

Memoirs and Homage to Lou Skinner

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Lou Skinner's passing was announced at the I.D.R.S. Convention in Minneapolis, July 27th 1993. The Wizard of modern reed-making had touched the lives of a multitude of bassoonists around the world and he will be dearly missed. The following are some anecdotes and memories of some of the many who passed through Lou and Betty Ann's door.

Richard Plaster's Memories ...

Lou Skinner was recommended to me in spring of 1946 as a potential teacher by John Burgess and Bernard Morrow, Baltimore flutist and oboist colleagues of mine in the North Carolina Symphony. I was making reeds according to the little Selmer book without a teacher, and Lou already had a reputation as a reedmaker. He was then the contrabassoonist of the Baltimore Symphony. For a year I had been studying with Kovar, who didn't make reeds. In September, I joined the Army Ground Forces Band at Fort Meade, only ten or fifteen miles from Baltimore, where I played with Otto Eifert and used weekend passes to study with Skinner and Kovar.

At that time Lou lived in a sunny apartment on Mt. Royal, a wide and pleasant street, near the Lyric Theater, where the Baltimore Symphony played. He was enjoying his career and even seemed to enjoy trying to improve my reeds. When I was tempted to give up on a reed he would say something like "it just isn't finished", and give it a touch that would improve it and encourage me. He was the one (and only one) who showed me fingerings for high f, f#, and g, which is odd considering he was a contra-bassoonist. During that period I heard him play concerts at the Lyric, along with bassoonist Walter Stein and David Manchester (Melissa's father) and oboist (Bill?) Criss. He had a robust and penetrating tone with stable and secure-sounding intonation.

Later, in the 1951-52 season I was playing second bassoon in the Baltimore Symphony. Lou had quit the year before and gone to work at a local music store of Ted Martin, a less stressful occupation for a person of Lou's conscientiousness and sensitivity. He lived across the street from first bassoonist Arthur Lannutti, so on a couple of memorable evenings I had dinner at

Lannutti's (his wife was a fabulous cook) and a light-hearted reed-making session in Lou's basement with him and Art.

I had bought a contrabassoon a year or two earlier and had Lou help me with it and its reeds. The reeds he had me make had a smooth, dolce, sound—different from the harder, reedier sound I had heard him use at the Lyric. He taught me a lot of useful harmonic fingerings, also. Putting the two together suggests to me that he used an instrument that had been raised, perhaps even the Heckel he told me about that had double holes in the low register. That year the Boston contra chair was to be vacated by Boaz Piller, for whom Lou made reeds. Our visits were then devoted to preparation for the Boston audition. Lou knew the acoustical, repertoire, and personality situation there, so he was very helpful.

During this period Lou and I got on a bus carrying about 20 or so musicians to run up to York, Pennsylvania and play with the local symphony. It was a delight to actually play in the orchestra with him and not just make and test reeds. At one point I glanced at his face. His forehead was covered with sweat, probably revealing why he had given up his symphony job, but I forget what I was doing at the time.

After that it was perhaps thirty years before I saw him again. In September Isabelle and I took a Honda 400 up to Baxter Park and then over to Jonesport for an afternoon visit to Lou. We chatted in his workshop looking at reed samples and models for any and all tastes, needs, and occasions, attesting to Lou's resourcefulness, experience, and imagination. We couldn't stop production for too long, but before we were allowed to leave grandmother re-attached my jacket button that was being torn loose by the wind. That happy September afternoon was a beautiful way to remember, Lou, Betty, and grandmother.

Otto Eifert's Memories ...

I was first made aware of Lou Skinner's presence by Joel Feinglass a fellow student at the Curtis Institute who related to me how this craftsman in Baltimore shaped cane using a sheet of brass as a template and then

transferring this to masking tape, laying the masking tape on the gouged cane and shaping by hand. My interest was aroused by this as I realized the possibilities of varying the shape and the ability to change shape very easily. Lou attended my graduation recital in the Spring of 1952 and I enjoyed meeting him but it was not until 1968 that I finally made the move for in depth study with him. My first trip to Fawn Grove, Pennsylvania was an awesome experience and had a permanent affect on my reed making for the rest of my career. We exchanged many letters and I was amazed at the length he would go to be sure to explain the ideas and concepts that he had developed. He was constantly changing ideas so that there was always a steady development. My file has a folder full of his letters discussing the many facets of reedmaking, charts, sketches, etc. I consider these as a rich heritage from Lou.

Chip Kaufman's Memories ...

I first visited Lou in 1978 and my lessons always went further than the subject: Whether teaching reed-making to an international collection of bassoonists, or introducing an impoverished local Jonesport boy to Chess, he was ultimately an instructor of his personal brand of metaphysics, and in this sense he was the quintessential mentor. Two things for which I am personally indebted: he turned the fabrication of reeds into a reliable art: he filled me with a sense of worth as an artist.

My last visit to Lou was in June of 1993. I cannot fully eulogize Lou without offering a word of honor for Betty Ann. Having known Lou before and after Betty Ann's death, it is clear to see that their lives had become inseparable. There is nothing I have gained through my relationship with Lou which does not also somehow bear the influence of Betty Ann. She personalized the process of learning, and helped familiarize, even endear one student to the next although these students might never meet. Betty Ann was a humanizing factor in Lou's reed lessons, and it was this humanity which gave Lou's studio the edge over the university lecture room.

Jim McKay's Memories ...

I booked my first lesson with Lou in the summer of 1981 and stayed in a small motel outside of Jonesport. Going back the following summer Lou and Snaggy (Betty Ann) insisted that we stay in the house, and would take no

compensation for it. So, on the last night, I took us out to dinner at a nearby restaurant. They left a bit earlier than we did, and when I went to pay the bill it had already been taken care of. These examples, of course, are aspects that all of us have experienced. I do not think that I have ever met a more giving and generous couple.

I returned the second year because I was really proud of what I had learned the first time round. This was fortuitous, because I realized, in this second session, that compared to Lou, I really knew even less about reeds than I thought. I suppose that all of us went through this feeling of awe and ignorance. But, somehow, he always managed to make us feel better about our reed making abilities.

In 1986, I brought Lou to York University in Canada to teach a seminar and repeated it the following year. It was after that second seminar that Lou sat me down and told me he wanted me to write "the book". I worked diligently that winter and finally sent him a draft chapter on the methodology. His response was as instantaneous as it was crushing. What I had written would be of no use to a young person who had never made a reed before. It took two more years, but I eventually completed a draft of the "method" which he approved. In fact, what we both came to realize was that there was no "one way" to make a reed, but rather variation upon variation. We spent two wonderful weeks together May, 1989 at my summer home going over chapters, variations, historical reeds, and his life. I made hours of tapes and pages of notes. My task now is to get the book published and the tapes transcribed so that his memory will live on.

Per Hannevold's Memories ...

When I heard of Lou's death at the I.D.R.S. in July my thought went back to April, 1993 when I saw Lou for the last time in Jonesport. He was in a very good mood, enthusiastic about reeds, instruments, life and death. We took a drive to Skinner's cliff. It was the place where "Smokie" and "Snag" always went to picnic when they could get away from the reed business.

The afternoon was spent trying bassoons, his #7201, my #13014 and an old #4668 that Sawicki had brought back to life.

Roger Birnstingl's Memories ...

The first time I went to study with Lou was in 1980. He was a "Wizard" who could teach anyone to make a good reed. The trip was a great

success and I enjoyed my stay, not to forget Betty Ann's lobster stew! Fantastic! Once I asked him about the rumors that anyone studying with him had to take an oath not to relate any of his teaching to anyone else. He answered that I was free to teach everything but to be sure and tell that I had learned it from him! He talked with a father's pride about his former students and we who were so privileged as to call him our teacher will always remember him with love and respect.

Sol Schoenbach's Memories ...

Lou Skinner was a dear old friend who made countless reeds for me but would never accept a cent. The story started back in 1942 or 43. I arrived at the Lyric Theatre in Baltimore for a rehearsal with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the manager introduced me to a Coast Guard officer who asked me if I could help them with a sailor. He had a bassoon background and that's why they contacted me. We started (as always with bassoonists) on reeds and he was fascinated with my thoughts. I would receive 30 to 40 page letters on his research and as you know he became the foremost practitioner and reed specialist in the world.

Bill Woodward's Memories ...

I studied with Lou in May of 1990, just a few months after Betty Ann died. I believe I was his first student after his recovery from his stroke. They were good days but he was still getting over Betty Ann's passing, which I believe he never did. As you know, they were as closely knit as any two people could ever be.

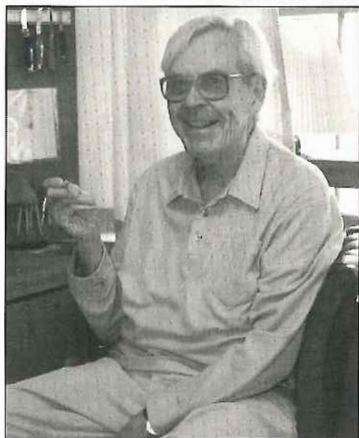
I will always remember Lou for how much he gave of himself as a reed maker, teacher and friend. When making reeds he delivered the best. They all had that elusive "free" crow and were stable in all harmonics so one did not worry when he played on Lou's reeds. As a reed teacher he made the mystifying understandable and gave us techniques that work. He always said "You can make a world in a reed" and he could! He had another way of saying it too—"There are a hundred ways to skin a ..." stopping short not to offend his favorite feline keeping him company at the reed table. In his last years he worked to write down his techniques in a book which I hope is in print soon. As a friend he was always there to discuss any aspect of life. God made only one Lou and we will miss him dearly.

A Photo Montage of Lou & Betty Ann Skinner



(L to R) John Miller, Lou Skinner, Milan Turkovic, 1991 Towson, MD., The Miller-Turkovic Symposium. "Lou really liked that photo because of his fondness for both John and Milan."

(Photo by Bill Woodward)



Lou and a finished reed, May, 1990.

(Photo by Bill Woodward)



Lou at work, August, 1974.

(Photo by Ken Wagner)



Betty Ann

(Photo by Per Hannevold)

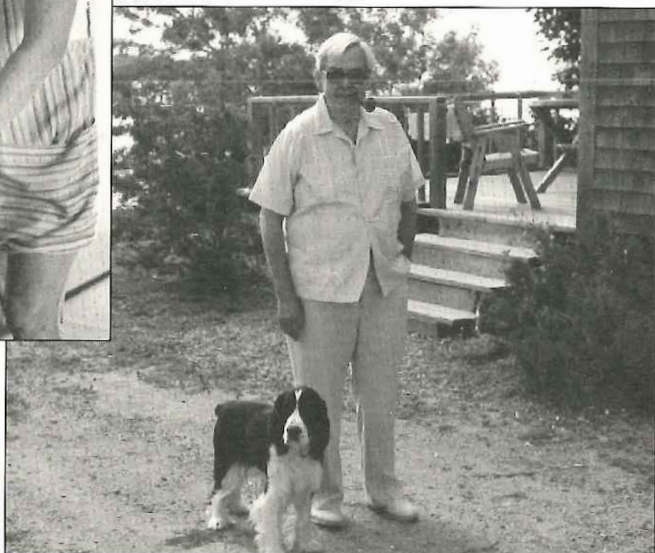


Betty Ann, August, 1974.

(Photo by Ken Wagner)

Lou and "Friend".

(Photo by Per Hannevold)



***Lou and students at the
Second Seminar on
Reeds at York University,
Canada, 1987.***

(Photo by Jim McKay)



***Lou with Jim McKay,
Charleston Lake,
May 1989.***

(Photo by Jim McKay)



***Lou teaching reedmaking at the
Miller-Turkovic Bassoon
Symposium at Towson, Maryland
in 1991.***

(Photos by Norma Hooks)

