



THE BROKEN DREAM OF JOHN LEDWON

by Mike Ohman and Stu Green

Post-fire photos by Stu Green

Fire and water, the arch enemies of the pipe organ, wreaked their havoc on a fine instrument during the October California brush fires. The organ had been a focal point in the life of John Ledwon since he was a teen-ager. We watched it grow from an 11-rank instrument to more than 25-ranks. We recall the slow trek of the present console westward from Plattsburg, N.Y., and chronicled John's painstaking work in re-arranging the stopkeys and adding pistons to accommodate the much larger organ he planned. We wrote about the projected home to be built,

with a high-ceilinged music room, even published sketches of the plans. Then came the carefully selected additional ranks of pipework.

When completed, a few years ago, it was truly a thing of beauty. The Ledwon home was often a meeting place for organ enthusiasts over the years, and it was on the agenda for the 1979 ATOS Convention. But no

longer. The home is a burnt-out shell, the organ nearly totalled. Mike Ohman was on the scene; his story follows.

Fall is normally a beautifully colorful season, brimmed with the hopes of a new year and fulfilled dreams. On October 23, 1978 at 2:45 p.m. John Ledwon's dreams went up in an agonizing 25 minutes of intense heat and devouring flames. His exquisite home and 3/26 Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ were the object of a desperate struggle.

A sick person — an arsonist — had set fire to the dry grass near the

ABOVE PHOTO — The living quarters of the Ledwon home fully involved as firemen pour on water. They succeeded in extinguishing this afternoon fire which burned its way right up to the pipe chambers where a fire wall helped block it.

(News-Chronicle photo by Tom Kelsey)

freeway in Agoura, California, a spaced-out residential area north of Los Angeles county limits. John, on his way home from Newbury Park High School, where he teaches music, saw the beginning of the fire just past noon and reported it to the fire department before he went on home. Once there, he watched the flames as they moved away from his home. Thinking he was safe, he went about his normal tasks of the day.

It was a dry day. The unpredictable Santa Ana winds suddenly changed course and without warning, blew the flames directly towards John's home. They traveled across the dry brush faster than a man could run. Before he could do anything to prevent it, the flames came up from the back of the property, up the steep incline to the side of the house, leaped to the back patio roof and made a feast of what they found.

Desperately, John and neighbors fought the flames. A husky garden hose was going full force but was as useless as trying to cool the hot, dry desert floor with a water pistol. Ten brush firemen stood at the bottom of the hill about 500 feet away from the house. John summoned their help but was refused because their assignment was to fight brush fires not structure fires. Some minutes later an engine company arrived and in a

Before the disaster, John stands at the foot of the hill with his organ-filled home looming above.



few moments the flames were out. But not before devouring the complete living quarters at the rear of the home. A fire wall barred the flames from the chambers — for a time.

All of John's personal possessions — gone! All the mementos of a lifetime of activities and personal achievements — gone!

Mike Ohman heard a live radio interview of the Ledwon fire and being quite close, drove there to see if he could help in any way.

When he arrived the neighbors were trying to get what valuables were left out into the open air to dry (an upright piano belonging to a neighbor, a few tools, two badly smoke and water damaged chairs, pieces of several antique chandeliers, a burned lamp, a singed teddy bear).

A bathtub on the top (3rd) floor had broken through the charred beams and fallen two stories to the basement floor. Refrigerator, oven, a brand new color TV and microwave oven all scorched and charred were lying in a pile of rubble on the basement floor, a grim sight.

The firemen, before leaving, gave instructions to guard the house against looters. They left a fire hose — "in case the fire rekindles". Mike and John cautiously began to make way towards the pipe chamber door. Blackened and crumbled as it was, when the door was finally forced ajar, it revealed pipework in relatively good condition. A few large wooden offset pipes were burned, some water damage, but mostly intact. The percussions which rested in their own chamber above the main and solo chambers were a total loss.

John considered himself lucky for even having saved what was left — a rare 16' Octave of a Wurlitzer English Posthorn, some choice brass pipes and the beautifully voiced pipework so professionally blended by Lee Haggart. There were only a few badly damaged pipes; these could be replaced.

The fire had charred 57,000 acres and some 150 homes were engulfed or badly damaged by flames. Livestock and pets perished. Many people were left destitute by the flames.

John and Mike decided to spend the night at the house to protect the charred remains from the hands of those who benefit from someone else's tragedy — looters! They left to get some food and sleeping bags. Be-



Longshot of the hilltop home. The afternoon fire burned away the entire living area (left end of structure) and ripped into the Percussion Chamber, destroying the percussions.



Light leaks through the ruined Percussion Chamber (above). A large wind chest (foreground), removed from behind the charred swell shutters, awaits transportation.

Closer view of the ruined living area and Percussion Chamber. The remains of the Marimba resonators can be seen in the upper level.





Student Gloria Higgins examines ruined console. The small sign at the end of the center manual is appropriate: 'Temporarily out of service.'

Dramatic shot of a borate bomber dropping its fire-quenching load on the Ledwon home. This is a last resort move. Firemen claim that the weight of the liquid can crush a sound roof.

(News-Chronicle photo by Tom Kelsey)



fore they could return someone had entered the house and removed an undamaged miniature electric train collection John had had for years in a specially built glass display case. It's most depressing to know there are people loose who can be so dastardly and brazen.

They bedded down on the undamaged front balcony of the house so that they could keep watch and listen for intruders. The night was quiet. The stench of burned oak permeated the thick air. Two or three crickets that had survived the ground blaze chirped; a maimed coyote howled in agony. Two roosters shrieked in the night. There were no stars; the sky was dark with clouds of smoke.

The two lay in their sleeping bags listening to the eerie sounds, each lost in thought, wondering why it had to happen, why this lovely place, and ironically, why to the very man who discovered and reported the fire.

Suddenly, without warning, there was a sound like small calibre gun shots, infrequent at first, then more intense and assertive. The chills ran up Mike's back. After a few moments John said, "I've got to see what's going on." Both jumped back into their wet clothes and shoes and ran into the basement to find wild flames consuming wooden wind lines. Quickly and without communication, each ran for the garden hose. Mike hooked it up to the faucet, John doused the flames in the regulator room which is located under the main and solo chambers. If there was fire in the basement, it meant that there must be fire in the chambers just above. Again both ran up the outside stairs and into the already weakened structure. Gingerly, they walked across the blackened floorboards hoping they would not fall through the flooring to the basement. They looked through the chamber door to be sickened by the sight of hungry blades of fire delighted by the taste of Tibias, Trumpets, and Tubas. The once stately 16' English Posthorn was now a molten mass of metal lying in a puddle on the blazing floor. The tears ran down Mike's face as he turned on the fire hose full force knowing that the water would kill the fire, but also totally destroy the remains of the magnificent organ. The smoke was intense and difficulty in breathing caused much discomfort. John and



A singed teddy bear guards the switch stacks and relays while they await loading on a truck bound for the Power warehouse for storage. These parts came through the fire almost unscathed because they were located in the cellar — except for water damage.



Ray Ledwon, John's dad, awaits the forklift which will lower the console (right niche) to ground level then take it down the steep driveway to the flatbed truck.

Jim Warner rides the console down as the forklift lowers it to the driveway pavement.





The forklift moves the ruined console slowly down the driveway for loading. The trees which line the driveway escaped the unpredictable course of the flames, which were propelled by a 55 mph Santa Ana wind.



The strain shows on John Ledwon's face as he examines a Tibia pipe burned beyond repair.

Harvey Heck and son Ron packed the pipes in coffin-like crates for shipment to the warehouse. The top of the Tuba pipe has been melted away.



Mike took turns holding the fire hose towards the blaze so that the other could run out of the chambers for a gasp of fresher air and then right back to relieve the other.

Some moments later, the fire out, John again inspected his once carefully laid out pipe chambers. The string pipes had melted and lay folded over like bobby pins, held up by the ties which supported them on their wind chest. The solo Tibias were now charcoal, hanging on the wall by their supports with the wind chest underneath them devoured by flames and gone.

The Tuba pipes looked as if they had been torn at by a large vicious animal whose instinct is to kill and leave for dead a mangled carcass. The taller metal pipes were mostly gone. The smaller ones were left full of melted remains of the larger pipes. Water lay in huge puddles all over the wooden chamber floors. The swell shades were nothing but large chunks of charcoal in a frame.

The two went to the basement and with screwdrivers, removed some of the chest bottomboards to find them full of water. They put their screwdrivers away. Went back to their sleeping bags and laid there waiting for the sun to come up over the mountain peaks.

Blackness, pierced by fierce fiery arrows.

The birth of a new day, a day missing a magnificent organ.

That's Mike Ohman's eye-witness report. It is difficult to contemplate the despair such a disaster brings, unless one is involved in one. As in all such disasters there was a brighter side looming. Although John's home and organ lay in ruins, the human element was soon apparent.

They started arriving in twos and threes — John's friends. They had come to help in any way possible. They came in work clothes and brought leather gloves for rough work. They brought food and drink.

One of the first to arrive was LA Chapter Chairman, Bob Power. After some consultation, it was decided to salvage what was left of the Wurlitzer. Bob Power offered storage space in his warehouse in Camarillo, an hour's drive north. He also loaned a flatbed truck and a forklift, drivers included. Meanwhile John's



John's high school students showed up en masse to help with the salvage and cleanup. Student Cory Campbell (left) conducted John's classes at school while he was doing cleanup work. Here, the pedalboard is being moved to the flatbed truck. We asked them to smile for the photo, to help relieve the tension of working in the ruins.

friends were converging on the ruined house, including many of John's students at Newbury Park High School and many ATOSers. All were told of the plan and how they could help. Let us record the names of some of the volunteers: Gene Davis, Bob Smith, Steve Ross, Harold Donze, Harvey and Ronald Heck, Bill Coffman, Neal Kissell, Ralph Beaudry, Rod Skelding and Virgil Purdue. Jim Warner acted as foreman. Chick Landers was the only casualty; he was conked by a falling fluorescent lighting fixture.

For the remainder of the week these volunteers (and we probably missed some names), showed up for the heavy labor of removing the water-logged pipe chests, getting the charred console, the badly scorched grand piano, the blower and other heavy or clumsy parts which might be salvaged, aboard the flatbed. It was always a struggle because the house is on top of a hill and the main approach is a steep, paved driveway. The water-soaked carpets had to be torn out to take weight off the weakened floor, and the broken glass from heat-shattered windows and mirrors had to be swept into piles as such rubble was a hazard to the workers.

The lighter work was ably handled by John's students; they insist he's a genius, an attitude probably engendered by his closeness to the students and his youthful outlook. He keeps students busy putting on school plays and musicals at a close to professional level.

At the end of the week the remains of the pipe organ had been put in



John's antique harmonium got both fried and waterlogged. The caption in the *LA Times* photo listed this as the \$100,000 organ which burned.

storage along with John's Hammond which somehow escaped fire damage. For the present John is rooming with a neighbor and he finally borrowed a change of clothing; all he had after the fire was what he had on his back.

John has taken his loss stoically. He hasn't lost his sense of humor. He will rebuild the house immediately, or as soon as his insurance company comes through.

"The sadness of losing my Wurlitzer was too much. But I have friends," philosophizes John Ledwon. "They proved it." □

Vancouver Orpheum To Feature George Blackmore Concerts

On Monday and Tuesday, December 18th and 19th, George Blackmore will present concerts at the Orpheum, Vancouver, B.C.

Each evening will be an entirely different program which means the true theatre organ buff will be served two days of top quality organ music featuring the artistry of Mr. Blackmore.

This is the final presentation in a series produced by Herbert McDonald of Vancouver. Past programs have featured Reginald Foort, Ann Leaf and Rex Koury.

The Blackmore appearances should prove to be a highlight event for the Vancouver Orpheum. Tickets



George Blackmore

for each performance are available through the Vancouver Ticket Center, 630 Hamilton Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6B-2R3 and are priced at \$5.00, \$6.00, and \$7.00, Canadian currency. □

George Wright Initiates 'Help John Ledwon Fund'

by Stu Green

When the flames had been extinguished, John Ledwon stood in the ruins of his once beautiful Agoura (Calif.) hilltop home and surveyed the shambles. In only a few hours his dream home had been reduced to a burned-out shell, the once proud organ destroyed for all practical purposes. John had come out of his



George Wright

bouts with flames with only the clothing on his back, but with more friends than he knew he had. They all wanted to help. Some donated their physical labor during cleanup operations. Others wanted to help in other ways.

Organist George Wright took the initiative by suggesting a "Help John Ledwon Fund" to gather donations from those who want to contribute some money to help assuage John's great loss. George knows John but slightly but he felt moved to help a fellow organist through the aftermath of fire destruction. George has lost much to fire — his own 3/25 studio organ, the 2/10 Wurlitzer in the Pasadena Rialto where he played concerts, and part of the roof of his hilltop home to a brush fire a few years ago. So George Wright has much empathy for anyone suffering such a disaster, and especially when an organist or organ are involved.

George contacted his friend Bob Power and asked Bob to be the trea-

surer for the proposed fund. Bob, already caught up in the aftermath of the Ledwon fire, agreed.

George started the ball rolling with a sizable contribution. Bob matched it. So did Dick Loderhose, Marion Cook, Howard Vollum and Peg Nielsen. Del Castillo said he would contribute proceeds from his January concert. John's students at Newbury Park High School said that proceeds from a November show they are putting on (John is the director/coach) will be passed on to John.

George Wright admitted that such contributions could never equal the loss (\$250,000 according to one published report) but at least they will help take the sting out of the heart-wrenching ordeal that John Ledwon is facing.

Those desiring to contribute to the George Wright-sponsored "Help John Ledwon Fund" can make out their checks to John Ledwon and send them to Mr. Robert Power, Box 392, Oxnard, Calif. 93032. □