

Infantry Center Band seeks answer to mystery

World War II Steinway found In Infantry Hall

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Feb. 13, 2004

It's grand, baby, and on today's market it would cost 62 grand. A 7-foot Steinway concert piano, covered in dust and – of all things – eggs shells, was recently discovered in Infantry Hall, though “discovered” might be a stretch, since the piano has been hidden in plain sight for as long as anyone can recall.

1st Sgt Wendy Thomson, of the Infantry Center Band, received a call from someone in Infantry Hall. It seems the floor of Marshall Auditorium needs resurfacing, and in order to do that, “all that mess backstage” has to be moved. Including a piano no one wants to claim.

“The person said they thought the piano was a Steinway.” Thomson said. “I’m not a pianist, but I know Steinway is top of the line.”

Thomson called a Steinway representative in Atlanta. Their records show that the piano, a New Yorker, was manufactured, mostly by hand, in 1944, and was delivered to Fort Benning's Special Services in February the following year.

“And that's all we know,” Thomson said.

Andy Williamson, the Steinway technician from

Atlanta, visited Marshall Auditorium Tuesday to look at the piano, which would've sold for \$2,800 new. Now, he said, the same piano would cost more than \$62,000.

“You've really got something here,” Williamson said, after clearing the dust and combing over the piano. “I'm very optimistic. Structurally, it's intact. It's complete. It's a Steinway.”

Still, he said, years of neglect and various minor alterations, like the replacement of the original ivory keys with plastic, have left the piano a little worse for wear. And its deep mahogany color is not original. The World War II era piano would've been finished in an ebony veneer over a solid wood base.

Williamson is working up an estimate to bring the Steinway up to date, a challenge he said is not overly difficult.

“We're gathering information at this point,” said Thomson, who'd like to see the piano find a home somewhere on post where it'll be used and well cared for. “We don't know how much it's going to cost or where it will go. And there's a paperwork process for the band to take responsibility for it. We're looking into this.”

In the meantime, while Williamson works the numbers, Thomson would like to know more about the piano.

“It came to Fort Benning back when live music was the main form of entertainment. Before TV,” she said with a shrug. “It'd be neat to know.



Andy Williamson checks out a 1944 Steinway piano in Infantry Hall's Marshall

It was most likely used in one of the theaters on post. One thing's for sure, it wasn't always here. Infantry Hall wasn't even built in 1945.”

Retired Col. Bob Nett called Fort Benning home for much of his infantry career. He believes the piano's first home was probably the Main Post Theater, which was located in the spot that's now called the “Lemon Lot,” the used car lot next to Burger King. Or perhaps, he said, the piano was used in the Infantry Chapel or the original Infantry School, now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

“Those are the most likely places,” Nett said. “I really can't be sure. But I do know that Special Services were the folks, in those days, who took care of all social activities, like the USO shows. So probably it was in the theater.”

The Bayonet would like to hear from anyone who has information about the piano and its history. Call 545-9135. As for the egg shells found inside? That's no mystery, “Somebody had a bad show that night.” Thomson said.