

# Pipe Dreams Do Come True!

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Ten years ago, stacked behind a wall of bolts of cloth, cardboard and tissue paper, I first saw the dirt covered remains of what once was a Mighty Wurlitzer. The organ had been purchased by a local businessman and removed from the Paramount Theatre, Charlottesville, Virginia. The proposed building of an auditorium in a local shopping center was the intended future home for the organ, but the rising costs in construction eliminated the chance of the structure ever being built.

So the past ten years has seen this fine instrument strewn among crates and cardboard boxes, each day wasting away a little bit more. Each month brought another accident — another crate thrown carelessly on a keyboard or a heavy box rolled over a group of pipes. All I could do was look and do whatever would minimize the chance of further damage. By shifting the parts of the organ into a better arrangement,

members of Piedmont Chapter were able to keep the organ at a safe distance from the rest of the stored items which were constantly being shipped out for distribution among remnant shops. It is amazing sometimes how many people cannot understand how fragile a pipe organ is!

While we performed some of this "Red Cross" work, we were surprised to find a three manual Kimball console in storage with the rest of the Wurlitzer. After further investigation, we learned the original console was accidentally burned when the proscenium curtain fell during a stage fire. To date, the time of the fire and where the Kimball console came from is unknown. Fortunately, the Kimball console only lacks nine stop keys from matching the Wurlitzer's style Balaban 1A specifications. These missing stop keys will be put on the console so the organ's eleven ranks can be taken full advantage of by the or-

ganist.

In 1970, additional warehouse space was built adjacent to the existing storage facility which prompted the owner to move the organ into this new area. Unknown to me or any chapter member, the organ was moved without proper supervision and out of ignorance, the moving crew unintentionally damaged a large portion of three ranks of strings. So severe was the damage, the bass end on the Solo String must now be totally replaced and/or rebuilt. With cries of anguish and despair, we began to reorganize, pack and restack the pieces all over again, this time in a much smaller space which hampered progress considerably. To make things worse, the added responsibility of surveying and cataloging the new damage for future reference was necessary while we shuffled the organ around.

The years passed and the future of the Wurlitzer seemed very dim in the ownership of her new patron. If an auditorium would ever be built, it did not seem likely the organ could survive such constant abuse during the interim. In order to save her, it was obvious that we find another storage area or an immediate home. Although a new storage area was the easiest of the two choices, I felt she had faced storage long enough and a new home for the organ was our best bet for complete restoration. After all, the organ (or any organ for that matter) was of more value to everyone in a playing state. From my experience, I have learned that pipe organs can turn to so much junk if stored too long, particularly if it is not stored properly.

Finding a new site for installing a pipe organ is not an easy task as anyone who has tried will tell you. To make it more difficult, we placed several strict provisions on possible locations.

1. The site must have the capacity to seat at least 600 people without violating fire and safety laws. (a home installation was not desirable)
2. The building proposed must have live acoustics; We did not want the organ to sound like it was being played in a paper bag, but rather that it should sound as much like it did in its original setting, this being another reason for our wanting to leave it

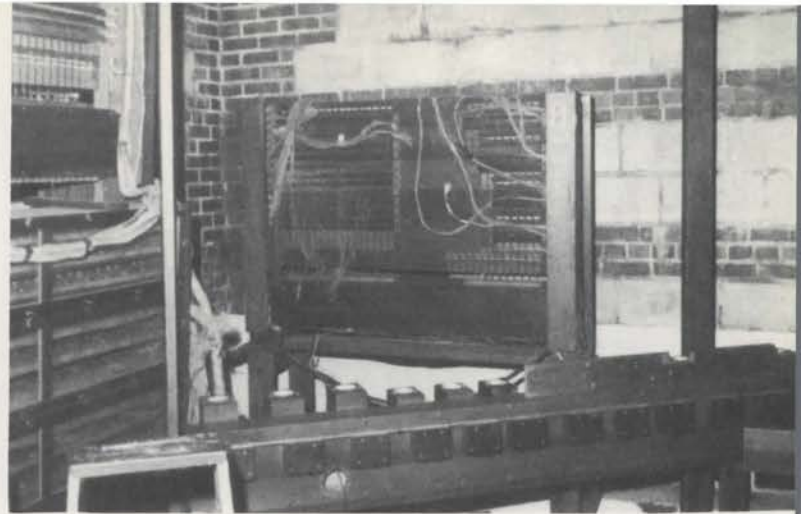
The organ begins to take shape in the solo chamber.







Moving the relay proves to be a difficult job.



Relay, remote switching, and Diaphone in place. Main chamber.

out of a home.

3. The site must have constant environmental control during the winter and be under some form of supervision or protection against vandalism, abuse, etc.

But every idea the chapter produced, however, seemed to have a flaw in it. Idea after idea was another dream dashed away.

In October of 1973, another possibility occurred to me. It was so simple and obvious, I was annoyed with myself for not having thought of it sooner. Ten miles from the storage area is Elon College, a four year liberal arts college. Why not put the organ in the gymnasium? The gym exceeded all the minimal requirements we had specified. It was a natural! For basketball games and graduation exercises, the organ would be an invaluable tool. In addition, all manner of public events are held in the building thus giving Piedmont Chapter a chance to give the general public some exposure to what theatre organs and our club are all about.

Immediately the owner of the organ was contacted and after several delays, a meeting was arranged between Piedmont Chapter, the owner and Elon College officials. An agreement was signed between the three parties. The *basic* terms of our agreement were as follows. In exchange for renovation, installing and maintaining the organ:

1. Elon College will accept the organ as a gift.
2. Elon College will provide ample housing for the organ which meets Piedmont's exact specifications.
3. Four times a year, Elon College will allow Piedmont Chapter to

use the facility for its use so long as it does not conflict or interfere with other school activities.

When the final agreement was signed, we began to sift through the storage area taking inventory to insure all the parts were there and to make a complete and accurate list of all the damage the organ had sustained. Among the many dents, scratches and abrasions, we discovered the relay had sustained water damage when the lower level of the theatre weathered a flood. Although the relay itself remained dry, the cable linking the remote switch stack to the relay had been totally immersed. All the double cotton covering on the wire had separated leaving too many wires without insulation, except for the usual lacquered layer characteristic of Wurlitzer cables. It was decided, therefore, to replace the cable linking the remote switch stack to the re-

lay. It was a big job, but we were thankful that the smaller portion of the cable comprising the relay was all that had to be replaced. Many tedious hours have gone into the rewiring along with a sea of coffee, many expletives deleted and a great *deal* of patience. With the biggest portion of the job completed, however, I can say having a reliable relay is well worth the effort.

The two chambers were finally completed in two corners of the north balcony one year after the agreement was signed. The installation is now progressing as rapidly as time and money permits. The first concert is scheduled for the first of October, 1975, two years after preliminary steps were taken to move the organ to Elon College and over eleven years after she was removed from her first home. It all just goes to show you, with time, lots of work and a little luck, your "pipe dream" can come true! □

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