

## One-Legged Grinders

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Thoughts of organ grinders of the past conjure up many different mental pictures, usually with the ubiquitous monkey at the side. Of the hundreds of grinder statues, post cards and other memorabilia, have you ever seen, however, a grinder with just one leg? Have you seen a wooden-legged organ grinder or rather, a peg-legged grinder? While browsing through my archives of grinder illustrations I came across a couple of such members of the fraternity of outdoor musicians (Figures 1 & 2).



Figure 1. A one-legged grinder with a peg leg and a small hand-cranked organ  
Source: *Drehorgeln*, 1994.

Researching this interesting subject has led to some intriguing references, and more illustrations (Figures 4 - 8), of such an unusual spectacle. First of all, why a peg leg instead of a wooden leg? While artificial wooden legs were developed as early as the dark ages, the actual medical use for such devices would come later, especially for the more affluent members of society. Grinders never reached that plateau of social or economic level. Many of the illustrations of one-legged grinders were also drawn in the same time period that our familiar peg-legged pirates sailed the seas (Figure 3). One never saw a one-legged sailor with a wooden leg—it was always a peg leg.



Figure 2. A peg-legged grinder with a pegged-supported hand organ.  
Source: Thun, 1991 card set.

Some insight to this situation of one-legged grinders comes from Joseph Roth's book, *Rebellion*. Written in 1924, Roth elaborates about the social worthiness of those inflicted with some sort of physical (or mental) disability. Having some purpose in life apparently lifted the disabled from the beggar's category and organ grinding was an occupation that could be performed, even with just one good leg.

Social attitudes about amputees were common at that time and continue to present day society. This has been amplified by the thesis of "Wooden Leg," (as noted by psychologist Dr. Eric Berne in his book *Games People Play* [chapter: "Wooden Leg: A Life Game"]) which is "What do you expect of a man with a wooden leg?" He elaborates that "no one would expect anything of a man with a wooden leg except that he should steer his own wheel chair." Later he admits that some invalids are able to do more, even hold down legitimate working positions.



Figure 3. A contemporary pirate figurine depicting the same era as the early organ grinder, again with a peg leg.

In George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) it was noted that:

Organ grinders, like acrobats, are considered artists rather than beggars. An organ grinder named Shorty, a friend of Bozo's . . . and his mate "worked" the coffee shops. Shorty's procedure was to stop outside a pub and play one tune, after which his mate, who had a wooden leg and could excite compassion, went in and passed round the hat.

It is worth saying something about the social position of beggars, for when one has consorted with them, and found that they are ordinary human beings, one cannot help being struck by the curious attitude that society takes towards them. People seem to feel that there is some essential difference between beggars and ordinary “working” men. They are a race apart—outcasts, like criminals and prostitutes. Working men “work,” beggars do not “work;” they are parasites, worthless in their very nature. It is taken for granted that a beggar does not “earn” his living, as a bricklayer or a literary critic “earns” his. He is a mere social excrescence, tolerated because we live in a humane age, but essentially despicable.



Figure 4. A one-legged barrel piano grinder. Imagine the difficulty in pushing the cart with just one good leg. Source: MBSI Bulletin, 1968.

Just how a potential grinder obtained his wooden leg (or peg) is a matter of the times. Andrienne Gavin points out in her dissertation, *Dickens, Weggs and Wooden Legs*, that amputees were common in Dickens time (1812 - 1870). One reason was the returning from war: the disabled soldiers did not have sophisticated surgery and antibiotics available and therefore, injured legs were commonly removed. In addition, accidents were a common cause for amputation. Many, including children, had legs crushed by wagon wheels.

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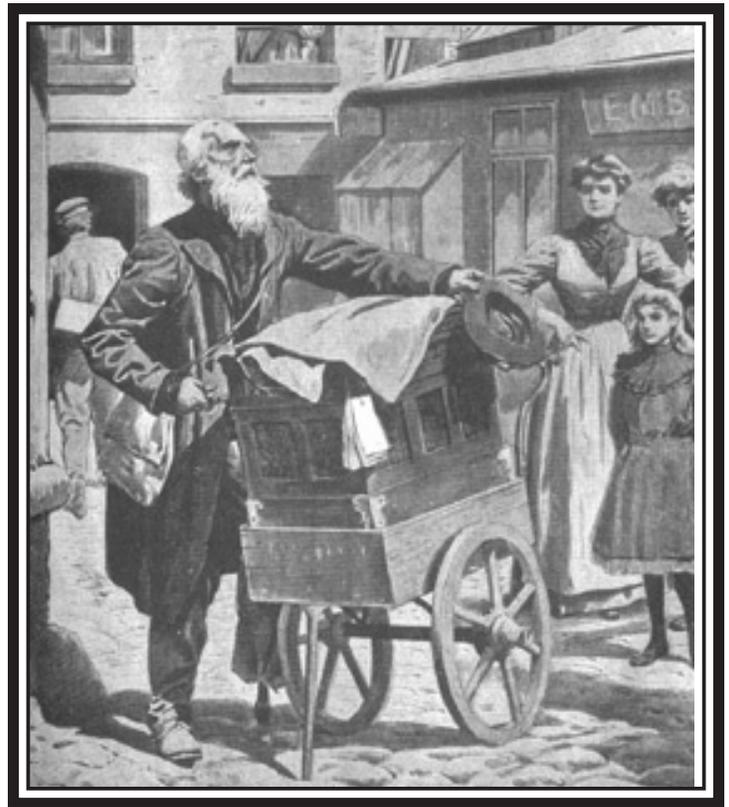


Figure 5. A one-legged grinder (look close) and his hand organ on a cart on a cobble-stoned street. Source: MBSI Bulletin, 1985.

Garry Kilworth in a fictional story authored in 1998, *We are the Music Makers*, penned:

There were those of course, who had returned with limbs missing. . clustered 'round the Charles Bridge, in the beautiful city of Prague, where they begged for crusts of bread.

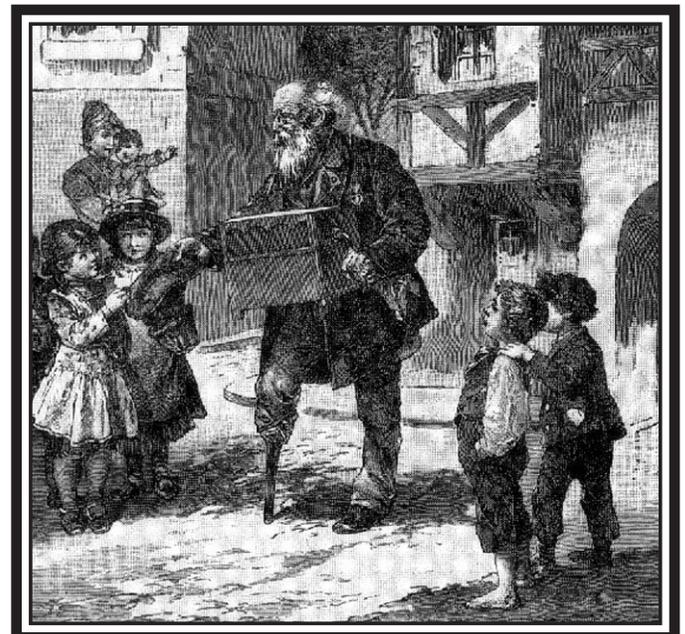


Figure 6. Another one-legged grinder with a small hand organ, but an old fellow at that, and on a cobble-stoned street.

Source: *Drehorgeln*, 1994.



Figure 7. Are the children amused by the monkey, the hand organ or the one-legged grinder?  
Source: MBSI *Bulletin*, 1978.

Once the war has no more need of such creatures, cripples became an embarrassment to the state. The authorities issued a decree that any man found loitering in the streets, with no visible means of occupation, would be deemed a vagrant and thrown into the city's prison. Thus their numbers were thinned and those who remained behind gathered together such coin as they had and purchased barrel organs and hurdy-gurdies, on which they played punched-paper music written by Haydn, Handel and Mozart. In this respect they had their occupations, required of them by law, and continued to ply their trade on and around the Charles Bridge.

There was a cripple who ground his organ from first light to the snuffing of the evening lamps. He stood on the palace side of the bridge, in the shadow of a hero's statue, and filled the air around with the strains of great composers, asking only a small coin in return. The right arm and right leg of the former soldier had been torn off by grapeshot and scattered over the remains of a dead Hussar's mount.

### From two legs to one: The Procedure

Removal of an affected leg in a pre-anesthetic period conjures up the often-viewed movie scene where the patient/victim is given a shot of whiskey and then allowed to bite down on a towel or wooden stick or what-have-you that was available. Surgeons would have required speed, strength, dexterity and assistants (for holding down patients). The surgery itself would have been performed with an amputation knife to rapidly cut around the skin and muscle followed by sawing through the bone; tying of the bleeding vessels (arteries) and then the dressing of the wound. Skilled surgeons could accomplish this in nearly two to three minutes. As you can imagine, mortality (death) was somewhat high by today's standards (30%). Often plant extracts were used such as opium, hemp, hemlock, and of course, alcohol. It wasn't until the 1860s that chloroform was routinely used. Surviving the operation did not mean uniform success as infection was common during this time.



Figure 8. A contemporary sketch of the one-legged grinder, again with one leg to support the organ. Source: Angelo Rulli.



Figure 9. An articulated leg offered recently on ebay.

After recovery a choice of device was offered, although the impoverished could only afford (or be given) a "peg" leg. Fancier legs were often articulated and included springs and joints (**Figure 9**). Common wooden legs, however, did not offer joint movement and were more commonly seen in the poorer classes.

According to Wetz ("History of Artificial Limbs for the Leg") replacement legs were developed since the middle of the 18th century (and even before in a crude sort of manner—even Egyptian mummies have been found with prosthetic limbs).

### The Fiction Literature

Lisa Ripperton's "Budulinek" appearing in a collection of stories in the 1920 *The Shoemaker's Apron* compiled by Parker Fillmore, is a story about a little boy named Budulinek, similar to "Little Red Riding Hood." In this story, cagy foxes were tricking Budulinek, causing him to hide. His "Granny" was sad because he was missing and:

One day an organ-grinder with a wooden leg began playing in front of Granny's cottage. The music made her think of Budulinek. "Organ grinder," Granny said, "here's a penny for you. But, please, don't play any more. Your music makes me cry."

“Why does it make you cry?” the organ grinder asked.

“Because it reminds me of Budulinek.” Granny said, and she told the organ grinder all about Budulinek. .

Eventually the organ grinder found Budulinek, where he had been kidnapped by four foxes, and returned him home to Granny. Before he did:

The organ grinder cut a strong switch and gave the four foxes a terrible beating until they begged him to stop and promised that they would never again do anything to Budulinek.

Joseph Roth’s book *Rebellion* is a 148 page book written specifically about a one-legged organ grinder. The central character is Andreas Pum who returned from World War I having lost a leg. He was promised an artificial leg but that was slow to come so he maintained his livelihood playing a barrel organ on a peg leg. Details of the organ include:

The barrel organ is manufactured by the firm of Dreccoli and Co. It has a box shape, and comes on a wooden stand that is collapsible and portable. Andreas carries his barrel organ on his back with a couple of straps, like a kit bag. The left side of the instrument has on it no fewer than eight screws. They are for the selection of the melody. The barrel organ has eight cylinders [? Eight songs—author], among them the *National Anthem* and the *Loreli*.

Depending on his mood, Andreas can crank the handle so fast that the waltz comes out as brisk and martial as a march, especially on cool, dull days when the pain in his amputated joint tells him there’s rain on the way.

Later, Andreas does get a wooden leg. Thanks to his new wooden leg with its sharp edges, he never misses his footing on the slippery pavement. He walks along the edge of the pavement, with Mooli, the little donkey, ahead of him, pulling the handcart with his hurdy-gurdy. He wanted a parrot and eventually obtained Ignatz.

This book has a sad ending as Andreas comes into trouble (by fighting a jealous lover) and eventually dies in jail, stripped of his donkey, parrot and barrel organ.

### Conclusion

As this article was sent to the press I did find one vintage photograph of a peg-legged barrel organ grinder (**Figure 10**). Otherwise, finding actual photographs of such oddities is quite slim. However, the number of illustrations and literary references obtained seem to authenticate the occurrence of one-legged grinders, whether they were hand organ or barrel piano. The trend in thought regarding these unique members of our mechanical history seems to be that playing a mechanical instrument, which required minimal musical skills, allowed the



Figure 10. A turn-of-the-century photograph of a peg-legged barrel piano grinder, complete with donkey.

crippled grinder a chance to attempt to earn a living and climb the social ladder, therefore avoiding the lowest form of society, the beggar.

It is ironic that, today, our friends and collecting members, who are certainly not included in the aforementioned lowest form of society, or anywhere close, pay a lot of money to assume this one-step-above the beggar, the organ grinder. I am not aware, however, of any of us cranking while standing on one leg.

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