



Bell Piano Newsletter[©]

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Did Bell Make Grand Pianos?

Several people have asked if the Bell Company made grand pianos. If so how big were they? How many were made and during what years? Yes they did make grand pianos and only a standard grand size is known about. There is no information as to how many were made or in what years.

Below are pictures of two of three known Bell grand pianos still to exist. Bottom left and centre are in the music department in the John F. Ross High School in Guelph. It measures 5'7" in length and no one is sure just how long it has been there. No serial number could be found but based upon the other two known Bell Grands it was probably made around the same time as the others in 1904.

The pedal support has broken off and the legs are supported by a grand piano dolly. The case is marked, faded and worn. On the plus side the keys, strings, hammers, and felts were replaced about forty years ago and are in great condition. Except for a good tuning and the case being restored this piano is in fine playing shape.

According to Dale Hobbs the high school's music director the piano is seldom used. It ends up collecting music books and dust more than being played. Her intentions are to have a fund created and the music students raise the money to restore the case to original condition.

From known information all instruments were made in factory two. Administration, sales, marketing, and design were in factory one (picture on page 2). Pianos were made on the fourth floor, organs on the third, wood working on two, shipping and receiving on one.

What part of the fourth floor was set aside for grand pianos is unknown. The total number of grands made and the sizes are also unknown. As to the years Bell made grands we can speculate it was only in the early 1900s. In The Guelph Mercury newspaper from April 1928 it stated that the Bell company would start up production of grand pianos again. They never did.

Of the three Bell grands the BPN knows of one was put into storage (picture C), the one in the school sits alone (pictures A & B), and a third is still being played in a persons home. All three had their actions and strings rebuilt, two were refinished, but only one is in regular use.

Bell grand pianos are a rare item and if one is found get it and rebuild it. Keep it tuned and it will make a great family heirloom to pass on.



Publication Notice

Due to unforeseen circumstances in December and a system crash this issue of the BPN was not sent as scheduled in December 2006. Thus there were only three issues in 2006 not the planned four. In order to make up for this there are five issues planned for 2007.



The Bell Company's Legacy

In the sixty years that the Bell Company was in existence they produced fifty products that were sold in thirty countries. While other organ and piano makers focused on a few products Bell diversified. From what has been thus far discovered Bell manufactured; melodeons, harmoniums both in standard and American versions, harmoniums also came in small, medium and large sizes, full pipe organs, pianettes, upright and grand pianos,

Bellolians for pianos and organs, player pianos, piano stools and benches, four and five pedal pianos, patented action pianos, and phonographs. They also published their own music books and sheet music.

Between 1887 and 1915 Bell received 11 Canadian patents. The 'Mouse Proof Pedal', Illimitable piano action, and Bell-Tone steel back frame being three of the more well known. This number of patents is greater than any other Canadian organ and piano manufacturer. Other companies imitated what Bell patented. However, one thing Bell did not patent but did invent was the Bellolian in 1889, which later developed into the Pianola. The Pianola became a large success in the United States. They are still popular in Great Britain today.

From 1864 to 1910 the Bell company produced over 110,000 organs. Between 1885 and 1930 they made almost 37,000 pianos. There is no record of the number of piano stools and benches they made but it is undoubtedly in the thousands. Phonographs were only made in the 1920s when other companies were making radios. Speculation is only a few hundred were made.



Bell factory one with its clock tower and wood lot on the other side of the railway tracks in the 1880s. Courtesy of the Guelph Civic Museum.

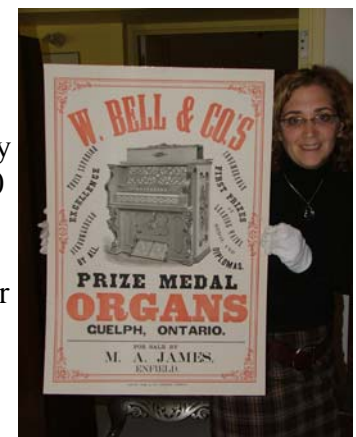
Of the two factories built in downtown Guelph in the early 1880s. Factory two is still part of the downtown landscape today. There was also a third factory and design building in London, England. Sales offices were in four countries; Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and South Africa. The total work force was estimated to be the largest in the British Empire during the 1880s and 90s with 1000 workers.

Other piano and organ manufacturers may have been larger in factory size or lasted longer or were more specialized or won more awards but Bell set a standard for them to achieve and later surpassed. The legacy the Bell Company has left all of us is far more than some pianos or organs or photographs.

They have left a sense of accomplishment that is still felt in the world today in terms of design, sales, marketing, and production. Between 1870 and 1910 the Bell Company lead the world in organs and pianos.

In addition to patents their sales and marketing ideas were innovative and extensive. From collector cards to using a picture of Queen Victoria (with her permission) to local branding of pianos, such a Kelly's Music Store pianos.

The major down fall of the company was that sales and production were controlled by stock holders in Britain. Reacting to changes in market trends were slow and they relied on William J. Bell to promote the products. After his death in 1925 what little sales they had quickly dried up. The sale to John Dowling in 1928 and the great depression of 1929 finished the company off. Bell became a brand name for Lesage Pianos in Montreal then faded away.



Kathleen Wall Assistant Curator of the Guelph Civic Museum with an early Bell 1880s advertisement.



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The Case of the Cracked Bell®

Inspector James Radcliffe was told that Sir William Bell had been killed by a train. After the inspectors arrival he suspects murder which will effect the largest employer in Galt. The investigation site is next to Sir William's piano and organ factory and is attracting a large crowd. Including some people which should not be together in 1890s Victorian Canada.

Part 3

"Inspector, the wood pile area has been roped off and yellow cloth attached to the rope making it more visible so people will not cross it." Stated young Constable Mallory. "I just saw something odd that you should know about." He added.

Inspector Radcliffe was puzzled by what Mallory saw and hand gestured for him to speak on.

"Well sir there were two men in the crowd that had been standing together for several minutes. At first I had not taken much notice then realized who they were." Mallory paused to look at the crowd before continuing. "They are not there now but thought you should know considering the circumstances."

As Mallory spoke the names some wood fell from the roped off pile making a loud noise. The crowd made an excited gasp and their noise level rose. Radcliffe leaned closer to Mallory as he repeated the names in his ear. Both of the Inspector's eye brows raised upon hearing the names.

Doctor Chambers and Mortician McIntyre had returned from examining the body with two paper candy bags filled with items on Sir William and found around his body as Radcliffe requested. Both men were visibly shaken by what they had seen.

"Ghastly, just ghastly." Stated Chambers. McIntyre sad nothing but the look on his face echoed the Doctors words.

They reported what they found. They said the body was Sir Williams. Sergeant Higginbottom arrived in a wagon with a cover. The three men gently placed Sir William's body on an army stretcher, covered it with a white sheet and put it on the wagon. All three then left for the funeral parlour.

Colonel McCrea and Lieutenant Kelly came to give their report to Radcliffe. Mr. Thompson was still taking pictures around the body. McCrea noticed the lumber piles. There was something not right about the way the wood had fallen. He asked

The Inspector agreed and said to get pictures of the foot steps as well. Then he turned to Mallory and told him to get a drawing of the foot step patterns. Afterwards he was to get impressions of the foot steps using Jenkin's store moulding kit.

McCrea had said the position of the body did not look right. He told Radcliffe he would write out his findings and give them to Kelly.

Pictures were finished being taken. The crowd was dispersed, guards were posted, and the tracks were released by 11:30. Four hours after the body's discovery. Mallory and Higginbottom remained at the scene working on the foot steps.

Radcliffe and Davis now went to Sir William's factory one. As they walked under the big sign that read Bell Piano Company there was a sense of uneasiness not only in the two policemen but also in the factory as a whole.

The inspector asked for Mr. Quimby, the general manager and for young William Bell, Sir William's son. Alex Quimby arrived moments later. He said young William was out of the country on sales trips and was not expected back for some time.

Quimby almost collapsed when the Inspector confirmed the news about Sir William. He said everyone in both factories, stables, and wood yards could go home for the rest of the day with pay. This raised the Inspector's left eye brow.

Some members of the board were on their way to Galt and would be told the following morning. Again Radcliffe's eye brow raised.

Quimby added that Sir William had been in the factory the previous day checking on production and chatting with some of the men. Otherwise Sir William spent little time at the factory. Either he was in Toronto or at the King Albert Hotel. Another raised eyebrow from the inspector.

Both policemen left moments later. Davis taking notes and Radcliffe pondering thoughts. At the moment he had more questions than answers.

Bell's Illimitable Action Piano

In March 1900 Bell received a Canadian patent for a modification they made to the piano action return. They called it the illimitable action which was designed to pull the hammer back faster. Their intention was to make an upright perform more like a grand piano for quicker repetition of notes.

This idea was supposedly based upon the design by German piano company, Bosendorfer, in the late 1800s. William J. Bell apparently saw it while promoting the Bell Company in Europe and brought the idea back to Guelph. Bell then came up with their version and probably only sold it in Canada.

Pictures C and D point out the differences between a regular piano action and one with illimitable action (with the yellow circles). The key is in picture D with the red arrow pointing at a wire hook with a silk thread wrapped around it.

“Bells Illimitable action has an assist spring for the jack spring. This spring is a wire on the jack and a silk thread that goes to the hammer butt. These threads go through an eye on the jack that hook to the assist spring.” Says Wayne Hohle, An Elmira Piano Technician who has three Bell Illimitable actions.

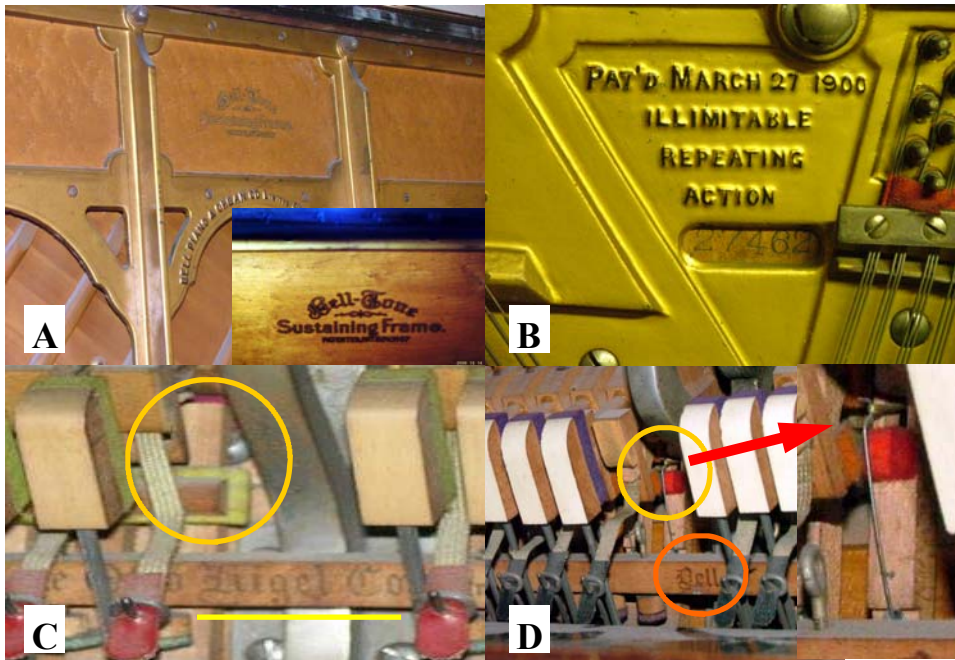
The only down side to this kind of action is that the silk threads need to be replaced. That is if you call rethreading this action every forty to fifty years a great expense. This is tricky time consuming work and needs to be done by a trained piano technician.

This feature did not disappear with the demise of the Bell Company. A similar version of this action is being used today by Yamaha and Kawi in many of their upright piano models.

Of the illimitable actions pictured below and of illimitable pianos seen two design notes have been observed. Illimitable action serial numbers made between 1909 and 1921 have Bell's patented 1907 steel 'Bell-Tone Sustaining Frame' (picture A). Regular actions were made by other suppliers, such as Otto Higel in picture C (the name is just above the yellow line). Illimitable actions have the Bell name (picture D orange circle) stamped on them but it's unknown if Bell actually made them.

It is not known how many Bell Illimitable action pianos were made. They were produced along side regular action pianos and grand pianos. Illimitable actions were also used in some player pianos.

Picture C has serial number 24117 made in 1916. The same year as picture B with number 27462. This model is also a restored Bell player, which is for sale.



Pictures A, B and D are of two Bell Illimitable actions. Picture C is a regular action. The regular and illimitable action player pianos are owned by Wayne Hohle, a piano technician in Elmira Ontario Canada. The other illimitable piano 'D' is owned by Byron Marshall, in Kitchener Ontario Canada.

Guelph & Wellington County (519) 837-1419
 Kitchener & Waterloo County (519) 716-6236
 Email: bellnews@mbi-communications.com



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