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HISTORIC PIANO GETS NEW LIFE

> PRESIDENT CALVIN COOLIDGE'S 1909 GRAND RESTORED <

By Levi J. Long
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

When it comes to the nooks and crannies of a historic piano, some telling details can be found about a previous owner.

A look at the worn and subtle indents in the ivory keyboards of a piano once owned by President Calvin Coolidge offers some clues to the man who served as the 30th president of the United States.

"This piano was used by someone who played very well," said Jens Witter, owner of Antique Piano, an East Side business specializing in piano restoration, repair, refinishing and tuning.

This spring Witter was given the job to restore a 1909 Mason & Hamlin Boston grand piano that served as the presidential piano for Coolidge.

Witter's job was to preserve the piano and restore it to its original condition.

Standing inside his repair studio, Witter tapped at the worn and indented ivory keys.

"This (piano) wasn't just looked at. Someone played it quite a bit," Witter said.

Further noting the worn "hammer felt" inside the pi-

ano, Witter said that too was a tell-tale sign of the piano's frequent use.

"It's like a car tire. If the tires are worn out, you know it's been driven a lot," he said.

Witter, 43, immigrated to the United States from Germany with his wife, Trudy, and their two children in 2002.

He was raised in Leipzig, Germany, and was influenced by his father, a professional pianist, to study music.

As a young man, Witter said he had a choice to either go to medical school or pursue his musical interests.

"But what I do is medicine," Witter said of piano restoration. "I can have a 250-year-old patient and I can bring them back to life."

Witter eventually earned a Ph.D. in music and wrote an encyclopedia that identifies and catalogues more than 30,000 German pianos.

During the Coolidge piano restoration,



Jens Witter and his wife, Trudy, sit at the restored 1909 Mason & Hamlin Boston grand piano that belonged to President Coolidge.

Witter said he also found some dried pine needles and pieces of sheet music under the piano's sound board. He's keeping the scraps in a plastic baggie.

For the past five months, Witter has been repairing the 6-foot-long mahogany piano and is getting it ready for its move this week to the New Apostolic Church in Ontario, Calif.

Witter is a member of the New Apostolic Church, 8282 E. Pima St., in Tucson and donated a restored piano to the congregation last year. When California church members were in Tucson last year, they asked Witter if he could find a piano to restore for their church.

After a few months, Witter found the presidential piano at Hachenberg & Sons Piano, 4333 E. Broadway.

Matt Hachenberg, an employee at Hachenberg & Sons Piano, said a customer traded in that piano at their store

earlier this year.

"We thought it was strange that someone traded it in since it holds a lot of historical value," he said.

After authenticating the piano with dealers, Hachenberg and Witter found out it was owned by Coolidge and that it had found its way to Tucson.

Rather than try to restore it, the Hachenbergs decided to let Witter buy the piano for the Ontario church.

Kevin Theilacker, musical director of the Ontario church, then gave Witter a \$14,000 donation from a church member to buy the piano and cover the costs for restoration materials.

But because the piano was so old, some pieces weren't readily available and had to be custom-made, Witter said.

John Rix, president of Cybernetic Research Labs., a manufacturing facility in Tucson, created an "agraffe" piece need-

ed for the piano, which holds piano strings in place.

Without charge, Rix looked at a plan for creating an agraaffe piece and created a model on a computer program, found the material and fabricated the part needed for the restoration.

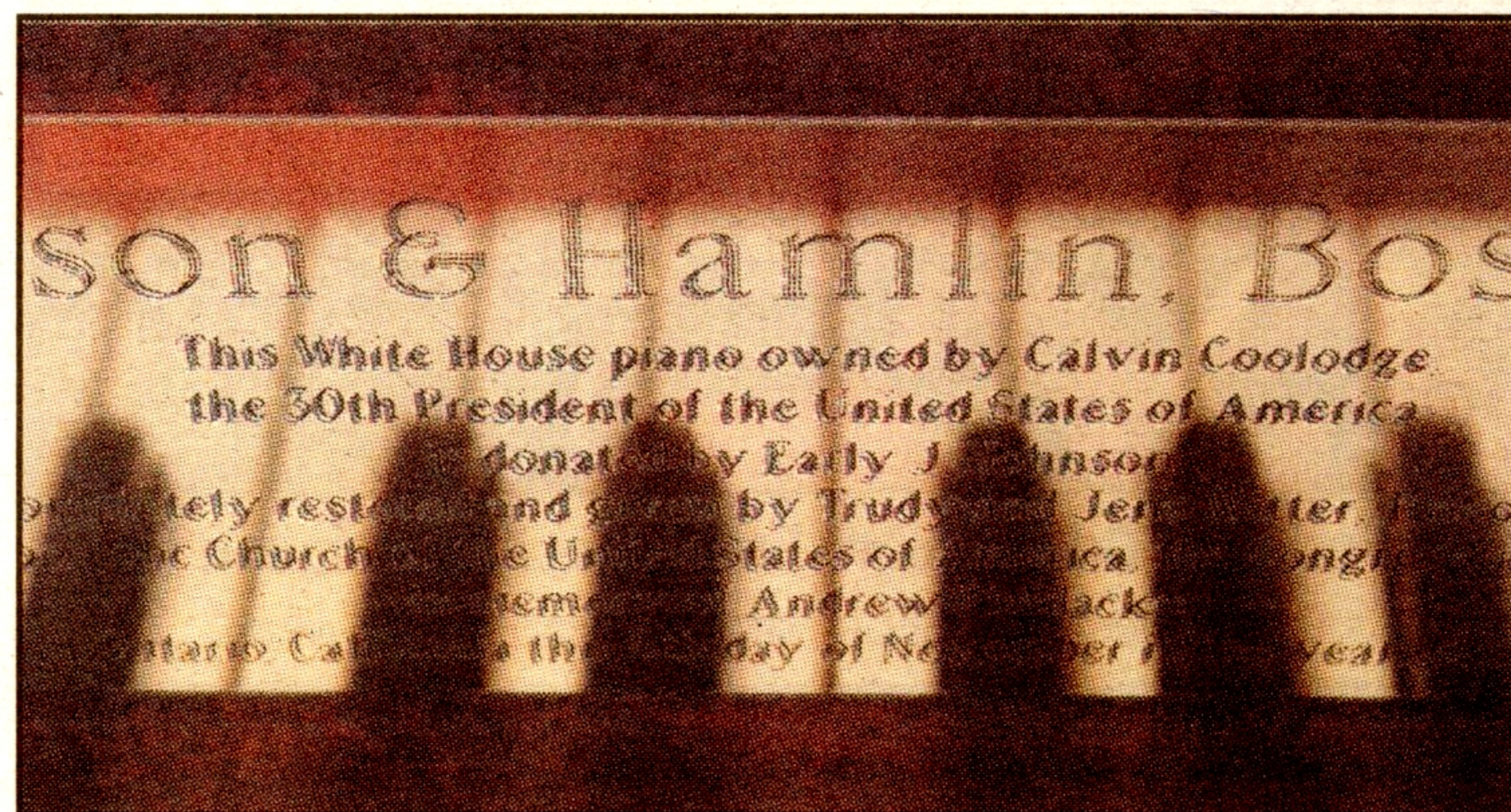
"We wanted to be a little patriotic," Rix said. "We felt like we should help to preserve a piece of American history."

Theilacker said the church has no plans to sell the piano, even with some appraisers setting a price of at least \$500,000.

"We place a higher sentimental value on it," Theilacker said. "Our intent is not to sell it but to enjoy it."

"It's a historical treasure," Witter agreed. "You can't place a price on that."

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A small plaque tells the history of the Coolidge piano, now restored, and ready for the New Apostolic Church in Ontario, Calif.