

William W. Schwartz

Bill Schwartz is president of William W. Schwartz Associates, a company begun in his name in the early 1950s by his father, and now run chiefly by his son, Jeff. The company is involved in promotional marketing and, since the mid-1970s, one of its sidelines has been "The Fiddle Factory," the sole product of which is the "Stumpf Fiddle." Although born in Omaha, Schwartz moved with his parents at an early age to Green Bay, and he eventually settled in Sheboygan. As a young boy he was given a toy comprised of a short stick affixed with percussive noisemakers. In the early 1970s, attired as an immense rabbit in Shriner parades, Schwartz would clown behind marching bands, beating out their tempos with his diminutive stick. Shortly thereafter, while attending a Green Bay Packer game, Schwartz beheld a pair of Cronin brothers, Sheboyganites, vigorously shaking a larger more elaborate stick whenever the boys in green and gold triumphed. Fatefully the Cronins visited Schwartz's business place soon after seeking help in marketing the rhythm stick, which they had already dubbed the "Stumpf fiddle"--mythically inspired by Harry Stumpf, a peg-legged tippler whose stump stomped the floor as he sipped brews. Schwartz placed an ad in the Wall Street Journal for \$600, received \$10,000 worth of orders, and a business was born. The Cronins eventually sold out to Schwartz, and today he is backed up with orders. While a solid core of Wisconsinites own stumpf fiddles (Schwartz has marketed the instrument through regional taverns and music stores), the stick sells widely throughout the country. Schwartz has pushed it with appearances on television and can claim that his fiddles are shook by celebrities ranging from actors (Bill Cosby) to politicians (Gerald Ford) to literati (Mickey Spillane) to criminals (Jim Bakker).

The stumpf fiddle, as it was designed by the Cronins and slightly modified by Schwartz, consists of a metal shaft with a ball at the base and a wooden handle on the top; the metal shaft is further outfitted with rows of jingle bells, a wood block, a taxi horn, a cast metal bell, a bicycle bell, two stainless steel pie plates enclosing several washers, and a set of springs. The up-down bouncing of the shaft sets the jingle bells, spring, and washer-filled pie plates vibrating; meanwhile a fiberglass "beater stick" serves to sound the wood block and cast bell, while the horn and bicycle bell require a pinch and a push. Schwartz, who learned piano by ear and has a good sense of rhythm, is quite adept at playing the stumpf fiddle and he reckons it can be played with any kind of music but rock 'n' roll. Schwartz purchases the parts, then contracts with retired senior citizens who assemble them in their own home workshops. Although pitched toward a broad market, the stumpf fiddle, partly by virtue of its name, still retains elements of its central European origins, not only through the "stumpf" name, but also through the presence of stumpf fiddle contests at Sheboygan area brat fries. There are also other makers--of the basement workshop and cottage industry sort--throughout the region who favor alternative central European names like the boomba and the teufel stick.

Supplementary Materials: 1) a brochure for Wm. W. Schwartz Associates; 2) an ad for the stumpf fiddle; 3) taped interview & index; 4) color slides and B&W prints; and 5) an array of materials available from Schwartz: a scrapbook of newspaper clippings and photographs (some of this could be borrowed), promotional items imprinted with Harry Stumpf's grizzly face (pencils, playing cards, pencils, T-shirts, and sweat shirts), and color separations of stumpf fiddle ads.

Availability of Materials: Yes, but contact Schwartz soon as he will be gone for some time after mid-December.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for  
Cedarburg Cultural Center  
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): November 2, 1989  
Interviewee: William "Bill" Schwartz  
Address: [REDACTED]

Sheboygan, WI 53082

Phone: [REDACTED]

Equipment Used: Superscope C-202LP

Stereo: no                      Dolby: no

Tape Brand/Length: Sony HF-60

Amount Used: Side 1: all

Side 2: 1/5

General Subject: musical instrument  
making

Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary

Recording Location: "Fiddle Factory"

Other People Present: none

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

The interview took place at Schwartz's place of business on South 9th in Sheboygan, which houses both the "Fiddle Factory" offices and William W. Schwartz Associates, Inc., a promotional and marketing firm. We met in a sort of storage and display room surrounded by various promotional items and catalogues.

The interview covers both Schwartz's involvement with the "stumpf fiddle" as a player and as a manufacturer and marketer. A demonstration of the instrument's sound comes near the close of the interview on Side B.



## TAPE INDEX

### Tape One, Side A

1. Announcement.
2. Bill Schwartz runs William W. Schwartz Associates in Sheboygan. Got involved with stumpf fiddle some years ago and now markets it all over the world.
3. Got started playing the instrument actively when a member of the Shriners. Dressed up as a bunny rabbit and played an old toy instrument for children in hospitals.
4. About 15 years ago went to a Packer game. There were two fellows there who played stumpf fiddle whenever the Packers did something good. A few days later those fellows, brothers, came into Schwartz's office with request for marketing help. Took out \$600 ad in Wall Street Journal, did \$10,000 worth of business from that ad. Began selling to taverns and music stores, also worked it into sales promotional programs.
5. Sometime next year will sell their 25,000th stumpf fiddle since 1975.
6. Schwartz born in Omaha, 1920, but folks moved to Green Bay. After WWII, B's father started William W. Schwartz Associates, now run by Bill's son, Jeff.
7. B's wife a member of the Chordettes, a girl's barbershop quartette from Sheboygan that appeared on the Arthur Godfrey Show.
8. Stumpf fiddles made by retired senior citizen furniture makers and craftsmen in their own home. Inspected and shipped by Schwartz's company. Every craftsman stamps his initial into the top of the fiddle's shaft.
9. Fiddles all made to a master plan. Particular parts: poles, pie tins, spring, bicycle bells, horn, etc. ordered in substantial quantities from elsewhere.
10. The "Bermuda taxi horn" can only be gotten from Japan. Has escalated in price from \$5 to \$15.
11. On the instrument's components. Rubber ball at the base for bouncing. Bouncing activates noisemakers in two stainless steel pie tins that withstand denting. Cast metal pieces hold in ball and hold spring on the fiddle. Then there's a wood block, the Bermuda Taxi horn, the bicycle bell, and a cast bell. "So that when you're playing it, you get some real percussion sounds, it's like a one man percussion section. That's why we call it a one man band." [Good for Down Home Dairyland.] Jingle bells on shaft mostly for decoration.
12. Make two models. The deluxe model (described above) and a standard model with springs, pie tin, wood block, and cast bell. Sell about 80 of the deluxe models to every one of the others.
13. Shaft is a specially formed pole with holes drilled to specification. Wooden handle. Size has to be within limits for UPS shipping.

14. Instrument used by men, women, children, in nursing homes for therapy, at parties "to break the ice." Still run holiday ads in the Wall Street Journal and sell quite a few even though price is \$159.95. Lots of hand labor goes into the assembling.

15. Toy B had years ago half the size of his present stumpf fiddles. A wood dowel with some jingle bells on the shaft and a sort of imitation hide tambourine. In Shrine parades B would stand on the corner behind marching bands and play to their tempo. Began playing this instrument about 1974, but had gotten it as a kid. Don't have to take lessons on this instrument. B thinks his old instrument was probably made in the Orient, but not sure.

16. Two brothers who originated "stumpf fiddle" were Bob and Charlie Cronin, Sheboygan residents. Charlie now deceased, Bob sold his share of business to Bill and moved to west coast. The brothers made the fiddle as a hobby.

17. Cronins had made up character, Harry Stumpf, who had a peg leg, used to stomp to music on it, then added a horn and bell and that gave rise to the stumpf fiddle. There is a picture of Harry on each fiddle, a grizzled Deutscher with a derby and a glass of beer.

18. Knows also of the "Polkacello" made in the Poconos. Has heard instruments called "humstrums." Stumpf or stump fiddle has gained exposure over national television: Dinah Shore Show, Good Morning America, etc. Consequently this trade name has been used generically by other makers, whether manufacturers or homemade makers. Has also encountered the "boomba," made by "a gentleman in Milwaukee . . . but that's a completely different instrument": a metal rod with beer trays and little metal washers. A guy in Illinois makes a similar "bumberstick." In Germany instrument was called the Devil's fiddle, but this was a much taller instrument. Bill has also heard "Teufel Stick," but hasn't heard "Paul Bunyan Fiddle."

19. B shows a scrapbook with a craftsman assembling a stumpf fiddle in his basement workshop. There's an Alvin Stycyzanski poster in the background.

20. T-shirts, sweatshirts, playing cards, pencils, and pins marketing along with the fiddle, especially at the formerly held "Stumpfvenshuns."

21. B reckons it would be possible to borrow materials from scrapbook. Also possible for Lewis Koch to photograph craftsmen assembling the fiddles.

22. On marketing through taverns. Go to national and state tavern shows to offer units to tavern owners at a dealer price for resale. If someone on the staff plays the stumpf fiddle, it works well for keeping clientele. Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Florida, California, and Germany are good markets. Has even sold them in Japan at a music show. Bill Cosby bought one from a music store in South Carolina. Jerry Ford, Micky Spillane, Willard Scott, Henny Youngman, and Sally Jesse Raphael all have stumpf fiddles.

23. On the Stumpfvenshuns. Two days of dancing and socializing, centered around a stumpf fiddle contest. Ran this for two years and had huge crowds coming. Was a complex event and not a real moneymaker, so decided to drop it. Sold their stumpf fiddle souvenirs there and still have some on hand. Could



loan for exhibit.

24. Sheboygan Jaycees tie a stumpf fiddle contest into their annual brat fry held the first Saturday of August. Had 12-14 contestants this year. B has also appeared with a lot of stumpf fiddlers at the Wisconsin State Fair. Would like to play at a Green Bay Packer game and at Milwaukee's Summerfest.

25. An "ensemble" of stumpf fiddles usually plays along with a band: a Dixieland band, or a polka band, or a modern band.

26. Some players swing the instrument over their heads, some play it hard. Bill likes to play it delicately with variable tones and volume. [A good quote for Down Home Dairyland.]

27. B plays piano by ear, playing stumpf fiddle comes naturally to him and he's often asked to bring it to play at weddings and at parties.

[end of side one]

28. The current stumpf fiddle is pretty much the design of the Cronins. B has gotten good at using all the components of the stumpf fiddle.

29. The stick used for the fiddle was once a drumstick, but is now a fibreglass stick, the "beater stick."

30. The springs on the stumpf fiddle are not bowed. B doesn't know where the fiddle designation came from.

31. B can't think of any particular German connection of the instrument beyond the Stumpf surname and the fact that the instrument fits well with polka bands. He often has played his "fiddle" to "Beer Barrel Polka" or "Rain, Rain Polka" (the Bohemian "Prsi, Prsi"). Beyond German and Czech polka bands, the fiddle fits well with Polish polka bands--can add double beat with them.

32. Bill illustrates the sounds of the instrument. Bouncing to activate the noisemakers, hitting the wood block, hitting the cast bell, ringing the bicycle bell, honking the Bermuda Taxi horn, then putting it all together. [Good for Down Home Dairyland.]

END OF SESSION