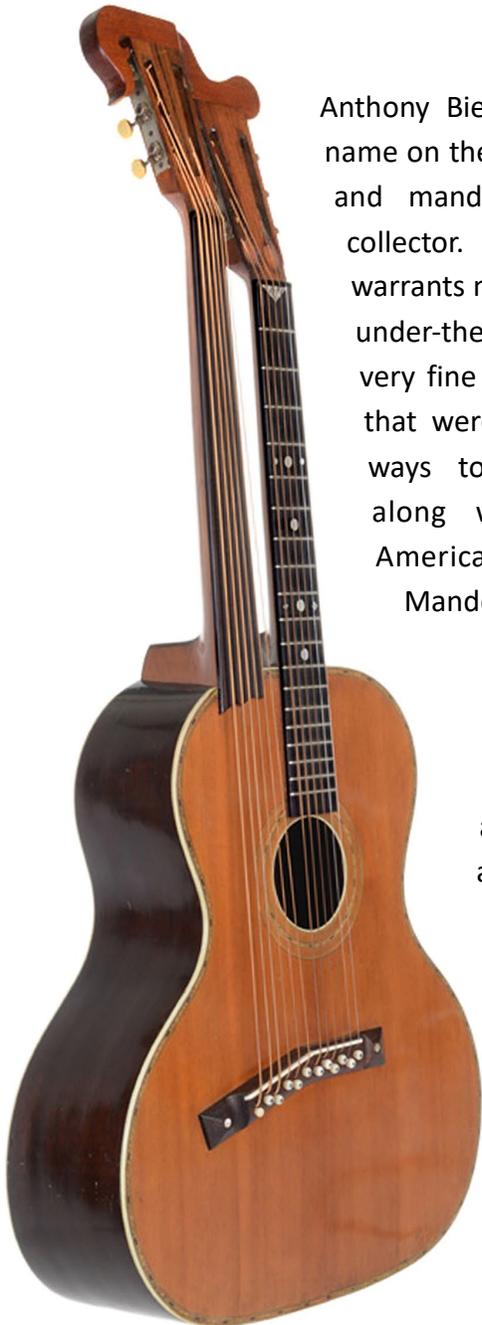


Tony Biehl, a Harp Guitar Manufacturer Ahead of His Time

Gregg Miner



Anthony Biehl is not exactly a name on the lips of every guitar and mandolin historian and collector. But I believe that he warrants more attention as an under-the-radar producer of very fine fretted instruments that were superior in many ways to his competitors', along with his part in America's BMG (Banjo, Mandolin & Guitar) story.



Biehl's obscurity today is understandable. His production period was a relative flash in the pan of less than nine years and his instruments are extremely rare today. Though he was a regular advertiser in *The Cadenza* magazine beginning with their inaugural September 1894 issue, he may not have received many orders outside of his native Davenport, Iowa.

Indeed, most surviving Biehl instruments seem to turn up there. In Davenport he quickly established a reputation as a fine musician and bandleader of two seemingly unrelated families of instruments; he not only frequented, but performed and taught in both brass orchestras *and* guitar & mandolin circles.

Right: *The Cadenza*, September 1894. Tony Biehl was America's first builder of harp guitars to advertise in *The Cadenza*, though they were not then specifically listed.

Biehl taught mandolin and guitar, but his greatest success was as a composer and music publisher. To this he then added guitar and mandolin production, which appear to have been the sole instruments he produced.

ACKNOWLEDGED SUPERIOR TO ALL OTHERS.

THE BIEHL

Mandolins 

 and Guitars.

Teachers and professionals, send for catalogue.

TONY BIEHL, Davenport, Ia.

This May-June 1897 *Cadenza* profile gives a “snapshot in time” overview of his activities, family, and reputation at that time:

We present herewith the jovial features of Tony Biehl, the popular and well-known teacher of mandolin, guitar, etc., of Davenport, Iowa. Mr. Biehl was born in Philadelphia in 1860 and early received a musical education, having played with bands and orchestras since he was fourteen years of age, and has since thoroughly toured the country, playing with different traveling combinations.

Eleven years ago he settled in Davenport to teach the mandolin, guitar and other instruments and his success as a teacher, director of clubs, composer and manufacturer is well known to our readers. He has taught the mandolin and guitar in many colleges and neighboring cities and has instructed some of the best mandolin clubs in the West and is justly considered one of the ablest and most successful teachers in the United States.

Mr. Biehl is married and his charming wife, who is also a clever musician, has ably assisted him. Then, they have a family of little girls who would put any man on his mettle. There's Lucy, twelve years old, whose mandolin and piano playing shows

the careful teaching she has always had. Leona, although only ten, plays the guitar very nicely and even Baby Grace, the sweetest one of all, has already done work upon the violin that would be a credit to a great many who have long since passed her age—eight years. So circumstanced it is small wonder Mr. Biehl has succeeded.

Thousands of players have been delighted with his mandolin compositions, “Wekota” and “Tri-City” marches, as well as with his “University” and “Villisca” waltzes and “Serpentine Dance.” Besides these efforts he has issued a number of others including original pieces, arrangements, medleys, etc., all of which have become popular.

Mr. Biehl is vice-president of Otto's military band and orchestra, and is one of the recognized leaders in Davenport musical circles. His work in the interest of the mandolin and guitar cannot be too highly praised, and those who have the good fortune to meet him personally will find him to be a most agreeable gentleman as well as an artist.



Though the instruments bore his name, there's no evidence that Biehl himself was a luthier. City directories revealed three men that worked for Biehl: his brothers William and John, and Frank Page. Presumably, these men were cabinet makers or even had instrument-building experience. Or perhaps they were just an extremely talented team that took apart a few quality guitars and mandolins provided by Biehl and his students to see how they were built.

Many of the Biehl instruments were “presentation models” featuring great design and detail. What I would really like to know is who designed Biehl's jumbo body with the distinctive wide lower bout – Tony, himself?

Left: Two plain Biehl guitars owned by Rod Davenport, one a standard parlor style, the other featuring the giant-sized body.



Above, an exquisite Biehl bowlback mandolin. (Image courtesy of Graham MacDonald)



A similarly beautiful mandolinetto. (Image courtesy of Graham MacDonald)

DON'T DELAY
 In ordering these 4 hits for 2 Mandolins and Guitar.
 Princes of Iran March, by Lee Grabbe.....40c
 Weiner Leider Waltz, arr. by Tony Biehl40c
 Lissi Redowa, " " " "40c
 La Villisca Waltz, concert number, Tony Biehl .60c
 Usual discount to dealers and teachers.
TONY BIEHL, Pub'r, Davenport, Ia.

By the late 1890s, Tony Biehl maintained a small factory that produced both instruments and printed music. He moved to a new location in 1901; perhaps he was trying to expand the size of his business.

Above: Biehl ran continual ads for both instruments and sheet music, including his own compositions (*The Cadenza*, May-June, 1897)

He didn't succeed. Three years later Biehl's business was bankrupt. The January 27th, 1904 Daily Leader described the sale of assets, including finished and unfinished instruments, sheet music, printing plates and associated copyrights.

A SNAP OFFER
 The entire stock of Mandolins and Guitars, finished and in course of construction, material, patterns, moulds, machinery and 32 pieces of Mandolin and Guitar music, with plates and copyrights, which Tony Biehl assigned are
FOR SALE, PRICE CHEAP
Ad 1853
FRANK A. COOPER
 DAVENPORT, IOWA

Left: An April, 1904 notice in the *Cadenza* from Biehl's assignee.

Right: August, 1904: The new owner of the Biehl library.

Apparently, there was still life left in Biehl's musical legacy.

THE HAL COFFEL AND TONY BIEHL PUBLICATIONS
FOR
Mandolin, Guitar and Banjo
 are now owned and published by George Stannard, Trenton, N. J. New Catalogue now ready represents works by the greatest writers and composers. Will be mailed free to any address. Now is the time to select your music for the coming season. No teacher or club's repertoire is complete without these arrangements. Every grade from the beginner to the concert soloist.
 Subscribe for new monthly issues. One or two copies each at printer's price.
GEORGE STANNARD
Music Publisher
 121 South Warren Street Trenton, N. J.

Tony Biehl was down but not out. He continued as a performer, and he and his wife and three daughters became a successful Vaudeville act. According to photograph collector Mike Brubaker, the Biehls “joined the Dubinsky Brothers Stock Company, which ran several touring ‘tent productions.’ The family acted in comedies and melodramas and played music as well. Based mostly out of Jefferson City, Missouri, the daughters married other performers and after their father's death in 1929 kept the production going as the Biehl Sisters Orchestra at least until 1937.”



Tony Biehl and the Biehl Family Orchestra, including his three daughters: Lucy the oldest, on clarinet, Leona on the horn, and Grace the youngest, on cornet (the relationship of the other two is unknown, though to me the drummer looks more like a sister than the horn player; the identifications come from Brubaker). This photo is believed to be from the general timeframe of the close of the instrument factory in 1904. (Image courtesy of Mike Brubaker)

Biehl Harp Guitars: First Discoveries

Naturally, I first learned of Tony Biehl through my harp guitar research. The first instrument unearthed had unfortunately been converted to a 6-string. A second 6-string conversion (at right) turned up on eBay in 2009. I attribute these questionable conversions to the fact that later



owners were 6-string players intimidated by the idea of the harp guitar, the lucky happenstance that Biehl's harp guitars had the main neck centered on the body, and the fact that with their huge bodies they sound great.

A friend (Anthony Powell) discovered the first intact Biehl harp guitar (at left) while doing a brief stint in the repair shop of Gruhn Guitars in Nashville in 2008. I immediately bought it when they made me an offer I couldn't refuse, having them ship it directly to Kerry Char in Portland for restoration.

When I later finally had it in hand, I was again reminded of just how *large* so many of these early American harp guitars were. With Dyer and Knutsen hollow-arm harp guitars at a healthy 15-16" wide and the common Gibson Style U seemingly much too big for a lap at 18" in width, it didn't seem like harp guitars could *get* much bigger.

I was wrong. The Biehl has a lower bout a full 19" wide and 5-1/2" deep at the end pin!

Built circa 1900, the size of Biehl's harp guitar was impressive. More impressive was that the instrument – built not by its namesake nor master luthiers, but by local cabinet makers – today looks and sounds like a surprisingly modern instrument. Significantly, while other makers often used friction tuners for the neck strings, and friction tuners or even zither pins for the sub-bass strings, Biehl shrewdly fitted his double-neck harp guitar with *geared tuners* for every string. Thus, it stays in tune and is therefore much more enjoyable to play – today, and undoubtedly back in the 1890s!

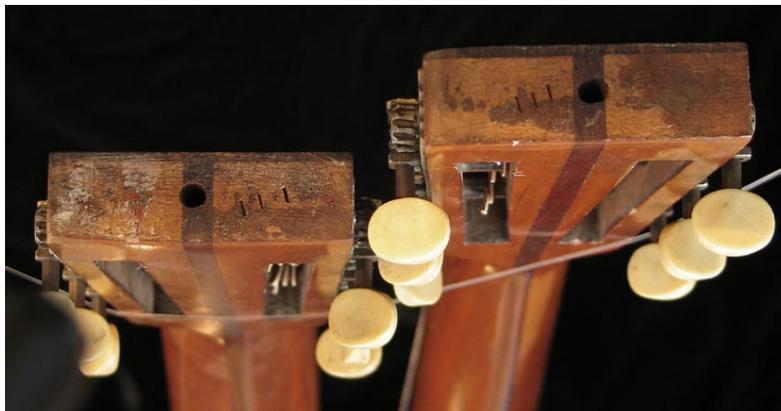
At first glance, many guitarists mistake this form of harp guitar as a just a standard “double neck guitar” – missing the fact that its second “neck” has no frets. The fun thing about the Biehl? While the sub-bass neck was never intended to be fretted, its set-up allows that neck to double as a fretless bass!¹

The builders of Biehl's instruments did a decent, if not meticulous, job on the inside of this instrument, while the outside is clean and simply appointed. It is the body plantilla shape that is most unique, with its narrow waist and very wide “hips.” It's a sturdy, ladder-braced instrument, yet has a tone remarkably like a hollow-arm Dyer harp guitar. In fact, the sub-bass tone is as close to a Dyer as I think I've heard on any other non-Larson instrument. The neck strings just get a bit thin sounding at the top end. It has a 25-1/2" scale, with the sub-bass vibrating lengths ranging from 27-3/8" to 28-1/4". Dimensions are: upper bout: 13"; waist: 10-1/4"; lower bout: 19"; body length: 21-1/8"; nut width: 1-13/16". It has a spruce top with stained mahogany back and sides. The headplates and bridge are Brazilian rosewood. All the harp guitars I've seen have slightly fancy mother-of-pearl markers, with that triangle at the nut. The binding and soundhole include



In lieu of a label, Biehl used a wooden medallion picturing a harp, with the words “Biehl” and “Davenport, IA.”

intricate colored wood purfling.



When I first saw this instrument, I imagined it to have only simple, non-connected headstocks. Upon acquiring it, it was obvious that there was originally something connecting the two heads. *But what?*

¹ You can see me show that briefly in the middle of my “Droopy Dog” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yx0qprdqPWA>

Until I could determine that, there wasn't much I could do.

Meanwhile, I had Kerry Char reset the main neck for playability. Yes, I was being cheap – but we saw no need or compelling reason to spend the time and money to reset the sub-bass neck. Alas, hindsight is 20/20 and I regret not doing both neck resets to match!

Yes – no sooner had Kerry completed initial restoration and neck reset than I acquired this rare unmarked and undated photo. Not only did it include what was surely a Biehl harp guitar, but there was my missing headpiece!



The fancy mandolin at center looks like a Biehl also. The 6-string guitar appears to be an 1890s Joseph Bohmann, built in Chicago, while the two plain 12-string bowlbacks are anyone's guess. I was curious about a possible Bohmann influence for Biehl's large body size, and here is a compelling connection, as this group of friends bought one from each maker.²

² Bohmann was building his giant "contra bass" harp guitars by 1894. While 19" wide like the Biehl, their bodies were much larger, being 6" deep and *two feet* long!

For all I know, this could actually be *my own* Biehl in the historical photo – the fret markers all match, though some appear slightly larger.

Check it out below and see what you think!



Obviously, I couldn't now leave the instrument in its current state. The smart thing would have been to reset the bass neck to match, though Kerry had warned me that because of their different lengths, it would be hard to get the ends of the two heads to align perfectly as Biehl's builders surely did. And so, I skipped it and asked Bill Fiorella to reference the photo and carve me something similar but in three dimensions; i.e.: with an S-curve in-between to accommodate the offset. We figured one could always reset the bass neck and re-do it properly later if desired.

Below, the end result.





As I prepared this article, I couldn't figure out why my harp guitar's shape looked so distinctive, while the body of Biehl's 19" wide 6-string guitar (at left) appears more "normal."

What was the difference?

Left: Biehl 6-string guitar owned by Roger Wilming



Interesting! To my eye, it seems to just be the size of the soundhole, which creates a fascinating optical illusion. When overlaid, the upper and lower bouts and waist appear *identical*, demonstrating that the factory used a single plantilla (mould). But to my eye & brain, the harp guitar's slightly smaller 3- $\frac{3}{4}$ " soundhole (above right) makes the body proportions appear more pronounced. *What do you see?* Perhaps Biehl and his team reduced the size of the hole so the harp guitar could have more soundboard area and bracing for the extra tension?

The First Biehl Harp Guitar?



An entirely different body shape appears on a curious Biehl harp guitar discovered in 2015. An eBay basket case, the new owner (John McKinstry) meticulously restored it, ultimately donating it to Davenport's Putnam Museum. Both then kindly shared images and information.

I wonder if this might be the "new harp guitar" – or the first experiment for same – announced in the Nov-Dec 1897 *Cadenza* issue.

The Tony Biehl mandolin and guitar factory, of Davenport, Iowa, is turning out a new harp guitar with sub-bass strings thirty-six inches in length. By this means the proper tone is given to each string when in tune and it is said to be the only perfect harp guitar yet constructed. Mr. Biehl has also completed for the trade a mandolin made from finest old cremona maple which has a wonderful tone quality.

By "in length" we can assume Biehl is referring to scale length (vibrating string length). 36" is indeed fairly dramatic for sub-bass strings, though the subs on this instrument only range in scale from about 32-1/8" to 34-3/4" – *almost* long enough.

If Biehl was "showing off" and counting the extra length behind the long curved nut, he'd be very close to his 36 inches. So, this is a compelling clue that the instrument might be the model referenced in the advertisement.

On the next page, if we compare it to my instrument with its own subs ranging from 27-3/8" to a maximum of just 28-1/4" – we can see Biehl was definitely going for it! He even extended the neck scale of this one to 26" (as opposed to mine's 25.5" "standard").



All photos of this instrument courtesy of John McKinstry.



Curiously, the body of the “1897” instrument on the left is much smaller – just 16” and 4- $\frac{3}{4}$ ” deep (compared to my common jumbo model at 19” and 5- $\frac{1}{2}$ ”). If “new” and seeking “proper tone,” why the smaller body? Perhaps “new harp guitar” simply meant that Biehl was introducing something “new to the market,” and this was actually his *first* attempt at a harp guitar. That’s my current working hypothesis. Theoretically then, his standard 19” model then improved upon this with its larger body, as he realized the extra bass string length was also unnecessary.

There are many other interesting differences within this new discovery. The top's inset rope marquetry is much different than the traditional binding & purfling on the other Biehls. The second neck, dovetailed in as before, becomes a decoratively carved support arm to hold a headpiece that is not too dissimilar to the joining bracket of the other. Note that they still managed to utilize geared tuners! The bridge is essentially a duplicate, and the fretboard inlays are similar, with a few extra being added to the headplate and headpiece as well. The labels inside are from two repairmen; this was missing the wooden medallion. Instead it has a fancy engraved plate for the sub-bass tuners.



Note the bottom of the carved tuner slots on the main neck – a wide, smooth spoon-shaped cut-out giving the strings plenty of room to clear before hitting the nut. Mine has this feature as well, and all Biehl guitars appear to have this identifying characteristic.



The bottom line is that there aren't yet enough clues to date any of these guitars and harp guitars beyond Biehl's known production window of late 1894 to the very beginning of 1904, nor know their true order of appearance.

Truly Magical Biehl Guitars

NOTE: POTENTIAL TRIGGER WARNING: Historical racially sensitive image follows.

In 2014, I spotted on eBay (and fortunately won) some unusual guitar images in a format completely new to me, though they were once incredibly common: *magic lantern glass slides*. I quickly discovered that these slides – evolved throughout different technologies over a century and a half – were made as projected images for the home or theater, often part of elaborate *phantasmagorias* of sight and sound. This served as entertainment until movies and radio finally made them obsolete.

But it was only much later that I discovered that these rare treasures held an additional secret. Those are Biehl guitars!



Shown ~actual size of 3- $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 4". An antique hand-colored transparency sandwiched between two pieces of glass taped together.

The two slides were said to be from the 1920s³ – true or not, I don't know. Both have a paper label of C. M. Brashear⁴ and include at least two of the same band members and same 6-string guitar in the two shots of the extravagantly theatrical string group.⁵ The images are enchantingly hand-tinted, the colorist giving the solid pearl fretboard a crude bit of green sheen among other touches.⁶



³ The final decade it seems for this particular “magic slide” medium.

⁴ The studio is listed in the 1920 directory of Little Rock, Arkansas, but I've no idea how much earlier he was in business. If these are Biehl instruments (which is almost certain), then they were built two decades before this.

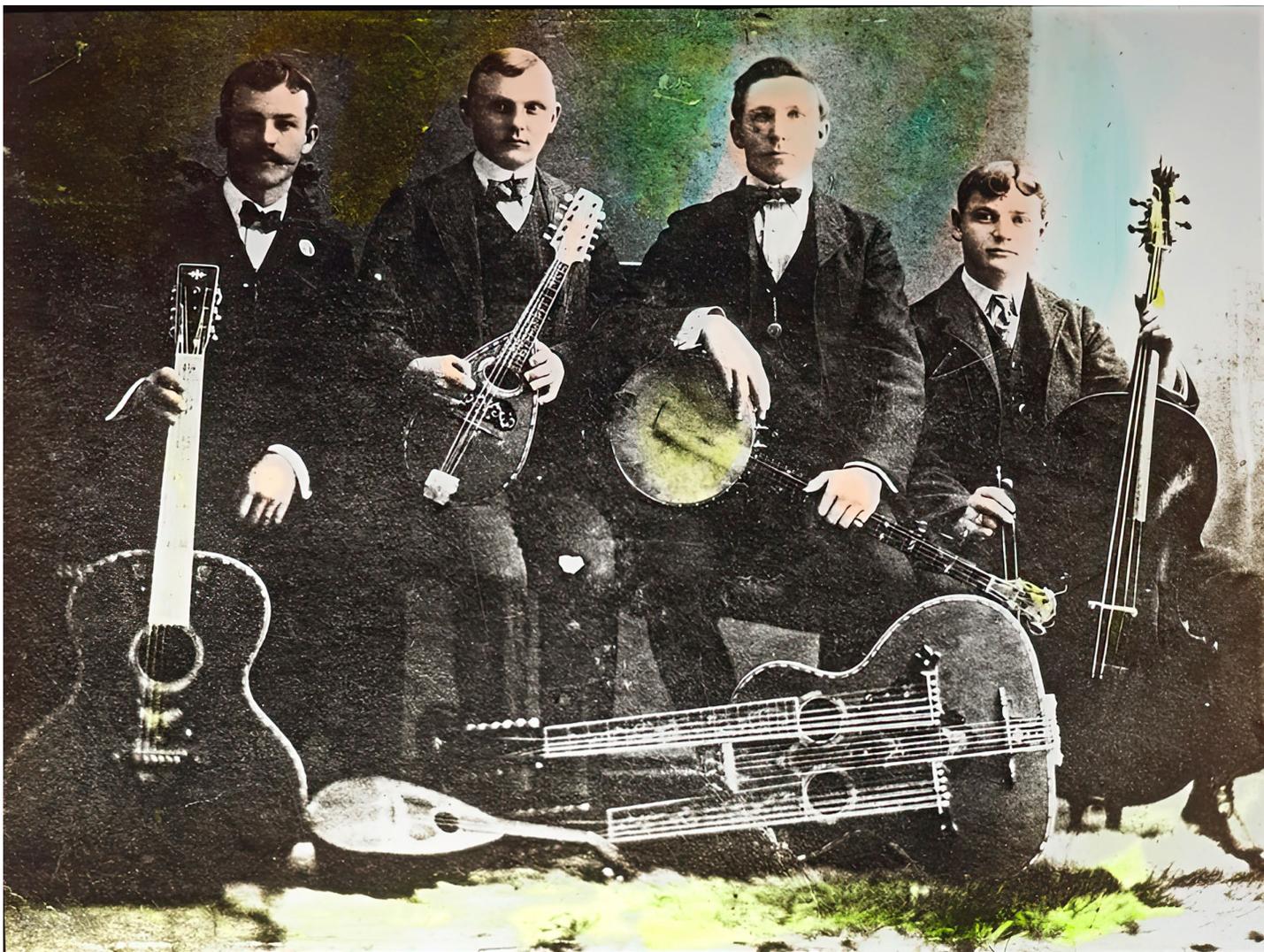
⁵ This particular image showing the members made up as typically racist Vaudeville “stock characters.”

⁶ I believe the tinting is done directly on a large positive film transparency, before it's sandwiched between two thin plates of glass and taped together with black cloth tape. I spent a couple of hours with my media guy (and two different high-end cameras and lenses) to shoot these sharp, optimized backlit digital images. Challenging!

The close-up below shows the 6-string best.



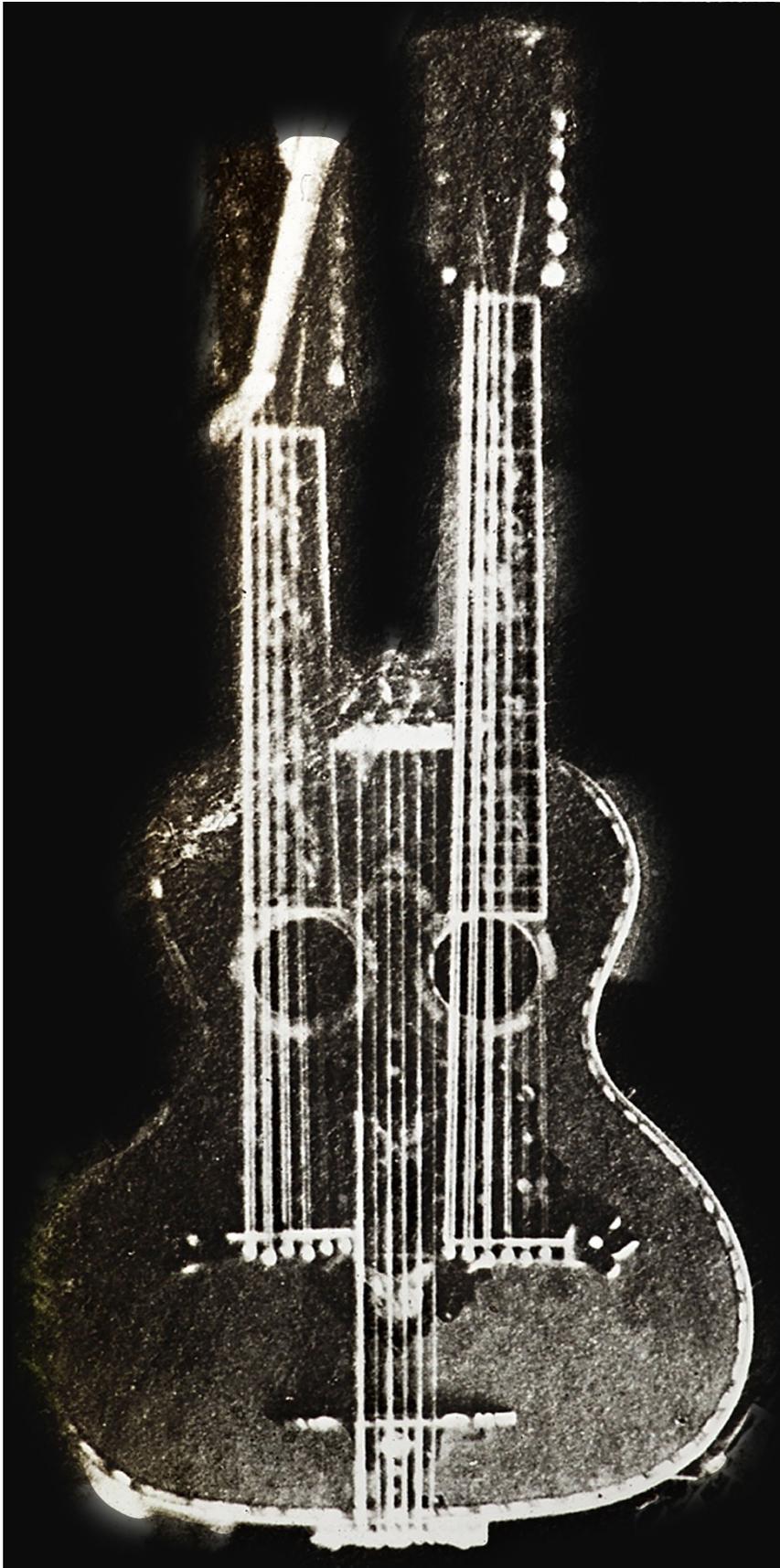
Whereas none of the extant Biehl guitars have pickguards, this incredible presentation instrument includes an inlaid butterfly pickguard under the soundhole along with additional inlaid decorations under the bridge, at the tail and even surrounding the fingerboard. What a stunning instrument this must have been!



In this image, the 6-string player is joined by his bandmates with an unusual 5-course bowlback mandolin and more common instruments. But the one laying on the shag fur carpet takes the prize: a *three-bank* double-neck harp guitar with *doubled strings on each neck*. From my article *Birth of the American 12-string Guitar*, you'll remember that America's 12-string only appeared in 1900 – not before. And Biehl's factory only built through 1903. This instrument is therefore another contender for the first example of a fully doubled 6-course guitar neck. And not one, but two! The strange “bass” neck though, turned out *not* to feature sub-bass strings. It's actually a second 12-string neck with a *shorter scale*.⁷ Both necks are surely fretted (the short neck is almost impossible to tell), with certain courses seemingly in either octave or unison tuning. Note the double soundholes matching the necks, something Biehl likely copied from the Harwood.

But, wait then – where's the “harp guitar”?

⁷ Probably tuned a third higher in *terz* tuning, a common European configuration that had already been offered by Lyon & Healy of Chicago.



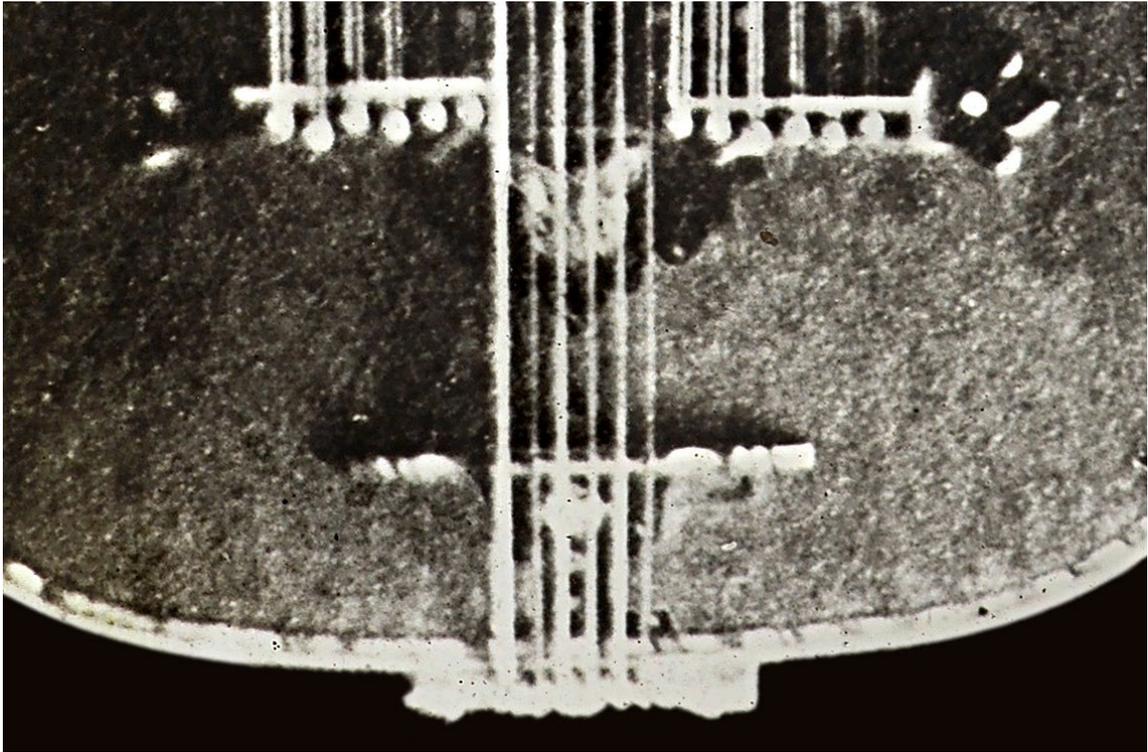
It's the bank of six open "harp" strings (technically, zither strings) strung *between* the two necks on the body!

These were likely played in fretless zither fashion with varying gauges of thick to thin strings in a re-entrant, chordal tuning. They appear to be tuned by friction tuners mounted at the top of the body.

There were a few other harp guitar experiments with banks of open strings on either side of a single neck, most notably Chicago's Arling Schaefer's invention of 1890 below.



Did one of those rare instruments give Biehl or the musicians the idea to try the *opposite* idea?!



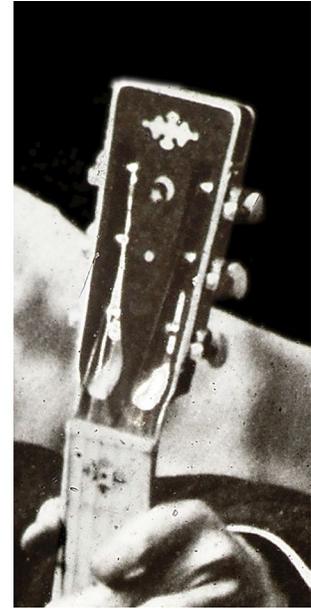
This second Biehl instrument is equally fancy, with similar body inlays, a carved bridge, and full vine inlays on both fretboards.

So, how do I know these guitars were made by Biehl's factory? I don't – but we can deduce so with high certainty (as other guitar experts agreed).



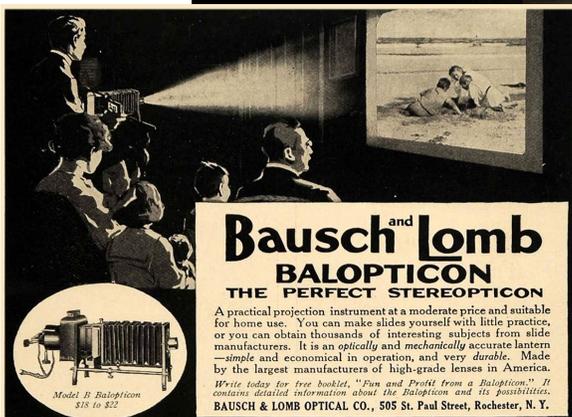
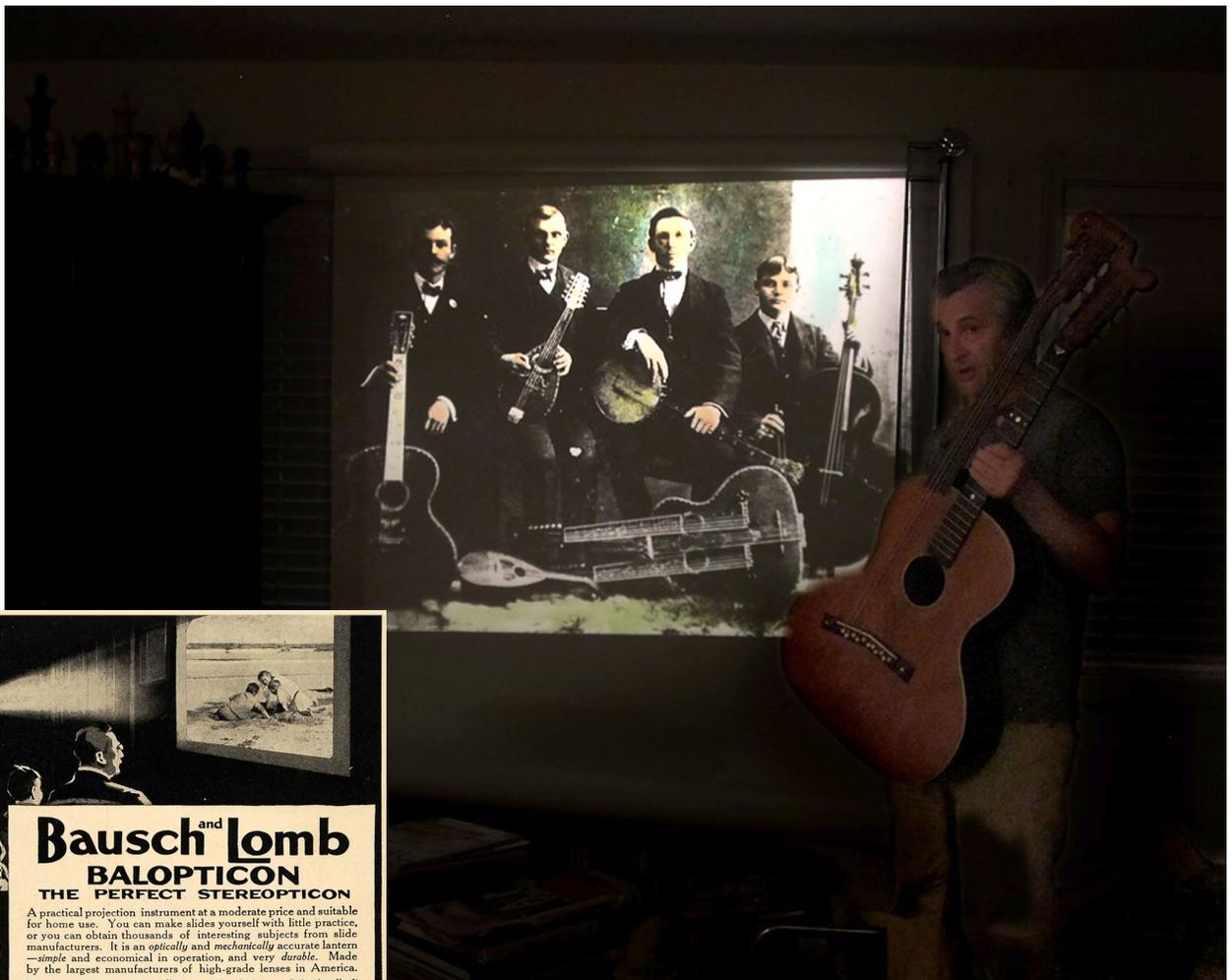
As seen on the previous page, Biehl's jumbo 19" wide guitar's exaggerated plantilla (body shape) is immediately identifiable. When overlaid, the two magic slide instruments match *exactly*.

Further, I eventually noticed that the telltale "spooned-out" headstock slots that are unique to Biehl appear identical on the 6-string's headstock (at right).



Biehl Slide Show

Of course you know I wasn't about to just stick these treasures in a dark drawer...not when I could hunt for an authentic period Balopticon to project them in all their original glory!



Bausch and Lomb
BALOPTICON
THE PERFECT STEREOPTICON

A practical projection instrument at a moderate price and suitable for home use. You can make slides yourself with little practice, or you can obtain thousands of interesting subjects from slide manufacturers. It is an optically and mechanically accurate lantern—simple and economical in operation, and very durable. Made by the largest manufacturers of high-grade lenses in America.

Write today for free booklet, "Fun and Profit from a Balopticon." It contains detailed information about the Balopticon and its possibilities.

BAUSCH & LOMB OPTICAL CO., 505 St. Paul Street, Rochester, N. Y.

Model B Balopticon
\$18 to \$32

Now I just have to find more cool images, so every Sunday night can be *family magic lantern night*.



The Inspiring Story of Tony Biehl

A Davenport, Iowa guitar and mandolin teacher achieves success as a local musical celebrity: performer, bandleader, composer and publisher. He then takes matters into his own hands and produces his own fine mandolins and guitars. Many are at the highest level of decoration and none of the instruments include any weaknesses like inferior design, difficult-to-tune friction or pin tuners, poor ergonomics or playability. For the time, they were about as good as it *gets*. Like some of his more famous peers, he was bold in offering large-bodied tone- and volume-producing monsters, yet they were neither unwieldy nor outlandish. Evaluated in today's terms, they remain eminently practical, fine instruments. He seems to have produced as many harp guitars as guitars, yet this was before America's harp guitar period had really begun to take off. He was even one of the very first American luthiers to build double-course instruments with a full complement of twelve neck strings.

And when his instrument manufacturing and publishing business failed, Tony Biehl simply continued what he was already doing: entertaining audiences with his wife and daughters.

Obviously a multi-talented entrepreneur, I bet he was also a terrific guy.

Acknowledgments: Anthony Powell, Kerry Char, Bill Fiorella, Graham MacDonald, Rod Davenport, John McKinstry, and Christina Kastell at the Putnam Museum



About The Author: Gregg Miner is, at various times of the day, a plucked stringed instrument collector, scholar, recording artist and performer. He is widely considered the world's leading authority on harp guitars. His web sites include Harpguitars.net, Harpguitarmusic.com and Minermusic.com.

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