Lovin' Life Sfter 50

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Coolidge White House piano restored by local Jens Witter

By Faye Brown

Lovin' Life After 50

The piano that President Calvin J. Coolidge and his wife, Grace, had in the White House has been restored in Tucson by Jens Witter. Jens and his wife, Trudy, and children Julius, 7, and Laura, 5, came to Tucson from Germany nearly three years ago.

The mahogany six-foot grand "Mason & Hamlin, Boston" was made in 1909.

President Coolidge was in office 1923-29. His wife was a gifted musician and enjoyed playing the instrument. Eventually it was brought to Tucson by heirs and Jens found it in a local store.

It was in ruin, but now it is completely restored, he said. Using the finest materials, he

ordered the strings and fish glue from Germany. Now brought back to life, the national treasure is in the New Apostolic Church of Los Angeles in Ontario, California.

"A church is the right place for that piano to be," Jens said. When the women's choir of that church performed in Tucson some time ago, Jens was enchanted with the beautiful voices and offered the piano to the choirmaster.

"If you have a moved heart, you can move someone else's heart," he said. "If the hair stands up on my neck I know it's good music."

Basically, the church paid for the parts and Jens donated his labor. He was a minister in the church in East Germany.

Born in Leipzig, East Germany, Jens said his stepfather, Eberhard Weise, was a pianist with the Central German Broadcasting orchestra. As there wasn't much for a young man to do under the communist regime, Jens did research on piano makers since the beginning of time and had a lot of conversations with old people.

"I could see that if I would not write down what they told me the abundance of information would be lost for the future," he said. He wrote his notes on cards and after 25 years he published his first book, the Piano Encyclopedia, containing 32,000 names of European piano makers, dealers and people who worked on pianos and stringed keyboard instruments. Other books followed.

He studied cabinet making and piano making and earned a PhD in music sociology, and once did work for Prince Constantin von Hohenlohe at the Castle of Schillingsfurst, Bavaria.

"I have a personal relationship with

pianos, they become as friends," Jens said. "If I were to be born again I would be a piano maker again. I love it! I have the most wonderful job in the world... If you press on one key you move close to 100 parts. Each instrument is different... I wanted to study medicine in the beginning. I figured out that I wouldn't be good enough in that field. If the people are 100 years old the doctors have not such great ideas, but if

my patients are 250 years old, I bring them back to a new life for the next 100 years."

There were more than 100 piano factories in Leipzig but now there are only one or two. His workbench, brought from Germany, is 160 years

old and decorated with carvings of Beethoven and Mozart. You need a little bit of inspiration in the workshop, he said.

"For me, coming to this country was the fulfillment of a lifetime dream and I will never take it for granted," Jens said. "I love it. I love the warm weather, cactus, sunny bright sky, the people."

He said that in East Germany, 20 miles before the border there was another border that people were not to go near. Even if you found a way around it, you would come to an electrical fence, mine fields, a line where German shepherd dogs would run and attack you, then several hundred yards with a watchtower with an armed guard and helicopters and an enormous fence. There was not a chance whatever of escaping.

"On my 13th birthday my brother saw a shooting star," Jens said. "He told me I had to wish something. He had read a book about cacti and I saw a picture of Saguaro National Monument East with a saguaro. I thought it would be great to see that. In November 1989 I applied for release from citizenship in East Germany. It took a long time. I came to Arizona to see the cactus. I came out of the airport and saw a saguaro. It was like being hit by a flashlight. I wanted to stay and die in this place.

"It took four and a half years to convince the U.S. government that I was a person with extraordinary abilities. This was a hard fight, but I'm here – I'm here!" he said. He has a green card and has applied for citizenship.

In addition to restoring and building, Jens also tunes pianos. Contact him at 520-722-2882, cell 520-440-9584. Website www.Antiquepiano.com; email Arizonapiano@aol.com.

