



Bell Piano Newsletter[®]

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William Bell Sr.

William Bell was one of the early Guelph business giants. Along with George Sleeman, (brewer and mayor) and James Goldie (miller) they developed the towns broad industrial base which it still has today.

Bell was born in Dumfries in the southern county of Dumfriesshire, Scotland on September 5, 1833. His parents William and Mary Bell along with brothers Joseph and Robert later moved to Canada.

Young William learned the carpentry trade in Scotland and later became a contractor. He moved to Toronto in 1853 and then to the United States either New York City or Minnesota. He came back to Guelph in 1860 to marry Isabella Christie. They moved to Minnesota 1861 following his carpentry trade.

In 1865 the couple returned to Guelph with son William J and daughter Edith L. He joined his brother Robert to develop the Bell Organ Company.

William had the sales and business knowledge that propelled the business to develop new products, acquire a rival, and export. His carpentry expertise stressed upon his workers to produce quality products.

By 1883 the two factories with 400 men occupied a downtown block. A lumber yard with drying kilns and stables with 200 men was across the street on the other side of the railway tracks.

In 1884 the company was sold to a British syndicate that controlled the factory and business development. This control continued until 1928 when the company was sold to John Dowling of Brantford.

When the organ and piano businesses were well established William turned to other ventures. He was co-founder and president of the Guelph Board of Trade, Guelph Junction Railway (still exists today), Globe Building and Loan, Traders Bank of Canada, and VP of Manufacturers Life Insurance. He was on the school board and was supposedly appointed to the Guelph Police Force.

William retired from Bell in October 1897. Nothing else is heard from him until his untimely and ill fated death by a railway train on September 26, 1912. He was 79.



The Bellolian

A Bellolian had a player like front and used musical roles but sat on top of the piano or organ keys in the back. It was developed by Charles Warren in the Bell Company's London office in 1888. It is similar in design to a player piano or Pianola but without the keys or the height.



Publication Notice

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MBICOM@BELLNET.CA

This newsletter is emailed free to all who ask. We seek Bell Piano stories and information plus reader opinions and comments.

Sandra's New Old Piano

Sandra lives in Guelph and her Bell Cabinet Grand Piano was made in 1895. It has been in the family over fifty-three years. Unfortunately, for the past twenty years it has sat in her garage open to weather.

However, this was not a disaster waiting to be disposed of. The outside case was marked and in bad shape. The bass strings were rusting due to moisture and the middle treble strings were also starting to rust. It was extremely dusty and dirty.

The pins and sound board were still in excellent condition. So were the ivory keys and back checks. There were no signs of mice or other insects living inside. The playability of the piano was off by a quarter of a note.

When Sandra asked that this piano be restored the piano technicians who looked at it were sceptical that it was worth her money and their time. That attitude changed quickly when they looked inside and played it.

Over the past twenty years Sandra's garage faced eastward on a sheltered small street. The temperature and humidity changed gradually during the year. There were six back support posts not the usual four giving extra sturdiness.

The piano technicians concluded that it would be worth it for Sandra to restore this Bell piano to its grandeur of 110 years ago. In June 2005 it became the task of WD40 Piano and The Piano Shop to rebuild and refinish Sandra's Bell Piano.

Below is the finished product.



Sandra's 1895 Bell Cabinet Grand Piano before restoration and rebuilding in May 2005. Age and storage has deteriorated the case.

Water, humidity, dryness and location had warped the lower half of the piano causing the veneer and wood to separate. The casters were seized.



The pedals and strings were rusted.

The piano was restrung with new bass and treble strings. Several hammer shafts and all hammer heads were replaced. Damper felts and bridal straps had to be replaced. The piano cabinet bottom and base bridge had begun to separate and were reattached.

After eight weeks Sandra's rebuilt and refinished Bell Upright Cabinet Grand Piano was returned to her in late August 2005. It was placed in her cool dry basement.

Sandra's response upon seeing the piano was a big smile. Her only words were, "WOW! Beautiful."

Bell Company Chronology of Events

1833	William Bell born Dumfries Scotland, on September 5th. First of 3 sons to William and Mary Bell.	1889	Office established in South Africa by William J.
1853	William settled in Toronto then left for New York City or Minnesota state as a carpenter & contractor	1889	Royalty in 4 countries have Bell instruments
1860	William returned to marry Isabella M. Christie	1889	William J. sold his company interests to syndicate for 1,050,000 (20 million in 2005 Canadian Dollars) remained as London director until 1892
1861	William & Isabella move to Minnesota	1890	William J Bell & Mr Alexander Guelph directors
1864	Robert Bell starts Bell Organ Co. in Guelph Made harmonium & melodeon reed organs	1890	Announce they have sold 50,000 organs Build first full pipe organ for Ingersoll Baptist Church
1865	William & Isabella return with son William J & daughter Edith L. William takes over organ production & sales	1892	William J. retired moved to Paris then Chicago 94 and back to London 97
1865	Produced 1 organ per week with 2 or 3 men	1894	Earliest recorded piano serial number 4900
1867	Take over of McLeod & Wood Organ Co. forming Bell, Wood Co.	1895	Announce they have sold 75,000 organs
1868	Imported pianos from Union Piano in New York State	1897	William Bell retires from company, Kirby new manager in Guelph
1880	Began selling organs in Europe	1902	First Canadian piano union established in Guelph
1881	Factory 1 opened on Carden & MacDonell	1903	Closed pipe organ section
1882	Factory produced 10 units per day or 100 per month with 100 men (sources vary)	1912	William Bell killed by train in Guelph at 79
1883	Factory 2 at Carden, Wyndham & MacDonell	1913	Changed to Bell Piano & Organ Co.
1883	Factory 2 allowed 25 units per day to be made with 250 men	1915	Women now employed to work in factories. Are paid equal wages to men, the first in Canada
1883	Largest employer in Canada with 600 men 50 different products being manufactured. Shipped to Britain, Europe, South America, West Indies,	1916	Pending bankruptcy of Bell Company (unconfirmed)
1883	South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, India, Java, China, Mexico, Turkey, Tasmania and United States (never officially mentioned)	1920	Introduced the player piano, the first in Canada to produce an electric player version as well Their player piano has 5 years patents and took 5 years to develop
1883	William J Bell establishes branch in Britain	1922	Introduced the piano bench replacing the piano stool
1884	British syndicate has control of Bell Organ & Piano	1925	Introduced the phonograph
1884	William J gets 500 plus organ order for Britain	1925	William J dies suddenly on November 13th in London at 62, cause unknown
1885	Piano making added to product line	1928	Ceased making organs, DW Karn in Clinton, Ontario took over organ manufacture
1885	Offices established in Australia & New Zealand by William J.	1928	Estimated to have made 170,000 organs & pianos by this time
1887	Patented mouse proof foot pedals for harmoniums	1928	John Dowling of Brantford purchases Bell Company
1888	First London representative Henry Hannington & Charles Warren	1929	London operation known as Piano & Gramophone Co. Ltd. Player piano main item
1888	Called Bell Organ and Piano Co.	1934	Lesage of Ste. Therese Quebec purchases Bell from Dowling. Bell product line 1940 to 1975
1888	Bellolian developed by Charles Warren in London then production moved to Guelph	1945	Factory 1 makes pianos until it burns down (unconfirmed). Factory 2 is shops & apartments

NOTE: This information was compiled from documentation from Guelph Civic Museum, Guelph Public Library, and Guelph Historical Society. Plus the books Upright Downright, Brainard's Biographies, and Harmonium. Additional information came from the 1901 census, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, Bill Martin—genealogy, Bill Kibby-Johnson—Piano Gen UK, Alastair McIntyre — Electric Scotland web site (Scottish History), and Wayne Kelly's Bell Piano file.

Piano makers used to sign their pianos and organs to show that they took pride in making a quality product. They do not do that today.



This is a glass ball on the bottom of a piano stool made 100 years ago. The ornate brass claw fits tightly to the ball. Both pieces become one and are hard to separate without damage. This level of craftsmanship and quality no longer exists today.



Where has our Canadian Piano and Organ History Gone?

Where have all the pianos, organs, people, files and equipment gone that were in this country that made music around the world once upon a time. Every year Canadians lose another piece of their history fading away into the ether of time lost forever.

Companies such as Bell, Doherty, Dominion, Heintzman, and Karn that made and shipped pianos and organs all over the world. These companies and a couple hundred others no longer exist. The people who worked for and created these companies are also gone.

The Sherlock-Manning Company in Clinton, Ontario was the last standing piano company and closed in September 1988. A wreckers ball demolished what little remained of the factory weeks later. Fires took the Bell and Lesage factories years before. Garbage dumps, rust, nature and time claimed the rest.

What can be done to retrieve some of the lost piano history? What can we tell and show the children of today and to come that Canada once made pianos and organs that sold worldwide? At the moment there is nothing except a book or two and some papers in a library.

Other countries have a piano museum to preserve their heritage, why not Canada. Why not create a Canadian Piano and Organ Museum celebrating Canada's rich history in the manufacture of pianos and organs. There is a private music museum in Alberta that has musical instruments of the world but there is nothing just for Canadian pianos and organs.

This museum would be to restore some of the history and culture that has been lost through modern electronic keyboards and imported pianos. It will educate our children that for a brief time in Canadian history that the sun never set on a Canadian made piano or organ.

This would not be a static museum but a live experience. People of all ages would be able to play the instruments, make parts for them in a class, see repairs being done, and hear the differences between each manufacturer. There would also be an emphasis on learning music by experiencing it.

To enhance the learning and history experience more there would be a recreation of a piano and organ factory. This would be a future project once the museum is up and running.

The site of the museum would be in Guelph. Not only is it where the Bell Company originated but is central to the other piano and organ manufactures. Places such as Bowmanville, Clinton, Ingersoll, Kingston, London, Peterborough, St. Thomas, and Toronto to name a few are located a short distance away.

Canada taught other countries to play and make music in the past. We may have even taught them to make the pianos that are being played today. Would it not be nice to know which countries and musicians learned on Canadian made pianos and organs. A museum for these instruments would allow people to make available pieces of Canadian history to be shared. It's about time that we as polite and quiet Canadians stood up and demanded that our history and culture be restored for generations to come.

Email or call to make your comments on this idea for a Canadian Piano and Organ Museum to MBI Communications. The email and phone numbers are listed below.

Guelph & Wellington County (519) 837-1419
Kitchener & Waterloo County (519) 716-6236
Email: MBICOM@BELLNET.CA



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