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TOP STORY

IT MIGHT AMOUNT TO A BUCKET OF SPIT

## Spotsylvania bagpiper promotes his breathtaking invention

Cathy Dyson  
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Bagpiper George Steele and James Madison University student Tommy Cantwell collaborated to produce they call the Piper's Friend, which prevents spittle from collecting in a bagpipe.

Photos by MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

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Cathy Dyson

George Steele doesn't want you to think he's blowing his own horn, but the Scotland native says he's come up with a device that will improve the lot of bagpipers worldwide.

"People have been playing bagpipes for centuries, but I'm the only one who thought of this," he said about the Piper's Friend, a device that catches moisture generated from blowing and is better, he claims, than what others have produced. "None of them have come near me."

The Spotsylvania County man is "quite a character," said Tommy Cantwell, a teenager who's worked with Steele on an invention he first thought about in the 1970s.

Bagpiper George Steele teamed up with JMU student Tommy Cantwell to bring an idea he's long had to life. The Piper's Friend is supposed to keep spittle from collecting in bagpipes.

Steele is 80 and still teaching others how to drive, which is how he and Cantwell met almost two years ago. He's had several lifetimes of experience in those decades, from police work in Washington and Glasgow to driving almost every kind of machine with wheels: tractors and motorbikes, limousines and double-decker buses, and railroad cars while in the Army.

Saying he has a thick Scottish brogue is as much an understatement as suggesting that he rambles. A proper Scot response to his digressions might have been: “Noo jist haud on,” which translates into “Now just hold it, slow down and take your time.”

Instead, Steele touched on the Reformation in the 16th century, as well as the scoundrel who ran off with his wife, how he vowed he would “never again have an addiction to wedding cake” and the way his fascination with miniskirts kept him from practicing the bagpipes.

He mentioned famous people he once chauffeured (Michael Jackson and Buzz Aldrin), the awful weather in Scotland and why he’s glad to be working in America instead of twiddling his thumbs and being “bored, bored, bored.”

“It’s like a dog’s breakfast what you’re taking from me,” he told a reporter, “because I’m getting so excited about how things are.”

In other words, the interview was a confused mess.

## ‘A GOOD RASCAL’

One of 13 children, Steele has been piping since he was a young lad on the Isle of South Uist. Every home had a bagpipe in those days, and while working on a farm with his uncle, Steele found a small practice chanter—the part on which the melody is played. The chanter had washed up on the isle during World War II, and there were no reeds attached, so Steele fashioned one out of straw.

“It made quite a sound,” he said, giving a broad smile. “That was the start.”

Even then, Steele was curious, “a good rascal” as his mum called him. She said he was climbing ladders at 9 months, always looking for something to get into.

He trained with well-known pipers on the island, but didn’t always practice the way he should because miniskirts and his uncle’s Massey Ferguson tractor held more allure. Likewise, classes in the two-room schoolhouse bored him so much he focused on maps of the world displayed on the walls.

Eager to see some of those places, he joined the British Army at 17 as a bagpiper and later went into the Merchant Navy. He wasn't keen on the water, but during a trip to New York, he fell in love with the United States and went to Gloucester, Mass., in 1965 to play with a bagpipe band.

He served in the American Army during Vietnam, joined the Washington Metropolitan Police Force afterward—"I can tell you stories that will make your blood churn"—then served with the Glasgow Police for 25 years.

He later did security work in Scotland, limo-driving in California and owned his own taxi company until he got swindled out of it—but that's another story.

## BAGPIPE LUNG

Throughout the decades, bagpiping was a constant, and Steele once went to Las Vegas to perform during conventions. He regularly thought about a problem that had afflicted players for centuries, a condition called bagpipe lung.

A 2016 case study quoted on WebMd said a 61-year-old died of the chronic inflammatory lung condition, thought to have been caused by fungi growing inside his dirty bagpipes. It seems that when players blow air into the bagpipe, a fair amount of spittle comes out as well.

"The moisture and the muck and the bacteria is caught inside the bag," Steele said. "So the next time he goes to play, he's adding more to it or it goes back into his mouth or into his lungs."

He said it's so disgusting, he remembers playing his friend's bag, especially "the stench itself, particularly if he was drinking booze before then. He's blowing into it, then I'm blowing into it. You need a gas mask. You don't realize what a horrible thing it is."

Various inventions over the years, called water traps, have tried to capture the spit inside a pot that sits at the bottom of the bag and contains a small amount of kitty litter.

“They’re a necessary evil,” said Catriona Laird, Steele’s daughter, who’s working in Scotland to drum up business for his invention. “They restrict the airflow into the bag and it’s harder to blow, and you end up having more moisture in your mouth.”

She said Steele’s device, the Piper’s Friend, “actually stops the moisture from going into the bag in the first place” instead of trying to capturing it once it gets there.

The Piper’s Friend is a two-piece, or double stock, that fits between the blowpipe and the bag. Its design, which Steele had tried to perfect for more than 40 years, features a number of channels through which the air can pass, but the heavier spit falls to the bottom, where a small piece of sponge absorbs it.

The device sells for about \$100.

At the end of a session, a piper can simply take off the blowpipe, remove the Piper’s Friend and change the small sponge. With conventional water traps, a player has to take apart all the pipes on the bag to get to the moisture pot.

Most people play for about 20 minutes. That’s about as much air as they have—and as long as an audience can tolerate it before “they want to shoot him,” Steele joked.

“The beauty is that anybody who fills this up in 20 minutes doesn’t need a Piper’s Friend, he needs a plumber,” he said.

## ‘COMPLEX LITTLE PIECE’

While Steele envisioned a different kind of water trap for decades, he couldn’t find someone who could take the idea from his head to the drawing board. In November 2019, he was chatting with Tommy Cantwell, who was taking lessons with Steele through the 2020 Driving School in Fredericksburg. Steele found out Cantwell, now 18, had done some work as a graphic designer.

“I said to him, I’ve been looking for you all my life,” Steele said.

He described the problem, Cantwell sketched out a blueprint and the next time they met, the teen presented the device, which he had produced on a 3D printer. Both were thrilled with the results.

“He understands the bagpipes, he understands the idea, and I understand the manufacturing and design part of it,” Cantell said. “We were able to meld those two together to create this very simple but surprisingly complex little piece.”

Steele’s relatives in Scotland are working on the manufacturing end. They’ve teamed with McCallum Bagpipes, which Laird calls “the gold standard of bagpipe makers internationally,” to produce the Piper’s Friend. Laird asked her father to use Scottish designers to print the device, but “he wanted to be loyal to Thomas in that regard, even though it led to shipping back and forth and delays,” she said.

Their website, **[pipersfriend.com](http://pipersfriend.com)**, includes endorsements from several bagpipers, including Bob Worrall, a Canadian player, teacher and world champion.

“It works like a charm,” he wrote. “I’ve tried every system going and this is definitely the most effective and advanced I’ve been able to use.”

Confirmations like that make Steele feel like he’s more an inventor than an idiot, he said, laughing. He’s eager to see what happens when Scotland removes restrictions on bagpipe playing because of the pandemic. He’ll travel back and forth between countries—homesick for each whenever he’s in the other—and think about other things he’d like to do.

He and Cantwell have already started planning a similar invention for the saxophone.

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I’ve been lucky enough to be a newspaper reporter for more than 40 years, covering everything from human-interest stories to medical news, farming to fracking, personal columns to county government.