

# How Elmer's Glue got its Name (According to Me)

By Craig Brougher

The Borden company claims that Elmer was Elsie the cow's husband who decided he could make glue out of the casein in the milk Elsie produced in such abundance but of course, that is just a story some advertiser came up with. Here's the real story behind Elmer—or what I think happened.

Once upon a time there was a noble craftsman who decided to rebuild player pianos and make them so strong that nothing could ever take them apart again. He also knew he'd have children and grandchildren and they could all take great pride in the fact that their grandfather restored player pianos so well that no one would ever need to do them again. Granted they didn't play but that's just because their valves were all rotted away. That was OK. The important thing was the player was so solidly glued that nobody wanted to even try to get it back apart again. A true test of principle to the enduring family pride and their values—*"If it looks like you got one, that's all that counts."*

It would therefore become an important monument for them over their generations and a part of his reputation for the ages. As long as nobody tried to "improve on it," it would become mute testimony to the enduring solidity of such a grand piece of classic interior architecture comfortable in any mansion, a piece-d-art coveted by any museum, and a true conversation piece—especially after a couple of 6-packs!

Naturally its value lies in the fact that no one has ever been able to improve on it (*of course they've never been able to get it apart*), and therein lies the true power within that wondrous glue bottle so coveted by the great artists, inventors, and creators in the world, not to exclude grade schoolers and carpenters who were never very good at driving nails. So let me tell you how I think this CVA glue became known as Elmer's.

The player is a Marshall & Wendall upright Ampico in beautiful original condition, a top-flight reproducing piano of *impeccable* original quality, that is, until somebody started "*peccabilizing*" it. We'll not cover the piano work needed here, but only how Elmer's glue became so famous. That means just the player work, and with a few select shots, you will get the picture why everybody got the idea it is so impenetrable.

While Elmer's was used throughout and included the pump of course, we'll confine this to the stack and expressions. The extreme conscientiousness of the rebuilder can never be forgotten (at least by myself) for the care he took to make sure that everything was safe from any disaster except an atomic attack. The first thing he apparently did was to swab all the nipple and elbow holes with glue, coat the nipple with a heavy coat of glue,

and then reinsert it. After reinsertion, the nipple row is then repainted, probably several times, with several more coats of glue, as can be seen in the picture. This clever and diabolical procedure makes sure that *“the most important thing of all—the nipples,”* cannot even be moved except by extraordinary means—in this case, heating each one separately but carefully so you don’t scorch the wood, and whenever necessary, drilling the holes out again.



As you can see, the conscientiousness of the rebuilder knew no bounds. Here’s a picture of the primary stack cover, cork sealant side with straight nipples (*opposite the elbow side above*), after chiseling it apart. The awesome amounts of glue seem to indicate that perhaps somewhere in his family tree may have been the original Egyptian embalmers for the Pharaohs. This may have been an historic family contribution to that legacy. Notice the concreted glue fillets standing on the top edge of the cover strip.



Now although no work at all was done on any valves, primaries, or their pouches in this piano, as can be seen here in typical fashion, and even though the primary leathers were so rotten that many of them were no longer even glued to their buttons (meaning that those notes never played), *that apparently wasn’t the purpose of this rebuild anyway.* The embalmed Pharaohs were through playing

too, and we always admired them, right? It wasn’t the Pharaoh that was impressive. It’s his edifice. Here’s a picture of a typical expression primary valve block.

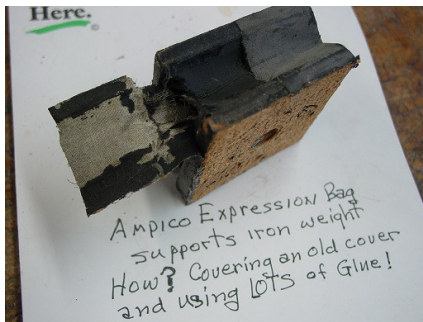
Speaking of valves, if a player piano is anything at all, it is valves. There are over 90 valves in most players and if they have primaries, there will be 180 valves. If each valve only leaked as much as a shirt-pin hole through tinfoil (#70), then times 180 or so, you have a total seepage of a little more than having drilled two ¼” dia holes through the pump! In this picture you see a row of block valves, *all Elmer’s glued to the stack, then clamped.* You just can’t be too careful nowadays, I guess. These all left a real mess, once they were taken off, but the knife blade is scratching the old rotten leather which is fluffing up like cotton and blows off like dust. Valves are the untouchables, you see.



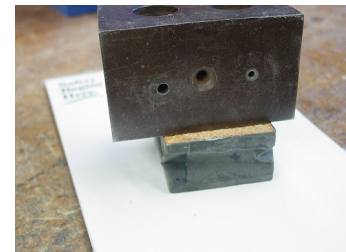
How much extra leakage do you want the player to have that it wasn't designed to compensate for? But not to worry. Our embalmer was a very clever fellow and really knew how to take care of that excessive leakage. He may have run the pump faster (*with its old rotten flap valves and worn out feeders*), and then he restored the expressions in a very special way to compensate.



Notice the two iron weights (6-1/2 lb) being fully supported by the expression lever pressing down three cloth-covered expression bags. I know you are saying, WOW! That's magic. How'd he do that? They are still open (*I could have stacked more on it*). Here is his trick:



When the bags collapse, the expression is playing at its softest level. When the bags are open, it plays at its loudest level. But not even the full pressure of the pump can put overall as much downward force on the lever as those iron blocks can. So let's see the magic utilized in this wonderful restoration. In other words, the lever was just for



looks. It stayed in the same position all the time, anyway, regardless of what the valves and spring pneumatic did.

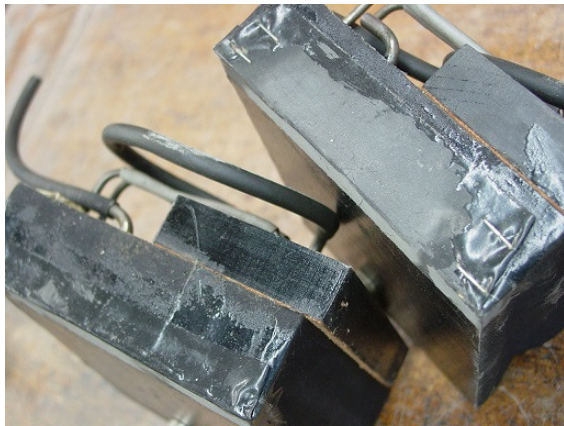
This brilliant method of assuring plenty of playing power was accomplished this way—the old covers on the expression bags were never removed, stripped down, and covered with new cloth. Instead, they were heavily coated with Elmer's and then the original material was also coated with Elmer's, and then wrapped with new motor cloth. When they dried they became as solid as cardboard tubing. But just looking into the player's innards, it appeared that *everything had been adequately taken care of*. Why, no wear on it at all, and solid as a rock! Any Pharaoh would approve.



**Impossible to remove** is what this rebuilder wanted. What good is a monument that doesn't stand the test of centuries, anyway?

Now of course, everything else in the player was done the same way—from the heavily triple-glued pneumatics which were then filleted around the edges with glue piled an eighth of an inch high and bridged between neighboring pneumatics about the same amount. But you understand of course, there's a good reason why that's

necessary when using Elmer's. It's because all CVA glues can only dry if they can get rid of their moisture and that requires wood absorption and evaporation. Trouble is when that's taking place, the glue remaining starts to form a "lacy pattern" in tight joints. What looked like solid wet glue becomes perforated with leaks as the moisture finds its way out of the joint, one way or the other. So since all the hundreds of little "paths" created for water to escape makes hundreds of little paths for air to escape, too. Naturally, the rebuilder wasn't too concerned about ever playing it again, but he did want it to LOOK LIKE it might have, so he is now obligated to build up heavy glue bridges between all neighboring pneumatics and glopped the tops of each one where the stationary leaf protrudes out from stack shelf's front edge. Yes, this fellow thought of everything. That's why he must have been so great *in his own mind*.



The expressions of course were just as enjoyable—well, from a *collector-of-the-bizarre's* point of view, of course. Now if at some moment 3000 years hence an archaeologist were to dig this piano up as a relic, he too would notice it wouldn't come apart either, and would therefore believe that we must have had really great chemists back in our day. [Amazing especially, since we obviously didn't have wheels yet, just levers—but

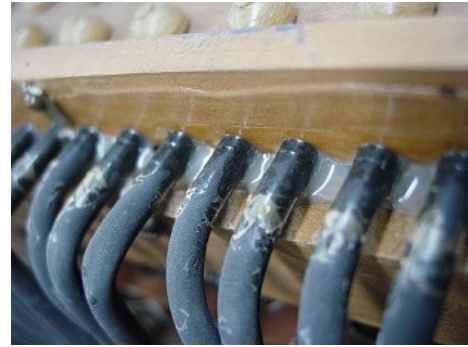
*now I lost my train of thought.*]

The crescendo covers were a particular problem for this guy, popping off the hinge end like they do with CVA when they close, so what he did was to fold the cloth around the hinge like you would wrap a package, and then fold and glue the cloth about a half-inch wrapped over the top edge of the crescendo bellows. After that, he stapled the covers down. Each crescendo had about 18 staples in it because as anybody knows, you just don't have an Ampico without crescendos. But to his credit once again he was consistent. He put the same number of staples in each one. Now that's a craftsmanship trait we can all admire.



All new pneumatics required to replace ones destroyed during removal.

As with all valves, and according to all the religious “restoration” doctrines of the day, “valve leather is holy and should never be defiled.” All any original valve required was an *appropriately grand vessel* of substantial enough means (meaning “elmered”) to transport them via Ibis to their great reward where they would then live forever and ever. Anyone at the time knew that all 80 year old, .010 thick leather needed was a nicely repainted box to reside in, with perhaps freshly brushed screw tops, and it would live forever. As one rebuilder of similar mind actually told me once, *“Why Craig, to have replaced that beautiful leather with the new junk that’s out there today, I would have desecrated it!”* Knowing him and redoing his work at the time of the call, I agreed he would have.



Very important technique used in embalming players with Elmer’s. Called tubing cocooning.



Striking fingers covered with Elmer’s and torn pneumatic wood, forcing removal and individually filing flat to re-glue to new pneumatics.

Seeing these wonderful works of art first hand, and hearing about his adoring customers and sterling reputation, but especially his multiple cases of their CVA glue being the primary reason for his great success, I believe the Borden company asked this great rebuilder what his name might be. And when they discovered that his first name was coincidentally exactly the same as Elsie’s husband

there was no more doubt about who they should name their new glue for—Elmer. Now I hope no one gets the idea that this is coincidentally just a lot of

bull. There is however a beautifully moralistic ending to the story. As you know, cows usually pass away in their middle to late teens and unfortunately that happened to Elmer the bull, too.

He was, of course, memorialized on the bottle, even though his true namesake was our famous player piano rebuilder who relied upon it for his living. Many people say that various bull statues throughout the country were named after Elmer, but mostly it turns out that it was just previous customers taking his name in vain and connecting him with that very familiar trail all bulls leave behind them as he and his wives were accompanied by their concierge’ to their family limousine in the “last roundup.”

To his credit, it was one of the largest limousines ever constructed. Elmer the bull with Elsie and 20 of his harem were personally chauffeured in their very own “Cattlelac” to

his last celebrity “vacation” from their spacious ranch home. As you might guess, their religion was Mooslim and they both faithfully faced Mocha every morning. So as good Mooslims, making lots of new cows was Elmer’s sideline. Glue was their family business though, and so America’s famous “First glue family” would not pass away in vain. Their hides were transported in beautiful ceremonial vans to Jonestown, New York where the famous processor of the greatest bovines who ever lived—Milligan and Higgins—were asked to memorialize both of them together as...glue. Hide glue! Yes, I know it’s really a sweet ending. Kinda brings a tear to your eye when you think of it.

If it hadn’t been for the “Elmer’s glue goof-off” which Elmer the Troll and rebuilder extraordinaire initiated here, this player would have never had to have been restored for another 80 years or so. Fortunately for it however, and lots of grandchildren to boot, everyone can now hear it again. Player pianos and kids go together just like ice cream and cones. They bond at an early age, just like Elmer and Elsie, and then mate for life. It’s one thing to embalm the dead. It’s completely another thing to resurrect them.

Today, that famous player piano which started it all has now received Elmer the Bull’s finest creation – himself! You could say he gave his life so that all player pianos might live again. They say his favorite song was, “*All of Me, why not take all of me.*” So, we did.

Today, he looks all sparkly tan and iridescently crystalline in his coffer, ready to do the real job he was born to do, and knowing Elmer the bull, his “*stick-to-it-iveness*” is legendary. No longer is he stuck with Elsie’s thermoplastic limitations and “glue creep,” even though he made her a very happy cow for a long while, and they became very prosperous. She participated in his great successes, fame, and fortune, but today it’s all about Elmer’s offspring and his family name which we all honor. Yes, thanks to Elmer’s ingenuity, his entire family eventually all ends up “going to pot!” We all know—only the greatest cows can ever do that! It’s their unflinching family dedication to principle.

If Elmer could “*render*” a comment today that wasn’t just bull, I’m sure he would be proud to say they have everything to “*hide*.” He’d give us everything including the skin off his back. Milligan and Higgins would all enthusiastically agree with that, too. So ultimately we have Elmer to thank when we see the huge improvement he has made personally in the Player Piano world. It becomes clear to all that we had to make that inevitable evolutionary trip with Elmer’s first try, through the plastic nozzle of hard experience, from the “*milk*” of the glue to a brush with “*strong meat*.” From casein to protein—and not a century too soon, either.

