

Rebirth in Alaska...

OUR LAST FRONTIER

by Lloyd E. Klos

J. Allan MacKinnon gets in some practice time at the Kimball. Swell shades are located above the chamber.

(F. Butte Photo)



Theatre organs are installed in a myriad of places, all far remote from the original intent of the builders.

On May 2, 1977, a milestone in the theatre organ movement was reached when a 2/8 Kimball was dedicated in the lobby of the cavernous State Office Building in Juneau, Alaska.

The Juneau installation is believed to be the first in a governmental office building.

The organ, Kimball #7019, had an interesting history. In 1924, W.D. Gross, pioneer Alaskan and founder of the motion picture business in that territory, decided to install a new pipe organ in his Coliseum Theatre in Juneau. That was the year of the first documented correspondence between Gross and C.M. "Sandy" Balcom's organ sales company in Seattle.

However, because of financing problems and Gross' desire to get a custom-built organ, it wasn't until 1928 when the deal was finally consummated that the organ was shipped to Juneau and installed.

The talkies were slowly eradicating the silents by then, so the organ's future in the theatre was clouded, even during installation. The first organist lasted just two weeks; he was that bad! Replacing him was Carol Beery Davis, who, for six years, was the fulltime organist at the Coliseum. After that, she worked part-time between chores of raising a family.

She worried about the instrument in those days, because the theatre was built on pilings over the waters

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of the Gastineau Channel. The floor was thin, and corrosion from the salt water could have been devastating to the organ's mechanical parts.

When silent movies became passé, the organ was used very rarely. Enter W.D. Gross again. In 1939, he built an apartment-theatre complex in Juneau called the Twentieth Century. He made provision for housing the organ in triangular-shaped chambers on both sides of the proscenium arch of the theatre. In 1940, the Coliseum's organ was re-installed in the new house. The console was located on the main floor in a shallow pit, center stage.

The move to the new theatre saved the Kimball from destruction. In the mid-1940's, the Coliseum was destroyed by fire. Theatres with organs in Ketchikan and Anchorage suffered similar fates. For a few years, the Twentieth Century's Kimball was occasionally used for patriotic celebrations, holidays, festivities and community events. Mrs. Davis taught on it, her star pupil being J. Allan MacKinnon, who later was to be graduated from Princeton where he studied advanced organ.

By 1950, the organ fell into disuse, but in 1951, Franklin Butte, a radio engineer from Portland, Oregon, and employed in a Juneau radio station, took an interest in the instrument. (The story of the initial restoration was in the Fall 1963 THE-ATRE ORGAN).

Following a concert which re-dedicated the Kimball, it was used occasionally for radio shows, Thanksgiving programs, etc. In the early 1960's, Al McKinnon returned to Juneau and played the Kimball regularly until 1965. It was used sporadically until about 1970. By that time, rats and moisture had taken their toll.

The organ was removed from the theatre, but as in so many cases, the main cable was cut. Enter Miles Remley, Juneau resident and pipe organ enthusiast. He bought the instrument for a fraction of its value. Recognizing its historical worth, he said, "I couldn't stand to see a piece of history go to ruin." After storing part of it in his home and the remainder in a warehouse, Remley sought a building big enough to restore and install it.

In 1975, he donated the Kimball to Alaska, with the proviso that it re-

main in the state. It was stored in the new State Office Building until officials said they needed the space. The organ would have to go. The threat existed of its being auctioned off as surplus property.

The state employees, to their everlasting credit, contacted Al McKinnon, Mrs. Davis and civic leader Connie Boochever. Through the last named, the Greater Juneau Arts and Humanities Council set up a tax-exempt fund to receive people's donations. Another "Save the Organ" crusade was on!

For a year and a half, funds were collected through such activities as a television auction and club-sponsored dinners. Coffee cans were placed in bars, coffee shops and restaurants. Some pledges for \$100 were received.

Within 18 months, \$20,000 was raised. In addition, Senator Mike Gravel helped to receive a \$10,000 contribution from the Lilly Foundation for the organ's restoration. Another \$30,000 in state museum funds were earmarked for installing it and building a glass showcase for the pipes.

Where the restoration would be done, was discussed. Some thought the work should be "farmed out," but thanks to Mrs. Davis, the instrument went back to the firm which originally shipped it north in 1928, Balcom and Vaughan of Seattle. The firm enjoys a national reputation as one of a few firms in the country which restores theatre organs.

Mrs. Davis journeyed to "the lower 48" to see progress made during the refurbishing, and has noth-

A sizeable crowd gathers on all levels of Juneau's State Office Building whenever the Kimball is played. Don Meyer is at the console. (F. Butte Photo)



ing but high praise for the employee-owned company and its president, a 35-year associate of Sandy Balcom, William J. "Bill" Bunch. The wood of the console had been terribly abused. But from a single eight-inch scrap of the original, found inside the case, the company matched new mahogany to that original piece to build a new chocolate-hued console.

Bill Bunch says that his firm "probably got the job on Franklin Butte's recommendation. He came to Seattle and spent a week with us, helping with the restoration and we had a ball.

"We worked on the organ for almost a year. The console had gotten wet in the pit and the base had to be rebuilt. All of the normal overhauling had to be done. We found the people in Juneau delightful to work with and most enthusiastic.

"The instrument was sent to us in a container van, and returned the same way, via Alaska ferry. So shipping was no problem.

"The installation is really something to hear, acoustically. It sounds like a much larger organ, and is most effective, in my opinion."

Following the months of rehabilitation, shipping back to Juneau, and installation work, the organ sounded

forth in its new home in dedication ceremonies on May 1, 1977. At the console was Mrs. Davis, and in the words of Allan McKinnon, "She played the organ for a lot of years, so it was appropriate that she be the first to play it now."

At the dedication, the crowd was attentive to the mechanics of the instrument, as well as its sound, because pipes, toy counter and percussions are displayed in a glass enclosure. The nearby Kimball upright piano, played from the console, displayed the movement of its keys. The swell shades opened and closed above the pipe chamber. The drums and chimes were heard, their strikers visible to the eye. When Mrs. Davis finished her stint, Al McKinnon took over, playing bits of Bach and ragtime of Joplin.

McKinnon believes the acoustics of the building are excellent for instrumental music, though the human voice does not carry across the vastness of the lobby. Empty, the building's reverb holds a note for six seconds. With a large crowd to absorb sound, the period is cut to two seconds. The overtones are most impressive when Bach is played.

The residents of Juneau are well aware of the new installation. The

man in charge of the organ's maintenance and security, Richard Engen, says, "I believe the organ helps people relate to the state in a more positive manner. The lobby seems to have been built with that in mind. It gives people reason to come to the state building, aside from dealing with the bureaucracy."

Furthermore, the organ's location is dramatic in itself. It is situated across from another addition to the state building's lobby, and dedicated at the same time — the "Old Witch" totem pole. Thus, with the organ pipes, totem pole and live trees which reach toward the high ceiling, five stories above the floor, the State Office Building in Juneau is unique in its accouterments. And, above all, the pipe organ enjoys a unique location.

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Franklin Butte was also a featured artist during dedication ceremonies in May. It was he who helped save the organ with an earlier restoration project in the sixties. (C. Maki Photo)

Though Alaska may be our last frontier, its citizens do dress up for important occasions. Here, J. Allan MacKinnon performs for the grand opening on May 1, 1977. He was a prime mover on the "Save the Organ" committee. (F. Butte Photo)

