

THE LEGACY OF QUALITY

The 2nd Generation of Ownership at Brannen Brothers Flutemakers, Inc.
Commentary and Interview by Catherine A. Thompson

During the last three years in the United States, there have been many changes in the flute industry. For better or worse, the perceptive chaos has included various company relocations, changes in personnel, companies sold to new owners with new agendas...not to mention the large job loss that has resulted from the manufacturing of products overseas, compounded by the increased outsourcing and reverse outsourcing practices; all are the subject matter of much industry consternation. Some flutists and flute business personnel are rightfully concerned about the future of flute making in the USA.

With the recent announcement of the ownership transfer of Brannen Brothers Flutemakers, Inc. to three of Brannen's employees, concerns in the flute community about the 2nd generation of Brannen's ownership are easy to understand, based upon the poor and conflictive outcomes that have resulted in other company scenarios. The catchall phrase 'end of an era' compounded with any likelihood of history repeating itself would not bode well for one of the most esteemed of high-end flute makers. Except in this case where the Brannen standard of excellence has been used with the choices made.

Bickford Brannen has far exceeded the expectations of his early days. Not only has he reached his goal to create a company that has created flutes that have set an international standard, but he has also created a legacy of flute makers and dedicated employees who are driven to continue his original mission of integrity and excellence. Just as Mr. Brannen has always had a talent for recognizing and collaborating with innovators in the flute business (Albert Cooper, Eva Kingma, Johan Brögger, and Robert Dick to name a few) meticulously planning and creating a fine instrument and company, it is not surprising that he has also been patient and discriminating with the sale of the controlling interest in his company.

One might ask 'how', or 'why', or even question the ability of filling such big shoes. With keen insight and a discerning disposition that only results from life experience, Bickford Brannen has been laying the foundation for his successor(s) for years.

His company hires quality people who are reflected in his flutes and philanthropic work with the Brannen-Cooper Fund. Even the training protocol to work at Brannen Brothers Flutemakers, Inc. requires a total integration into such standards thereby fostering loyalty and skilled excellence in its staff. This philosophy of quality and integrity has been continually cultivated over the years. In my opinion, this is his greatest legacy.

I hope you will enjoy a brief and introductory interview with the new owners Birgitte Flanders, Payson Greene and Dennis McGuire. Included is a brief description of their qualifications for their future roles.

May 10, 2007 – Catherine Thompson, Editor~The American Flute Guild



Payson Greene, Birgitte Flanders, and Dennis McGuire

Brannen Brothers Flutemakers, Inc. 2nd Generation Ownership

Birgitte M. Flanders has been with Brannen Brothers for 9 years. She has considerable experience prior to her current position as co-owner and President of Brannen Brothers. Her background includes an MBA from The Whittemore School of Business and Economics. She has taught college-level classes at various institutions in addition to working with other accounting and consulting firms. Her 9-year tenure began as the Manager of Accounting and Administration. Presently she is the Managing Director of Finance and Administration where she contributes a steady influence to the smooth flow of monetary management at Brannen Flutes.

Payson L. Greene is currently the Managing Director of Engineering and Facilities. He has an extensive flute-making background as a former employee of the Wm. S. Haynes Co., Inc. where he began his apprenticeship in 1971, and with his long tenure at Verne Q. Powell Flutes, Inc., from 1974 -1988 where Bickford Brannen was his boss until his departure in 1976. Mr. Greene began his tenure with Brannen Brothers in 1988. He excels in stringing (key-making), coordinates the building and shop environment at Brannen Flutes, as well as the production of parts made on site as needed. His hands-on management style, combined with decades of flute making experience, has contributed to the success and reputation of the Brannen-Cooper flutes.

Dennis P. McGuire Prior to joining Brannen Brothers, Mr. McGuire was already an accomplished instrument repair expert. As a graduate of the Navy School of Music and while working with the US Army Field Band he received comprehensive training and work experience as a technician of musical instruments. Due to his conscientious nature and the desire to improve his technical skills, he simultaneously pursued additional training at Brannen Brothers where he established his working relationship with Bickford Brannen. Following his retirement from the military, he joined the staff at Brannen Brothers as a finisher and soon after became the Finishing Department Manager. He currently is the Managing Director of Production and Quality Assurance where he facilitates the finishing process of flute production and oversees the meticulous tasks of quality control.

AFG (Catherine Thompson): Please describe what kind of process was taken to get to this point. Did you as a group of employees express an interest in purchasing the company or did Bickford Brannen or the Board of Directors of the company seek you out individually or as a group?

Birgitte Flanders: Mr. Brannen has spoken for years of his dream to sell the company to employees. People heard, but didn't really act on it. He became increasingly vocal about it a year ago. Finally, we as a group decided. We got together, discussed it and said, "Let's go for it!" I think we were all aware that he might be receptive.

Payson Greene: Mr. Brannen was approached by others as well...small companies and larger companies, but his desire to keep the company in Woburn and maintain his approach that includes a dedication to the manufacturing of high-end instruments of the highest standard...*without compromising the quality...* were the main factors in his final decision.

AFG: *How long did the transition take for the transfer of ownership?*

Birgitte Flanders: About 6 months.

AFG: *How was the news received from the other Brannen Brothers' employees?*

Payson Greene: The initial response was 99% supportive. There was a level of shock in some instances.

Birgitte Flanders: There is always a range of response in such a situation. I think mostly everyone was relieved once they saw that it was staying 'in the family'.

AFG: *Please share a little of the transition of your new responsibility and identity as new owners. I can only imagine how exciting or overwhelming it is. What sort of impact does your new role have on your outlook, workload, and commitment?*

Payson Greene: In my case, there was some intensity because our parts-maker retired a few months ago and while the process of transfer was taking place, the responsibility of making the parts fell to me. Obviously, I was not at liberty to say anything because of the private manner of the negotiations, but when the sale was finalized, we hired new people. It became my job to help guide the new people so my workload was greater with the retiree's responsibilities in addition to my regular and new tasks.

Dennis McGuire: There is a big change in one's life when one becomes responsible for so many other people. Owning and running a company is a huge responsibility.

Birgitte Flanders: I feel even more enthusiastic about my work here. I think we all do. I continue to do the same thing as before, but with an increased purpose. Obviously, we all work longer days. Working well as a team, the three of us meet often because there are always details to be discussed. Mr. Brannen and Laura Brannen are still shareholders in the company and are available to us on any topic that needs to be discussed. All three of us have a controlling interest in the company. I find it very exciting and challenging. Most importantly, we share the same values. We want to continue the Brannen tradition with its working protocol and as new owners make it even better.

AFG: *How has it affected Mr. Brannen?*

Dennis McGuire: He is busier than ever. He's doing more of the nuts and bolts of flute making again and less paperwork. This is a good thing for the company and the flute world.

AFG: *Do you feel Brannen Brothers will continue to be the company it's always been with a high standard and innovative quality?*

Birgitte Flanders: We are truly committed to making our flutes in the best way possible. We are clear in our commitment to the Brannen concept of quality.

Payson Greene: And committed to continuing the Brannen-Cooper Fund as well which serves the flute community with sponsorship of guest artist masterclasses, concerts, as well as new music commissions. We all believe as a company in the mission of the Brannen-Cooper Fund.

AFG: *Do you already work well together or are there any particular challenges with 'too many cooks in the pot'?*

Birgitte Flanders: So far! (laughter from the group) We complement each other, rather than compete with each other...and communicate well with each other, too. We also have the advantage of previously working together. I believe that this is a strong point for us.

AFG: *Have you received any feedback, positive or negative, about the transfer of ownership from any of your customers or dealer network around the world?*

Payson Greene: We've received many cards and letters wishing us the 'best of luck' and our dealers throughout the world are very excited.

AFG: *Yes, it is very reassuring to see the promotions from within the company. It helps to maintain stability and established standards. How do any of you feel about the responsibility of owning a company that has the particular standard of excellence associated with the Brannen name?*

Payson Greene: I think often about the fact that we own somebody's name and that as new owners we have a responsibility to that.

Dennis McGuire: I feel strongly that the Brannen way is the quality way. We are very committed to continue that. I truly believe it. My own experience coming here in 1991 showed me that sense of quality that everyone here was focused upon. *It was always about the quality...Job #1 was and still is quality.* It's about the customer. The ongoing commitment to provide the customer with a reliable flute is foremost. Everyone here is committed to that. We bend over backwards for our customers to service them in the best way possible.

Payson Greene: It is even part of the training when a person joins the company. When I was at Powell Flutes we had the same responsibility to the urban myths and standards of Verne Q. Powell and his flute making. It's the same dynamic, the desire to do well and carry on the traditions of a company's namesake.

AFG: How can you convince skeptics that Brannen Brothers Flutemakers, Inc. under new ownership of three longtime employees will not produce similar results to those that occurred after Mr. Powell sold his company in October of 1961?

Payson Greene: Well, a lot of us came from that company and will work hard to avoid similar scenarios while doing our very best to maintain what has always been the focus of Brannen Brothers.

AFG: I know people are concerned about the large changes in manufacturing that are taking place in the flute business. With outsourcing and reverse outsourcing becoming more commonplace, how dedicated is the management at Brannen Brothers to maintaining its flute making facilities here in the United States, and particularly in Woburn?

Payson Greene: If a company goes offshore, you are not there as a flute maker to assure the quality. We are totally committed to keeping the work here in Woburn. Cost is determined by quality. It's difficult to make an instrument with attention to detail and keep the price down. Especially if one is not a well trained flute maker. You have to have knowledge about what you are doing. A metal worker is not a flute maker. Even in our company we have a very comprehensive apprenticeship and training program.

AFG: How do you recruit your flute makers...where do they come from?

Payson Greene: We have an apprentice program. It's a formal program that has been in place for many years. We are prepared to teach people in all aspects of flute making. The best approach is to begin with the level that is appropriate to them.

Birgitte Flanders: They are compensated for their work at the level of their skill and experience.

Dennis McGuire: The skills learned in our program prepare them to become a master flute maker. It takes at least 3 years to become a finisher or an expert at body making.

Payson Greene: We attract all types of people. Flutists, jewelers, people with metal working experience, as well as former employees of other flute manufacturers. We receive resumes from all over the world. And even if they already have experience we still train them with the methods we use here at Brannen Brothers.

Dennis McGuire: It's so important in this profession to preserve knowledge. Skills are taught person-to-person. We know for instance there is a loss of knowledge when people retire – so it is important to transmit that information.

Payson Greene: If that gets lost it could become a problem years later. It is a sincere commitment on our part. Whatever level they come – the time we dedicate to teaching someone is tremendous.

AFG: That must be a main component in what cultivates the artistic level of the company. The loyalty and high standards for the Brannen employees and flute makers serve that philosophy to create something beautiful. There is no compromise with the ongoing effort to create perfection. You were always in training! The teamwork, the respect for knowledge, and the sincere motivations of the original founders, all have produced a continuing legacy of people who will cultivate ongoing success and quality at Brannen Brothers Flutemakers, Inc. It has been an honor to speak with you. Congratulations!

Please visit www.brannenflutes.com to learn more about Brannen Flutes and to receive information about the Brannen-Cooper Fund.



© Copyright 2007 American Flute Guild All Rights Reserved