

The Making Of A Drum Company

The Autobiography of William F. Ludwig II

Heritage

In 1886 my grandfather, Henry Jakob Ludwig, left Germany with his family and struck out for the New



The birthplace of Wm. F. Ludwig Sr., Nenderoth, Germany. The village of Nenderoth is 60 miles north of Frankfurt, in the Rhine River Valley.

World. He became part of the great migration wave of the later part of the 19th century. The Ludwigs landed in New York City where friends and fellow musicians awaited to steer Henry Ludwig to work in his profession as a trombonist.

These plans were torpedoed by the New York Musician's Union which ruled that there must be a waiting period of one year before new arrivals could work in the music business. So much for overseas planning! In dismay, Henry called friends in the German community in Chicago and they assured him there was no waiting period there, and the cost to join was only \$1.00. What a buy!



The Ludwigs left New York without playing a note and trained to Chicago where in the heart of the German community Heinrich Jakob Ludwig set up his family of three, with one more son still to come. It proved to be the ideal location to begin life anew even though no one in the family spoke a word of English!

The elder Ludwig immediately got work through contacts because of his ability as a talented trombonist. Thanks to experience gained in the German Military Bands, he was an excellent reader which meant he could play all types of music. (It was to spare his son, William Frederick Ludwig, that same cruel and exhausting two-year compulsory military service in 1870 that prompted

him to flee to the New World.)

The Ludwigs settled into a rented wooden house on 14th street near Halsted Avenue in 1886. The children, Lina Elizabeth, William, and later Theobald, were all enrolled in the German school in the neighborhood and promptly learned English as a second language.

As newcomers in that school, they were often taunted. William had all the buttons ripped from his brand new suit the first week. Gradually the family blended into the community and father Henry found enough work in the music community to support his family and arrange for music lessons for William and Theobald.

Dental care in those days was extremely rudimentary—when you had a toothache you pulled the tooth and that was that. Henry had lost some teeth already which caused a weakening of the support a brass player needs to form a strong embouchure. He knew this could only get worse so he resolved to school his sons in any instrument but wind instruments. That left three choices—piano, violin, and drums. Naturally both boys started on the violin. There was plenty of work for violinists, thus their earning ability would be large indeed.

After two years both boys had had enough of fiddling and simply rebelled—to the utter disgust of their father. No musical training was provided for the eldest Ludwig child, Lina. As a girl she was expected to marry young, be supported by her husband, and have children.

Since the boys refused to practice, the teacher quit and left father Ludwig to move along to the next non-wind instrument—the piano. The piano was a perfect choice because it taught the bass clef as well as the treble clef. A teacher was hired to come to the house and a piano had to be purchased. The piano set Henry back \$35.00—nearly a month's wages in those days! Again Pop was frustrated as two years later first Theobald and then William announced they were finished with the piano lessons. Father was again furious. All was not lost, however, since the four years of musical study, however fitful, provided the embryo for what was to follow in the political campaign of 1889.

William Jennings Bryan was running for President of the country on the free silver ticket. There was a torchlight parade through the Ludwig neighborhood and William was there sharing in the excitement as he marched alongside the drum and bugle corps of



Elsa and Little Billy (the author), age

the Illinois National Guard all the way to the end of the parade. He was fascinated with the drummers and inquired of their instructor, George Cattlet.

The next day William Ludwig announced to anyone of the family who would listen that he wanted to become a drummer. Since this fit Henry's initial requirement of a non-wind instrument, a drum William would have, and lessons from the Guard Instructor George Cattlet. Thus a career was born— not only that of a great percussionist but the foremost drum builder of that entire century!

I was born September 13, 1916, in the Robert Burns Hospital on Washington Boulevard in Chicago, just a half block west of Garfield Park. It is long gone, converted to a parking lot. My interest in fine literature could have come from my place of birth, for Robert Burns was one of Scotland's greatest poets!

My earliest recollections are of peering through crib posts on sunny afternoons in the back room of our apartment in Rogers Park on Touhy Avenue about 1918. It was summertime and breezes wafted lazily through the lightly curtained windows. Dad worked at the drum plant Ludwig & Ludwig and played nights in the percussion section of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Mother, Elsa, had been a lyric soprano in the

Chicago Grand Opera Company where she met father who was the principal percussionist about 1912. They were married June 1, 1914 and honeymooned in The Congress Hotel across the street from the Auditorium Theater on Congress Street so they wouldn't miss rehearsals and performances. When I came along in 1916, mother retired from the opera company to devote full time to motherhood.



Elsa's wedding dress, June 1, 1914

Ludwig & Ludwig was growing, so father resigned from the Symphony in 1918 to devote all of his energies to drum making. There must have been enough money rolling in to allow to pay sufficient salaries to both Ludwigs— my father, and his younger brother by eight years, Theobald Ludwig.

My father's brother, Theo (Ted), was an important part of the Ludwig & Ludwig drum company. When America became involved in World War I in April 1917 the government moved quickly to manage the economy by identifying scarce materials and placing restrictions on their use for nonessential items. Since drums were quickly identified as nonessential to the



war effort, brass, steel, copper and other metals were banned to drum companies. The company changed over to rope tensioned drums.

One very large bid was under consideration and in anticipation of getting that order my father and Theo purchased all the iron hooks needed for the 400 field drums. The order went to the Fred Gretsch Company of Brooklyn, New York. Theo was sent East to find out why. He found that the bid had been changed from fifteen inch diameter shells to fifteen and a half- a size Ludwig could not make. In an effort to find out why the change, Theo looked up the Government chief in charge of all musical instrument purchases; one Colonel Brockenshire at the Philadelphia Quartermaster Depot. Theo went there only to learn that Brockenshire was caught up in the influenza epidemic of that year and confined to the influenza ward of the Government hospital.

Somehow, Theobald got into that ward and found from Brockenshire that the Gretsch Company, in collusion with a local jobber from New York City, Buegeleisen & Jacobson, had convinced the army that the larger diameter on a field drum was better in producing volume than the fifteen inch. Theobald had solved the dilemma and made plans to return to Chicago and his brother to

spread the news. Since he had the afternoon until train time he called on a local dealer there in Philadelphia who took one look at him and said "Man, you're sick. You better get back as soon as possible. You look like you have caught the flu." That dealer called my father that night to alert him to meet the train in the morning. My father did just that and was appalled to find Theo running a very high fever and unable to even get off the train. An ambulance was sent for but it was of no use, for young Theobald Ludwig died within four days.

My father was, of course, devastated. One half of Ludwig and Ludwig was gone, and at the early age of only 29! My father related this story to me for the rest of his life and placed his portrait of Theo in the pages of many future Ludwig catalogs.

Although the order never came, I have always drawn inspiration from Theo's effort to save a lost order and it has inspired me to go the extra mile in many a business deal since then.

Evanston, Illinois – 1924

Though my father had resigned from the Symphony and the Opera Company to devote all of his efforts to the growing drum business, he continued to play, as a serious amateur. He joined the Shrine in order to play with the great Medina Brass Band and enlarge his contacts with the business community of Chicago. About this time he received a call from A.R. McAllister, director of the prize-winning Joliet High School Band. This was a key call in his and my life. McAllister said his drummers were the weakest section of his band and asked if my father could come out to Joliet to help out. Joliet is only around forty miles from Chicago but in 1922 it was a day's drive round trip due to the very poor roads. It was, therefore, at some sacrifice, that my father



loaded up the car with practice pads which were newly developed, drum sticks, and drum methods, such as they were, and headed out for Joliet. When he arrived he was appalled at the poor quality of the section. No two drummers had their drums set up at anywhere near a correct playing angle and no two held the drum sticks correctly. He spent the entire day with that section and improved their performance tremendously. This was the first drum clinic in percussion history, but more than that, it gave him an idea— why not participate in drum education on a company level? Thus, the kernel of an idea was born which later led to his formation of the National Association of Rudimental Drummers— the N.A.R.D. and standardizing the rudimental system of drumming.

Evanston

In 1922 my parents picked out a corner lot in Evanston, at 1001 Maple Street, and built a brick colonial three-story house on it. We moved in the following year from Rogers Park. My sister Bettie was with us, having been born on March 23, 1920. Among my earliest tasks as an eight year old were to mow the lawn in the summer, shovel snow in the winter, and crank the heating oil from the underground storage tank into the indoor feeding tank to the furnace. This activity lasted about a half hour a week depending on the weather and I am sure that being right handed built up my right arm muscle tone!

Shortly after moving in my father brought home a practice pad mounted on a drum stand (one of the first produced) and a big instruction book and a huge pair of drum sticks, set it all up in my bedroom and announced that my drum lessons would begin that moment. “What fun,” I thought. Each evening after supper, which was always on the table at six o’clock, it was up to my bedroom to work out on that rubber-covered block of wood. The novelty soon wore off (in about a week) and I started skipping some practice periods. My father soon caught on and raised hell which led to tears and wailing. I went to my mother for protection. She told Dad to lay off. He told her in no uncertain terms to stay out of it and the lessons resumed, this time on a daily basis. Thus

for half an hour every night it was da-da-ma-ma-da-da-ma-ma.... left left right right and at a very slow deliberate cadence. Most dull and boring, believe me! Often I would attempt to increase the tempo but Dad would slow me back down to a monotonous *even* cadence. It was explained to me that what I was working on was the long roll. Rudiment number one. The most basic of the rudiments of drumming and that it had to be learned right or not at all. Slowly, slowly the cadence was quickened but only when it was even hand to hand.

In about two months I was performing twice as fast as I had begun, but the effort was exhausting not to mention boring. My father wouldn’t quit and drilled me each night after dinner on that gum rubber pad a half hour daily. Finally, in the third month, I requested a promotion to a drum because I was getting sick of the smell of gum rubber. To this day I can recognize it and



still hate it! Dad turned me down, saying I had to learn more rudiments before he would bring home a drum. Imagine it! Here was one of the largest producers of drums in the world turning out hundreds of drums daily and would he bring his eight-year-old son one? No, sir! Not until I mastered more rudiments than the long roll! A man who had seemed so kind and loving— my father— had become in my eyes a monster— my worst enemy. In the summer time the boys in my neighborhood were outside playing ball and calling for me after supper but no, I had to keep lifting and dropping those big heavy sticks.... da-da-ma-ma-da-da-ma-ma until my arms and wrists ached. Finally, toward Christmas



Ludwig family portrait in the year 1922. Sister Bettie, mother Elsa, the author age 6, father Wm. F.Ludwig Sr.

time, I was performing more like a steam locomotive. And to my surprise, the beatings were nice and even. A tinge of pride now began to creep into my practice sessions and I no longer needed daily practice supervision. Did I get a reward? No, I got another rudiment! The flam. Very patiently my father guided the sticks in my first flams. High hand hits hard, low hand lightly. Then change hands, right high, left low. And so on.. I must admit the flam came rather easily but still each practice session began and closed with running down the long roll at least twice, open, close and open but never speeding up so much that the beatings became uneven.

After Christmas, 1923 came a new year and more rudiments. I had finally reached the forlorn conclusion that I would have to learn all twenty-six rudiments before I would get that drum! Finally in the summer of 1924 (one year after that first agonizing lesson), I was half way through to my objective. Still no drum. Eight months later, in March of 1925, I tackled No. 26 and got my drum... a 10-inch deep shell fourteen inches in diam-

eter, single tension, calf heads, with sticks and sling to match! That drum had a plain mahogany finish but still I was so proud of it that I played it for any visitors who came to our house. Having spent two years on that gum rubber practice pad I was now ready for some drum cadences. But first came marching with it. My father showed me how to sling up with the drum at the proper angle resting on the left knee. It was important not to let the drum slip off sideways which sharply changed the angle of the head causing the right stick bead to dig into the calf head and often tear it. Since the drum was very light weight, (I was ten at the time), it was difficult to march and balance it on the left knee. From this experience my father conceived a leg rest to steady the drum on the march. He had his engineers make a model up and brought the first sample home



The author, Age 6

for me to try and it worked. But it could not be folded for storage with a canvas cover covering the drum. Back to the shop it went where further tinkering in the engineering department created a clever folding hinge with an on-lock and an off-lock which became most sought after world-wide. Hundreds of thousands were produced and sold and copied by every drum company that existed at that time and later as well.

My first complete piece was of course the standard roll-off, followed in short order by the standard 2/4 and 6/8. I joined the Boy Scouts of America and played in the Evanston chapter Drum and Bugle Corps. Naturally my solid rudimental training gave me the advantage and I was soon appointed drum master of the ten man drum section. I worked out various routines on the march and signals indicating changes from 2/4 to 6/8 rhythms.

All went well until one fateful day in the summer of 1926. My mother gravely announced that I was to take piano lessons! "Good grief," I thought. "What next?" And before I could muster up a defense, the piano teacher was at the door one Saturday morning!

He was a very neatly attired young man and I hated



him on sight. I just didn't want piano lessons! But my father backed up my mother and I could see that defiance would only cut into my play time. They thought I should get acquainted with the treble clef as well as the bass clef which is the drum clef. We had a mahogany finish Steinway baby grand piano prominently situated in the bay window of our living room so that the neighbors could not miss it and see that we were a family of culture and not just a bunch of ruffian drummers. My baby sister Bettie also got roped in and her half hour lesson on Saturday mornings followed mine. My father liked the idea of both of us suffering lessons, as he could see some return on his piano investment. Being four years older, my progress on the scales was much faster than hers and gave me an advantage which I used to taunt her unmercifully. Saturday became the most dreaded day of the week. Friday was the cram day for both of us, so a system of whose turn it was on the piano was refereed by mother.

After several weeks on the circle of fifths, I was given a piece. It could have been *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*, I don't recall, but the fact that I could produce some melody and harmony began to appeal to me. I am certain this revelation occurs to everyone tackling the mastery of any musical instrument. Six months or so performing for house guests provides a satisfying sensation of accomplishment. A dividend of sorts. In my case, however, the piano study was preparing me for a later day when I would be confronted with many percussion instruments to master other than just the field drum. I was being grounded in music, harmony, and rhythm— the three elements of music.

Culver Military Academy— Summer 1927

In my eleventh year I had the opportunity to spend a summer at the Culver Military Academy summer camp program at Culver, Indiana. At the end of June I was packed off with my drum sticks and pad to the Academy. I loved it! Each day was filled with new experiences and lessons in woodcrafts, camping, boating, and of course the drum and bugle corps. Each evening all six hundred boys in the camp assembled in their dress uniforms on the parade grounds to pass in review before visitors. The cannon on the hill fired the evening salute and the Nation's colors were gently lowered while the entire corps of cadets stood at attention and hand salute. All except we drummers who maintained a steady fortissimo roll. My love of the military customs was born at Culver. Learning and performing the routines in the Culver drum and bugle corps sharpened my hand technique and strong sense of rhythmic cadence.

Back home I threw myself into renewed piano and