



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

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## Executive Director's Column

Most of this column was written before our good friend, Jerry Mescher passed away, and his passing has made my initial observation painfully clear.

Over the years we have lost many of our good friends, perhaps because so many of us are in our later years. Dan Murphy who passed away this spring was not only a good friend, but one who genuinely liked the bones and advanced our instrument. Walt Watkins, the originator of the pass off, was an inspiration to us all. Jerry Mescher was a true innovator, who was continuing a tradition, and forging a new approach to bone playing. I think back about all the folks we have lost, and have come to the realization that as much as I have loved them, and respect them, I don't want to lose the fact that we want to appreciate those who are here. I think that is what they would have wanted us to do as well. Life is about being there, being present, and experiencing all that it has to offer. We are so

blessed to have a membership that is more like a family. Each time we meet it gives us the energy to continue in life. Life is fragile, and it can be taken from us in a blink, but as long as my feet are on the ground, and not in it, I'm going to strive to experience everything it has to offer, that's not only what they would have wanted, it's what they did. See you in Shepherdstown.

Speaking of Bones Fest, it's fast approaching. Shepherdstown is a small town rich in history, the arts and music. The weekend promises to be a most memorable event hearkening back to a by gone era. I'm planning on spending some extra time exploring the area, including the state parks, and historical sites, including Harpers Ferry. We made the mistake of telling Jeremy about the Fest, and every day we deal with the question, "When West Virginia?" So he's primed and ready. I hope you are too! *Steve Brown*

## Jerry Mescher: A Man of Traditions

I met Jerry Mescher on September 5, 1999 at the National Traditional Country Music Association's annual Old Time Country Music Festival and Contests then held in Avoca, Iowa. I heard there was a bones contest as part of the Festival, and I went with video camera to capture it for Bones Fest III being held on September 25, 1999.

I arrived at the Bones and Spoons Contest site and heard Jerry (dressed in a striking red shirt) play as he started the contest with a demonstration. He was not a competitor having won the contest in 1987 and wanting others to win it. That was the year his sister, Bernie Worrell, entered the contest and won it.

After the contest, I introduced myself to Jerry who quickly introduced me to his wife, Sharon, his sister, Bernie, and also to Donnie DeCamp and Jerry Barnett both of whom became RBS members. From then on I was taken care of by the Meschers as if I was part of their family.

There are hundreds of performers at the Festival who put on 30 or so minute sets, and I attended every one of Jerry's sets. There are many workshops as part of the Festival and Jerry was the organizer and teacher of the bones workshops.

This was an annual event for Jerry for many years

before I met him including this year's Festival now held in LeMars, Iowa. Jerry was inducted into the NTCMA's Old Time Music Hall of Fame in 2001.

Twenty days later I attended Bones Fest III where the Rhythm Bones Society was organized. I nominated Jerry Mescher to be on the Board of Directors, and even though he could not attend, the founding members could see he was someone who should help direct this new organization.

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Jerry Mescher with wife, Sharon, on left and sister, Bernie Worrell, on right together as the Mescher Trio.

## Editorial

This newsletter looked quite different a few days ago before the news of Jerry Mescher's passing came in. As time goes by I am having more trouble finding stories, but the flood of remembrances in a very short time has filled the newsletter. I wrote the Page 1 story.

Two time winner, Steve Brown, reports on this year's All Ireland Bones Competition, and please note that he contributed two more stories to this issue of the newsletter. As mentioned above, it is more difficult to find interesting articles and I again issue this plea for stories about rhythm bones history, your rhythm bones stories, calendar events and the like. It will be a great help.

As I prepare for Bones Fest XIX by practicing rhythm bones rudiments, I am anticipating what host Skeff Flynn has in store for us. And after reading Steve Brown's Editorial on Page 1, I too may spend an extra day or two visiting the sites around Shepherdstown. I look forward to see you all there.

## Letters to the Editor

I am so sorry! So sad for our Bones Society. Losing far too many. My heart hurts for Sharon and Bernie.

I appreciate the kind thoughts and wonderful words about Walt, especially to Steve Brown, Mitch, Sharon, Ernie, Donnie DeCamp and especially to Steve Wixson for his kindness and all the work he does for rhythm bones. If anyone wants to contact me, please use my or e-mail or phone number; jhwatkins100@att.net, 817-496-8098, *Joy Watkins*

I am still learning to play, and I am using the book and videos from your web site. I know Bob Bolton [an RBS friend from Australia]. I have seen some of his sets of wooden bones, but I have not heard him play. I don't know any active players in Australia, but Dom Flemons played the bones and other instruments at the Illawarra Folk Festival here last January. He inspired me to get interested.

I don't know of anyone selling rhythm bones in Australia. I bought mine from Lark in the Morning in the US.

Cheers. *Bob Vickery*

## Remembering Jerry Mescher

I met Jerry Mescher at the first RBS Board Meeting at Bones Fest IV. I remember his reserved, and gentle approach to the discussion, and real genuineness when speaking with him. It wasn't until the next day that I saw him play for the first time, and in contrast it was electrifying. It reminded me of the first time I had seen the bones played, and left me with the question that many people ask them selves after seeing the bones, "how is he doing that?"

Over the years I am proud to have counted Jerry as a good friend, really more like a brother, transcending even the bones, although his bone playing was magical. Some fond memories I have: spending the week end with he, Sharon, Bernie, Steve Wixson. and Yirdy Machar playing rhythm bones at the Avoca Old Time Music Festival and Contests in 2002, staying up till 2am watching he and Bernie play *I love banana's because they have no bones*, Jerry performing *Maple Leaf Rag* at Bones Fest V with the most amazing intricacies, having dinner last summer with he and Sharon, Mary Lee and Frank Sweet on the Wednesday of Bones Fest in Grand Rapids, and his cordial hello with a big hug which just made you feel special. Jerry the bones player was in a class by himself; Jerry the person was truly genuine. I will miss them both. *Steve Brown*

If there is one person that I looked up to most as dedicated to the art of playing bones it was Jerry. But even more Jerry was a kind, loving, giving person. Was that thunder! or did I hear bones rattling? *Mitch and Annette Boss*

I'm so sad right now. I'm holding my favorite bones I got from Jerry. What a wonderful family and legacy...*Bill Vits*

That is very sad news indeed. He was a skilled bones player and I always enjoyed seeing the carefully choreographed performances he did with Bernie and, more recently, with Sharon as well. He was also an interesting man to chat with on all sort of subjects. I'm sure he was at every Bones Fest that I've been able to attend. I will miss him. *Michael Ballard*

### *Rhythm Bones Player*

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

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.org](http://rhythmbones.org)

As a 'newbie' to the RBS I did not know of Jerry until attending last summer's Bones Fest. Unfortunately I did not get to meet him there (actually I found myself too shy in the presence of who I quickly perceived to be a living legend). I regret that now. I recently read the PhD thesis about him and his family which I found fascinating and I vowed to try to connect with him at this year's Bones Fest. I have been trying to follow the music notations for some of his pieces that were included in the thesis. It was therefore a sad shock to hear of his sudden passing. *Jay Thomson*

Continued on Page 5

## Bones Calendar

**Bones Fest XVIII.** August 6-9, 2015, Shepherdstown, WV, Skeff Flynn, Host.

**NTCMA Bones Contest.** August 31 - September 6, 2015, LeMars, IA. Bones Contest will be on Sunday. Expect some sort of remembrance for Jerry Mescher.

## Mel Mercier Remembers Jerry Mescher

I first saw Jerry Mescher play the bones at Bones Fest IV in Chattanooga, on September 23rd, 2000. When he stepped onto the stage and began to play I was mesmerized! The precision of his playing combined with the panache of his performance was thrilling and intoxicating.

As part of his presentation that day, Jerry spoke, with some intensity and emotion, about his father, Albert, and his sister, Bernie. I had the opportunity to ask him more about Albert, Bernie and his story when I interviewed him the following day; sitting face to face with him, we began a conversation that would continue for many years, forming the basis for our growing friendship and the narrative of my PhD about him, and Bernie, Albert and the Mescher Bones Tradition. My final conversation with him took place over the phone last week, just days before he passed away.

I had the privilege of spending time with Jerry at Bones Fests, at his home in Halbur, Iowa, and in Ireland. The process of researching and writing the PhD meant that I spent short, intense periods of time with him, followed by years thinking about him and his life: about his German-American heritage and, especially, the formative relationship with his father, Albert; about the ups and downs of lives lived, and livelihoods earned, by generations of Meschers on the family farm; about the growth of Jerry, the musician, alongside his father in the family parlour; and about his and Bernie's reinvention of Albert and Jerry's duetting practice.

From the moment I sat down to talk with him that first time in Chattanooga, to the final conversation I had with him last week, Jerry opened himself up to me with unbounded generosity. I think Jerry was compelled to tell his story, and I was blessed that he chose to share it with me. While I was first, and instantaneously, drawn to him by his exceptional musicianship, my fascination quickly developed beyond the purely musical dimensions of his life, to encompass the broader persona and biography.

Our conversations and time together

inscribed in me a deep sense of him, and I carry many rich and potent images of his life: carving his first set of bones from the wood of peach crates; playing along to polka music on the radio as boy, in the kitchen under the watchful eye of his mother; duetting with Sharon in the sitting room of our home, here in West Waterford; flying himself over the family farm in Halbur to check the alignment of the new barn; standing on the stage at Bones Fest IV, as we watch with him the video of his youthful self playing with his father on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour; the charged atmosphere, sharp intake of breath and release of sheer joy in the room when he launched into his scintillating rendition of Maple Leaf Rag; and the sight and sound, moments later, of brother and sister, their bodies and hands synchronized, in their wonderful moving ritual remembrance of their father, Albert Mescher.

I met Jerry at a critical point in my life and he gave me the gift of his story. He introduced me to his wife, Sharon and his sister, Bernie, and her husband, Tom, all of whom welcomed me and my family into their lives with great warmth and love. Like Jerry, and so many others in our community of bones players, I learned to play the bones from my father, and guided and gentle encouraged by him I have enjoyed a life in music. Exploring Jerry's biography, gave me insight into my own, and I am also deeply grateful to him for that.

An elegant, musical, generous and hard-working man, Jerry loved to share his gifts and his story with all those he encountered throughout his life. In Ireland we often use the phrase *Ni Bheith a Leithéid Aris Ann* (We shall never see his like again) when someone dies, and this is certainly true of Jerry. Another saying that is often used to end an epitaph is *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dilis* (May his dear soul be at the right hand of God), which conjures up a comforting image of Jerry in the Heavens. However, given the man he was, it is also tempting to imagine Jerry, reunited with his father, entertaining the souls of the departed, reminding themselves and their celestial audience of the earthly pleasures of embodied music making, and carrying on the Mescher Bones Tradition across Eternity. *Mel Mercier*

## Bones Fest XIX Update

Bones Fest XIX is just around the corner, and included in this newsletter is a registration form. Note that you can register online on our website.

In addition to the program listed in the enclosed Registration Form, there will time to remember both Jerry Mescher and Walt Watkins who passed away a short time back.

For a preview of our host, Skeff Flynn, read his profile on Page 5.

The special Fest room rate is guaranteed on the block they held for us until the 6th of July. They will honor that rate afterwards as long as there are rooms available - it's just not guaranteed, first come first serve instead.

# Bones Fest XIX

## August 6-9, 2015

### Shepherdstown, WV

### Skeff Flynn, Host

### Registration Form in the newsletter.



The late Dan Murphy

## Remembering Dan Murphy

The first time I actually saw Dan was on a video tape the RBS had purchased showing the 2002 and 2000 All Ireland Bone Playing Championships. He had received a letter from Everett Cowett applauding the Championship and Dan's efforts to promote and continue the championship, and was reading it into a microphone from the stage at the competition.

When he got to the last line of Everett's letter, "may your bones be with you", he stopped and said, "I'd be in real trouble with out them!"

Dan Murphy, musician, businessman, festival organizer, and all around great human being, passed away April 10, 2015. He was the force behind instituting the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship as inspired by his friend, and Master bone player Sport Murphy. For many years Dan ran the Failte Bar in Abbeyfeale, and was responsible for bringing to the town many of Ireland's finest musicians. In 1994 he, along with his wife and a committee of very enthusiastic folks, started the "Fleadh By the Feale" in Abbeyfeale, a traditional music festival which included concerts, a busking competition for kids, set dancing, and classes in various instruments. In

trying to distinguish the festival from other festivals in Ireland, the idea of sponsoring the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship came to him. The local community was wildly enthusiastic, and the competition grew each year. Many of the local bone players competed, while his son, Donal Murphy, a noted accordion player, provided the accompaniment. The Fleadh is in it's 21st year this year, and the Bone playing Championship has been a part of it for many years.

Dan played the accordion, and told me once he had briefly been a student of the famous Kerry Fiddler Pdraig O'Keefe. He also told me once that he was the only member of his family who had not won an All Ireland Championship. He tells a very funny story of playing the accordion for a police man to get out of getting a ticket. He had ambitions, at one time, of hosting the World Bone Playing Championship, much like the World Bodhran Championship held in Milltown, County Kerry. Unfortunately he became ill before that could be realized.

Dan did a lot for traditional Irish music, and for bone playing its self. Attendance at his funeral on April 12 reached 7000. I will cherish the time I spent with Dan, and his family in Abbeyfeale. He was not only a friend of the bones, but a true friend to me. RIP Dan Murphy!  
*Steve Brown*

## Lew Guernsey Gives Clappers To Bill Vits

Below is an email received from Lew Guernsey.

"I know the bones that I give to Bill (see photograph on Page 8) are old as the man who give them to me was older then me and that was 15 or 20 years ago. He said his dad had them and he wanted me to have them. Now I want Bill to have

them so they stay in the bones club with some one that likes them. Yours, *Lew Guernsey*"

It turns out that there is some history about these rhythm bones, and Beth Lenz included some catalog excerpts showing them.

Old catalogs, such as Sears, Roebuck & Co, circa, 1900, show them advertised as: "No. 7794. Clappers. made of Walnut with patent steel spring and lead clappers. Per set of two...\$0.02"

Then from the Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia; "Clappers. Patent. Flat Walnut with 2 Flappers. Especially recommended for boys and ladies. Price per pair, 15 cents postpaid." This version appeared to have one piece of wood with steel springs and lead clappers on both sides.

Advertisement for bones and bones clappers from Denison's Minstrel and Song Catalog, late 1920s-early 1930s. "Made of maple and steel band and double clapper. Fine for female minstrels. The amateur who finds the regular bones difficult to manipulate will have no trouble with these clappers as they are practically automatic in action. For this reason they are ideal for children use and for all amateurs, black face comedians, etc. Price, each, 20 cents; per dozen, \$1.25" They were advertised in the Montgomery Ward catalog from 1898-99 for 12 cents.

The word 'patent' sent me to our website to read Joe Birl's history of his patented rhythm bones, however, this patent was not mentioned and I could not find the patent for these specialty bones. If you find something, let me know and I will update the story.

Bill Vits said, "I remember I had something similar in my noisemaker collection and dug it out today (see photograph on Page 8). Looks like it was from the same era/catalog and is the same length and lead/spring steel construction. It says J. A. Wheelers(?) PAT APL'D FOR. You can get a sloppy triplet going with it, but that's about it. The single ones Lew gave me can get a loud clack in each hand and make a racket. Maybe we could ask our membership if they have other bones related novelties?"

Members if you have any such items let me know and they will be included in a future newsletter. *Steve Wixson*

## 71st NEFF

The 71st New England Folk Festival was held over the April weekend of the 24th through the 26th in Mansfield Mass, and yes the bones were well represented. Each year I sign up for a workshop to teach the bones, and invite several, mostly local, RBS members to assist me. In the past I've had John "Mr. Bones of Boston", Percy Danforth, Russ Myers, Everett Cowett, Martha Cowett to name a few. This year was no exception as Mr. Skeffington Flynn drove all the way from West Virginia to teach at the festival, and help me in my bones booth in the craft room. Fortunately for us we were assisted by Jonothan Danforth, and good friend Ken Sweeney, accomplished harmonica, banjo, concertina, and of course bones player.

What workshop at NEFF would be complete with out my son Jeremy Brown gladly clacking away for anyone to hear, and he was in fine form. Somewhere around 50 enthusiastic attendee's arrived promptly for the workshop, and were quickly inaugurated into the basics of the bones. Each of us went into the crowd after a brief explanation of the next element, spending a few minutes of undivided attention with the person before going on to the next. Each of us demonstrated our own personal style toward the end, before ending in a pass off dedicated to our departed friend, Walt Watkins.

Of course that did not complete the bone playing activities as we jammed through out the week end. Woody Pringle and Marek Bennett showed up Saturday evening, and we engaged in some civil war music before their performance. Bob Bloom cordially invited Skeff and I on stage during his tribute to Baba Tunji Olatunji, and the bones were gleefully played to African Music. Jeremy went to a Beatles sing along where he played the bones to every song. We met new friends, like Jerry Freeman of Whistle Tweaking fame, and many old friends. Close to one hundred RBS brochures and flyers for Bones Fest XIX were handed out with many new players making plans to travel off to West Virginia. Thanks to everyone who came, but especially Skeff Flynn who traveled the furthest! *Steve Brown*

## More Remembrances

We met Jerry Mescher in 2002 at the Greensboro, NC Bones Fest sponsored by the Cowett Clan. It was our first Bones Fest and we were overwhelmed at the different styles of playing bones. But Jerry Mescher stood out from the rest. He played with his sister, Bernie, and the two were mesmerizing as they performed a duet with perfectly synchronized movements and sounds. They wore beautiful matching western performance shirts with embroidered patterns. They smiled, they moved as one and they dazzled us with their precision and skill and color coordinated outfits. Then Jerry's wife Sharon joined the act and the magic continued as a trio! Jerry demonstrated the importance of practice and perfection. He loved performing and encouraged others by always being available to coach and teach.

But Jerry's greatest gift was making everyone feel welcomed and valued. He never failed to greet us and always had positive things to say about our performances and our "performance" clothing. Thank you Jerry Mescher for many years of friendship. We will miss you, but we will never forget you! *Frank & Mary Lee Sweet*

## Profile of Skeffington Flynn

I have always loved music and rhythm in particular. I played a few instruments not very seriously as a child before picking up the electric bass in high school. That lead me to pursue music in college and after taking the scenic route through my educational career I eventually earned a B.S. In Music from Towson University, just outside of Baltimore. After graduating I spent a few years in Baltimore teaching private lessons, playing in bands and working various odd jobs. About 10 years ago I moved away from pursuing music as my primary source of employment and have been working for a software company ever since.

When I moved to West Virginia in 2008 I befriended a family of spoons players. At the time there were four generations of spoons players under

one roof. They took me under their wing and we had a good time playing and singing at local establishments that offered karaoke. In the spring of 2009 they were asked to put on a performance at a local elementary school. Given my background in music they asked if I could talk to the kids. Of course I agreed and offered to give not only a quick lesson in playing but also a brief history lesson as well. In researching the history of spoon playing I stumbled across the rhythm bones and started watching videos of players on Youtube. I was instantly hooked. I ordered my first set of bones that night and have been playing ever since.

Last year I was asked to present at the Antietam Early Banjo Gathering as well as at Bones Fest XVIII. During the process of putting together my presentations I was able to flesh out an idea that had been on my mind. It seems to me that a small group of bones players in the 1900's did so much to preserve the instrument. Frankly I wonder if I would know about the bones at all if not for a handful of players that were what I call "Bones Ambassadors". The bones have brought a great deal of joy into my life and I feel that I in turn need to embrace the role of a self appointed Bones Ambassador to help bring the bones to others. My service on the board of the Rhythm Bones Society is a big part of that. Here's to a wonderful Bonesfest



## David Holt's State of Music

David Holt's State of Music PBS series premiered on January 29, 2015. The premiere show included Rhiannan Giddens on banjo and David playing rhythm bones on a couple of songs. A still from the video is shown on Page 8. You can view that show at <http://video.unctv.org/video/2365405328>.

## Rhythm Bones in Spain and England

The mention or sight of the bones in Madrid, Spain causes laughter, curiosity or even misunderstanding amongst modern Spaniards. Upon seeing me play they invariably cry "la castanuelas, la castanuelas!" and then make jokes about me being one or other of the great FEMALE flamenco stars of the distant Madrileño past. A quick demonstration satisfies the curious that my bones are indeed bones and not castanets, but my enquiries as to finding a living bones tradition on the streets or in the countryside quickly flounder. In what is a very traditional capital city, oddly I have yet to see a single bones player on the street and indeed, in all my years of being here, I have only seen ONE street castanets player, in Madrid's famous Rastro market. Personal enquiries yield little information either, with most people in their fifties and sixties greeting my questions about the bones with a shrug.

It was only when my Spanish girlfriend, Irene, mentioned my clacking activities to her Grandmother, Teresa, a lovely old lady of eighty-five years, that any light at all was shed on the matter. Abuela Teresa, who was born in the San Blas area, East of Madrid, clearly remembered seeing somebody playing the bones and NOT the castanets when she was young. Although it is difficult to make generalisations on such meagre evidence, we might assume that this sighting would have been in the 1930s or 40s. Given that the Spaniards in their fifties and sixties to whom I have spoken can say nothing about the bones, perhaps we can assume that they fell out of popular use in the modern Spain of the 1950's and 60's?

My native England seems to be a happier place for bones playing. Here I made two bones connections in as many days! While on my annual vacation back home in early September of this year, I spent a week in Birmingham with my cousin, Nick Ward, who is a professional vintage jazz percussionist. While depping for an ill Mr. Peter Eddowes, the resident drummer with the fantastic *Six In a Bar Jazz Band*, my cousin was told that Peter plays the bones as a novelty item as part

of the band's act. Upon my return to Spain I obtained Mr. Eddowes contact details, and he very kindly granted me a telephone interview.

Peter has played the bones since he was a child and started out with bacon rib bones! He says that these cut his hands. Peter then changed to a set of purchased bones in the 1950s or 60s; his Mother thought that these might be ivory, but he now believes them to be polished bone. They are certainly a prized possession and he worries about losing them. As a back up set he has improvised a set made from the tool bookmakers use to cut paper, although Peter says these don't make quite the same sound as his main set, which have a high treble sound. Peter plays in a two handed, syncopated style and does a duet with a flageolet player.

My other close encounter of the bones kind came quickly afterwards. My cousin was playing with the *Salon Rouge Jazz* band at the Hen and Hound pub in Bascote Heath, South Warwickshire and, upon hearing that I was a neophyte bones player, Nick's fellow musicians pointed me in the direction of an elderly gentleman seated in front of the band. This was Mr. Jones 'the bones' originally from Wales. At a guess I would say that he was in his seventies or eighties and he was initially a little shy in talking to me.

Mr. Jones started playing the bones at an early age with a set of bones - or "clappers" as they were known - made of Welsh slate from the roof of his parents house! He was told that if he was able to play the slate set he would be rewarded with a shop bought set. Mr. Jones then produced for me the set of four bones he had been bought as a child. They were a yellowy white colour, rectangular in shape and about four inches long - the smallest bones I have seen hitherto and almost too small for my hands. During the evening we were treated to a solo spot by Mr. Jones and he played a two-handed piece, even doing some stop playing with my cousin. He was rewarded with good applause.

I was left with the impression of a very humble man. When I asked him for advice on playing he told me that he had been playing for some 70 years and that if I had rhythm in my soul I would be okay. *Simon Talbot*

## 2015 All Ireland Bones Competition

Once again the All Ireland Bone Playing Championship were held in Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, Ireland on the May Bank Holiday weekend.

Held as part of the Fleadh by the Feale, it includes both a children's or Junior competition on Sunday, and Adult or Senior competition on Monday evening. Bone playing in itself is well known in Abbeyfeale, in part due to Patrick "Sport" Murphy who was known throughout the community, and won the competition seven times. Although the Sport passed away in 2011, his legacy lives on through the many bone players in the Community. His son William is a well known player, and David Murphy (no relation) who himself has won the competition numerous times, and now teaches youngsters in the community.

This year's judge was the well known bones and bodhran player Johnny "Ringo" McDonnagh. John played for many years with the band DeDannan, with whom he recorded a number of records, often using the bones, and his own band Arcady, with whom he is currently playing.

The Junior Bone Playing Competition was held on Sunday May 3rd, amidst unsettled weather, but continued outside. Six competitors vied for the title. The top three competitors were all related to David Murphy, past Champion, and are students of his. First place was awarded to Jaqueline Murphy, Second to John Ford, a previous winner, and third to David Murphy, Jr, last year's winner.

The Senior Bone Playing Competition was held on Monday May 4th, and saw a very high standard among the seven competitors. First place was awarded to multiple winner Paddy Donovan, who returned to form this year. Second place was given to Junior Davey, who placed first last year, and third place to Galway resident Declan Donnohue, who has placed as high as second in previous years.

All of the competitors in both divisions took the stage for a grand finale performance at the end. A grand fireworks display was held to end this year's Fleadh by the Feale, and truly a grand time was had by all! *Steve Brown*

(Continued from Page 1)

Jerome 'Jerry' Mescher was born on March 6, 1941, the son of Albert and Ann Mescher. He attended catholic schools. His hobbies were restoring tractors, flying his 1947 Piper Super Cub, and building airplanes. Jerry served in the National Guard and was an American Legion member.

As a boy Jerry began learning to play the bones by imitating his father, Albert. With a pair of wooden bones carved out of an old peach crate he practiced alone for several years, mostly by playing along to polka music on the radio in the kitchen. Eventually Albert and Jerry started to practice together in the parlor and by the time Jerry was in his late teens they had built a strong musical relationship. They developed a unique style of duet performance in which they accompanied the player piano or gramophone recordings with beat-for-beat, unison renditions of Albert's bones arrangements. When he finished high school, Jerry decided to work on the farm with his father rather than go to college. They continued to play music together and farm together until Albert passed away in 1967. Jerry took over the farm after his father died and worked it with his mother for almost twenty years before she died in 1985. In 1986, he married his wife, Sharon, and they continued to run the 160-acre family farm. [This paragraph was taken from a PhD thesis by Mel Mercier (see below)]



Jerry and his father performed on



the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour television show. They had won a local talent contest and were invited to come to New York City to be on the show. It was Father's Day 1961 and Ted Mack introduced them as father and son. They did not win, but gave the bones some national exposure. You can see this performance at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIRG0ANd2yQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIRG0ANd2yQ).

Bernie never learned to play the bones while her father was alive, but one day in 1970 she sensed her dad's presence, and picked up the bones getting something out of them for the first time. Bernie got serious about bone playing after she found an old player piano and while pumping it and playing the bones she felt like she was reliving another era. She began playing with Jerry recreating the tradition started by their father.

Mel Mercier first heard Jerry perform at Bones Fest IV, and knew he had heard something unique. He describes this in his Remembrance on Page 3, and how it led to a doctoral thesis on the tradition created by Jerry's father. The thesis is titled *The Mescher Bones Playing Tradition: Syncopations on the American Landscape*, and it is the only known PhD thesis on rhythm bones. For more information on Jerry and the Mescher tradition, you can read Dr. Mercier's thesis on the Internet at [http://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/1530/2011\\_Mercier.pdf](http://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/1530/2011_Mercier.pdf).

Jerry and his wife, Sharon, and sister,

Bernie, have attended most of the Bones Fests. In the early years, Jerry and Bernie performed together as the Mescher Duet. More recently, Sharon got the rhythm bones bug, learned the tradition and joined them as the Mescher Trio shown in the photograph on Page 1. You can read a more complete story about the Mescher Tradition in a newsletter article by Bernie's husband, Tom, at [rhythmbones.org/documents/RBPV011-13.pdf](http://rhythmbones.org/documents/RBPV011-13.pdf), and doing an Adobe search (ctrl+F) for 'Volume 8, No. 4).

Also in recent years with Bernie living in Florida, Jerry and Sharon have performed as a duet at events close to their home, such as nursing homes, schools, etc.

Jerry also made rhythm bones, and his first ones were made in his high school shop class. Jerry made a machine to make great bones consistently and in quantity. He preferred Ebony wood, but found many other woods that provided good sound for less cost. Only someone like Jerry, who had played bones for many years, could find just the right techniques and materials to make high quality bones.

Jerry performed as a professional in music technique and stage presentation. That requiring long hours of practice, and he taught his students the three Ds; desire, determination and discipline. He and his troupe would always rehearse/warm up before each Bones Fest performance. For public performances he was always in costume.

Joe Birl went to New York City to try and get rhythm bones on the David Letterman show. If he had succeeded, the Meschers would have been the act to be on national television as they were that good.

I titled this article "Jerry Mescher: A Man of Tradition." Jerry had plans to attend college and study aeronautical engineering, however, he instead stayed on the farm to continue the family tradition of farming. And there was this Mescher Tradition of rhythm bones.

I will surely miss Jerry, however, with the wonder of the Internet, I can spend a few minutes every now and then watching and remembering this special friend. *Steve Wixson* [Some text from brochures by Sharon & Bernie and Tom.]



Photograph of the Clappers Lew Guernsey gave to Bill Vits at BFXVIII. (Story on Page 4)



Something from Bill Vits collection of noisemakers. Must be by same manufacturer (See Page 4)



David Holt and Rhiannan Giddens in a still image taken from a video of David's *State of Music* PBS series (see Page 5)

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## *Rhythm Bones Society*

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*Address Correction Requested*