



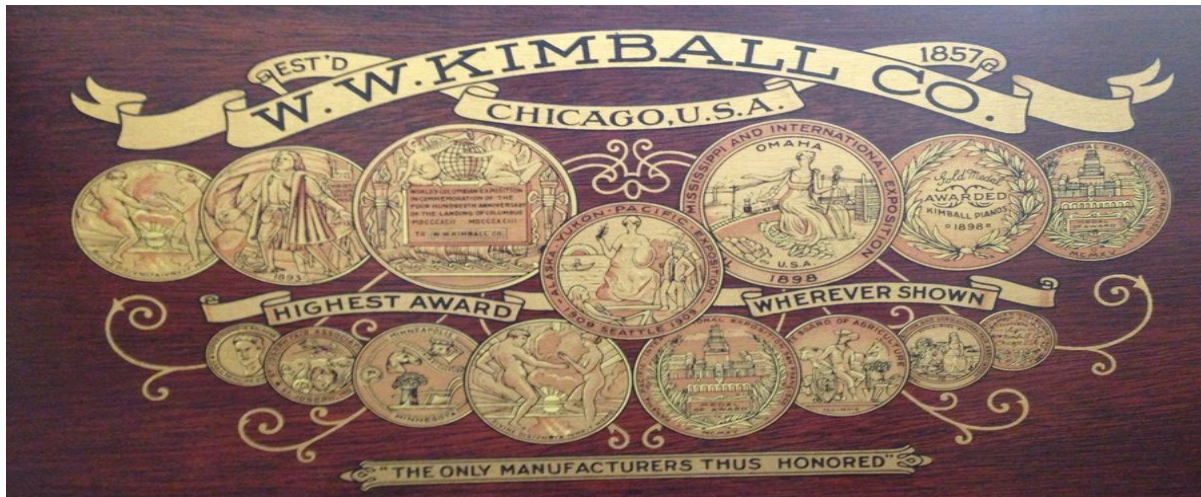
Kimball

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Around the same time Steinway & Sons began their piano manufacturing journey, another great American by the name of William Wallace Kimball started his own piano distribution network. Established in 1857, Kimball set up shop in Chicago, IL and began selling mostly square pianos made by Hallet & Davis, Emerson, Chickering, and H. P. Hale. Kimball was a brilliant businessman and visionary and became successful quickly. Unfortunately in 1871, Kimball lost all of his assets in the Great Chicago Fire, but it did not slow him down. He began moving forward again in 1888 after producing and selling a Kimball-made piano line. After making mediocre pianos for a few years, he hired seasoned technicians from Steinway & Sons and

C. Bechstein to greatly improve the quality of his pianos. And it did just that.

In 1893, Kimball-made pianos won the “World’s Columbian Exposition Award” for high quality pianos, efficient manufacturing, and aggressive sales practices. W. W. Kimball passed away in 1904, leaving his legacy to his son, Curtis N. Kimball and later, others in the Kimball family. The Kimball Company continued to flourish and won many more exposition awards for quality pianos. It survived the Great Depression and helped in WWII by halting piano production and switching to manufacturing aircraft parts for companies such as Boeing and Lockheed. Piano production resumed after the war had concluded.



After the war, Kimball assumed the piano industry would continue to thrive and decided to build a new five-story factory in the Chicago suburbs. Unknowingly at the time, this would essentially put an end to the Kimball family's ownership of the company. The new factory ended up costing the company more than it could handle. The instrument quality was diminished and production numbers were poor.

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In 1959, Kimball was bought by the Jasper Corporation. This essentially saved the company. Pianos under this new corporation were produced as Kimball, La Petite, Whitney, Krakauer (purchased in 1980) and many others. The Jasper Corporation made other products such as office and home furniture. It noticed that the Kimball name had more pull than the Jasper name and renamed the company Kimball International in 1974. It went public on the stock market a few years later in 1976. Kimball decided specifically not to produce spinet pianos and offered a small console type instead. This decision sent a lot of business to other manufacturers making spinet pianos. It did not help that the social climate was beginning to move away from pianos as a household staple. The worldwide demand for pianos continued to decline in the 1980s and 1990s slowing down the company. It became rough enough that Kimball Int. would offer vacation packages as an incentive to encourage dealerships to sell more Kimball pianos. Kimball produced its last piano in 1996; the entire factory crew and executive staff signed this last grand piano which is now displayed at the Kimball showroom in Jasper, IN.

I have the most experience with the Kimball pianos made more recently than the ones from the golden era of the late 1800s to before WWII. I can tell the quality did indeed wane as I find parts installed incorrectly in the pianos and just an overall dissatisfaction with tonal quality and function, even on the well-maintained grands. When I see a well built Kimball from the turn of the 20th century, it is a welcome surprise and a pleasure to experience. Not only is the case usually aesthetically pleasing, but the instrument quality is sturdy and produces a good tone. This just goes to show that timing is everything.