

Wandering Minstral



Helmut Fricker renovates old books, such as this family Bible.

HELMUT FRICKER IS A ONE-MAN BAND

BY KIMBERLY NICOLETTI

PEOPLE WHO SEE HELMUT Fricker dressed in his traditional Bavarian outfit — white shirt, gray felt hat and leather lederhosen held up by suspenders — might think of him as a caricature. The 72-year-old German-born Vail Valley resident tells jokes and plays his accordion five days a week in Beaver Creek, and his image is broadcast on billboards, life-size posters and television commercials for Erdinger beer nationwide. Though Fricker admits he has “so many stupid jokes” he tells again and again (like: “The drinks are on the house, but you have to bring your own stepladder”), he’s far from a one-dimensional character.

BY THE BOOK

At home, Fricker spends three to four hours a day in his book bindery, filled with an Old World paper cutting machine, a wooden sewing frame, a slender black antique sewing machine and shelves of various leather, linens and papers. He learned

bookbinding in Germany after deciding to finish middle school and study a trade rather than go on to high school. He chose creating and restoring books by sewing pages to leather and linen covers; after a five-year apprenticeship, in 1955, he became a master bookbinder. These days, he says he has more work restoring old family Bibles, inherited cookbooks and antique children’s books than he can finish in a lifetime. He could make a couple hundred thousand of dollars a year if he did it full time, but he’d rather play his accordion, said old friend Hank Parker, who lives in Dillon.

“There are two sides to his personality,” said longtime friend Dick Dennison, a neighbor in Eagle Ranch. “When he’s going to his bindery, it’s day and night, compared to when he’s entertaining. He’s very business-like, very concentrated when he’s in the bindery. Then when he’s got to entertain, he flips



Though his Alp horn is a show stopper, Fricker also plays a mean accordion. He takes requests, too.

FUNFACTS

ABOUT FRICKER

The oldest book Helmut Fricker ever restored was a 1494 Italian book on botany.

The most expensive book he worked on was a 1610 hand-printed Bible with religious pictures made from wooden blocks. It was worth \$635,000 and cost the owners \$1,000 to restore.

Helmut's first customer was Gov. John Love, who needed the book "African Trails" restored. Since then, former President Gerald Ford, Ross Perot and movie stars from across the nation have brought books to Helmut.

Check out Helmut from 2-5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays at the Plaza at Beaver Creek, during the summer and winter seasons.

the switch and he just starts bubbling over and talking to all the people; he's a nonstop entertainer until he comes back. He entertains for fun, but his real craft is in binding."

He also teaches people like Vicki Medall, who regularly flies into Vail from Charlottesville, N.C., to learn the Old World art. Throughout the 15 years she has worked with him, she has learned the archival aspects of restoring antique books, but more importantly, she has soaked up Helmut and his wife Ursula's stories.

"Personally, I have made two of the most amazing friends in my life," Medall said. "We chat and he tells me stories from the past. Maybe that's why I haven't dove in and bought (bindery) equipment of my own; I'd prefer to hop on a plane and visit them. It's so much more fun and enriching."

MUSIC MAKES THE MAN (OR VICE VERSA)

Fricker's oldest accordion is a 1928 model, which his father

brought home to him after serving in World War II for four years and being a prisoner of war for five years.

Helmut always wanted to take music lessons as a boy, but his family couldn't afford it, so at age 16, he taught himself by studying music books. He became so proficient at the accordion, he learned to play 10 different instruments, including the harmonica, trombone and guitar, from studying books.

When he moved from Germany to the United States in July 1969, with his wife and two kids (then age 6 and 9), he set his sights on bookbinding — he never dreamed of playing music. Within six weeks, he ended up living in Denver, working for Hirschfeld Press and playing music on the side at a hotel. His entertainment career took off when movers and shakers from Vail heard him play and began inviting him up to perform in lodges and restaurants. Four years later, he had so many jobs in Vail, he moved to the mountains

permanently.

He says people hire him sometimes just for the jokes, not for the music. But as his friends tell it, he's popular not just because he knows how to "work a room," as Parker puts it, but also because he exudes a joy for life.

That gratitude for life stems from growing up in war-torn Germany, where his home was bombed twice; when Fricker was 8 years old, he and his family were buried under rubble for 50 hours — all were found alive. Now, he counts every day as a blessing.

"It's the struggle that he's gone through that has given him such an appreciation for life," Medall said.

"He's just a wonderful character," Parker said. "He's one of the happiest guys in his skin I've ever met — whether he's out there in his lederhosen pumping his accordion or whether he's there by himself in his beautiful bindery. He's a real treasure and such a wonderfully engaging, funny guy." ☺