

THE SOONER TUNER

Newsletter of The Oklahoma Chapter 731 of the Piano Technicians Guild, Inc.

January 2009

COMING EVENTS

January 15th – David and Barbara Bonham's house, 10717 Eastlake Circle, Oklahoma City, OK, 405-721-0566, 8:30am.

The technical will be on part of the grand regulation sequence: Setting hammer blow distance, let-off, drop, and spring tension. This group of four steps is generally the most dramatic part of making the piano play like it should. And they are the adjustments most prone to change and needing attention. If the friction has been addressed and the keyframe and keys are moving as they should (all things we have presented recently) then regulating starts to get more fun! At least that's my opinion. We will demonstrate these steps on action models and our Steinway O. Whether you have ever done this or you could do it in your sleep, come join us for the fellowship and the opportunities to learn and to help teach! Also please come with ideas in mind for programs you would like to see and suggestions for meeting locations.

Presidents Message:

Well sorta. His phone service is out so that means no business calls and no internet. Seems like if you are the President at least your phone should work for cryin' out loud. It needs a bailout I think.

Bob is working on an article for the National PTG Journal on Bob Qualls and we will pass along some of his work on this when they repair the line in his area maybe sometime this week. What an awesome story his life was. He was the kind of individual we look up to even in their parting.

The following is an interview with Bob Qualls that took place June 2003:

OFFICE OF HANDICAPPED CONCERNS
WILL'S CORNER, OKLAHOMA
(Serving the Disability Community of Oklahoma)
Volume 4, Issue 2
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Steve Stokes
Director, Office of Handicapped Concerns

100 Years, Happy Birthday Robert Qualls

"Mr. Qualls, may I call you Robert?"

"Sure."

"You turned 100 years old on April 11. Was it a great experience achieving this milestone?"

“Well, not really, Will. I told my friends that I had put it off just about as long as I could. I guess I’m going to have to admit that I’m getting old.”

“(Chuckle) Well yeah. Did you have a special celebration?”

“They told me they were going to invite a few friends and family here in Enid, but it turned out to be a real wingding. We had a large room reserved in a local restaurant, and I had lots of well wishers. I have worked as an advocate for people who are blind for many years in Oklahoma, and many of them came out to help me celebrate.”

“Robert, I first heard about you in a media release from the Department of Rehabilitation Services. Their release said the Oklahoma Council for the Blind was planning a special birthday celebration for you at the Library for the Blind in Oklahoma City. I think Governor Brad Henry signed some kind of special citation for you which was presented that day. When I heard 100 years and I heard blindness, I knew I had to contact you. Will you tell me your story, Robert? Will you tell me about you and disability and our state of Oklahoma back at the turn of the last century?”

Robert Qualls

It’s hard to know where to start. I guess I’ll need to begin at the beginning back on the farm in Marlow. I was playing with a pitch fork throwing it on the ground and listening to its tines vibrate and sing. My eye got bruised and my sight began to go bad. Today they might have called it macular degeneration, but back then they didn’t know what to call it or how to treat it. In 1913 my family sent me to the Oklahoma School for the Blind in Muskogee to go to school. I actually had some sight left then but soon became totally blind. I’ll never forget leaving my family and taking the train to El Reno as a young boy. I had to change to the Interurban train in El Reno going to Oklahoma City. From Oklahoma City I changed trains again before arriving in Muskogee. Way back then you didn’t get to come home every weekend like the students get to do now. We were separated from our families and actually lived on campus. We went to school on the campus of the School for the Blind and learned our regular subjects as well as things which would help us earn a living like piano tuning, broom making, and basket weaving. I first learned the trade of piano tuning right there in Muskogee, and I made my living from this during most of my adult life. I actually graduated from the School for the Blind in 1924. (Gosh, that was a long time ago.) I went to Texas Christian University in Ft. Worth that same year and was the first blind person ever to be enrolled at that school. I took notes in Braille and either answered test questions orally or typed the answers out. I

used thread and cardboard to make the angles and graphs for my trigonometry class. I got my Bachelor of arts degree from TCU in English in 1928 and this was followed by a master of arts in 1929 in philosophy. I had my hopes set on teaching English and/or speech and drama at the college level. With this in mind, I attended the Curry School of expression in Boston, Massachusetts on a scholarship. But, something got in the way of my plans, and it didn’t have anything to do with my disability. It had to do with something that happened to all Oklahomans and Americans regardless of ability.

They called it the Great Depression, and I wasn’t able to get a job teaching like I had planned. I didn’t know if I was going to be able to get any kind of a job. Times were bad, and I had moved back to Oklahoma as a single man. I got a hotel room on North Broadway in Oklahoma City for \$14 per month. A man by the name of General Keyes and his staff person, Homer Heck , ran the Works Progress Administration in Oklahoma City. I was able to sell Homer Heck on the idea of hiring twenty-five blind people across Oklahoma to go into the schools, civic organizations, and work places to teach visual safety. We taught children and adults to be conscious of their eyes and to protect their sight. Our teachers in rural Oklahoma made \$38 per month. In Oklahoma cities the same position might pay \$80 per month. I actually got \$150 per month to administer the program. That was a lot of money, especially in the Depression. You could buy a full meal for 15 cents then.

Way back in 1934 or 35’, I don’t remember which one, up in Washington D.C. they passed legislation called the Shepherd/Randolph Bill. This bill was very important to blind people because it provided for the first

opening up of vending stands to give blind people a way to make a living. In the process of implementing the Shepherd/Randolph Bill in Oklahoma, I talked to a state legislator from Leflore County. I told this legislator that if we passed legislation right here in Oklahoma authorizing vending stands to be run by people who were blind that this would give them a job. I was lobbying hard for our cause. The legislator looked at me a long time and said, "If we gave a farmer 40 acres and a mule, he could make a living too." We got our money from the State Legislature to begin the blind vending program in public buildings across Oklahoma. They gave us about \$25,000. The first vending stand actually opened up in the post office in Muskogee, Oklahoma in the mid 30's. I opened up a vending stand in the post office right here in Enid in 1936.

Now let me digress a little here. I actually moved out of that hotel in Oklahoma City in the early 30's and got room and board at a preacher's home. My future wife was cooking and serving as a nanny to the preacher's children at the time for her own room and board. Layleth was attending Oklahoma University at the time where she was studying to be a secretary. She never became that secretary. Instead she became my wife and business partner for more than 50 years. We worked together those many years to raise our family and to establish our business. I told you we opened up a vending stand in the post office in Enid in 1936. I tuned pianos on the side to supplement our income. Finally, in 1947, we got out of the vending business and devoted ourselves to tuning pianos, and we were successful.

Layleth would drive for me. We had contracts with several private and public colleges to tune all their pianos. We went to Chickasha, Weatherford, and Alva to tune the pianos at local colleges. I did the work, and Layleth kept the books. Our two sons, Robert and George, were born in 1938 and 1943. We made a living.

I became a charter member of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma League for the Blind in Oklahoma City in 1949, and I served on their board for 40 years. I am still a member of the board emeritus. (The League for the Blind is a workshop for people who are blind.) During these times, we noticed that blind people had a lot of trouble borrowing money. In 1958 I became a charter member of the Association of the Blind of Oklahoma and Texas Credit Union. This credit union was a result of the efforts of the Oklahoma Council for the Blind of which I am also a member. That's about it, Will That's the long story of my life. I have been totally blind almost 90 years. I have lived in Oklahoma all of my life except when I went out of state for my higher education. I have lived in this state since before statehood. Oklahoma has been good to me. I can truthfully say I have had a full life.

Robert Qualls lost his faithful wife of over 50 years in January, 1987. He himself had a battle with colon cancer back in 1990. He walks .6 of a mile everyday at the mall in Enid and faithfully climbs the eight stairs in his house ten times a day to supplement his walking. Robert still owns his own car and hires a driver to take him all the places he needs to go. He continues to operate his piano tuning business of over 56 years. He concludes our interview explaining that he has another piano tuning job scheduled tomorrow morning. Why doesn't that surprise me? Let this be a tribute to an Oklahoman who has served the disability community for a lifetime. When asked about his plans for the next 100 years, he answered, "When you think of all the changes that have taken place in my first hundred years, I figure we better just take one day at a time."

"All our knowledge has it's origins in our perceptions.
As a life well spent makes for happy sleep, so a life well spent brings happy death."
--Leonardo da Vinci

HOW DO YOU TUNE?

By Ben Gac, RPT

It's a question that has fascinated me since I learned of tuning methods that were different from the one I was originally taught. Do you tune with a strip mute? Just a wedge? Both? Why? What kind of lever do you use? In what order do you tune your temperament? Why? Do you tune your unisons as you go or after you've set a section? After your temperament is set, do you tune the bass section next or the treble? Why? Do you use an ETD or tune aurally? WHY??

Many of us tune using just one method because it was the way we were taught. I recommend that you go back over your notes and consider exploring new options. If you haven't questioned your tuning technique, you could be short-changing yourself. Any method—whether it's bedding a keyframe, setting let-off, needling hammers, re-stringing a section of the piano or tuning—it can be done best when:

- 1) it's done in accordance with the scientific rules and principles that dictate the physics of pianos and
- 2) it's done according to the optimal ways that your body and mind work.

Unless someone makes an astounding, groundbreaking scientific advancement in our conceptualization of piano technology, #1 is pretty solid and unchangeable. Although parts of our understanding are conceptual and speculative and there are some debates about some of the intricacies, in the end, the ideas and principles remain the same. #2, however, is what makes each of us unique in the field as piano technicians. The methods we learn are based upon the rules of science and physics but each method and technique can produce a variety of results. There are plenty of ways to accomplish our task; I'm betting that the one that works best for ME may not work best for YOU. You should experiment and try new things. It's the only way we can be truly proficient in our field— by discovering what works for each of us and making it our own.

Tuning is no exception. As the bread and butter of our trade (and also the most highly visible part of what we do), we owe it to ourselves and our clients to be the best we can be. How can we optimize the tuning process? Here are a few things to consider. Hammer technique is critical. Do you pull or jerk? What about flagging & bending? Light or heavy test blows? I won't go into the details or the arguments for any of these methods—but understand what you're doing. What other goals about quality care for the piano—and yourself—are you aiding or ignoring with your technique?

Dan Levitan has been writing a series of articles for the Journal to address this very issue. In what order do you tune? Keep in mind that the bearing of the tenor section is affected by the load of the bass section because of cross-stringing (and vice versa). Take the time to note the changes you are making when doing a pitch raise and listen to the results. Very similar changes are being made when a normal tuning is done, just on a smaller scale. How do you overcome a flat melodic section? How wide do you stretch your octaves; how sharp do you tune the highest octave? Do you tune with a strip mute, a wedge, a combination or something else?

David Andersen is a champion of "Whole Tone Tuning," and to see him do it is downright inspiring. How do you compensate for what he calls "VSP" (Virgil Smith Phenomenon—when two strings played together sound lower in pitch than one string that is played by itself)? Consider this especially when tuning in the unisons on A440 and also listen for small shifts in your temperament that will affect the rest of your tuning. I don't want to babble on forever about what is the BEST way to tune because it's different for every technician. But—we can find the optimal ways that our ears and hands work, then shape our techniques to coincide with facts that we know. Consider what you do. And for goodness sakes, listen critically to your results. You may begin hearing in new ways, breaking the rote method that leaves you brain dead or thinking about what was on TV last night. I challenge all of us to step up and offer our service at the highest level!

Ben

"I hate quotations."
--Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Cheers!

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