



Frances and Percy Danforth in their Ann Arbor home. Photo by Bob Kalmbach.

It Was Love at First Fox Trot

The story of a couple, now in their 70's, who met at Michigan

by Sue Barber, '76mus, MMus, '77

It's not unusual for a young man and a young woman to meet at the University of Michigan, fall in love, and decide to marry and spend the rest of their lives together.

It's a bit more surprising that 51 years later, this young man and young woman, now septuagenarians, continue to share a love and respect for one another that is still growing. But it's absolutely amazing that, at an age when most people have retired from public life, Percy and Frances Danforth are

healthy, active, working, interested in life, and excited by the possibilities and challenges that lie ahead.

Percy, after what he describes as "a varied and checkered career" (as architect, artist, engineer, teacher, and businessman) is now personnel manager for Balance Technology, an Ann Arbor company he helped launch in 1968. (That concern has grown from a three-man, over-the-garage operation to a multi-million dollar concern.)

But Percy's real love these days is

the bones. His enthusiasm for this ancient and nearly forgotten musical instrument is sparking a revival of interest in bones-playing throughout the country. And it was Fran's interest in music and musical instruments of all kinds that provided the debut appearance in the bones' renaissance. But that's getting ahead of the Percy and Frances Danforth story a little.

Percy remembers well pacing the floor on the evening of October 30, 1926, trying to work up the courage to call one Frances Adams and ask for a date. He had gone out with

another coed a few days before and had spotted Fran at his date's sorority house. He decided she "looked more interesting." Finally he called the young Miss Adams and, "I was flabbergasted — she accepted."

The time agreed upon was the following evening, Halloween. Percy washed a shirt, ironed it dry, and put on his new French shoes — an outfit he hoped would impress the young lady. "I was late, as usual, so I was running to the sorority house. Some kids, Halloween pranksters, had stretched a rope across the sidewalk about six inches up. I never saw it. The next thing I knew, I was doing a tailspin flip-flop. I wasn't hurt, but my hands and knees were covered with grass stains and mud and I had lost one of my new shoes. I search around and found the shoe, cleaned myself up and hobbled on my way. We went to a dance that night. Just three steps onto the dance floor and I knew this was my dish: dancing with Fran was like picking up a cloud and walking off with it. Life was different after that."

Frances Adams was the only daughter of an educated Chicago family. Music was the common bond between her mother and father, and Fran grew up surrounded by music. "They practically pushed me in that direction," says Fran. So, at the age of 18, recently graduated from high school, Fran went to New York to study piano and composition. The next year she enrolled at Michigan to continue her musical studies. In spite of the encouragement of her musical interests and talents, her parents were not at all happy about her romantic interest in a budding artist/architect. "My father wanted me to marry a businessman who could carry on the family interests, and my mother wanted me to be a concert pianist and society belle. But I knew what and who was right for me. I had ideas of my own and I just clammed up. They didn't know what I was thinking about."

What the young couple was thinking about was getting married, which they did, on April 14, 1927. Fortunately, Fran's parents

had grown to like Percy and were reconciled to the match.

Although she was married, Fran did not give up all her own interests and achievements. "I was women's lib way ahead of time." She began teaching piano in 1929 and has continued to do so ever since. (There were only brief suspensions of the teaching when Malcolm was born in 1938 and Douglas in 1941.) In those years she read and attended seminars to keep up on the latest improvements in pedagogy and has evolved a number of innovative teaching techniques on her own. She has worked with hundreds of children and adults, showing them that "music is a living thing, not a stunt. Most students who come to me will never be great pianists. But they can learn to love music, to be appreciative audiences for those who do have talent as performers. That's my biggest contribution as a teacher, the creation of new audiences."

In recent years, Fran's life-long



Percy Danforth plays the bones, a nearly forgotten musical instrument.

interest in composing music has occupied more and more of her time. (She now has only 12 students in order to devote more time to her composition.) "I've had these ideas buzzing around in the back of my head for a long time." She had studied with several composers through the years and, in 1969, began taking composition courses at Eastern Michigan University. Her music has won prizes for composition and has been performed in the Ann Arbor area in several settings. In April, 1978, her "Piano Suite" was played in Rochester, N.Y. There have been a woodwind trio, other piano works, some songs, and "currently I'm struggling with a percussion piece."

Frances Danforth's music is not what one might expect from a lady who is in her 70's. She writes in the contemporary, dissonant idiom and uses such current techniques as prepared piano and performer improvisation. She says of one of her teachers: "He thought that anybody with my hair color should be sitting on a shelf knitting instead of writing music. But he finally said to me, 'You know, you write music like a much younger person. I don't really like what you write, but I have to admit that it is exciting and interesting as a piece of music.'"

It was Fran's musical studies that indirectly launched Percy's new career as a musical bones virtuoso. In 1972 she took a class in world music. The professor was discussing American folk instruments and happened to mention the bones. She added that bones playing was virtually extinct. Fran spoke up. "My husband knows how to play the bones. He learned to do it years ago."

Years ago, indeed. Percy's father had been a printer with a yen to travel. Percy was born in North Dakota but in 1908 the family travels took them to Washington, D.C. It was there, on a street corner, that Percy learned to play the bones.

"All the kids from my white neighborhood and the nearby black one gathered on summer evenings in front of Isaac Clayman's grocery

store. The black guys would take sand from the gutter and sprinkle it on the sidewalk. Then, they'd do a soft-shoe sand dance, accompanying themselves with the bones. The gas lamps cast a soft glow over everything. It was so beautiful. It still makes the ends of my hair tingle to think about it. It was on that corner that I learned to play the bones."

The bones were originally, as their name implies, curved pieces of animal rib or shin bone, cut, dried, and polished. When held between the fingers of the hand and struck together, they produce rhythmic patterns, clicks, taps, and rolls, that can be played alone or with various musical accompaniments. The origins of the bones are lost in the mists of prehistory, but they have been depicted on ancient Egyptian and Greek artifacts. They show up throughout European medieval history and came to the New World with settlers from England, Ireland, and Holland. Black slaves began to play bones, adding the complex rhythms and performance flair typical of African music.

American style bones-playing was most popular during the heyday of the blackface minstrel show, when Mr. Bones provided the necessary rhythmic background for the singing and dancing. When the minstrel show declined, bones-playing was heard on street corners and in schoolyards and market places. But as the old-style bones players died, the art virtually disappeared. By the 1970's only a few bones-players, like Percy, remained.

Actually, Percy didn't play bones much between 1908 and 1973. He was too busy with his work and family. But he had, from time to time through the years, picked up a couple of forks or rulers and clacked away a bit. So, when Fran volunteered Percy to demonstrate the bones for her class, he was able to pull a program together. The class was astounded and delighted. Percy was asked to perform with musical accompaniment in a program of period music. He stole the show. More invitations followed. Before long, word began to wind its way onto the folk festival circuit and

Percy began appearing at gatherings from Canada to Florida and from San Francisco to New Bedford, with numerous stops in between. There have been instructional video tapes; demonstrations for amazed staffers at the Folk Archives in the Library of Congress; a chapter on bones-playing for a book on various folk instruments (*How to Play Nearly Everything*, Oak Publishing Co., 1978); a TV appearance on the PBS "Over Easy" show; and an instructional record and booklet soon to be released. There is also now a small company making bones for sale at festivals and music stores.

In no small measure, the surge of interest in bones-playing is due to Percy himself. He plays in the minstrel show style — standing up, two bones held in each hand, with an amazing array of rhythmic variations at his fingertips. "When I come out on the stage and start 'tuning up the bones' people always wonder what in the world this silver-haired old bunny is going to do. When they find out, they are amazed."

And how does Fran feel about Percy's new-found avocation? She good-naturedly accuses him of "glory-seeking" and then shimmers with pride when an audience cheers him on. She works with him at home on the fine points of coordinating bones rhythms with musical accompaniments.

Percy says about Fran, "She's quite a gal, a real powerhouse: We haven't always agreed on everything; sure, there has been an occasional disagreement along the way. But after 51 years together, she's down to the soles of my shoes."

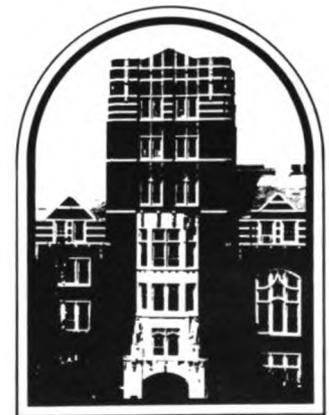
Says Fran, "There's never been a dull moment in 51 years. Things haven't always been what I've planned, but I'm an inventive and curious person. I'll climb on any new bandwagon."

Percy and Fran own retirement property in Florida, by the way. But neither has the slightest inclination to want to occupy it. "Why would we want to retire? We're having too much fun." 

Come, Take a Look at us

A place to-
listen to music & poetry
stay in the hotel
hold a meeting
view art in the gallery
watch a movie
go to a dance
dine in the U-Club
stop for cider & donuts
after the game.

Stop in for an hour, a day,
or a week.
A great place to be!



**MICHIGAN
UNION**
State St. at S. University