

# RAILROAD ABANDONED FOR PIPE ORGAN

by George E. Brown  
photographs by Leo Malberg

July of 1974, a little known railroad applied for abandonment. It wasn't a great common carrier . . . but it was a heckuva lot of fun! However, when the railroad president traded a couple of greasy, sooty steam locomotives for a pipe organ, sentimentality couldn't get in the way . . . much.

Threats of abandonment had become more than a rumor over a two-year period. These rumors reached a crescendo when railroad President George Brown of Twin Falls, Idaho, found himself seated at the console of a Smith theatre organ at the First Christian Reformed Church in Seattle, Washington. The organ just happened to be for sale. Here is what ensued.

**A**s I sat at the console, it had the distinctive look of theatre organ to it. Curved stop rail, and a condition similar to the weed-riddled roadbed of the railroad . . . an aged shadow of its former grandeur. Several stop keys were missing, or changed with masking tape and ink. No nameplates anywhere . . . and the front or second-touch board wasn't evident.

It sounded churchy . . . trembs, but a bare tremble . . . and it didn't cipher! Although a few notes didn't play either! No sign of traps or percussions. For a railroad president who would have to relinquish his railroad for the "Compleat", dreamed-of theatre pipe organ, this unit wasn't the best reason for tearing up the track!

Also, to add to the negative angle of that "test-drive," the skies picked that moment to open up and let forth a torrent of water that would have made Noah envious, complete with diaphonic thunder and post-horny snaps of lightening! I turned the instrument off and exited at that

point, without seeing the inside of the chamber.

While returning home days later, future plans for the railroad nestled, just waiting to be fed . . . while visions of pipe organs danced in my head (in 9/8 time!) Especially that Smith organ. It appeared to be in poor shape, just begging for some attention. But wasn't that what I was looking for anyway? A relaxing, simple winter-weather project????!

Perhaps this organ could be the starting point for building a larger and better mousetrap? Why not? So began the barrage of phone calls and letters. Who was Smith, and how good was his product? How much money? What shape was it in? As I hadn't seen the chambers, Bill Bunch of Balcom and Vaughn checked the instrument out . . . and filed a report with the railroad head office.

Finally, some slight encouragement from Lee and Laurel Haggart of Granada Hills, California ("My Gosh, yes! Do it! Hurry! Get it!") finalized abandonment of the model railroad.

The right-of-way of the Skinnyfish and Knipple HO Scale narrow-gauge railroad was in a room in the basement of 1734 Poplar Avenue. That room must now become a pipe organ chamber, and since railroad grease and pneumatic leather don't mix, the railroad had to go.

My Smith organ was originally installed in the Capitol Theatre, Olympia, Washington. It was built in 1924 by the Smith Unit Organ Co., of Geneva, Illinois. It had two manuals and nine ranks of pipes, on 10 inches of wind, including a Diapason, Flute, Tibia Plena, Violin, Vox Celeste, Tuba, Oboe, Vox Humana and Kinura, powered by a 5 hp Spencer

Orgoblo.

According to Historian Eugene Nye, the console was removed from its orchestra pit location in the theatre in 1956 to a backstage storage area. There it sat until purchased by the church in 1960. Balcom and Vaughn moved it to the church, emasculating it by removing those things which aren't of any use to a church.

The church received nine ranks of pipes, two regulators, one tremulant, the blower and the console, with the second touch board dismantled and a piece of solid walnut veneered over it. The Kinura, percussions, toy counters, piano and second touch were removed. Their whereabouts today are not known. The original Smith relay and switchstack were removed in 1965 and replaced with a Klann Remote Key Action.

In July of 1974, I naively made an offer to the church for the organ, which was accepted. Little did I know what I had gotten myself into! Having never before dismantled a pipe organ, a crash training program became imperative. Mike Ohman of Salt Lake City gave me a nut and bolt tour of his pizza installation. I learned an awful lot about pipe organs that afternoon, along with "detailed tips" such as "it doesn't feel good to sit on regulator valve push-ers while working under chests!"

Loaded with good information, and all kinds of assurance, "Operation Smith" got underway Monday night, August 20. Four ex-railroad gandy-dancers, Leo Malberg, my teenage brothers Chris and Craig and I left for Seattle.

Arriving there, we picked up our chief cook-and-bottle-washer, Susie Woods of Twin Falls, who was

schooling in Seattle at the time. The five of us, armed with spike pullers, ballast tampers, electric screwdriver and Oly Beer, descended on the First Christian Reformed Church. It was suggested that perhaps we would find the pipes full of Oly Beer since it came from Olympia, but I rather doubted that.

Men from the church cut a hole in the chamber side to allow us egress for the many components. Little did we know how high the chamber location was, until the saw broke through the plasterboard, high up the chamber wall. Five people stared up at the impossible conditions ahead. Four turned to me said "What have you gotten us in to?" We didn't even have a ladder with us!

Exuding a feeling of confidence, I stumbled over to the console for one last session before it was silenced for good. It's amazing, but the old girl sounded better than I had remembered! Perhaps it was because it was now mine. Still, some notes didn't speak, but I used my imagination to boost the tremis to an acceptable level. While I played, Leo was up in the chambers shooting film.

We turned the organ off for the last time in that location and disconnected the blower. Then, a quick tour for an instant appraisal of the situation. Five hours later, we determined it couldn't be done! Everything was jigsawed together, with barely enough room to cramp a muscle, or scratch an ever-swelling lymph node.

Climbing to the upper chamber was a real thrill... about like scaling the Washington Monument without a rope. The main chamber floor was 12 feet above the altar stage. All organ parts were making like "birds"... sitting high above that floor on 2x4's and a few planks of 2x8's.

Maneuvering was fascinating. I was about a foot too wide no matter which way I turned. Ever had the feeling? First order of business was obviously to remove the pipes to give us working space. Incidentally, the pipework was in excellent condition.

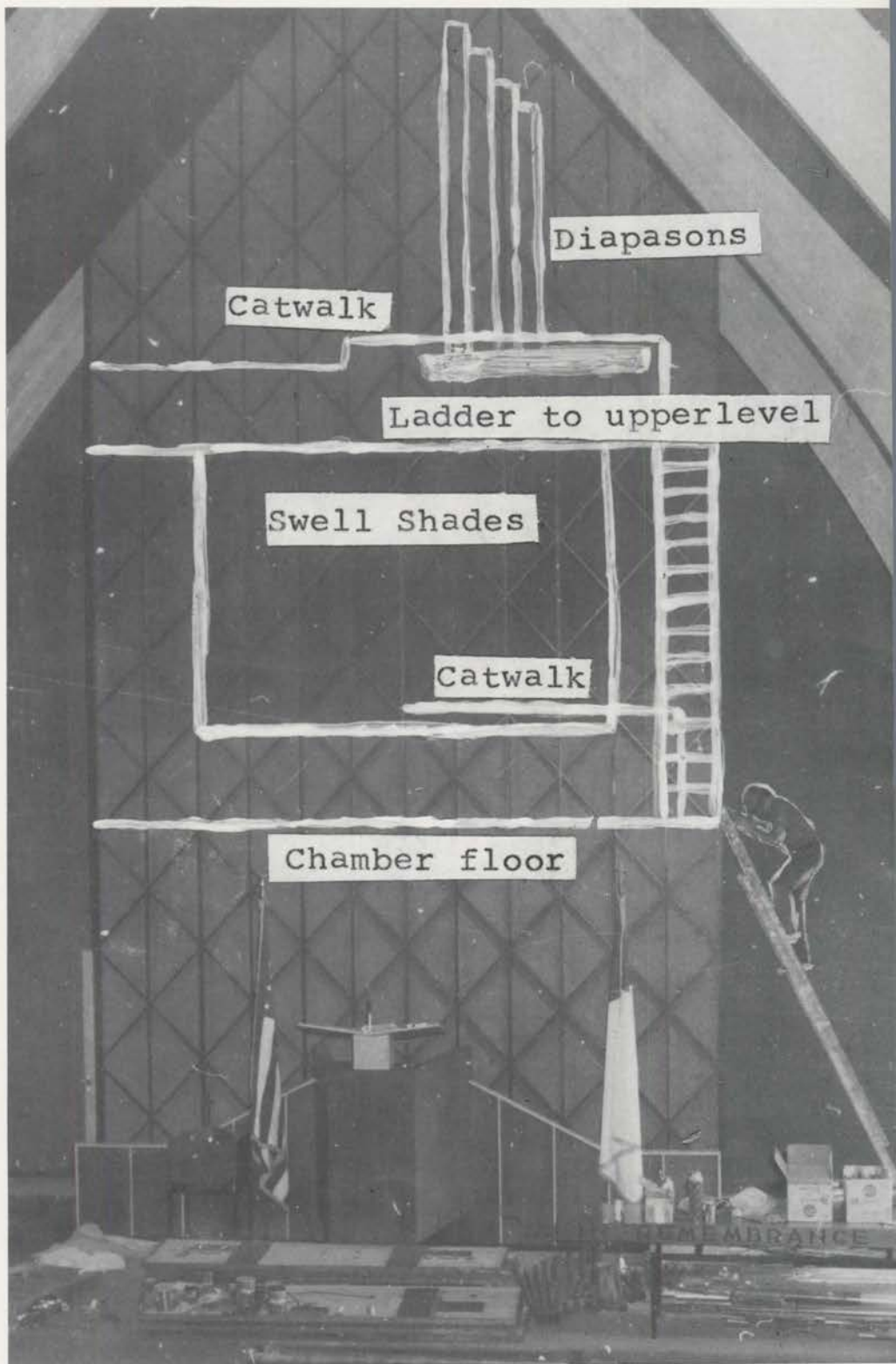
After a quick lesson in pipe handling for the ex-gandy-dancers, over 600 pipes were removed. Small pipes were brought down in cardboard boxes. Larger pipes were chain-ganged out of the chest, through the wall opening, down the ladder to the

church floor.

Bill Bunch provided four large pipe crates in which we packed all pipes except the very large wood and metal ones. Wrapped in paper and excelsior, the pipes made the cross-country trip in good shape. Susie Woods was our pipe packer, and saved at least a day's work by her help. Remember our motto: "Take Along a Pipe Packer!"

It's amazing how easy it was to maneuver around the chambers with the pipes removed. A screwdriver was dropped into one of the diapasons at this point... never to be retrieved until the diapasons were removed, a final operation due to their height. A lifesaver was an electric screwdriver, a suggestion made by Mike Ohman. It was a real palm saver.

This superimposed diagram shows the layout of the chamber. One can imagine the difficulties encountered in the removal of the organ. The outline of Craig ascending the ladder on the right gives some size perspective.



While the crew was making hash of the chambers, I was cutting wires from the remote key action. Nothing is as easy as spreaders to disconnect. Then on to the console! We moved it, and its stock of hymnals, pencils, paper clips and hairpins so we could get to the cable. We hoped to be able to pull it loose from a crawlway under the altar stage. It wouldn't budge. So, Leo crawled under the shallow stage tracing the cable until it disappeared into the floor joists. Still it wouldn't move. So the verdict was in...the cable would have to be cut? We left about seven feet of cable under the floor, salvaging the remainder.

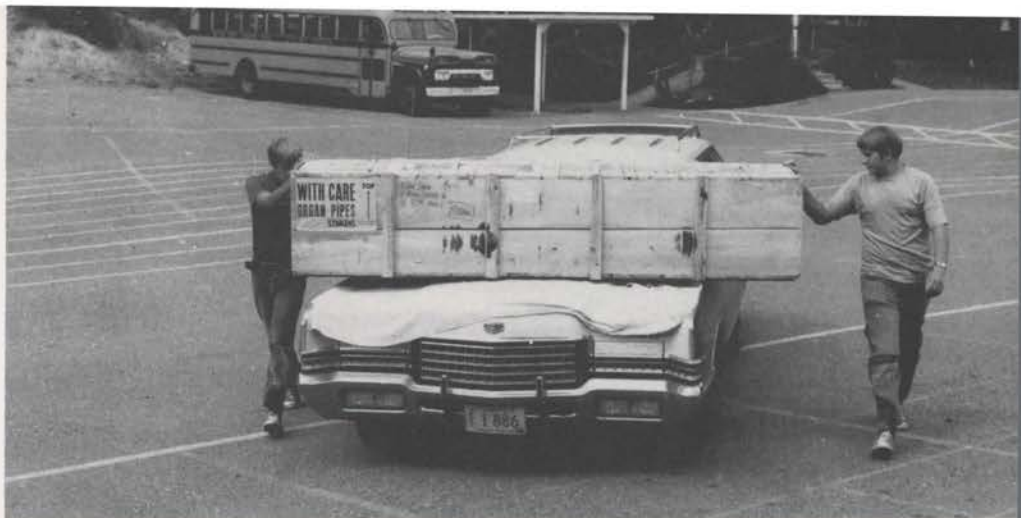
After a day and a half, little did we know the easy part was over. The windchests were next, starting with the four-ranker blocking the chamber opening. Under it was a regulator which had to be dismantled to remove it. Each of us, including our church helper, Ken Oordt, grabbed a corner of the chest. "Hoist!". Pop! Pop!Pop!Pop! Four hernias at once!

Once again a call to B&V, who kindly loaned us their block and tackle. We rigged ten heavy wind chests to the floor, being sure that no one was standing under them as they were lowered in case a rope broke!

When we got to the upper level, it became a matter of juggling on a tightrope! With three people balanced on 2x4's, we heavy-handed weighty chests up off their supports, and placed them on end on a 2x8 plank treading the 2x4's. Then, re-rig the rope and tackle, lift up the chest, remove the 2x8 from underneath it, and lower the chest 10 feet to the chamber floor below. All chests, and the large wooden Flutes and Tibias were removed this way. Most of the time was spent in studying and deciding the best way to do each job, and to ensure maximum safety for those walking the 2x4's!

In dismantling the upper chamber, we reached the apex of the church ceiling. As we moved lower, we took everything with us, leaving only a few bolts sticking out of the concrete chamber walls, and graffiti etched high up on the chamber walls with a nail!

The chamber was rapidly becoming empty, and we still had a blower to go. It was advancing late afternoon, Friday. The one large swell shade, 6 feet by 9 feet, came



A hard way to drive to Idaho to be sure! Craig, Chris and an unseen George move one of four pipe crates from school storage room to church for packing. Beats carrying them.

apart for removal, after we made several nutty attempts to remove it intact. Then, came the large wood Diaphones which couldn't have been moved before now due to the fact they were wedged behind chests and catwalks. After the twelve Diaphones, the large nine foot Diaphone chest. A heavy chunk of wood to be sure. We also retrieved our wayward screwdriver by turning the CCC# Diaphone upside down.

After sweeping the chamber floor, it was clean and empty. Now came what has to be the worst part of the job. Doing a reverse wedding procession up the long aisle to the back of the church and the waiting 18-foot truck. It might have been more enjoyable if we had had organ music for the procession. Heavy items went first, and it was constant walking for seemingly endless hours with loaded arms. We had taken a makeshift dolly which came in handy for mov-

ing anything too large for armloads.

Eventually the truck was loaded, with just enough space on the rear for the blower. That was the next job, which was tackled by Leo, Ken, Chris and Craig, while I cleaned the church. The Orgoblo was in a large room in the basement. But to keep children out of it, the church built a wall around the blower, with a door a scant 24 inches wide. The wall had to come down, and the blower and motor were thoroughly dismantled since it wouldn't clear other church doors.

It took a full evening for the crew to remove the regulator and ductwork in the blower room, the wall, and the blower. We wheeled the blower out at 2 ayem Saturday morning! There was very little at that time that a tired crew found to be funny...but it must have been quite a sight to see five be-draggled, filthy people pushing the blower up

Let's see. I wonder if I can get out of this job yet! Susie surveys the task of packing the metal pipes in the crates. She stands amid String, Oboe and Tuba pipes.





Stand under it and catch it when it comes, Susie! The four-rank chest descends to the church floor, with one-man on the rope, and three more in the chamber guiding it down. An impossible task without Balcom and Vaughn's block and tackle.



That long walk up the aisle! Pipe Crate #3, with swell shade and Diaphone rack piled on top, heads toward the truck, not necessarily under the control of Craig, Chris and George.

They even came out of the woodwork! Leo, the Cable Saver, had the dirty task of crawling through a small hole to save the console cable. It finally disappeared beneath floor joists, couldn't be pulled loose and had to be cut. (George Brown Photo)



the hill beside the church at 2:30 in the morning!

The weight of the blower "done in our dolly." With five of us under it, we hoisted the blower into the truck, followed by the motor, electric box, starter and rectifier. The last thing to load was the back console panel. And there was very little room left for anything else. The remote key action was loaded into the station wagon where an eye could be kept on it.

At 3:30 A.M., the organ was loaded, the church cleaned and the truck locked. The Idaho crew thanked our Seattle Helper, Ken, and headed for bed. Downtown Seattle was very beautiful with lights glowing that night... but I don't think any of us cared.

Saturday evening saw our two-vehicle caravan heading over Snoqualmie pass in Washington. We were rested, yet still tired. But I had a real feeling of accomplishment, knowing that 6500 pounds of organ were safely stashed in the truck, and everyone had done a fantastic job at something which was totally foreign to them, and without injuries, except tired and aching muscles. There also was no damage to the organ either... nothing was dropped in all that handling.

Rental trucks are not known for their speed, particularly over Northwestern mountains. It was a slow, monotonous journey until late Sunday night when we arrived in Twin Falls. Monday morning, Leo and I backed the truck up to the garage which was to become storage for the new household addition. When we tried to open the truck gate, it wouldn't move!

Visions of three tons of pipe organ shifted up against the door flashed through my mind! We finally managed to jimmy the door open enough to feel the console rear panel, which could be moved. Sighs of relief as we knew nothing enormous had shifted. After some cussing and tugging, we found that a regulator board had fallen, wedging itself between a pipe crate and the truck gate. After some effort, the door popped open.

It took the better portion of the day to stash the organ in the single-car garage. For a time, pipes, windchests and diaphone resonators were strewn about the lawn, causing many a turned head and inquisitive com-

ment from neighbors, whom I suspect will hear more about the organ in the future!

Two years of work on a large model railroad layout was dismantled in an afternoon. Years of accumulation of equipment was stored in boxes. The Smith theatre organ will be installed in a basement chamber, with console in an attached room. Eventual plans call for a Solo and Main chamber and it will be necessary to acquire some off-set chests because of a height problem. We're also looking for smaller swell shades to help control sound.

There are pipe chests to clean and repair. Wood and metal pipes, generally in very good shape, to clean. Wires to be traced and prepared. I have plans for expansion, and the addition of voices. But I'll have to settle first for a simpler installation as I learn more about pipe organs. I feel I'm very fortunate to have this instrument. Theatre organs in Idaho are rare, and include a Robert Morton in the Ada Theatre in Boise, another at the University of Idaho and mine. At one time, there were four theatre organs and a Fotoplayer in Pocatello, Idaho. They are long gone.

I hope to be adding percussions and a toy counter, but I don't anticipate achieving the original specs.

In looking back on the task of removal, the job was fun. At 3 A.M. Saturday morning, I don't think the crew could have cared less about pipe organs. But now, in retrospect, we're enjoying the memories, and we're ready to do it again!

And it couldn't have been done without the help of Bill Bunch, Mins Reinsma and Ken Oordt of Seattle, Susie Woods, who let us use her apartment as our base of operations, and kept us well-fed, Mike Ohman, and Leo Malberg, and my brothers Chris and Craig who are now quite knowledgeable about pipe organs!

In closing, I would very much like to hear from anyone who has historical data about Smith theatre organs, particularly my instrument, as well as individuals who have overcome limited home facilities for an installation. I'll answer any and all letters I receive.

And if you have an opportunity to help dismantle a theatre pipe organ, I can only say "do it!" It's a great experience, and a great hobby! □