



Goodbye, Bill!

As regular readers of A Story A Week know, many of the episodes are pulled out of my 'memory bank' files, and some are triggered by some aspect of my present activities. Today's story comes from both. I received an email this week from a friend in Vancouver letting me know that Bill - the owner of the music shop where I had my first adult job - had passed away.

This was not a completely unexpected event, as Bill had not been doing well for some time, being in and out of hospital for a few years. But in the years when I knew him, and especially the early years, it was a different story. It would have been difficult to find a more vigorous and hearty man. He had been in on the ground floor of the business, buying out the original partners, and then building it into a major power in the field - providing supplies to school music programs.

Now that's not a type of business that most people are familiar with, and at first hearing, it might sound like a fairly 'easy' business to be in; schools are given money by the government to fund their operations, and 'all' we had to do was waltz in and scoop some of it up. Well, in real life, it's the other way around. Schools are scratching for every penny and trying to stretch budgets as far as possible. Competition between suppliers is extremely fierce, and on top of all this, in the years I was with the company very inexpensive instruments from Asia were flooding into North America for the first time, severely under-cutting traditional suppliers, whose instruments provided most of our inventory. It was a very difficult time (and many companies were unable to survive).

But all these difficulties were grist to the mill for Bill. He was both imaginative, and aggressive, and he produced a constant stream of innovations, which over time transformed the school music business in the area.

A wonderful example of this was our 'bus'. Teachers were frequently too busy to be able to come to our shop to look at music, so Bill came up with the idea of taking it to them! He arranged for an old city bus to be gutted and turned into a mobile shop jammed with sheet music and instruments, and jumped into the driver's seat and drove it for thousands of miles around western Canada, stopping at schools everywhere he went.

But this is not supposed to be some kind of eulogy for Bill, just a 'story', so let me tell you an episode from one of our trips together. He and I were visiting a school one September, when the band classes were just starting up for the new school year. The teacher had arranged for all the parents of prospective band students to gather at the school one evening, and we (along with our competitors) made presentations about our instruments, so that parents could decide from which company to rent an instrument for their child.

Bill loved these competitive meetings, and when it came time for him to make our presentation, he put on his showman's hat and went at it. This particular evening, he had got to the point in the presentation where he emphasized the quality of our instruments, and to prove his point, took a piece of the clarinet he was showing, and tossed it into the air to show how 'unbreakable' it was. Now these events were usually held in the school bandroom, with a low ceiling and carpeted floor, but this particular night was in the school gymnasium - with a very high ceiling, and hard wooden floor - and in his enthusiasm Bill got a bit carried away, tossing the piece far up near the roof. All of us on the dealer's side of the room knew instantly that he had

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over-reached and what was about to happen, but the hundreds of parents on the bleachers watched in wide-eyed fascination.

The piece sailed up, up and up, in a high curve, seemed to hang in the air, and then plunged back towards the floor, where on impact it exploded into thousands of tiny fragments. So much for a demonstration of 'unbreakable'.

Bill didn't miss a beat. "And we all know what kids are like. It's quite possible they will drop their instrument. What if *that* happens to *you*; what then?" And he turned and picked up a piece of paper from the table, which he then waved at them. "Every one of our instruments is backed by an unconditional, no questions asked, guarantee from the maker. Just send it back for a replacement!"

Now this was a bit of a stretch indeed; nobody was guaranteeing the instruments against *this* kind of abuse, but Bill - always a calculating gambler - simply figured that the chances of this happening in real life were pretty slim. I have no data on how many claims we had in that subsequent year, but I do remember the *long* lineups at our sales table once the talking was over and the business began.

And this was his way: start with good products, ones that we ourselves could be proud of and enthusiastic about, and then simply communicate that enthusiasm to others as best we could. It was a very winning combination, and one that has guided my own work and life ever since those days.

Over the years a lot of young people worked for Bill, and a lot of customers came to know him well. His influence and legacy in that community is very wide indeed, and a lot of people will miss him.

Including me.

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