

Tony Biehl, a Harp Guitar Manufacturer Ahead of His Time

by Gregg Miner
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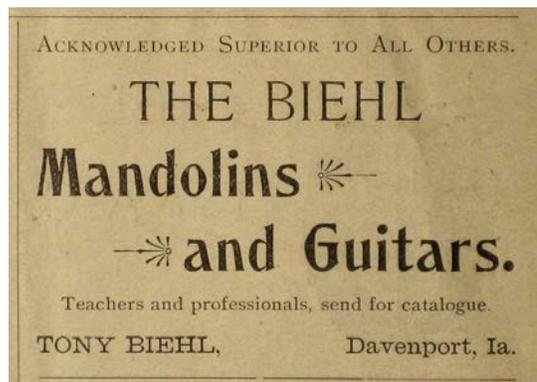
Anthony Biehl is not exactly a name on the lips of every guitar and mandolin historian and collector. But I think he warrants attention as an under-the-radar producer of very fine instruments that were superior in some ways to his competitors', along with his part in the broader American BMG (Banjo, 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 gotten many requests 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:

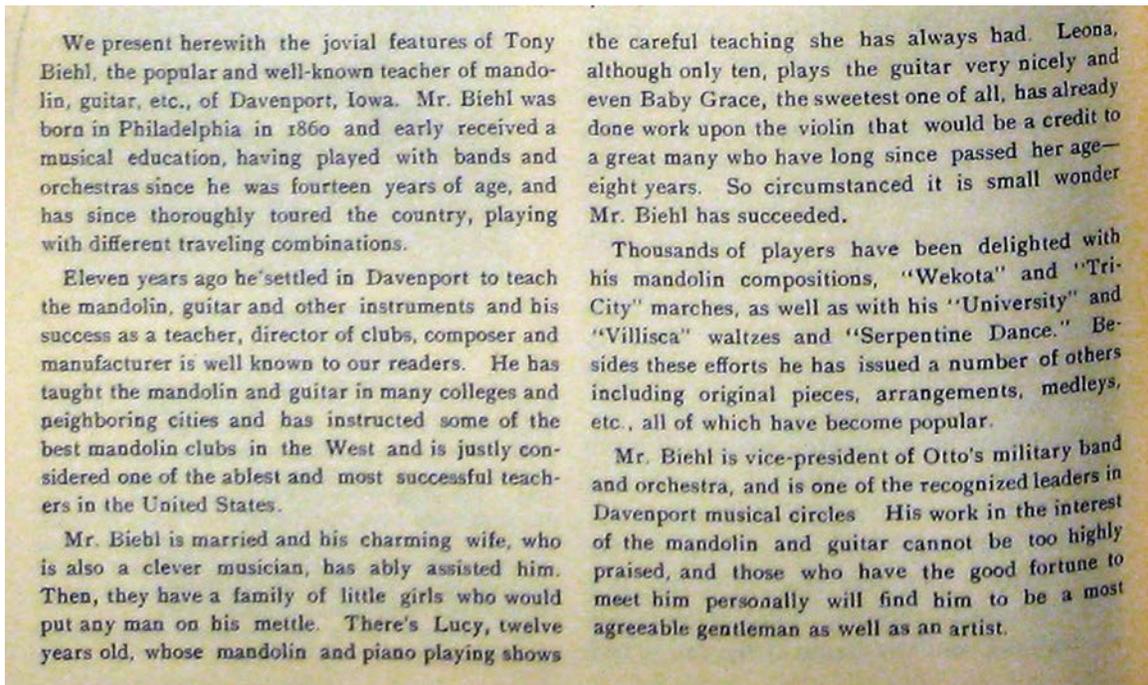
he frequented, performed and taught in brass orchestras *and* guitar & mandolin circles.

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

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



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: brothers William, 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?

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. Below, a similarly beautiful mandolinetto. (images 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. It moved location in 1901, and it may be that Biehl was trying to expand the size of his business.

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

He didn't succeed. In three more years 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.

Left: 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.



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). Photo believed to be from the general timeframe of the close of the instrument factory in 1904. (Image courtesy of Mike Brubaker)

Biehl Harp Guitars



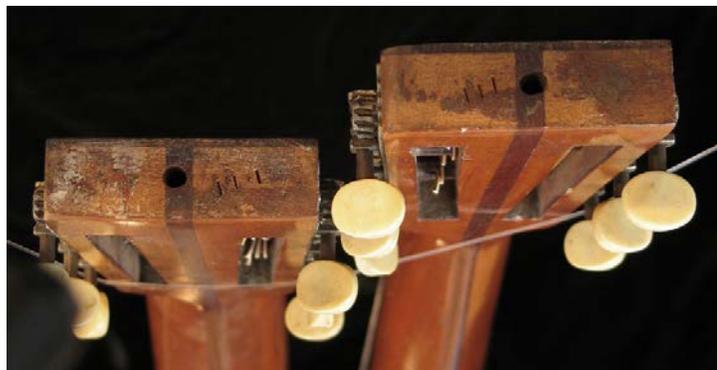
Naturally, I first learned of Tony Biehl through my harp guitar research. The first instrument unearthed had unfortunately been converted to a 6-string. A second 6-string conversion (at left) turned up on eBay in 2009. I attribute these questionable conversions to the fact that later owners were 6-string 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 19" wide bodies they sound great.



My friend Anthony Powell discovered the first intact Biehl harp guitar while doing a brief stint in the repair shop of Gruhn Guitars in Nashville. I immediately bought it when George made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I had it shipped directly to Kerry Char for restoration, who revealed that the headstocks were unfinished at top and had dowel holes – obviously, a connecting head piece was missing.



In lieu of a label, Biehl used a wooden medallion picturing a harp, with "Biehl" and "Davenport, IA"



You can read the details of the two restorations I had done on the instrument in my [Harp Guitar of the Month article](#). Kerry Char did the initial work, then Bill Fiorella created the replacement headpiece.



Key to the success was stumbling upon a rare photograph showing an identical Biehl, complete with original headpiece!

In my accompanying article I also describe the superior aspects to this high-quality instrument: size, tone, playability and geared tuners for all strings. (See [Tony Biehl Harp Guitar: Ahead of Its Time](#) for more on my harp guitar and historical photograph.)

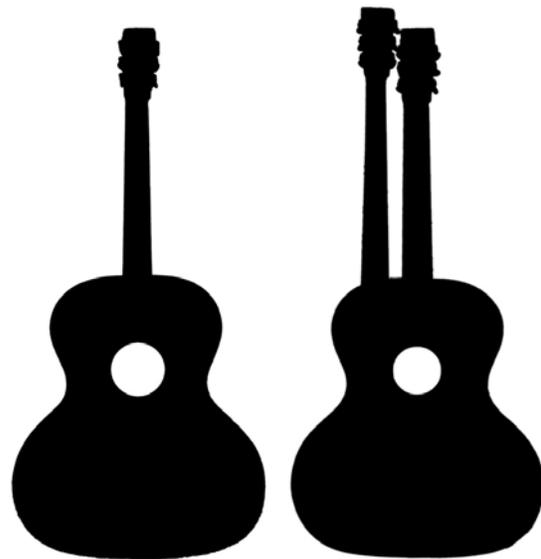


In preparing this article, I couldn't figure out why my harp guitar's shape looked so distinctive. The body of Biehl's 19" wide 6-string appears more "normal." What was the difference?

Biehl guitar owned by Roger Wilming

Interesting...to my eye, it's just the size of the soundhole, which creates an optical illusion. The upper and lower bouts and waist appear identical when overlaid, demonstrating that the factory used a single plantilla (mould). Curiously, to me the harp guitar's smaller $3\frac{3}{4}$ " soundhole makes the body proportions appear more pronounced.

Biehl and his team may have reduced the size of the hole so the harp guitar could have more soundboard area and bracing for the extra tension.



The group of musicians in the vintage photo hold a Biehl harp guitar (and mandolin) along with a 6-string guitar built by Joseph Bohmann of Chicago – which makes me wonder if one builder didn't influence the other (Bohmann created an even larger "contra bass harp guitar" in 1894).



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 kindly shared images and information.

I wonder if this might be the "new harp guitar" – or 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" would indeed be pretty dramatic for sub-bass strings. The subs on this instrument 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 nut, he'd be very close to his 36 inches. Compare this to my instrument with its subs ranging from 27-3/8" to a max of just 28-1/4" – and we can see he was definitely going for it! He extended the neck scale to 26" (as opposed to 25.5" "standard") and note how his tuners and tuner slots are moved even further north beyond the nut.



Curiously, the body of this one is smaller – just 16" and 4-3/4" deep (compared to the common jumbo model at 19" and 5-1/2"). If "new" and seeking "proper tone," why the smaller body? Perhaps "new harp guitar" simply meant new to the market? (meaning Biehl's first attempt) Or maybe this was an anomaly and there was *another* harp guitar with the extra long basses as announced in *The Cadenza*. Perhaps time will tell.



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 order of appearance.

There are many other interesting differences on this new discovery. The top's inset rope marquetry is much different than the traditional binding & purfling on the others. 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 an 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 feature.



Truly Magical Biehl Guitars

In 2014, I spotted on eBay some unusual guitar images that additionally were in a format completely new to me, though they were once incredibly common: magic lantern glass slides. In [researching this medium](#) that had lasted a century and a half, I became even more enchanted that someone had captured such a unique vaudeville act, and astounded that the act featured Tony Biehl guitars! These slides were supposedly produced in the 1920s, the last decade of magic slide production. And the performers could have been photographed as late as that time. But I tend to doubt it – as they are clearly posing with Biehl instruments that must have been built before 1904.



Shown 3-¼" x 4" actual size. A hand-colored transparency sandwiched between two pieces of glass taped together.

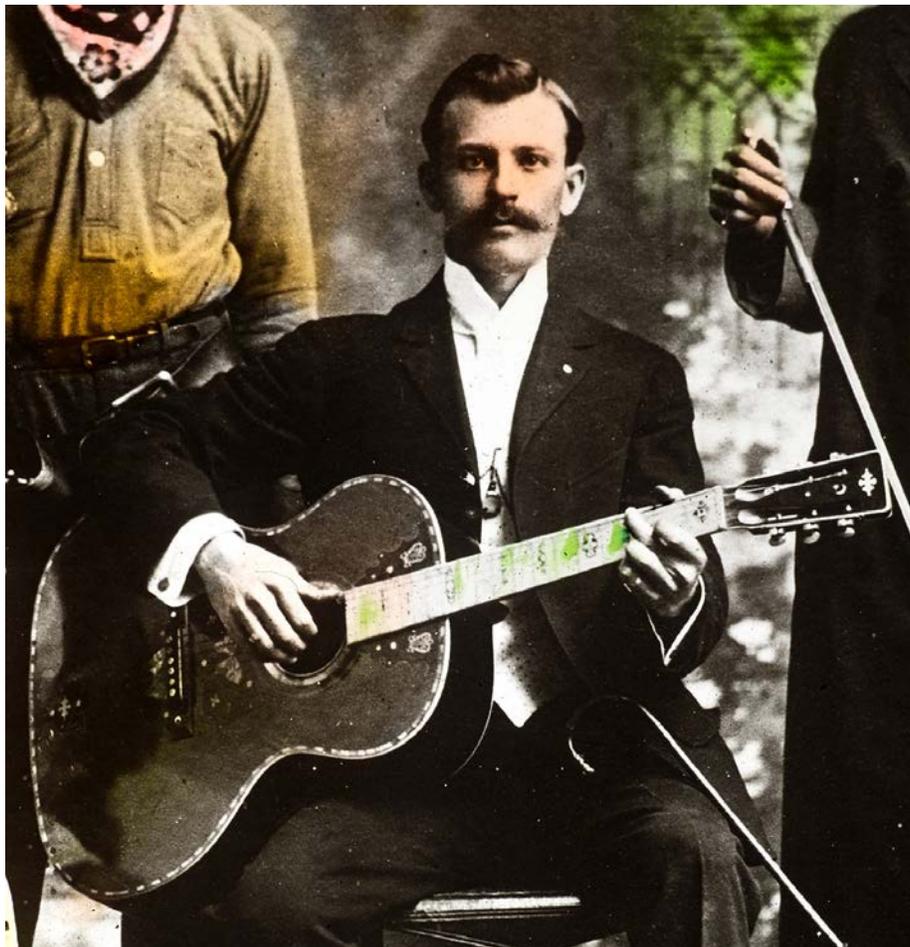
And what guitars! One is a presentation grade jumbo 6-string, with fancy trim, inlays and pearl fretboard like the presentation mandolins above.

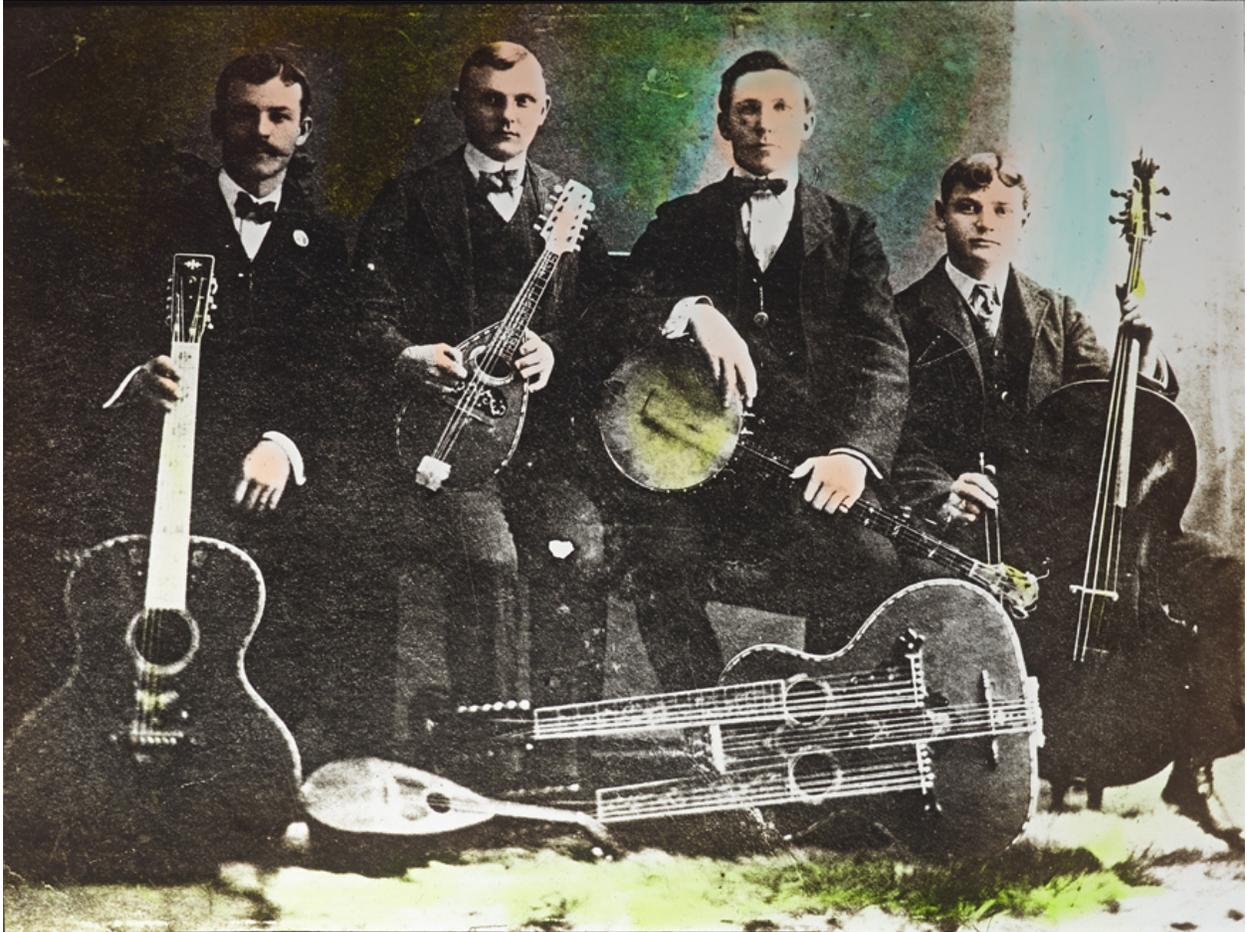
The other is, well, one of the most astounding early American harp guitars ever created.



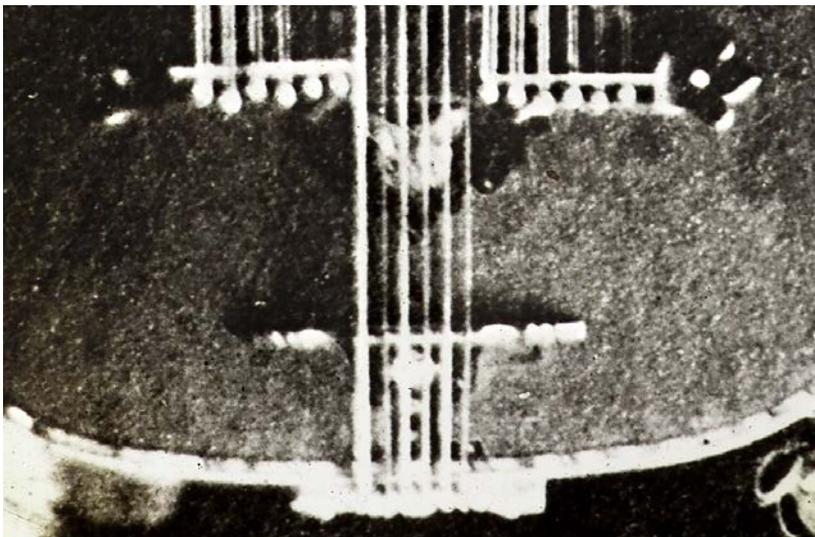
This slide shows the 6-string best. It's interesting how the colorist tried to crudely imply the green abalone inlays in the mother-of-pearl fretboard. Beyond that, the guitar received no coloring.

Whereas none of the guitars above have pickguards, this one includes an inlaid butterfly pickguard under the soundhole along with inlay-filled inlays under the bridge, at the tail and surrounding the fingerboard.





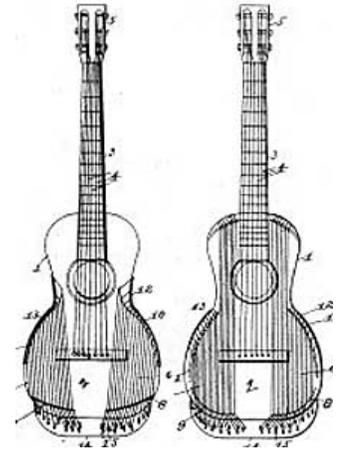
In this image, the 6-string player is joined by his bandmates with an unusual 5-course bowlback mandolin and more common instruments. But the one laying in the shag carpet takes the prize: a three-bank double-neck harp guitar with doubled strings on each neck. From my article *Birth of the American 12-string 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 double 6-course guitar neck. And not one, but two! The second neck is the length of a *terz* guitar (tuned a minor third higher), a scale already offered by Lyon & Healy in Chicago.

The third bank appears to consist of six “harp” strings (really, “zither” strings) possibly played in fretless zither fashion with a varying

gauges of extremely thick to thin strings in a re-entrant, likely chordal, tuning. They appear to be tuned by friction tuners mounted at the top of the body. There are a few harp guitar inventions and experiments with a bank of accompaniment zither/harp strings on either side of a single neck (including, at right, Chicago's Arling Schaefer's in 1890) – did they give the musicians the idea to try the *opposite* idea?!

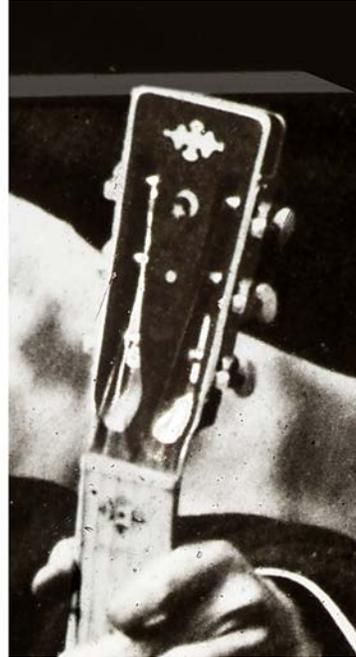


This second Biehl instrument is similarly fancy, with a carved bridge, many body inlays and full vine inlays on both fretboards. *Why* are there no other known images of this very visual musical group?!

Now, how do I know these guitars were made by Biehl's factory? I don't, but we can deduce so with high certainty (as several guitar experts agreed in my [blog comments](#)).



As seen above, Biehl's jumbo 19" wide guitar plantilla (shape of the mould) is exaggerated and immediately identifiable. The two magic slide instruments match exactly (assuming the same scale length).



Further, the similarly distinctive headstock string “spoon”-carved slots that are unique to Biehl appear identical on my Biehl harp guitar and the 6-string’s headstock.

And so – until the next surprising Tony Biehl discovery – we conclude this uniquely American story.

A Davenport, Iowa guitar and mandolin teacher achieves success as a local musical celebrity: performer,

bandleader, composer and publisher, 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 guitars or harp guitars include any weaknesses like inferior design, difficult-to-tune friction or pin tuners, poor ergonomics or playability. 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 begun to take off. He was even one of the first to build double-course instruments with a full compliment 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 talented, I bet he was also a terrific guy.

Thanks to Graham MacDonald, John McKinstry and Christina Kastell at the Putnam Museum

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