



Bell Piano Newsletter[®]

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Rare Bell Finds

In November and December 2005 emails were received from two families in the Kingston, Ontario area regarding a Bell organ and piano that they owned. First was a reed pipe organ that was still owned by the original buyer in 1900. The second was a piano that had a serial number of 0083, which if correct would be one of the first Bell Company pianos ever built.

Both of these finds had to be checked out and so in mid January 2006 on a bright, cold and snowy Sunday the BPN staff had the opportunity to look at and photograph both of these fine musical instruments. There was also the opportunity to visit with the owners learn something of their instruments history. They looked great after 100 plus years of age.



The Bell Organ of St. Alban's School

Saint Alban's was a boys school in Brockville, Ontario (one hour east of Kingston) until it closed in 1949. When it opened 1901 the three buildings comprising the school for the wealthier students in the area consisted of a senior boys house (pictured below) built in 1859, the juniors boys house was to the left with a stone building in between.

This middle building housed the gymnasium and chapel. Inside the chapel was a Bell reed pipe organ purchased for the school in 1900. According to the current owner of the property and daughter-in-law of the last headmaster, Eve Mainwaring, the organ was playable until just a few years ago.

Standing three meters tall (9.5 feet) with 17 real pipes for decoration is impressive. Although the lower wood stain has faded the pipes still have kept their beautiful colour.

The organ was pumped with either the main foot pedals or side pump lever or both. There are four additional foot pedals and two knee swells for operating the bellows.

The pipes are real and would have come from Bell's pipe organ department. Bell produced pipe organs from 1889 to 1903.

As to the age of this organ the main foot pedals say 'Mouse Proof', from Bell's patent in 1887. The serial number on the back says 54,559. Bell stated in their advertising of 1890 and 1895 they had produced 50,000 and 75,000 instruments. The estimated date of this reed pipe organ then is late 1890.

Currently a new home is being sought for this organ. If anyone is interested they may contact BPN for details.



Somerset House now home for St. Alban's riding academy.



The Bell Company's First Piano

Thirty minutes to the west of Kingston is Belleville and just south of there is Picton, Ontario. Since the summer of 2005 this Bell piano has been in the garage of Bob and Debbie. Prior to this the piano travelled from Ontario to Quebec to Nova Scotia and back to Ontario. This would not be significant except for the fact that this Bell piano has the serial number of 0083.

The newspaper accounts of that time say The Bell Company made their first piano in 1885. Thus making this piano 121 years old. Considering the age of this piano and upon inspection it is in excellent condition.

The hammers, bridal straps, damper felts and key tops have been replaced. The strings are still original as they are rusty as also indicated by the worn string felts underneath. The outer finish is marked and faded on the front and lower sides but overall well maintained.

In 1884 Bell was taken over by a British syndicate becoming the Bell Organ and Piano Company Ltd. yet this piano does not indicate the corporate name change. Underneath the strings in the bass section it says "Wm. Bell & Co. Guelph, Canada". This is still the old name used from about 1870.

There are two other building differences about this piano. Unlike the Bell Cabinet Grand, reported in Volume 1 Issue 2 made in 1895, this piano has no master craftsman signature. Saint Alban's reed organ from 1890 also had no signature although later organs did have a punched name. The other distinction is that this piano has eight supporting back posts. By 1895 there were six and by 1924 there was only four.

Except for a tuning this piano is in great condition unless someone wants to restore and refinish this piece of Canadian history. Yes this piano is being sold. Bob and Debbie do not play and are looking for a good home for this piano to someone who will take care of it.



The Golden Age of Canadian Pianos

In 1840 reed organs were being manufactured in Canada and pianos by the 1860s. By 1930 only a half dozen piano firms remained. Sixty years later even they were gone. During this 150 year span the period from 1880 to 1930 saw Canadian pianos and organs being sold not only in Canada but the world. This was the 'Golden Age of Canadian Pianos' as Fred Napoli of CBC Radio calls it.

Each company developed their own marketing and advertising programs. These were new and innovative ideas such as pins, collector cards, music books, celebrity endorsements, sales gimmicks, and payment plans. These ideas set the pace for the future advertising that are still used today.

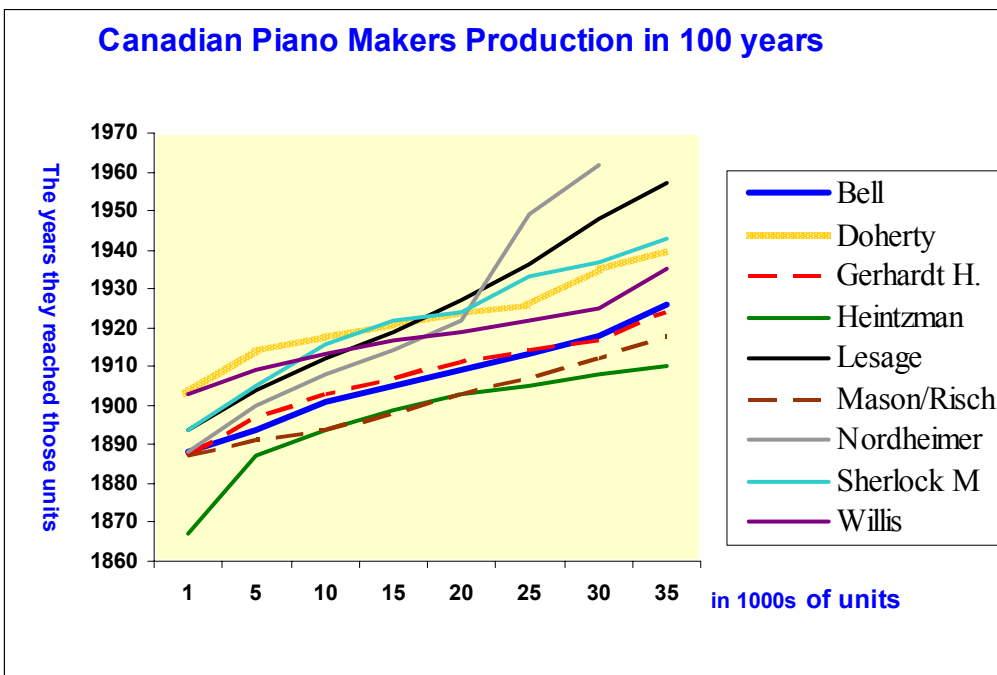
By 1890 the Bell Organ and Piano Company of Guelph, Ontario had two thirds of their orders going to Europe. Karn and Sherlock Manning both of Clinton, Ontario sent train loads of pianos to the port of Vancouver destined for Pacific markets.

The First World War halted sales going to Europe and nearly bankrupted many of the major players. Communities and investor groups kept several of them going for a few more years. Piano companies became furniture makers just to keep the doors open. Many were bought out by USA or other Canadian companies. Some become distribution centres or produce a lower quality piano.

Most piano makers dealt through a dealer network to sell products. Mason & Risch sold many of their instruments to the Eaton's Department Stores for national distribution. With an increasing demand for phonographs and then radios piano demand fell and dealers switched product lines. Companies like Heintzman and Mason & Risch had their own retail outlets which expanded to sheet music and other musical instruments. By 1924 business they were selling the competitors products.

Fires in many factories either put the companies out of business permanently or for several months. Some companies had dynamic leaders such as Gerhardt Heintzman or D. W. Karn. When Gerhardt died in 1928 and Karn retired in 1920 both companies became part of the competition. The Bell Company was controlled by overseas interests that took a long time to change products and had too many products.

The graph below shows the sales of the top nine piano manufacturers in Canada between 1880 and 1930. Most piano makers were not able to get beyond the 5,000 unit mark yet these nine



Graph Notes
 - Karn Pianos is not included as the numbers only went to 12,400 and stopped in 1915.
 - Doherty's was taken over by Sherlock Manning in 1920 and the serial numbers made a huge jump. The numbers here have been adjusted to represent a continuous flow to 35,000.



Dowling Buys Bell Piano Company

On Friday April 20, 1928 John S. Dowling of Brantford, Ontario headed a group that took control of the Bell Piano and Organ Company in Guelph. This brought the ownership back into Canadian hands from British shareholders who had it since 1884.

Dowling stated at that time the thirty-five current employees would remain as there were no plans to move the operation to Brantford. Funds would be invested in the Bell Company to increase production to 1000 units per year and increasing the work force back to 400 workers. No financial help was requested from the city but a request was made to have the taxes assessed at \$10,000 for ten years. There was also a plan to produce grand pianos again.

Negotiations had been going on since February when Sid Saunders, a Bell agent in Hamilton, contacted Mr. Dowling. Saunders will now become a director in the new Dowling business.

Mr. H. Grimadick who was the court appointed trustee and General Manager since 1916 and would not be staying. He was thanked by Dowling for his great work and years of service in keeping the company going in difficult times and regretted that Mr. Grimadick was leaving.

Charles Peacock of the Williams Piano Company in Oshawa, Ontario took over as the new Bell General manager. Donald Bruce and Louis Gassard both of the Nordheimer Piano Company took over the respective positions of Secretary Treasurer and Designer Builder.

Mr. Dowling began the John S. Dowling Insurance in Brantford in 1902. This firm also did real estate, mortgages, and customs brokering. Dowling along with fellow Brantford businessmen invested in other local businesses turning unprofitable industries into profitable ones.

(This information came from the Guelph Evening Mercury dated Saturday April 21, 1928)

Unfortunately the Great Depression began nineteen months later and the expected rebirth of the Bell Company never materialized. At the time of this writing nothing further is known about John Dowling.

The Guelph business directory lists the Bell Piano and Organ Company until the 1931 issue. In 1934 the assets were sold to Lesage Piano of Ste-Therese, Quebec. They in turn kept the Bell brand name alive until 1975. In 1986 Lesage was taken over by its 1982 partner Rösch which produced pianos until 1991 and closed. (Information about Lesage and Rösch in coming issues.)

To the right is a Bell Piano pin used as a marketing promotion. There is no exact date for it but it is believed to be from the early 1900s. More on advertising in future issues.



Did you miss a previous issue?

Do you want to know when your piano was made?

Do you have questions about piano tuning and maintenance?

These and answers to other questions can be found at www.MBI-communications.com

There is more than just piano information, so check it out. Tell us what you think so we can improve it.



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Guelph & Wellington County (519) **837-1419**
 Kitchener & Waterloo County (519) **716-6236**
 Email: INFO@MBI-COMMUNICATIONS.COM

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