contain the gas. Use this when the room is vacant. Avoid breathing it, because it does kill lung cells. Ozone is a superior sterilizer.

Metal Parts

- NeverDull comes in a can and is available from any hardware store. This is great for shining up key pins. It smells like a kerosene solvent and feels oily. There is a slight white residue afterwards. Jeanne uses naphtha afterwards.

Bill's Art

- Every particle of felt has abrasives in it. Carving lacquered Asian hammers are like carving teak wood. Bill passed around some of his amazingly detailed art made entirely out of piano hammers.
- Bill made the Golden Hammer award for 26 years.