

Biographie "Franz Schwarzer – Missouri's Zither King"



Over 10,000 concert zithers were made in Washington, Missouri by Austrian immigrant Franz Schwarzer, beginning in 1866. Schwarzer's zithers competed favorably with those of European makers and were sold all over the world. In this article, George Bocklage, Washington Historical Society secretary, details the life of this innovator, musician and businessman and the exhibit which endeavors to preserve his life and legacy.

Franz Schwarzer was born in the town of Olmutz, Austria in 1828. The son of a building contractor, he also learned the building trades. Franz Schwarzer attended the Polytechnic Institute of Vienna, where he studied architecture and wood working. After college, he studied zither under the highly regarded composer, Ludwig Ritter Von Ditrich.

In the spring of 1866 Schwarzer and his wife, Josephine, came to America. Before their marriage, Josephine had a short career as a stage actress. Sadly, they had lost an infant son before they immigrated. They probably had come to America in search of economic success in the face of a prolonged economic slump in the Austrian handicraft system.



Franz Schwarzer (1828 - 1904)

In New York, they bought property in Missouri from a land agent which was not the idyllic estate they had expected. The dwelling there was a two room log cabin with a dirt floor. Many of their neighbors were German peasant farmers who were thriving in the New World. The Schwarzers, however, found pioneer life on the land too difficult and soon moved, in 1867, to nearby Washington, a prospering town on the Missouri River where Franz found a ready market for his hand-crafted furniture.

In Washington they lived in modest circumstances while Franz occasionally fabricated a zither for one of his friends. Before the Civil War Washington had become a bi-lingual, bi-cultural town, as were most of the counties in the lower Missouri valley, following heavy German migration which had begun in the 1830s. Franz became active in the Washington "Turn Verein" and the "Liederkranz" and was elected the first Fire Chief of the town.

His reputation as a zither maker spread and in a few years he was able to work full time making various models of the concert zither, importing stylish components like German silver frets, mother-of-pearl inlay, ivory and rare woods from abroad. In 1873, Schwarzer entered three of his zithers in the Vienna Exposition and was awarded the "Gold Medal of Progress", the highest award of the fair, for his entry.

That distinction, and his skillful use of the publicity, increased his business and allowed him to enlarge his operation, ultimately to 25 workmen. He was also able to experiment with other instruments, especially mandolins and guitars. A plain zither sold for about \$19. Larger zithers with more strings and decorated with fine inlay could fetch from \$600 to \$1000.



Schwarzer Zither Label

Eventually the Schwarzers owned the entire city block on which their brick residence and factory buildings were located. The landscaped grounds were the scene of many festive gatherings with their friends and customers. Prospective buyers were encouraged to come to the factory and personally choose the inlay designs which they preferred. Banana trees, monkeys and a pet alligator were attractions which, along with their native Austrian "Gemutlichkeit", made visiting with the Schwarzers a special event.

Schwarzer died in 1904. His widow carried on the business for eight years and at her death a nephew, Herman Grohe, took charge. Interest in the German zither had declined in the early 20th century and the business had suffered accordingly. The First World War also had its negative effect on German culture in America.

Grohe died of tuberculosis in 1924 and after that, one veteran workman, Albert Hesse, continued to sell off inventory, make repairs and fabricate special zither strings for clients around the world. Hesse was one of the last zither players in Washington. He lived long enough to experience the exciting zither music of Anton Karas which was featured in the film "The Third Man".

The Washington Historical Society maintains an exhibit of a dozen Schwarzer zithers and other instruments from his factory at its museum at Fourth and Market Sts. in Washington, Missouri. The Schwarzer zither exhibit originated in the mid-1960s. After the old factory was demolished in the 50s, Thomas M. Davis and Franz Beinke collaborated with the Missouri State Museum to gather locally owned zithers and other artifacts for a permanent zither exhibit at the state capitol in Jefferson City. About the same time, the state historical society published their scholarly account of the development and demise of Schwarzer's enterprise ("Franz Schwarzer - Missouri Zither Maker," Missouri Historical Review, Vol. LX, October 19, 1965, Number 1, Page 1).

When it opened in 1984 the Washington museum had a small zither exhibit. The museum moved to larger quarters in 1995 and the state museum has allowed much of its zither collection to be displayed there since then. Schwarzer zithers and family memorabilia donated to the Society now comprise the exhibit along with those on loan from the state. Several highly decorated instruments and a foot-powered, string-winding machine remain on display at the state museum in Jefferson City.



Franz Schwarzer Zither Factory, Washington, Missouri

The Washington Historical Society museum is open every day from March 1 to mid-December, except Mondays and major holidays. Admission is free. For more information on the museum, featured exhibits and publications, visit the Washington Historical Society's web site at www.washmohistorical.org.



A nine minute DVD history of the Washington factory is available featuring Janet and Lou Stessl of Chicago playing a zither duet in the parlor of the Schwarzer house, still an imposing residence overlooking the Missouri River. For a copy send \$5.00 plus \$3.50 S & H to Washington Historical Society, P. O. Box 146, Washington, MO 63090.