Four Score and Seventy Years Ago

by Jack Lawton

The term "Vintage Drum" is often used to describe drums produced in the 1950's and 60's by the great manufacturers of the era, such as Camco, Gretsch, Leedy, Ludwig, Premier, Rogers, and Slingerland. With each passing year, these drums become more valuable and sought after by players and collectors. Suppose we were to go back a hundred years before that era, to take a look at the drums of the 1850's and 60's, and see who were making them and what they were like. We would notice a surprisingly large number of drum manufacturers and a great demand for their product. According to official Army records, the U.S. Government purchased over 32,000 drums from 1861 to 1865. That number does not include drums used by the Southern Army or the ones that were purchased by private citizens for use in community concert and marching bands.

Many of the major drum suppliers of the day were from cities like Baltimore, Boston, New York, Philadelphia and surrounding areas. Some of the more familiar include:

William Boucher, Jr. - Baltimore, MD
John C. Haynes and Company - Cambridge, MA
Oliver Ditson - Boston, MA
Alexander Rogers - Long Island, NY
C. & F. Soistman - Philadelphia, PA
Horstmann Brothers and Company - Philadelphia, PA
William G. Sempf - New York, NY
William Ent, Germantown - Philadelphia Co., PA
Noble & Cooley - Granville, MA
Ernest Vogt - Philadelphia, PA.

The drums produced by these and other companies, were light-weight and simple in design, being held together and tensioned by rope. The basic shell construction was one, two, and sometimes three plies, using woods like ash, maple, and rosewood. The wood panels were usually submerged in barrels of boiling water for a given length of time, then removed and bent around a cylindrical form, and clamped until dry. When the raw shell was removed from the form, it would be sized, glued and clamped, having an overlap seam 8 to 12 inches. Many manufacturers would then secure both the internal and external seams with a vertical row of round-headed upholstery tacks, that were pushed through the overlap and bent over on the inside. The percussion hole (vent hole) was often centered between these two rows of tacks, in the middle of the shell. Next, a decorative tack device would be placed around the vent hole, which was also bent over on the inside. These decorative tack designs not only helped to secure the overlap, but they

Civil War Era
F. Woehr (Regimental Eagle Drum)
after restoration

were also like a trade-mark of the drum builder, much in the same way badges are used by modern drum companies. Inside the drum, directly across from the vent hole, was pasted a paper label that had the name, address, and other useful information about the manufacturer and /or distributor.

After having secured the seam, many shells were reinforced with internal glue-rings, top and bottom, and sometimes even around the center. The snare drums would then have narrow, but deep snare beds cut in them to accomodate the thick strands of gut snares. The next step would be to add any type of emblazonment, such as a regimental eagle or state seal, to the front of the shell. This was usually done by artists or sign painters, and some would use stencils to insure uniformity for large orders. The Army guidelines stated that military drums would show the arms of the United States on a blue field for infantry and a red field for artillery, with the number or letter of the regiment to appear in the banner, or scroll, or under the coat of arms.

Early 1800's Henry Fraley Drum after restoration

The drum heads were made of calf-skin, sheepskin, or goatskin. The piece of skin was cut to a diameter that was 4" greater than that of the shell. It was soaked in cool water and tucked, or mounted on a wooden flesh-hoop. The heads were held in place on the drum with wooden rims, or counterhoops. A length of rope (approx. 45') would be laced through the holes in the counterhoop, going on diagonals, from the bottom rim, to the top rim, and back again to the bottom, around the circumference of the drum. When the eyelet at the beginning of the rope was reached, "a pig-tail" was twisted to finish it off. There was excess rope left, that would be braided and hung from the bottom of the drum, from the pig-tail to the opposite side. This braided piece was called the "drag-cord". It was not only decorative, but it was also used by the drummer to sling over his shoulder to carry the drum with the thin snare head against his back.

Tension on the drum heads was controlled by leather "ears" or tugs, that were placed near the top of the drum, while the rope was being installed. As the ears would be slid down toward the bottom of the drum, the ropes would be pulled together, and both heads would become tighter. Snare tension was often adjusted by a simple thumb-screw type strainer that was mounted near the bottom of the shell, centered above one of the snare beds. Another type of strainer was mounted on the bottom rim and could actually release the snares from the bottom head.

These simple snare drums were capable of producing a sharp, crisp snare sound with much depth and volume. They are instruments that speak with authority. It is difficult to establish prices on rope-tensioned drums of this era. Depending on condition, a plain rope drum might bring from $100 to $500 or more. If the drum has a painted state seal or regimental eagle, it could be valued between $ 1,000 and $7,000 or more. The more that is known about a drum, such as who made it, who played it, and where it was played, generally the higher the value. On a recent trip to Gettysburg, I saw several Civil War era drums ranging in price from $4,500 to $6,500, with most of them in need of some sort of restoration. There are most likely hundreds of these relics to be found in basements, attics, and barns all across the country, just waiting to be discovered by someone who will appreciate the fine craftsmanship and historical significance which these unique instruments possess.

Early 1800's Drum with Seal of Pennsylvania Made by Henry Fraley of Germantown (restored)