



Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 5, No. 3 2003

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Bones Players are finally coming out of the closet. You can find them almost everywhere and good ones are not that hard to find. At a summer music camp in Winston-Salem, NC (a referral from John 'Mr. Bones' Cahill) I recently added 44 more and had a great time doing it. The students were in grades 5-8, yardsticks were cut into 6" pieces to make 176 bones and most everyone was playing simple rhythms using both hands after only two 35-minute sessions. Starting with a pair in each hand appeared responsible for the success. My grandson Ramsey was also helpful and related well to these children who were only a year or 2 older. By the end of four 35-minute sessions I was so

proud of all of them that I almost cried out loud. The Rhythm Bones Society has had a spectacular year. We have more than 115 members worldwide. The web site, *rhythmbones.com*, is up-to-date and the newsletter, *Rhythm Bones Player*, is outstanding. Several members have won major competitions (Yirdy Machar in IA USA and Steve Brown in Abbeyfeale, Ireland. Maybe we should hold one. I am confident that Russ Myers, Steve Wixson, Don DeCamp, Vivian Cox, Ramsey Cowett and about a dozen or more members would like to meet them head on. Let me hear from all of you on this one. May your bones be with you, *Ev Cowett*

Fred Edmunds - Hearing Rhythms of the Bones

Lexington (AP) - July 18, 1993. Fred Edmunds was hoping for something as big as the yo-yo or Hula-Hoop—something that would create a nationwide craze.

He's still hoping. (*Editor's note: Fred Edmunds died December 28, 1997.*)

But more realistic now, he will settle for less. Edmunds would be happy just to pass along his beloved art of playing the bones to the next generation.

"It would be a shame to let a musical instrument that has been around for 5,000 years fade into complete obscurity," he said. "The bones are obscure enough as it is."

In fact, Edmunds, 73, is nearly alone when it come to bones.

A retired physician, he flirted for more than half a century with his fascination for the simple rhythm instrument before it became a serious pursuit—some might even say obsession.

The bones date back to ancient Egypt and Africa and enjoyed a long heritage in America through the Civil War. They were made from shank bones of cattle and played by gripping a pair of bones in each and smacking them together.

Edmunds first came across the bones at a church retreat in North Carolina when he was 15 years old. "I heard a bunch of kids

knocking them around."

A man was selling them and gave the young Edmunds a demonstration. He brought a set right then. He says they were easy to play.

"Once you can hang on to them, you can play."

(Continued on page 7)



Dr. Frederick Edmunds in his Lexington home with his beloved bones. Photograph used with permission.

Editorial

The story of Fred Edmunds in this issue is long overdue and is a reprint of an Associated Press article that appeared in 1993. I learned a lot from the article and subsequent research and if I had it to do over again I would print this story as the first Rhythm Bones Player feature article. Ev Cowett and Russ Myers call Fred the father of the Rhythm Bones Society and that makes him uniquely important in our brief history. Look for a display of his memorabilia at Bones Fest VII.

Russ Myers wrote a short biography of Fred that is also included.

Jim Meyers bought the rights to Fred's Bones Unlimited business and recently donated the rights and materials to the Rhythm Bones Society.

Walt Watkins met Richard 'Mr Bones' Thomas (see last issue) and wrote a nice tribute to him. Walt made a video of Richard and is bringing the video to Bones Fest VII for anyone who wants to see and hear him. I will bring his Bones and Blues CD.

At the last Board meeting, Terry Carroll suggested that we get a Library of Congress ISSN number for the newsletter. We did and thanks Terry for the idea.

My wife, Janet, and I took our daughter and our grandkids on a Caribbean cruise recently. I signed up for the talent show and performed for almost one thousand people, my biggest audience. During the next day and a half about one hundred and fifty people stopped to thank me or find out more about rhythm bones. I told Ev Cowett about this and he said he had

Letters to the Editor

Editor's note: I asked Bob Everhart of the National Traditional Country Music Association Bone Contest about making prize money be in line with the All-Ireland Contest and about how are judges selected. Here is his reply.)

Actually, we'd much rather be a springboard for competitors to go on to something bigger and better.

I'm sure Ireland, with concentrated

attention to the single facet of bones playing, can do a much better job than we can with more than 35 contests. If we 'upped' the ante on one, I'm sure there would not be any interest in other competitions to "up" the ante on theirs.....would there?

We use three judges. One is the previous year's winner, one is a bones player of equal or better reputation and one is someone who likes the bones but does not necessarily play them (sort of our audience representative.) It usually works out pretty well, though the end result is sometimes what we never expect.

You're right, 28 years is a long time to 'host' any kind of competition. I would hope that in the 'international' sense, that it not be just in Ireland, but travel around to various countries that show interest, and eventually come to us, with us being the USA host.

Something for you to shoot for.

Thanks for coming to the festival, sure hope you help support our move to Missouri Valley this year. *Bob Everhart*

Bones Calendar

25-27 July. Bones Fest VII hosted by Linda and Gil Hibben, Louisville, KY
25-31 August. National Traditional Country Music Festival and Contests with 29th Spoons and Bones Contest on Saturday the 23rd. This year's event has been moved to Missouri Valley, IA about 60 miles from Avoca.

21 Sept. 2 - 4 pm, Mc Cabes, 3101 West Pico Blvd. Santa Monica, CA 310-828-4497. Join Aaron Plunkett for a one day workshop at Mc Cabes (just west of the 10 Fwy) where he will present an exciting "hands-on" look into drumming styles and rhythms from Ireland (including bones), the Balkans, Egypt, India, Persia, Indonesia, Africa, Cuba and Brazil. The workshop will accommodate beginner, intermediate and advanced playing levels. Participants will learn the elements that make up music: beat, rhythm and pitch, and the class will play traditional musical forms from various regions around the world. Basic instruments will be provided for you or you can bring your own. Cost is \$30.00 and you are encouraged to

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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

bring your cassette recorders and notebooks; however, video taping or digital recording is not allowed. For further information contact Mc Cabes at 310-828-4497 or Aaron at 818-569-

Website of the Quarter

www.earpower.com. Sally Carroll found this website. You can play a random or custom rhythm pattern and the program will tell you if you did it correctly. To develop 'spot-on' timing try the steadiness option. Free trial.

Recorded Bones Music

Cecil Hiatt's Oklahoma Bones LP album (see story on Page 5). Produced by Byron Berline and BCH Productions. Barry Patton learn to play from Cecil. This is a unique LP record with Cecil talking about bones playing as well as playing the bones. Byron has a few of these LP's left. Contact him at www.doublestop.com

On The Road To Abbeyfeale

And that was exactly where I found myself that May 2nd., traveling up the N21 from Kilarney on my way to Abbeyfeale, in West Limerick right there on the Kerry border, to attend the 'Fleadh By The Feale' and to eventually compete in the All-Ireland Bones Playing Championship. Still in shock to be in Ireland at all and somewhat woozy from the jet lag and trying to get my energy back. And of course wondering how I would be received here playing my American style of bones playing in a country which had developed its own and quite beautiful style of playing bones. The phrase 'Yankee Go Home' wandering in the back of my mind. Soon I was settling in with some of the friendliest people I could imagine with my sleep deprived insecurities behind me.

Abbeyfeale, a little town in West Limerick right on the Kerry border, has hosted the All-Ireland Bones Playing Championship for the last nine years as part of the 'Fleadh By the Feale,' a gathering of traditional musicians from all over Ireland during the May Bank Holiday weekend. At any given point you can go into any one of 20 pubs and find a session, an informal gathering of musicians, going on.

Other parts of the Fleadh include concerts, master classes in traditional instrument playing, competitions in a variety of instruments for children as well as the Bones Competition which is the last event of the weekend held on the Monday night.

This year the competition was especially steep with players coming from Denmark, England and the USA as well as from all over Ireland. But the strongest competition comes from Abbeyfeale and the surrounding area where almost half of the 16 competitors come from almost entirely due to the inspiration of one man, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy (See Rhythm Bones Player, Volume 2, Number 3 for an article on 'Sport' written by Mel Mercier.)

Now in his late seventies Paddy 'Sport' has been playing the bones for almost 70 years. In fact he showed me the pair of bones he said he had been playing for 65 years and another one of the contestants, David Murphy (no relation but a fine bones player in his own right,) told me his inspiration to play had been seeing Paddy 'Sport' play when he was a boy of 12 and he is now in his 40's. In deed the fact that the contest is held is a testament to Mr. Murphy and the significant impact he has had on bones playing in and around Abbeyfeale.

His playing personifies style; fluid, distinct, exact to the music, reflecting the liveliness of the Slaibh Lucarra region he lives near. In fact I found that many of the players who come from this area have this unique quality to their playing although Mr. Murphy is the essence of it.

My experience in Abbeyfeale was particularly special for me due to the presence of one of my long time bones hero's, Ronnie McShane (RBS member), who had come all the way from Dublin to compete in the contest. Ronnie is an alumnus of both the ground breaking group Ceoltori Culleann and the Chieftains as well as a close personal friend of legendary musician Sean O'Raida. In fact I've been listening to Ronnie since before I could play the bones and add to this that he is truly one of the nicest people I have ever met. You can see why we talked non-stop for four hours upon meeting.

The competition this year included several two handed bones players such as Yirdy Machar from Denmark, the current World Champion and RBS member, Vicky Smith from England (another RBS member,) and Rob 'the bones' Coppard a native Englishman living in Ireland for the last 9 years. And a number of excellent one handed players such as previous winner Paddy Donovan from Ardagh, Co. Limerick, David Murphy from Ballagh, Abbeyfeale himself a finalist several times, Brian Hickey from Adare, Co. Limerick, also a previous finalist and bodhran player Min Gates who had come all the way from Bloomington, IN (USA) to compete.

The contest was held on an old flat

bed truck converted to a stage in the center of Abbeyfeale Square on a cool night that gradually turned misty and then rained. The crowd was undaunted, however, and I have images of multiple umbrellas covering a good size crowd determined to stick it out to the end. I must defer at this point from reviewing the performances due to my participation in the contest, but will say that Paddy 'Sport' Murphy was brilliant and in my opinion deserved first place.

Regardless of the contest outcome, I had a great time in Abbeyfeale and have great memories including: playing until the wee hours with Paddy Donovan and David Murphy, meeting and talking with Ronnie McShane and his lovely wife Vera, meeting Paddy 'Sport' Murphy for the first time and my entire stay with my Irish family Tom and Noreen Browne (no relation) at the world's greatest bed and breakfast Park Lodge (if you go you must stay there). Thanks to all my new friends Steve Johnson and Min Gates, Vicky Smith, Rob Coppard, but especially to old friend Mel Mercier whose encouragement and support kept me going. And if you do go to Abbeyfeale a couple words of advice: be sensitive to those other bones wary musicians, get plenty of

Steve Brown Win's All-Ireland Bones Contest

WINCHENDON. Ezekiel cried "Dem dry bones." Stephen T. Brown calls them a musical instrument rich in tradition.

In a time when one man's spare ribs is another man's shake, rattle and roll, no one has a bone to pick with Winchendon's bones daddy when it comes to being named the undisputed 'All-Ireland Bone Playing Championship.'

The 'All-Ireland Bone Playing Competition,' which is part of 'Guinness Fleadh by the Feale,' took place on the first weekend of May in the town of Abbeyfeale, located on the border of Cork, Kerry and Limerick in Ireland.

For coming in first place, Mr. Brown - who plays, makes, and sells

(Continued on page 4)

(Steve Brown Wins—Continued from page 3)

bones, as well as is the Assistant Director of the Rhythm Bones Society -came home with lead crystal rose bowl, 300 Euro and bragging rights for his triumph.

"What does being the All-Ireland Bone Playing Champion mean?," Mr. Brown said. "It really, probably, means little. It's a little bit like winning the National Tiddlywinks Championship. Nobody has any idea who you are. For bones players, though, it's a big deal."

Bones are a percussion instrument that come in pairs, made of two slender pieces about seven inches long. Originally, the instruments were made from animal bones and, in some cases, they still are today. Some people are one-handed players, while others play with two-hands. Mr. Brown is a two-handed player.

The 53-year-old percussionist, who has been beating the drums for 46 years, has been playing the bones for a quarter-century of his life. And, for the last 20 years, Mr. Brown has been making bones from the shin bones of a cow and, also, out of wood. He won the competition playing homemade bones made out of hornbeam wood. To contact Mr. Brown about purchasing some of his bones, you can email him at bones@crystal-mtn.com.

Mr. Brown's interests in the bones grew out of his love for traditional folk music. In the early '70s, Mr. Brown went into a record store and an album sleeve with an illustration of all these strange looking instruments (including the bones) sparked his curiosity. The rest is history, he said.

"I had no idea what the bones sounded like," he recalled. "I never even heard of the bones before. It was like, buy me, and I bought it. I went home and listened to it. And I was like, Wow! This is the strangest music I've ever heard."

Mr. Brown credits legendary bones player, maker and teacher Percy Danforth as being his mentor. He sent Mr. Danforth (who learned to play the bones from the minstrel shows) an inquisitive letter to his home in Ann Arbor, Mich., and Mr. Danforth sent him back a picture of himself, instructional material and set him up

with his first pair of bones.

"The bones is an instrument that's so of the people," Brown said. "It's so informal in a lot of ways. Clearly there's no formal way of learning, no formal people teaching it. It's kind of an instrument that people pick up. And we're talking about an instrument that dates back thousands of years, way beyond the Irish influence in it."

Although bones playing has an important niche in traditional Irish music, its influence stretches way beyond that. More than happy to rattle off some of the historical significance of the hand-held percussion instrument, Mr. Brown details how the ancient Egyptians played the bones, how Shakespeare wrote about the bones, how the bones were a crucial part of the traveling minstrel shows in American history and how Sears even carried a whole variety of bones in its popular mail-order catalog.

"Bones go back a long, long time, way before we used spoons to eat with," said Mr. Brown. Bones are one of several types of clappers, which are often confused with spoons, which are also clappers. Fellow bones player and good friend Ronny McShain (who was in the contest and who once played with The Chieftains,) once told Mr. Brown that "Spoons are for soup and the bones make the soup."

Mr. Brown explained that this was a very unique year, in a lot of ways, for the annual 'All-Ireland Bone Playing Competition.' It was the first year women competed. It was the first time international players competed. And it was the first time two-handed players competed. Traditionally, Irish bones players use one hand.

So that makes Mr. Brown the first international player and the first two-handed bones player to reign supreme. And just because he plays with two-hands (which translates to a pair of bones in each hand,) doesn't mean he had an unfair advantage, he said.

Some people might say, "Well, gee if you play with two hands, you will automatically be better than somebody who play with one hand." Absolutely not true at all," Mr. Brown said. "Two-handed bones playing and one-handed bones playing is different. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that

they are different styles and that one is not necessarily better than the other by the nature of what it is."

What's so unique about the part of Ireland in which the competition was held, Mr. Brown said, was there's a considerable number of bones players who have emerged out of the area, solely because of one guy, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy, a man who has been playing the bones for 65 years and who has never been defeated in any bones competition (that is, until Mr. Brown crossed his path).

Of the 16 who competed in the contest, England, Denmark and the United States, were represented against a strong contingent of Irish players, many of who live within two miles of the festival site, Mr. Brown said.

Whether he was playing the tap, the double tap or the rattle, Mr. Brown proved to be a bones player to reckon with, even though he didn't fully believe it himself. He was just happy to have an opportunity to hobnob with such bones playing greats.

"I will be honest with you," Mr. Brown said. "I think I could have played better. There was one place that I thought I blew the reel."

In the competition, bones players have to play two tunes of dissimilar time signatures with an accompanist (which Mr. Brown never found one that he could rehearse with beforehand) and a bones/percussion expert judges their performances.

"I was hoping that I might place and then they did fourth and third and I wasn't mentioned. I was like, Oh no, this is not good. And when they announced second place was Paddy 'Sport,' I'm really thinking it over. Who could have beaten Paddy Sport? This is ridiculous. And then, all of a sudden, it started to occur to me. I was like, this isn't happening. And they announced first place was me. Holy Cow! I'm still in shock."

Coming in second and third place, respectively were Paddy 'Sport' Murphy and David Murphy (no relation), both of Abbeyfeale, Ireland. Paddy Donovan of Ardagh, Ireland, came in fourth.

When Mr. Brown triumphantly

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Cecil Hiatt

Oklahoma Bones

Cecil Hiatt and his family have been friends of my family since the late 1920's. He was born in 1912 and raised near Braman, Oklahoma, where he worked on the ranch and dairy farm. Music was a pastime that everyone looked forward to, especially after a long day's work, as a means of getting together with family and friends.

Cecil's early influence was his father, a musician who played several instruments. Cecil bought and learned every Jimmy Rodgers tune that was released. I will always remember Cecil playing guitar and harp, singing and yodeling those Jimmy Rodgers songs.

Cecil met my Dad, Lue Berline, around 1930. They lived only ten miles apart, but music is what eventually brought them together. Cecil was playing with a local band, the South Haven Ramblers, every Saturday night in the little farm town of South Haven, Kansas. The show was free and held outdoors on a little stage in the middle of town. Herb Bullene, a good fiddler from South Haven, was the band's organizer and leader. He found out about my Dad and got him to join the group. They occasionally played a few other small towns nearby, staying together as a band for eleven years.

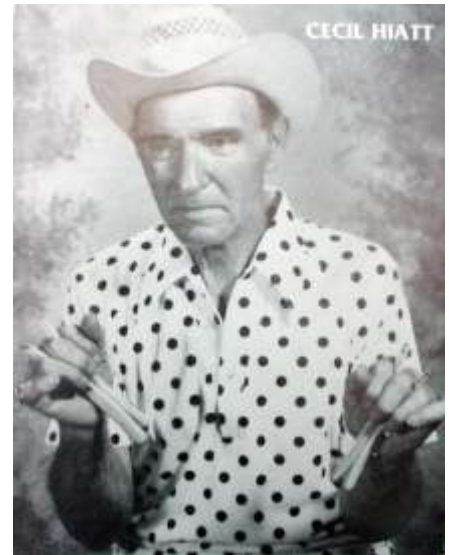
In 1928 the South Haven Ramblers were invited to play at the famous 101 Ranch annual shindig. The 101 Ranch was located near Ponca City, Oklahoma and employed 500 cowboys to work its 101 thousand acres. Every year they would have a big barbeque to honor the ranch and the people who worked there. One of the most famous and favorite of all cowboys was Frank "Pistol Pete" Eaton. Frank was born in the Oklahoma Territory in 1860 and became a U.S. Marshal at the age of 16. He also played the fiddle and sang great old songs. Cecil and my Dad played for their annual party from 1928 to 1968. Very few of the original 500 cowboys were still alive when I first went along with Cecil and Dad. Pistol Pete died in 1957 and Cecil was

asked to play and sing "Cowboy Heaven" at the funeral.

Cecil's (first) introduction to the bones came by way of a traveling medicine show to Braman when he was just five years old. They were so fascinating to him that he went right home and fashioned a pair for himself out of lath boards the very next day. Little could he know that he would be making an album with bones as an instrument some 65 years later. He has since made over 2000 pair out of every kind of wood available. He even made some from a piece of orange wood cut from a tree in my backyard, but for this album he used a couple pair of old cow ribs. They get the tone Cecil likes best for recording.

Cecil hopes this album will help get other people interested in the bones as an instrument. In addition, he wanted you to hear some of the favorite old songs that he has learned through the years. My nephew, Barry Patton, was one of Cecil's first bones students. He is already making quite a name for himself; Cecil is really proud of him and hopes other young musicians decide to take up the instrument and see how much fun it is. Dan Crary, John Hickman and I were grateful for the other musicians who helped Cecil make his debut album. Tom Sauber, a walking historian and scholar on old-time music, plays banjo and guitar. Carol Yearwood, a fine bass player, who is involved in several Southern California bands and is a wonderful singer. Skip Conover enjoyed working on the album because of the material that lended itself beautifully to the dobro. Bill Caswell, who in my opinion, plays the most incredible Jaw-Harp you ever heard! I am sure Cecil is as proud of this album as I am and his thanks go out to all the musicians. But I am sure he would also want to thank his family, especially Bernice, his wife of almost fifty year.

It is a shame there weren't any tapes or records made of the bands that Cecil and Dad were involved in. Some marvelous music was made back then and there's marvelous music today. That's why BCH would like to present to you...Cecil Hiatt. *Byron Berline.*



Cecil Hiatt—Oklahoma Bones Player. Photograph from the back of his Bones LP album. Used with permission.

Barry Patton on Cecil Hiatt

I can remember being five or six years old and a man came up to the door with a guitar case in hand. It was my first introduction to Cecil Hiatt, a bone player. When I was older I went with Cecil to jam sessions and watched him play the bones. When I was about 14, he started teaching me how to play the bones. I was playing one handed and he would say "you gotta get your left hand in there and you got keep practicing." You know, I finally got the hang of it.

Later we'd go down and play at jam sessions at the Walnut Valley Festival. He'd play a song and then let me play a song. I'd get to watching him and he'd go back and forth using both left and right hands alternating the two of them and then play both hands at the same time. That's pretty much how I picked up those traits.

One time we were playing with Mason Williams (he wrote Classical Gas) and the Tulsa Philharmonic Orchestra. The violins got off rhythm and after it was over Cecil said "did you see how I kept 'em right on beat with my bones."

We played bones together on his 84th birthday. He said, "Barry, this is the best birthday party I ever had I do believe. It was one of the last times he played his bones. Come Spring he

Excerpts from Edmunds Newsletters

Fred Edmunds started a quarterly newsletter in late 1994 and here are some highlights from the 12 issues. Fred used the newsletter to promote his Bones Unlimited business and those promotions are not included.

Issue #1. Hallelujah! Bones playing is catching on across the land. I think. Maybe. Possibly. I'm not sure. We would just love to see a real revival of this once extremely popular musical pastime. The real craze ended about Civil War time but we can still hope. Reasonably, I believe.

There are lots of ways to have fun but none are as fun and convenient as bones playing. Everyone loves it once they get started. Another thing that bones players love is hearing about other bones players. I get calls all the time from people telling me about other people. It occurred to me that a NEWSLETTER would be just the ticket for all of us boners. (How about a computer hookup? Not yet.)

Issue #2. The response to the quarterly Newsletter Issue #1 was good and very much appreciated. If this thing really flies we may even have a convention some day.

Issue #4. So far you have not mentioned the possibility of a bones convention. We don't seem ready yet but I have hopes. Think of it-lots of boners, all together, rattling around with nothing in mind but fun and frolic. Really and truly getting instructional materials and good bones out among the population is the only hope for the revival of this great lost art. And isn't that the point of everything. I think so.

Issue #6. Art Scholtz (RBS member) sent a long list of stores and several of them bought my products. I learned that J.E.B. Stuart, famous Confederate general, was a bones player. (Note from Russ Myers. Stuart had his own bones player with him in all his camps—he could not play the bones himself.)

Issue #7. *Contains a brief biography of Fred.* I'm out of space but the point is that maybe we could have our bones convention at

Appomattox.

Issue #8. Everyone will recall, I think, that I have mentioned several times in these Newsletters the happy prospect of a big get-together for all of us in one place at one time for a bones convention. We should be a society. The others do it and we should too. Of the "simple" instruments ours is by far the most versatile and exciting. By far the best crowd pleaser.

Issue #9. There is a very enthusiastic bones player here in Virginia who is all keyed up by the notion of a bones festival. A lot of work will be necessary he says. (*That was Russ Myers.*)

Issue #10. Now! The Bones Festival. So far so good but the June date is out and October is in. It will be in Appomattox, VA or Greensboro, NC.

Letter dated May 1997. Mr. Everett Cowett of Greensboro, NC has very kindly volunteered to have the first one in his house. No rent and no insurance. He'll even hold a free cookout for us. Date: September 20, 1997.

Issue #11. I want to meet as many of you as possible. It's not enough to just know your names. We need a society through which we establish all these wonderful personal friendships. It's incredible but many of the people who have bought my products have never known or even know of another bones player.

Issue #12. We said we would and we did and that ain't bad. Small in number but gigantic in spirit. For three years we have been talking and writing letters about establishing a Bones Unlimited Annual Festival and the ball has started to roll. The first one will probably be in September 1998 in Appomattox, VA.

Postscript. Fred died before the second Bones Fest and Ev Cowett took the lead and organized Bones Fest II in Greensboro in September of 1998. Martha Cowett gave Ev the Rhythm Bones Central website that became the computer hookup Fred mentioned in Issue #1. Russ Myers hosted Bones Fest III in Brightwood, VA where the Rhythm Bones Society was officially organized with Ev Cowett as Executive Director. A Society was mentioned in Issue #8 and

Ev suggested it in his opening remarks at Bones Fest I. The new Board of Directors created this newsletter that continues Fred's newsletters.

Fred's mailing list contained the names of 165 people. In 1997 he

Short Biography of Dr. Frederick T. Edmunds

It was 1935 and Frederick T Edmunds, a 15 year old lad, was vacationing with his parents in North Carolina where he purchased his first set of wooden bones from a peddler at a church retreat. The future gynecologist had to teach himself to play to the annoyance of his friends back home in Charleston, West Virginia.

He must have achieved a high degree of proficiency because by the time he entered the army during WWII he played cadence during 20-mile marches while his company commander volunteered to carry his rifle.

Upon retiring to Lexington, Virginia, Dr. Edmunds became interested in 'reviving' bones playing which he had come to believe was a lost art. He knew nothing of Percy Danforth, although they were contemporaries, and knew of only two other bones players. Like Percy, Fred developed a course and video on bones playing.

Fred had a set of "Driver" bones, although he did not know the maker by name. His favorite set of bones were made of Pakkawood (now called Dymondwood) a laminate used mainly in knife handles and cremation urns, which he had especially made in Waynesboro, Virginia to his own design. They were not only beautiful but had a very sharp sound and felt good in the hands during play.

Fred started his "Bones Unlimited" Newsletter in December 1994 and continued it until his death three years later. It was his list of bones players that was used to summons the faithful to Bones Fest I, hosted by Ev Cowett, which he attended as perhaps his last performance. He was acknowledged as the "Master of the Tap".

In many ways we should perhaps

(Fred Edmunds—Continued from page 1)

Playing them well is another story. Back home in Charleston, W. VA., Edmunds didn't play so well. But it wasn't for lack of trying.

"I'd take them to dances and make an annoyance of myself," he said.

To this day, he says he is remembered among his Charleston classmates as the guy with the bones. He even was asked to play them at his 55th high school reunion.

"People thought it was a stupid thing to do. I agree with them, but I was having fun, so that was the end of that."

His interest in the instrument waned, however, through college, medical school and adulthood. "They would stay in the drawer sometimes two years at a time."

Only occasionally would his interest be rekindled.

One time was at the 1939 World's Fair, where Edmunds met Frank Wolf, the owner of Frank Wolf Percussion Instruments in New York City.

The man who sold Edmunds his first set of bones had told him that they originally came from Wolf's store.

So, Edmunds inquired.

Wolf said he had not carried bones in years.

"He said it was a completely dead art," Edmunds said.

Indeed, Edmunds has done research and found that the bones in America started fading in popularity after the Civil War. (They are featured for about two seconds during a scene in 'Gone With The Wind.') By the turn of the century they were rarely played outside of minstrel shows. By the 1920s, there were rarely played anywhere.

On another occasion, in 1955, Edmunds' interest was sparked again when he came across the only true set of bones—made from real bones—he had ever seen.

All the other bones sets he has seen were made from wood.

He found his authentic bones in a Savannah, GA Music store. They were in a dust-covered glass display case in a back storage room that he had wandered into by mistake. He asked to buy them.

"I said how much do you want for those?" He said, "What are those?"

He got them for \$3. He calls them his 'bone bones'

It wasn't until about eight years ago, though, when he retired to Lexington, that Edmunds developed such a keen passion.

With newfound time on his hands, he took his bones out again. He says he started experimenting with different rhythms and more complex beat patterns.

"Then it dawned on me, 'My gosh, write a book for posterity.'"

He wrote two books, one for beginners and one for advanced players. He created 166 different bones exercises and invented his own musical language. A capital 'R' means play a 'right-handed click.' Capital 'L' means a 'left-handed' and 'T' means play both hands together.

He even writes about how not to play.

"Almost every bones player is so bad that it is embarrassing. Here is the way they play:

'click-a-de-click, click-a-de-click click-a-de-ick-a-de-ick-a-de-click.'

"Just the same thing over and over."

As far as Edmunds knows, his books are the only written instruction on the art of bones playing. He also has made an instructional video.

This then left him with a dilemma. He had the books. He had a video. But he didn't have any bones. How could the next generation carry on the legacy without any bones?

He started thinking big. He contacted some manufacturers and had some prototypes made. "I had a notion that it might go in the direction of the Hula-Hoop or yo-yo or something like that."

He admits now that he got a little carried away.

Radio spots in Lynchburg and Roanoke yielded not a single call. He attended a music merchants' convention in Chicago. Again, nothing.

Finally, he decided to target folk music stores and compiled a list of 150 of them by combing library microfilm of the Yellow Pages from every sizable city in the country. It was a project that took him three solid

weeks of eight-hour days.

Then he called the stores. About half agreed to stock him book, video and bones. After three years, he says sales are picking up. He expects to sell \$5,000 worth of books and bones this year and to double that next year.

Who knows? Maybe it will turn into a craze, after all. "It could happen that this thing could suddenly catch fire." *Story by Mark Morrison, The*

A Tribute to Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas

Richard 'Mr. Bones' Thomas was not talkative. He had a great sense of rhythm. When asked to play, he just shook his head OK.

He played short beef ribs. He aged them and polished them. They had a soft mellow tone.

He knew how to improvise - probably the best at that I have ever heard. My understanding of improvisation is playing a rhythm outside of the rhythm of the tune but in consonance with the beat. Sometimes the music could be stopped with him just playing on and when it started again he would hit the beat perfectly.

He always played seated and could play even when one sang without stepping on their being featured. In other words he could play along just like any band member. Bones players do not do that very well. But he did.

The barbershop is the place in NE Washington, DC where the players meet every Saturday at 1 pm and play until they get tired. It is at 2007 Bunker Hill Road. Their phone is 202-526-7539. Put a contribution in the can for the Archie Edwards Heritage Foundation and you are welcome. Don't go in big groups; they can hack bones players just one at a time. Call before you come.

Most of the music is bluesy. No blue grass played here. Lots of whinny harmonicas around and lead guitars but enough bones rhythm to turn you on. I told Thomas I liked his play; he smiled and shook his head up and down which I believe meant he liked my play too. He was great and an asset to the craft.

Worthy of emulation, he is sorely



Steve Brown photograph by Worcester Telegram & Gazette. Used with permission.

Jim Meyer Donates Fred Edmunds' Video Rights

After Fred Edmunds' death in 1997, RBS member Jim Meyer bought the rights and remaining materials of Bones Unlimited from Fred's widow and sold the books, videos and bones to bones players. Recently, Jim donated the rights and remaining materials to the Rhythm Bones Society. The Board of Directors at their meeting at Bones Fest VII will decide their future. Thanks, Jim.

(Steve Brown Wins—Continued from page 4)
embarked on the stage, Paddy 'Sport' Murphy came over to him and said, "" You know, I'm glad you won." Mr. Brown acknowledges that this was very gracious but had to be really tough for a guy who has never been defeated and defeated by a foreigner on his home turf, no less.

As a result of his win, Mr. Brown enjoyed instant celebrity status where strangers were congratulating him on the street and people raised their pint glasses and gave him standing ovations whenever he entered one of the many neighborhood pubs.

Mr. Brown said bones players are wonderful, warm people who share their knowledge every chance they can. And one thing that he always tries to do is give a way at least one pair of bones to help keep the tradition alive. On this trip, he gave away two sets.

"It's planting the same seeds that were planted for me," Mr. Brown said. "It carries things on. That's what it's all about, making sure that this tradition doesn't die and continues to live because it's a tradition that has roots so tremendously deep."

Mr. Brown considers his bones



Mel Mercier plays two-handed bones for Prince Albert in Monte Carlo in October 2002

playing style to be 'in fluxed' and describes it as being a cross between two-handed and one-handed bones playing.

"I have been really, really fortunate that I have learned from so many great bones players and I've learned so many things," Mr. Brown said. "I'm a sponge. I soak it right up and I love it." *Craig S. Semon*. Reprinted with

Rhythm Bones Society

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