

# THREE GENERATIONS

by George Johnson

The Johnson family is in the process of insuring that theatre organs will live forever. Paul K. Johnson, father, his son, George, and now grandson, David are deeply involved in the "cause". Their efforts can be described as a real family affair. We'll let George tell our readers about it.

"It all began back around 1905 when Dad was a small boy. He became interested in the tracker mechanism of an old church organ."

The next exposure occurred in the early twenties when the Balaban & Katz organization was installing organs in its theatres. Dad's brother was hired to assist the installer in setting up a 2-manual Kimball of five or six ranks (no toy counter or percussions). Dad hung around during the work, particularly during the finishing process. Late one night after all other workmen had left the building, the installer sat down at the console and played everything from Bach to ragtime for nearly two hours. That clinched father's desire for pipe organs.

While in college, Dad was inspired by listening to Professor Palmer Christian at the console of the Hill Auditorium organ at the University of Michigan. Of course, this music was classical except at football rallies.

Following graduation, Dad started

to find out how to design and build pipe organs as a hobby. He borrowed a copy of "Audsley's Organ Stops" and started a notebook of all pertinent information he could get on organ construction. The next volume of any value was MODERN ORGAN BUILDING by Walter and Thomas Lewis which gave much information on wind chests and tubular pneumatic action. In the early thirties, Dad picked up more information on Moller chest magnets from a local church installation, and also tried his hand at making un-stopped wooden pipes.

During World War II, the pipe organ dream was shelved for family duties, sea scouting and yachting, plus overtime work, designing ships for military action.

Following the war, we moved to the Washington, D.C. area. Here was the chance to peruse the music section of the Library of Congress for additional information. Audsley's "Art of Organ Building" was not available to the public because it was simply worn out. Business trips provided opportunities in widely spread places such as New York, Houston and Seattle libraries to get even more information. In all, there were 14 books studied on the subject of organ construction.

We then started building a two-

manual, one-rank "unified" pipe organ. We built the chest, blower, chest magnets, console and relays. The pipes were of a scale matching the earlier experimental pipes which were included in the rank. By this time, we had acquired a copy of Barnes' "The Contemporary American Organ" which proved to be informative. We used phosphorus bronze spring wire and .010 brass shim stock for contacts. A model railroad rectifier supplied DC current for the next 20 years. The six years prior to the rest of the family's move back to Newport News, gave me my basic knowledge of the workings of pipe organs.

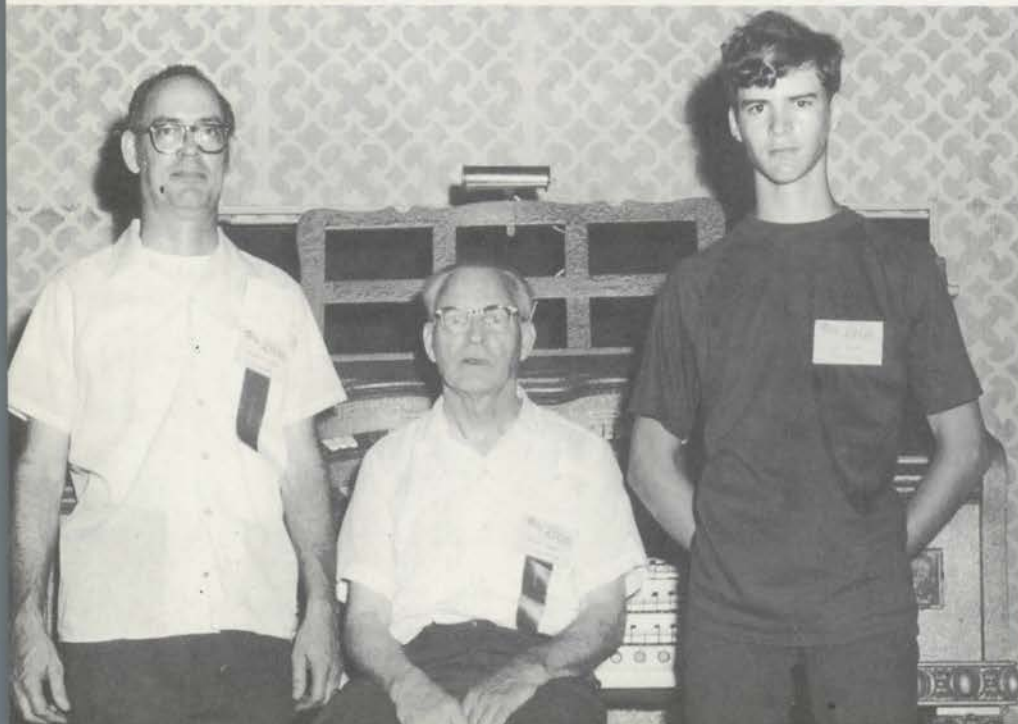
Dad moved back to Newport News and the organ was enlarged to include pedals, a rank of labial oboe, and bourdon bass pipes. Several Moller and Reisner parts were used in these chests. The organ was set up in a small chamber in the attached garage with the swell shades opening into the living room. This organ was used for my sister's wedding.

Dad had always considered this organ as experimental and the next and present stage started only after he retired and began to plan enlargement of the organ.

In 1967, we found out about ATOS and met Ray Brubacher and Woody Wise of the Potomac Valley Chapter. Work on a 2/9 Lewis & Hitchcock church organ was followed by work on the Grande Barton (both owned by Woody). The Barton has a special meaning to me as it was the first pipe organ I had ever heard, it having been located in Newport News, Va. where we lived for a number of years. Dad and I were part of the crew which moved the Barton into the Virginia Theatre in Alexandria in 1968. We still help maintain it. By 1969, the old 2/13 Kimball of Dad's and my own 2/7 Wurlitzer were stored in my basement along with a large model railroad layout.

Dad's pipe organ was stored here while awaiting a new home to be built in Williamsburg, Va. During all of this, my mother, wife and son David pitched in and helped clean parts. We also had much needed help in the moves from

Three generations — George, Paul and David Johnson.





George Johnson's Wurlitzer console. Toe studs and stop tabs were added while the organ was owned by a church.



P.K. Johnson's home built console using manuals and tabs from a large church console. Cabinet work and inner working parts by P.K. Johnson.

some of our ATOS member friends. David is now 14 and has helped many times on various stages of organ work. He has completed four years of organ instruction using the Wurlitzer for his weekly lesson.

My Wurlitzer was moved in about 10 days from a church 25 miles away. It is a 2/5 (Opus 815) which was enlarged by two ranks in the church, with no toy counter, and was originally installed in the Richmond Theatre (now the Richmond Playhouse) in Alexandria in 1924.

In January 1970, I became Potomac Valley Chapter chairman and found that to enjoy an organization is to get involved.

Early in 1971, the Lewis & Hitchcock was purchased from Woody Wise by a church in Newport News to be

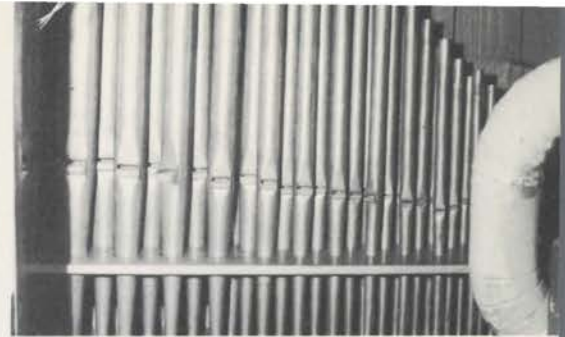
The George Johnson family.



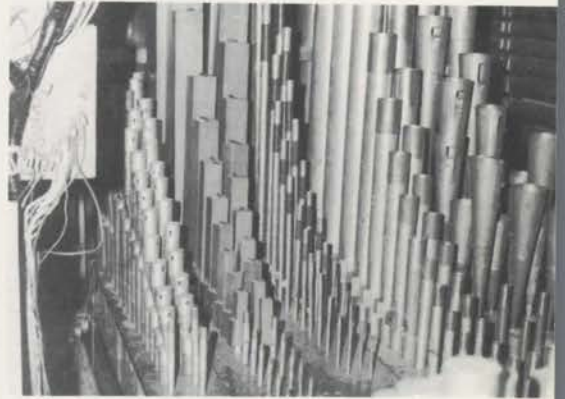
P.K. Johnson's swell chamber for Kimball. Top of chest is even with the studio floor.

installed by chapter members under the supervision of the Johnsons and with Dad's help. Frequent trips back and forth to Newport News from Alexandria and Williamsburg delayed work on Dad's installation.

His installation has also grown. A new console of three manuals will incorporate the original rank of the early experimental organ and several



George Johnson's Wurlitzer Vox Celeste. The new chest was built by George with Reisner 601 magnets.



George Johnson's Wurlitzer Main Chest showing Vox Humana, Concert Flute, Salicional, Diapason and Trumpet. Horizontal pipework was necessitated because of the low 7'6" headroom.

others in converting it from a straight church organ into a concert instrument.

As of the first of January 1972, I was back to being a plain, ordinary chapter member, and now continue to make refinements on our Wurlitzer which is installed in our basement, and serving as part of the small crew which helps the Grande Barton in the Virginia Theatre play seven nights a week. □

George Johnson is proud of the model railroad setup in his basement.

