



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 5, No. 2 2003

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After you read this newsletter I am sure that you will agree that each issue is better than the previous one. How long can this go on? This one indexes all the prior newsletters, therefore, if you are not a Charter Member you may want a copy of one or more that you missed. At a cost of \$2.50 each, Steve may be able to help you.

BONES FEST VII should be marked on your calendar (July 25-27). This will be a great one! A chance to meet many new boners from all along the famous Kentucky Music Trail as well as old friends from everywhere.

A video of Bones Fest VI is now available.

It is 1 hour and 49 minutes of great bones playing, available at cost plus shipping. Send your check for \$15 to the Rhythm Bones Society, 1060 Lower Brow Rd. Signal Mt. TN 37377. The tapes will only be copied after your order is received, therefore plan 2-3 weeks for delivery.

Have you opened the bones web page lately? Jonathan Danforth our new web Master as changed the format and brought most of the page up to date (see rhythmbones.com). It looks great and is easy to read.

God willing and the creeks don't rise we will see you in Louisville in July.

Russ Myers—Playin' the Bones

Russell Myers places a set of bones between the fingers of each hand and flips on a recording of "I'm Looking Over a Four-leaf Clover."

For three minutes, the 67-year-old Madison County man clackety-clacks out a beat to the old song, much to the delight of his audience. Somehow, he even manages to change pitch on his percussion instruments, taking his music up an octave on the second verse.

Myers holds the title of World Champion Bone Player, an honor he won in September at the Old Time Country and Bluegrass Festival in Avoca, Iowa.

His goal is to make sure this art does not die out in America.

"Ninety-nine percent of the people in this country don't even know there is such a thing as bone playing," Myers says.

He is probably right about today's society. But at the turn of the

20th century, when minstrel shows were ushering in the vaudeville era, most people in this country knew all about bones.

Bones were one of four instruments traditionally used in minstrel shows, the others being the fiddle, banjo and tambourine.

But bones, which are about 7 inches long and

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Russell Myers of Brightwood, VA is considered one of the world's best bones players. One of his specialties is performing with three bones in each hand, rather than the standard two bones. The set he's holding is made from whalebone. Photograph by Robert A. Martin, used with permission.

Editorial

Part 2 of the Tim Reilly's *Bones at Sea* article concludes in this issue. This article was of particular interest to me as I learned to play the bones from my father who learned from a sailor. That sailor must have had Irish roots as I learned as a one-handed bones player. Again, Thanks, Tim.

This issue reprints an article on Russ Myers that was picked up by the Associated Press and ran in many newspapers. Russ is a founding member of our Society and until last year our Assistant Director. Mel Mercier wrote a short article that covers his bones playing from a bones player's perspective.

Member Sandor Slomovits, a professional performer who plays bones, wrote the article on Ray Schairer, Percy Danforth's bones maker.

Ev Cowett wrote a review of member David Holt's interesting instructional video that includes bones and a whole lot more.

Check out the Website of the Quarter. Jonathan Danforth has reworked rhythmbones.com and done it in style.

A few members competed in the

Recorded Bones Music

Little Blue Heron. By member Adam Klein and Constance Cook. Two bones tracks from Bones Fest V. To hear samples and get purchase info go to artists.iuma.com/IUMA/Bands/Little_Blue_Heron/.

Letters to the Editor

A quick report from Abbeyfeale.....

Steve brown beat off stiff competition from a total of 15 other bones players (1 other American, 2 English, 1 Danish, the remainder Irish) to win the All-Ireland Bone-playing competition last night. Paddy 'Sport' Murphy, the reigning champion was placed second. Undaunted, and gracious in defeat, he continued to play great music for his family, friends and admirers into the night.

There were some wonderful performances in the competition and it was easily the best year yet. Steve played wonderful music. He was still in shock (and in heaven) when I left him late last night as he 'pressed the flesh' of his new fans! Congratulations to Steve and to all who took part. *Mel*

Bones Calendar

June 29-July 4. Bones and Bodhran workshop by Mark Nelson and Michael Baytop at Common Ground on the Hill, Westminster, MD.

www.commongroundonthehill.org/ for details

Bones Fest VII. July 25-27,2002.

Louisville, KY. Hosted by Gil and Linda Hibben. See insert for details.

August 25-31. Bones and Spoons Contest at National Traditional Country Music Festival. Bones Contest is on last Saturday. Contact Jerry Mescher or www.oldtimemusic.bigstop.com.

Sandor Slomovits's Items

June 7. 11:00 am and 1:00 pm, 800-527-2182, Flint, MI, "Kaleidoscope" at Crossroads Village.

June 11. 7-8:30 pm, 734-675-0920, Brownstown Rec. Dept. 21311 Telegraph, Brownstown, MI 48183

June 17. 734-261-9087, Redford, MI., An outdoor Gemini Family Concert.

July 6. 2:30 pm, 800-648-PARK Linden County Park, Clover Beach Pavilion, Linden, MI. An Outdoor event.

July 20, 2:30 pm, 845-987-9826, Warwick, NY. Outdoors at Stanley Deming Park, as part of the Warwick

Website of the Quarter

www.rhythmbones.com. It all began back in 1998, when Martha Cowett gave her dad Ev a present-- a web site dedicated to rhythm bones! Until that point, the world had probably never seen (or dreamed of) a web site devoted solely to the bones.

Since then, our site's pages have grown tremendously. Besides lists of players, books, videos, bones sources and makers, articles, announcements, and trivia, Rhythm Bones Central pages host an extensive bones calendar (over 80 events in 2003), reviews of

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The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: rhythmbones.com

Bones Fests, history, ethnomusicology, lists of books, recordings, and web links, as well as information on the Rhythm Bones Society (which sponsors the site). Together with the Yahoo Group mailing list based on the web at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/rhythmbones>, the Rhythm Bones Central site at <http://www.rhythmbones.com> remains the most comprehensive internet resource for learning and communicating about rhythm bones.

Of course, as the mouthpiece of the Rhythm Bones Society, the web site wouldn't get far without feedback from RBS members. Check the site often for updates, and email suggestions, links, info, and feedback to webmaster@rhythmbones.com.

Jonathan Danforth

(Editor's note. Jonathan took the website over from Martha Cowett following Bones Fest VI. He has recently reworked it and it is in great

Ray Schairer - Percy Danforth's Bones Maker

Percy Danforth is a name familiar to most people in the bones-playing community worldwide. Percy, who learned to play the bones as a young child in the early 1900's, began teaching them to others in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the mid 1970's and went on to play and teach the bones throughout the United States and in Great Britain up until his death in 1992.

Less well known, but perhaps equally deserving of credit for the bones rise in popularity in Percy's wake is Ray Schairer, the man who has fashioned the bones that Percy and his many students—and the students of his students—have played.

Ray, born in 1922, is the third generation of Schairers to farm land near Ann Arbor, Michigan. He was born on his family's 120-acre family farm and grew up running it alongside his dad and then continued by himself after his father's passing. He planted grains, milked cattle, raised sheep and chickens — doing what used to be called general farming.

Along the way, he also became a fine woodworker. His dad taught him the basic skills as a young boy (Ray still has the first workbench his father made for him) and Ray went on to hone his skills, fixing and making furniture and fashioning everything from wooden bowls to miniature mantle clocks, lathe works and other craft articles. As a young man he began teaching woodworking to boys and eventually, as the times changed, also to girls in the local 4-H program. Recently, the Washtenaw County Extension Service honored him for 55 years of 4-H leadership.

His fame as a woodworker and teacher is probably how he came to the attention of Percy Danforth. By 1976 Percy Danforth had enough bones students that he needed a steady supply of high quality wooden bones. Percy played everything from genuine bones to ones made of plastic and ivory but he preferred the sound of

wooden bones, especially pine. He came to Ray's workshop one day in 1976 and showed him the bones and asked if he could set up a system to turn out large quantities of wooden ones. Ray still has the curved piece of pine that Percy brought with him that day to show the exact curve he wanted on the bones.

A business relationship and friendship was formed which lasted till Percy's death and even beyond. Ray continued to send royalty payments from the sale of bones to Percy's wife Fran and now sends them to his children.

For more than a quarter century, in the converted chicken coop on his farm that served as his wood shop, Ray has turned out bones. The wood shop is small, with its low ceilings serving as a reminder of the original purpose of the building. It is filled with all the standard woodworker's tools: band saw, belt sander, table saw, lathe, stone sharpening wheel and a full assortment of hand tools, plus some custom-made power tools to shape and sand the bones.

To make the bones Ray takes 5/4 inch boards of wood and first cuts out the curved shapes, about a foot long and about 3/8 inch thick, on his band saw. Then he pushes each piece twice through the shaper he designed and built with the help of an engineering professor at the University of Michigan. The shaper puts the concave shape on the bones that makes them comfortable to hold and play. Then he sands each bone on a three-belt sander he fashioned, first with medium grade sandpaper, then with fine and finally with emory paper. Then it's back to the band saw to cut off the extra length on each end. (When finished, the bones are 7-3/8 inches long but he needs the extra length at the beginning of the process to push them through the wood shaper and to hold them on the sanders.) Then it's over to the drum sander to sand the edges he's just cut. A coat of Minwax is next and finally he affixes the tiny *Danforth Bones* decal in the center.

Ray estimates that in the past twenty eight years he has made over thirty thousand Danforth bones. "I haven't had chickens in here for thirty



Ray Schairer in his workshop. Photograph courtesy of Sandor Slomovits

years. I make more money turning out bones than raising chickens." That comment says more about the economic conditions of the family farm than it does on the profitability of bones making.

Although he's shaped thousands of bones, Ray has, literally and figuratively, never cut corners. He uses the most modern of power tools, yet is a true craftsman in the old tradition of woodworkers. Certain that it would be possible to set up a mass production system for turning out the bones, he says that's not his way. He likes his more deliberate hands-on approach and takes pride in knowing that he handled every pair of bones before they left his shop.

Percy sold the Danforth bones at his many concerts and workshops at schools, coffeehouses and festivals. He usually played bones made of soft pine, but people asked about other woods and so Ray began turning out bones made of cherry, hickory, walnut, oak, maple and exotic woods like ebony and rosewood. As Percy's fame spread, he began getting orders from music stores and individuals all over the US and from as far away as Europe, Australia and Japan. Today, ten years after Percy's death, Ray still fills orders from all over the world.

Ray himself has learned to rattle the bones, but his primary musical

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(Ray Schairer - continued from page 3)

instrument is the piano. He still plays on the beautiful old upright that his grandmother bought for his father when his father was six years old. "That's the piano I learned on too. We had a trio, my dad, my sister and I. He also played the violin and my sister played the saxophone." With typical and misplaced modesty Ray adds, "As long as I was accompanying them, I could get away with it. But I didn't want to be up there as a soloist."

Ray is retired now. He and his wife Jane recently celebrated their Golden Anniversary and now live in the Chelsea Methodist Retirement Community. Retirement has allowed him to play his beloved piano a little more but has not slowed him down a bit. Ray and Jane sold the family farm to a distant relative and so he still has access to his wood shop there but the Retirement Community also has a well equipped wood shop in the basement. Many mornings find Ray down there working on various projects and, of course, fashioning more bones.

He continues to experiment with new woods. He recently heard of a company in Wisconsin that is making lumber from logs discovered at the bottom of Lake Superior, wood that had sunk there well over 100 years ago when the virgin forests of Wisconsin were first logged and tree trunks were lashed together in huge rafts and towed down to Chicago. Lake Superior's frigid waters have preserved this wood — from forests standing long before the Declaration of Independence was signed — in impeccable condition. Ray now fashions maple, birch and pine bones from them. The wood is very close grained and beautiful and Ray says admiringly, "This is real wood. You don't often see wood like this anymore." The sound is different too, sharper and crisper than bones made from the same conventional woods.

Ray has never advertised, but word of his well-crafted bones keeps spreading. Bones players who learned from Percy are legion and when people see his fine instruments they want their own. Some of Percy's students who play music professionally play them in their

concerts and after the shows people ask where they can buy them. There is even the principal of a nearby elementary school, himself a bones player, who every year teaches all his fifth graders how to play. He uses tongue depressors to get them started and then orders a pair of bones for each of them as a graduation gift.

"Sometimes I think that interest in the bones has waned and maybe I've made my last set of bones but then I get another big order," says Ray. "This thing just has a life of its own. I love making the bones and I'll keep doing them as long as I can."

Sandor Slomovits, who learned the bones from Percy Danforth in 1976 and who Percy came to refer to as "my prime protégé," is one half of the children/family music duo of Gemini. He plays the bones in all Gemini's concerts at schools, teacher's conferences and concert halls and even with Gemini's performances with symphony orchestras throughout the US and Canada.

To order Ray Schairer's Danforth bones, in a wide variety of woods, including the ones from virgin forests, visit Sandor Slomovits' website www.geminichildrensmusic.com where you can also find a copy of the instructions Percy used in teaching people how to play the bones. Or contact: Sandor Slomovits, 2021 Penncraft Ct., Ann Arbor, MI 48103, 734-665-0165,

Tip and Techniques More on Tuning

I approach this from an intuitive or scientific angle. As is so often the case, the two overlap.

Fundamental frequency vibrations are multiples of the point where the fingers are held, typically near the top of the bones. This determines where the bones hit towards the bottom of the bones. Common sense basics.

To achieve the tone one is looking for-- that harmonic sought by the individual-- most of the variables are the curve of the bones, the shape of the hand/fingers, the material used for the bones, the mass of the bones, the shape of the bones and WHERE ONE

POSITIONS THE FINGERS

For sake of discussion, take a set of bones and place the together thus,)(. Pinch them together at the mid point node. Pinch them again 1/2 the distance from the mid-point toward the bottom of the bone anti-node. Now slide your fingers down from the top until they stop. This is the point at which one STARTS to tune the bones.

Now we start the process of sliding the fingers up or down a millimeter at a time, moving one bone or the other up or down a millimeter at a time, turning one bone or the other (or both) top to bottom, finding bones with different shapes or thicknesses at one end or the other. The variations are endless, all based on the above mentioned variables and a few hundred others that each of us discovers as we "go along".

Regardless of all these factors, we all know or discover the "tuned" tone we seek. This is particular to the individual and the volume is basically inconsequential and only a product of the need to be heard in a given setting. Shifting the bones to move the anti-nodal point can be used for effect and to color the sound. This is particularly important based on the music one is playing with and the effect one is trying to achieve.

The above pontification is based on 40 years of playing and experimentation and all I can say for myself is I ain't dead yet. *Hank*

First Regional Bones Fest

I am interested in sponsoring a regional one day bones fest as suggested in the most recent newsletter and have picked a date, June 22nd. This is in conjunction with Mel Merciers attendance at Gaelic Roots and I would like to have Mel do a presentation based on his research. I will be looking into a location and let the board know as I progress. Preliminary schedule is: coffee and discussion 9 am-10 am, Mel's presentation 10 am-12 noon, lunch 12 noon -1:30, afternoon performance 1:30-6 pm. Any thoughts or suggestions? Hope everyone is well,

(Russ Myers continued from page 1)

an inch wide, far predate the minstrel show, which was born in New York City in 1842.

There are pictographs of high priestesses playing bones in the Egyptian temples of Luxor some 4,000 years ago. The instruments were used as part of religious ceremonies to honor Hathor, goddess of fertility.

"And in those pictures, the priestesses hold the bones the same way we do today," Myers says.

In fact, bones may be the oldest musical instruments known to man, perhaps predating even the drum. Cavemen may well have banged two bones together after supper, long before they used them as drumsticks.

Although bone playing has become a lost art in America, there is one place in the world where it is alive and well: Ireland. "Almost every pub in Ireland has a bone player," Myers says. Irish immigrants in 1719 brought more than potatoes to their settlements in New Hampshire. They brought bone playing, too.

There is a written record of bones being played by a German musician in the Bronx Theater in 1740.

And there is a scene in Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that refers to bone playing.

Still, it was the minstrel show that made the playing of bones an art form in America.

"Only the main musicians in minstrel shows traveled," Myers explains. "The end men were picked in each town where the troupe played."

The "end men," called because of the seats they occupied on stage, were the bones and tambourine players.

Myers' father was an end man with Lowes Minstrel Show in the late 1890s, but gave up bone playing when he became a district manager for Shell Oil Co.

Myers says he was unaware of his father's talent until 1941.

"My father attended a dinner meeting and the company put a set of bones beside each plate. Everyone knew what they were, but only my father could play them."

Myers' father brought the bones home and played them for his son. "Until then, I didn't know he had an

ounce of music in his body," he says.

Myers learned to play the bones, slowly mastering both the tap and the roll, the only two rhythms these instruments make.

Bone playing almost died out with vaudeville. By 1970, these musicians had become so rare in the United States (only 10 were thought to remain) that the Library of Congress called Myers, who then lived in Northern Virginia, and asked him to make some recordings.

"They were afraid that bone playing would die out altogether and they wanted some record of what these instruments sounded like," says Myers, who admits, "I thought I was the only bone player left."

A few months later, when Michigan bone player Percy Danforth came to Washington to make similar tapes, the Library of Congress got the two together.

It was then that the two bone players--along with the Library of Congress--decided to try to revive the art.

Danforth inspired two University of Michigan theses. And Myers began playing bones for civic-club gatherings in Madison County, where he moved in 1975.

The real turnaround in the bone world, however, came in 1997, when the first Bonefest was held in Greensboro, N.C., and the Rhythm Bones Society was formed.

Eight people showed up each of the first two years, says Myers, but 38 musicians took part when Bone Fest III was held at Myers' home in 1999.

That number swelled to more than 100 at Bone Fest VI in 2001 in Phillipston, Mass., and the future of bone playing is now beginning to appear much brighter.

In fact, the membership of the Rhythm Bones Society has grown to about 125. Myers is further encouraged by the fact that a 12-year-old boy took part in the Iowa competition in September. The Rhythm Bones Society now even produces its own newsletter.

"My concern is that bones won't die out forever," Myers says.

Rhythm bones can be made of animal bone, wood or plastic. Each set

produces a similar yet distinctive sound.

When playing, only one bone is moved while the other is held against the palm of the hand. The two are clicked together not by finger movement but by a twist of the wrist.

Typically, two bones are held in each hand, but some talented musicians--including Myers--can hold three. Myers is the only U.S. bone player who can change the pitch on his instruments as he plays.

While there are few commercial bone-playing recordings being made these days, it was not always so. Several records in the 1950s sold more than 250,000 copies.

And if you think you've never heard a recording on which bones are played, you're probably wrong--especially if you have ever seen a Harlem Globetrotters basketball game.

That team's theme song, "Sweet Georgia Brown," features Freeman "Brother Bones" Davis on the bones (he also does the whistling), and a vocal reference to the bone man is made at the beginning of the record.

Myers, in his effort to promote bone playing, says their clacking rhythm would be perfect for today's rap songs and would also do well with modern country tunes, too.

Because of the way they use their wrists, Myers says, keyboardists make great bone players. Drummers, on the other hand, have the worst time adapting.

You might catch Myers and his bones in action if you attend one of the Brightwood General Store's Friday-night picking parties next summer or you might see him on the Virginia Public Television show "Virginia Currents."

If you are interested in learning to play the bones or just keeping the art alive, the Rhythm Bones Society is looking for members.

The days of the minstrel show and the end man may be gone, but their bones are alive and well.

Russ Myers hopes they will go on clicking and clacking forever.

Story by Donnie Johnston, The (Fredericksburg, Va.) Free Lance-Star, and Photo by Robert A. Martin, The (Fredericksburg, Va.) Free Lance-Star. Used with permission.

Bones at Sea

Part 2

The bones made it into songs and poetry on vessels, too. There is a neat quote from a song called *Down The Ohio* with the initials EWF. I have no idea who that is, but the poem dates from the 1830's or 1820's. "Oh, da master is proud of the old broad horn cause she brings him plenty of tin. The crews of darkies and the cargo of corn and the money come tumbling in. There's plenty on board for the darkies to eat and something to drink and smoke. The banjo and bones and the old tambourine, there's the clown with the comic joke." They say that the broad horns were named because the oars stuck out on either side like horns on a bull. They said the only currency to pay the crew was Monongahela rye whiskey and if you failed to ship it you would not get a crew at any price. The men wore woolen trousers, no shirts and heavily studded brogans.¹¹ They would get ashore and just rip up the place and get back on the raft. There's a kind of a reference to the free and easy lifestyle in the *Jolly Flat Boatman* painting by Caleb Bingham. There's also a reference in *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain. I found a book called *Showboats* the day after Bones Fest V and that had a lot of information about the flat boats and also on the James Raymond.

There is a very old tavern in New London, CT on a street called Green Street which is called Dutch Tavern. I just recently visited the Dutch Tavern during our Sail Festival in New London. It was opened in the 1680's so it qualifies as one of the oldest pubs on the East Coast of the United States and definitely the oldest pub in Connecticut. Its one of the places where sailors would come to hear music and pick up improvisational entertainment in New London. The city also had a concert location, and I know of a minstrel troupe performing in New London in 1862. At this point I am still trying to research the actual place by the papers in the area.

One of the biggest hurdles to clear was the question of availability of the

bones for sailors. Provisioning a ship like a whale ship in the Port of New London, CT, the purchase of a lot of the beef that was used to outfit the crew was a big expense. The beef itself would have come from either Bank Street along the Thames River or maybe two blocks up on Golden Street. There would be an order placed by the captain of the vessel or the First Mate for how many barrels of beef, pork, flour, hard tack, molasses, coffee, sugar, etc. the ship would need on the voyage. You know you are going to South Georgia on the *Julius Caesar*, and you're going to be out for two or three years, so most of your food has to be non-perishable. If they put up the beef in the same way that salt fish was put up, you would have several sections of bone in large slabs of meat that the 'doctor' or the cook could cut down. To serve in New London, the sea provisioners would have included a fellow named Brooks on Main Street which was two blocks from the water. The most famous one was a fellow named Hobron who was on Bank Street leading up from the wharves. Another named Tinker was on State Street and there was also a prison on the bottom of State Street next to the commercial wharf where the whalers tied up; that was probably to get the real troublemakers right off the ship and into the brig at the end of a voyage so they couldn't file any grievances up the street at the courthouse.¹² These people listed would all provision the ships. The casks were several hundred pounds, rolled down and carried in carts to the wharf. After they were opened several weeks into the voyage, anyone who really wanted to make the instrument would try to get in well with the doctor and get all that left over bone. As a rule on a ship, even crossing the Atlantic in 1993, which I did in a short handed motor ship, wasting food and lying were the two biggest crimes onboard the ship whether there were 37 or 7 people on the crew.

So once you had gotten the bone from the cook you could scrape down the beef bone and have a set. A friend of mine, Don Sineti, who is a cetacean scholar in Connecticut, showed me a pair of bones he was lent from a man

on Nantucket Island who bought them at an antiques auction. It's a pair, obviously, of beef bones and both of the ends are rounded. There was also a very long piece that was included in the auction which is probably whalebone. It's very, very thin, a 1/16 of an inch thick and ten inches long. The beef ribs are about 7 1/2 inches long by 1 1/4 inches wide and very flat in cross section. We were led to believe looking at the bones that these might have been a triple set with the long flat piece being held in the center and the two curved clappers hitting against it. What I think might have happened is that it might be a busk, but it's too skinny in the width and pretty long. The maker of these bones, if it was his name, engraved very, very lightly on one of the bones the word 'Sear' just like Sears, but we were looking all over for the 's' but we didn't find it. I met the fellow who bought these at the auction at a concert a couple of years ago, and he was rueing the fact that he didn't have those bones with him so I could go up and play them with Don. I think that's in the works if I ever record. We're going to let him know, and he is going to bring them into the studio, and I'll play them on a tape.¹³ On the whale ship if a nobler pair of bones was fancied, you could also use the jaw of a whale. I don't know that you could use the teeth because of the way the teeth are made. You are cutting down the length and it's similar to cutting out a piece of wood. I don't know if the ivory would stand the shock of playing (we know that jawbones do), so that is just conjecture right now although some castanets have been made from elephant ivory.

There were two sets of bones played on the whaler Chas. W. Morgan in 1886 by a Philippi no cook named Chrispolo De Aris. He taught a young American man how to play the bones and that man's name was Joseph Bement. His grandson, Frank, was given these bones his grandfather played as a memento of the voyage, a hand me down, a keepsake. Frank, the grandson, brought them to the Mystic Seaport Museum in 1991 as a part of the Morgan exhibit that was being

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(Bones at Sea—continued from page 6)

celebrated for the ship's 100th anniversary. I never got a chance to play those bones, but there is a photograph of one of the staff musicians with the bones poised in his hand. The real heart-rending thing about that photograph is a bones player and historian is the fact that this fellow is holding these very antique instruments over an open hatchway grating and if they slipped out they could have gone right into the bilge and probably not be found. I've actually taken working dimensions off of those and came up with these measurements, 7 x 1 x 3/8 inches. The wood that they're made from is either dark rosewood or ebony.

Shortly after those bones were donated, there was another set found at the antique show at Brimfield, MA which was all solid bone and I wanted to take photos of those, but I wasn't allowed to because, I guess, of security or logistical reasons. But those two small ones are just about 6 inches long by 1 1/4 inches, and they have a bluish white tint to them. I have to go to the senior curator and see if he did a test on them to see if they are whalebone or beef bone. The pitting is fairly pronounced on them; the pores of the bone and I really don't know what they are. They were found completely by accident and brought into the museum. Initially, I was going to be called in to take a look at them to see if they were shoehorns or bones but because of a scheduling difficulty, I wasn't able to actually see them until later.

I am always looking for more maritime references. So if you know of any that I might not have gotten, I'd love to share out information. I don't think this should be any secret knowledge for people to hoard their own information; it is better for the Society to have a broad large base of as many related aspects of the instrument as possible. *Tim Reilly*

References

11. [The Making of a Nation](#), American Heritage Books, [The French Quarters](#), Herbert Coksury
12. [Bear's Atlas of New London County](#), 1868, Mystic Seaport Museum.

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A Bones Player Meets Russ Myers

I received my first (and only) American speeding ticket on a sunny morning about five years ago. I was about half way between Greensboro, North Carolina and Brightwood, Virginia, when, seduced by the quiet, mid-morning lull in the traffic, the joy of the American freeway (in comparison to the Cork-Dublin road!), and the powerful gallop of my rental-horse, I sped into the sights of the tallest policeman I have ever seen. So long, in fact, that his knees rested on the dashboard beside his in-car computer as he issued me with my ticket. A good-guy! He listened to my story about the music that I had heard the previous night in the Cowett family home during the celebration of Everett's birthday. He seemed bemused and not a little confused: "Bones-playing"? he repeated with a genuine curiosity. "Yes", I said, "a whole family of them - two-handed players, not like in Ireland where all the bones-players are one-handed"! That didn't help!

I had a wonderful time in Greensboro where I met Everett for the first time. I was delighted by the warmth and generosity of the Cowetts and thrilled by the bones-playing I heard there. Now I was on the way to meet another musician for the first time, Russ Myers. Everett had spoken very highly of Russ when I interviewed him. He told me how they too had only recently become friends and how Russ was not only a great character, but also quite the virtuoso player. I was excited!

By the time I arrived in Brightwood, I felt like I already knew Russ. Meeting Wilma, Russ's wife, I was struck immediately by her gentleness, and as the day passed into evening I experienced the calmness and peacefulness of their home. Russ spoke to me about his love of the bones, his research into their history, and his own bones-playing story. Russ generously shared a version of it with me in his own inimitable style; a mixture of humility, humour and historical accuracy. My favorite part

of the story is when Russ joins the ROTC band during the Korean War. The photograph of him on the ROTC parade ground in full uniform, playing his bones as part of the army band, is the single most extraordinary image of my bones research to date.

Russ also played for me and I was amazed at his remarkable technique and musicality. The fine sense of form and rhythm evident in his bones arrangements, and the accurate performance of complex rhythms and 'pitch-shifting' (his trademark) leaves me breathless to this day. This, of course, is only as it should be because Russ is, quite simply, one of the master bones-players. *Mel Mercier*

Review of David Holt's Folk Rhythms Video

This 47-minute video has been available since 1996 and is as valuable to your library today as it was when first recorded. You can learn to play Spoons, Bones, Washboard, Hambone and the Paper Bag by viewing this entertaining video. The folk rhythms, 1 and 2 and 3 and 4, with accents on 2 and 4, are central to all five instruments, and folk music for that matter.

The video begins with the basic folk rhythms and detailed instruction on wood and metal spoon playing showing the versatility of this simple instrument when playing on body parts and clothing. This leads into stories, hamboning, use of the body as a drum machine and the selection and play of a washboard. All great fun.

Then comes the bones instructions. Although bones playing is limited to only 7 minutes of the video, bone types, sizes, how to hold them, creating a snap and a roll with one and two hands is covered. As all bones players know, practice and patience are important. Holt feels that 5 minutes a day for two weeks is sufficient to play snaps, rolls and various combinations. You are almost ready to go public.

This is a very fun video by an award-winning multi-instrumentalist folk historian from 5 generations of bones players. The video closes with



Photograph Legend from upper left. Sailor's band on an American ship and another sailor's band on a British ship. Both about the turn of the 20th Century. Photograph to the right is an 1854 Japanese painting of Perry's minstrel troupe (see story in Part 1). Photographs courtesy of Tim Reilly.



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13. Personal Correspondence, Don Sineti, Tim Reilly and William Grady, Mystic 1995.
14. The Log of Mystic Seaport, Autumn 1993.
15. Personal research, 1995.

Rhythm Bones Society

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