

# SOONER STATE

## ACQUIRES

# TULSA ORGAN

by Dorothy Smith    photos by Lewis Jarrett

"Dor'thy, we've got the organ!"

It was 5 p.m., Saturday, May 13th, 1978, and Phil Judkins, chairman of Sooner State Chapter, American Theatre Organ Society, was on the phone.

"I knew it, I knew it!" I shrieked! Why? Because the number "11" has been connected to my pipe organ life ever since it began: I was born on the 11th; I first played Tulsa's Ritz organ on the 11th; I played the swan-song for the auction when the Ritz closed, on the 11th . . . That very morning, when I was figuring funds from my current pay check, I came up with cash-on-hand of \$111.11! Now who wouldn't be superstitious and consider that an omen?

"We're meeting tomorrow at American Christian College," Phil continued when I calmed down. "Because it's Mother's Day we're not starting 'til 4 p.m."

"I'll wear my grubbies," I promised.

And so it began. Suddenly all the stories I'd read in *THEATRE ORGAN* about this group and that group and how they'd acquired their own instrument completely flip-flopped from *ho-hum-big-deal* to *wow-we've-done-it-too!*

Our story really begins early in 1978 when news came out that the American Christian College, in serious financial difficulty for the past year or so, was going to close. The campus was to be purchased by the United States Department of Labor for a Job Corps training center — and they certainly weren't interested in the 3/10 Robert Morton theatre organ installed in the auditorium. We learned subsequently that the government was to take over on June 1st; the school — and the organ — had to be out by May 31st.

Originally installed in a theatre in Steubenville, Ohio, the Robert Morton (and its rebuilt console) had been moved to Tulsa in 1966 by Phil Wellington, and our chapter had been responsible for its maintenance since that time. In return we had enjoyed many delightful meetings at the college and had considered it "home

"How do you transfer out of this chicken outfit??" says Lee Smith. L. to R.: Harry Rasmussen, Jim Reel (way back, in the doorway), Lee Smith, Deshayn Wilson, (behind Lee), Dorothy Smith and Phil Judkins.



base." In fact, the 1969 Southwestern Regional ATOS Convention had been centered around this instrument. Was it all to end now?

*We ought to buy the organ.*

*Yes, but we're a small group without a prayer of raising enough money, and anyway, where would we put it even if we could buy it? We'd have to pay for storage 'til we could find somewhere to re-install it . . . Mini-storage for a year would ruin the console, and who's got room to store it anywhere else? We'd never get the blower out without tearing out the wall . . . we'd have to re-build the wall: more money. Of course, they'd give us every consideration because of the maintenance we'd done, but after all . . . surely they'd sell to the highest bidder . . .*

In March, we'd looked into our pocketbooks, came up with a figure, and submitted a bid.

*Our bid's too low, we'll never get it. But at least we've tried. All the other theatre organs in Tulsa have gone to Texas. We'll never find another one right in our own backyard . . . they're all gone. Well, Oral Roberts University has its 21-rank Wurlitzer, Central High School has its 4/46 Kilgen. Phil Judkins has his 3/8 Wicks in his home, and Bruce and Martha Wilson have their 2/12 Hilgreen-Lane up in Claremore. Others have non-assembled organs in planning stages. Theatre Pipe Organ isn't completely dead in Tulsa — we'll manage . . .*

Phil called a special meeting on May 3rd. College officials had sent us a letter stating their minimum acceptable bid — way over what we'd barely scraped up earlier. We could never come up with that much money — no way! Furthermore, the May 31st deadline was staring us in the face: even if we started this coming Saturday we'd only have four weekends to get the organ out . . .

*That's not enough time . . . we'd never do it by then. And who'd take vacation time during the week to take out a pipe organ?*

Phil called the college secretary at home that night, and told him we absolutely could only raise (and he named the sum); if that wasn't enough we'd be out of the running. The secretary would let us know.

The first weekend came and went — no word.

*They must have higher bids. Why*

*didn't they let us know? Maybe they didn't have other bids . . . This suspense is awful!*

On Friday, May 12th, my husband, Lee Smith, dropped by the college just as an "interested civilian." He wished them well on their move to Colorado, then "By the way," he said, "I've listened to the pipe organ in your auditorium these past years; what are you going to do with it?"

"An organ group in Tulsa is interested in it, plus one other party, a church," they told him. "No, the church isn't from Texas, it's local."

"I imagine it would be quite a job to remove the organ," Lee continued, "and it couldn't be done too hurriedly or it'd end up a pile of junk. I'd think taking the blower out would be a problem, too." Then he added, "If you're going to sell it, I'd say you ought to do it real soon. The government doesn't want it, and you may end up with a white elephant you can't give away, if whoever gets it can't take it out in time."

They said someone from the interested church was coming by that afternoon, and then they'd know.

And the next day (Saturday) they said it was ours!

I don't think anybody, gathered that red-letter Mother's Day, truly realized that we had *actually* purchased the organ! Even though, as people drifted in, one by one, each wanted to play "one last number before we shut her down," it was almost as if we were having an ordinary open console meeting. Furthermore, we had *no* definite arrangements as yet for storage: mini-storage would do for all but the console, but no lease had been signed, nor decisions made about the console. We didn't even have a truck rented to haul it in! Talk about faith!

But then a few cameras appeared for "one last picture at the console," and then somebody asked, "How do we begin?"

The reply came back, "First we turn off the blower . . ."

For the record, Bob Busby was at the console, cut off in mid-song, as our beast sputtered its last breath in its second home, Tulsa's American Christian College.

For a hot Oklahoma Sunday afternoon with no air conditioning we had a good turnout. Phil Judkins was there (this was his sixth organ to remove), and Harry Rasmussen, Bob



Here comes the toy counter. Top (in the chamber door): Phil Judkins. Below (catching) L. to R.: Jim Reel, Harry Rasmussen and Joe Crutchfield.

Busby, Jim Reel, Joe Crutchfield, Betty and Bob Weddle, and Bruce and Martha Wilson with sons Derek (age 11) and Deshayn (age 5½). Thank goodness Martha thought to bring iced tea — we drank *gallons* of it! Sam Rhoades, with the first check for the purchase fund, was there, with his wife Nona. Fern Dean had been recruited from a meeting of the Tulsa Organ Club (plug-ins) and appeared in her Sunday best to help. And of course I was there, and had persuaded my son Jeff that his muscles could be his Mother's Day present to me.

After we'd cleared all the auditorium chairs out of the way and removed the railing from in front of the console, the console was disconnected and pushed out of the way — on its own wheels — over near the door. Then Bruce and Derek Wilson climbed the stepladder (there never had been any built-in access to either chamber) to the left-hand chamber and started to hand out pipes, little ones first. Betty Weddle and Martha Wilson, old hands at wrapping them in newspapers, showed us how, and we took turns wrapping and placing them in the several pipe boxes Phil had scrounged from the Central High School project. Little Deshayn Wilson was just the right size to help put them in the boxes.

When the pipes got too big for Derek to lift, Jeff Smith took his place. By the time Bruce and Jeff

had moved to the right-hand chamber, the big diaphones and tubas were moving slower and slower. From where we were waiting on the stage, we'd hear Jeff call out in his best Karate-chop voice, "Ei-YA . . . UNH!" — and another pedal pipe would appear in the doorway. When they got to the D# diaphone (they told us later), after the preparatory "Ei-YA . . ." — nothing moved! They each looked at each other, thinking, "Are you giving this all you've got??" — and tried again. At last it, too, yielded, and appeared in the chamber door to be handed down.

Joe Crutchfield, Martha Wilson and I, along with Deshayn, had formed a bucket brigade to pass pipes along, off the stage, to Jim Reel and Fern Dean. Jim shouldered the big pipes without too much trouble and laid them carefully side-by-side on the auditorium floor. He hated to admit he had to have some help with the very biggest ones, however — quite a blow to his ego!

"I'm getting stronger with each one," Jim insisted.

"It's awf'ly hot in here with no air conditioning," I answered. "How do you mean that, 'stronger'?"

Meanwhile, Phil, Harry Rasmussen and Bob Busby had been inspecting the relay board and switch stack, deciding how it could be dismantled. Bob agreed to come in early the next evening (Monday) and start unsoldering switches. They'd work out the removal of the relay later.

And like a giant game of jackstraws, the pile of ductwork on the auditorium floor was growing, as piece after piece was unscrewed and lowered to waiting hands below.

By 8:30 p.m. all the speaking pipes were out. When Joe Crutchfield declared that he'd had about all the "fun" he could take for one night, the rest of us agreed that this was a good place to stop. Joe was assigned the job of finding us a storage place, renting a truck, and getting other necessary supplies.

As Phil was locking up after everyone had gone, Bill Roberts, finished with his Mother's Day activities, showed up to help. Phil showed him all we'd done.

"I can't believe it," said Bill. "You mean you got *all* the speaking pipes out in four hours?!!" Then he added,

"Well, that's the easy part . . ."

How right he was! The next night, although not all the same people could make it, we added more names to the crew: Laura Judkins (Phil's wife), Lee Smith, Bill Roberts, and Harvey Young. Bob Busby had started the mammoth task of unsoldering the relay switches, while the rest finished packing pipes and began to dismantle the wind chests. The mess on the auditorium floor was growing!

Tuesday night J. B. Ellis added his name to the roster. More chests were taken down, more relay switches were unsoldered, more duct pipes were handed down. The blower might not be an impossibility, after all — maybe it could be taken apart and moved through the door one piece at a time, and we wouldn't have to tear the wall down.

There were more new names on the sign-in list Wednesday night: Paul Lynch (Phil's neighbor) and Dr. Raymond Maguire. Dr. Maguire, a pathologist, had never done anything like this before in his life, but we handed him a screwdriver and put him to work. I sat in the middle of the chamber floor with masking tape and newspapers, and began the arduous task of swathing relay switches in protective wrappings. Bill Rob-

erts was directing the removal of more parts from around me — the swell shutters, the bar harp, the xylophone, orchestra bells, chrysog-lott, more chests — the place was getting empty! If you remember the scene in the movie *Around the World in 80 Days* toward the end, where Phineas Fogg ran out of coal crossing the Atlantic and ordered the ship's crew to dismantle the ship itself to burn for fuel — *that's* what our organ removal was like!

On the lower lever, meanwhile, the blower was yielding to the mechanical artistry of Phil Judkins and Bruce Wilson, with Joe Crutchfield to help. Three fan blades — each three feet in diameter — had to come off, and by hitching a hydraulic jack to the hub with a chain, two had come off quite easily. The third wouldn't budge. Maybe if they loaded it with grease and tried again the next night? . . .

By Thursday night the two chambers were emptied of everything but the relay and switch stack. And from the blower room came the triumphant announcement that the third fan blade had come off! The entire blower was now disassembled and was waiting by the freight entrance to be moved.

Friday we tackled the cable. Since

Dorothy Smith with pedal Tuba and the console.



one part had to be push-pulled across the arch on top of the stage, Lee Smith and Phil got on one side to *push*, and Jim Reel and I were on the other side to *pull*. At the cry of "PUSH!", we synchronized our "PULL!" — and inch by inch, the three-inch-diameter cable began to move. When Bruce Wilson added his muscles to the *pull* it moved a little easier — and finally, suddenly it was through and lying at our feet. It was only then that Phil informed us that he'd run out of cable to *push* after only a few times, but had stayed on his side of the arch, hollering, so we wouldn't be discouraged!

The other part of the cable had to be pulled *up*, through the wall from where the console had been connected. This time no amount of *push-pull* by the entire crew had the slightest effect. Maybe we could undo the red one and pull it through separately — no luck. Maybe four of us could pull in rhythm — it didn't move. Finally, Phil brought his "come-along" up into the chamber, hitched the rope around the entire cable, braced the back hitch around the only piece of wood left bolted to the floor, and ratcheted it, *half-inch* by *half-inch*, up through the opening in the wall.

Saturday was moving day. For a job proceeding on faith, we were doing well! Joe Crutchfield had arranged the truck rental and loading would begin as soon as he arrived with it. Storage space had materi-

alized . . . miraculously! Phil had found a friend with a storage building on his private property, larger and costing much less than commercial mini-storage. Harry Rasmussen had offered space in the front window of his sound-equipment store for the console; the toy counter would be safer in Phil's garage.

Dr. Jim Routson's name had been added to Friday night's roster; Jim Reel's wife Helen joined the crew for Saturday. We'd saved the toy counter removal for *Tulsa Tribune* photographer Lewis Jarrett: it was the last thing to come down the ladder from the right-hand chamber. (The half-page feature story which appeared in the *Tribune* later was written by Jackie Boucher of the *Tribune* staff.)

With Bruce Wilson masterfully supervising the loading of the truck, the rest of us carried pipe organ parts, one by one, from the auditorium floor, out the door, to the gaping back end of the truck. Laura Judkins, Martha Wilson, Helen Reel and I made up the "girls' team", merrily determined that anything the men could do, we could do! It took two of us to lift many parts that they could carry alone, but I'm sure we made up in enthusiasm what we lacked in muscles!

Regulators . . . pipe boxes . . . big pipes . . . wind chests . . . we were a column of ants, carrying loads far bigger and heavier than anything

we'd dreamed existed! Big stuff on the bottom, little stuff on the top . . . quick break for lunch, back to work again . . .

"What I'd like to know," deadpanned Lee Smith, "is how d'you . . . (*ooph*) . . . transfer out of this . . . (*agh*) . . . chicken outfit . . . (*howoo!*) . . . !??"

Piece by piece, the truck was filling up. Thanks to Bruce's genius it was packed without a single vacant space. At last, late in the afternoon, it was ready.

With Phil and Lee driving the truck and the rest of us piled in cars, we drove the several miles to the storage building.

Thank goodness our experienced members could assure us that *unloading* was easier than *loading*! Again, the "girls' team" competed gleefully with the men: "I've got it, I've got it," we'd call as we took turns with the parts handed off the truck. Pedal tubas and diaphones were tied standing up on the back wall; wooden flutes and tibias were stacked near the center by size on their sides; shutters were leaned along a side wall; xylophone and chrysoglott were opposite, with the chimes beside them . . . The big chests were *heavy*! We girls staggered with a couple — just to prove we *could!* — then decided it might be wiser to let the men do the others. My legs were numb.

Finally . . . sore muscles, dirt, splinters, bruises, sweat, and all . . .

Saturday moving crew — L. to R. — Deshayn Wilson (age 5½), Phil Judkins, Jim Reel, Dorothy Smith, Harry Rasmussen, Derek Wilson (age 11), Joe Crutchfield, Bruce Wilson, Martha Wilson. Not pictured: Laura Judkins, Helen Reel and Lee Smith.



it was done.

Sunday, with Tony Reel (Jim and Helen's son) and John Roberts as fresh recruits, enough brave souls came back to move the console and the blower. It was quite an engineering feat to maneuver the console out the door (how in the world did they ever get it *in*?) and onto the hydraulic lift, but at last it was wedged and tied inside the back end of the truck. There was a bumpy ride in the rain of several miles, then the process was reversed: carefully, the console was lowered to the sidewalk in front of Harry Rasmussen's store and pushed through the front doors to the display window.

The blower was easy by compari-

son! Its disassembled parts were soon on the truck, and the space we'd left in our storage building was just the right size for it.

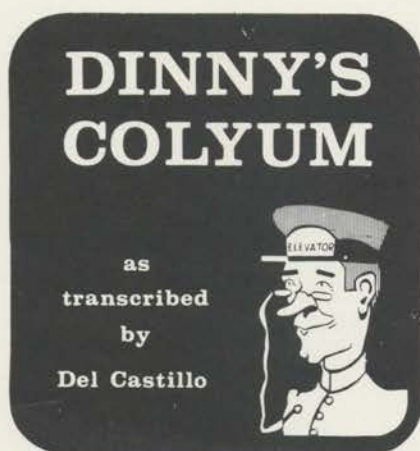
It was Tuesday night before we'd rested up enough to tackle the relay board and the switch stack. Gene Robinson was the last new name on the crew list. After much "Let's try . . ." and "Why don't we . . .?" and "D'you think we can . . ." we *very* cautiously, with two ladders optimistically tied together for a ramp — roped . . . slid . . . creaked . . . breathed . . . and precariously coaxed the bulky switch stack and its cable-linked heavy relay board to the floor. From there we could use dollies to move it all to Bob Busby's

pick-up truck. Alas, the "girls' team" wasn't much use — I couldn't even pick up the cable!

But finally this last load was also safely stored with the rest of the organ: the job was finished. Ten ranks in ten days . . . we did it!

Now our faith has taken over again. We're still trying to find a place to re-install our Robert Morton, where it can be played and enjoyed by all. I'm sure we will.

Oh yes . . . the government pulled out of the Job Corps center for the college buildings; the campus has now been leased by a Tulsa church. Does anyone suppose that *they* would have "not-wanted" the pipe organ? □



I got to hear a whoppin good organ concert by a lady organ player last month and it got me to wonder in why we dont get to hearin from the gals more often. The one I was lissenin to was a cute little Japanese organ player her name is Maria Kumagai and she has give three organ concerts at the Wiltern Theayter here in L.A. and the way she gets around them peddles reminds me of Miss Ann Leaf who cant scarcely reach down that far but boy they both of them they can sure dish it out. Bein a left foot organ player myself and dam little of that I got a lot of admiration for these organ players that can use both ends of both feet as you mite say. And when they is only about five foot tall and they start stretchin way up and down them peddles and sometimes even usin both feet together I dont know why they dont fall off of the bench.

I remember Miss Ethel Smith Miss Twinkle Toes I use to call her on acct. she had them cute little high

heel shoes with her left foot agoin lickety split all over the place. Of course I never heard Miss Smith on a pipe organ she mostly played what they call plug ins so I dont know as I should menshun her in a classy magazine like this one that is all about pipe organs. But anyways she could certainly tear off some of them fast peaces like Dizzy Fingers and Ticko Ticko and peaces like that there. Way back in the good old days they was another little bitty lady organ player in Boston name of Edith Lang and I always got a kick out of hearin her when they was war pitchers because she had a big base drum over to one side and when they was any cannon shootin she would give the base drum a good whack with one hand while she kep on aplayin with the other.

Maybe it is on acct. lady organ players is littler than men organ players we dont hear them so much but I dunno they has certainly been a lot of good ones goin way back to Miss Helen Crawford who was Jessey Crawford's wife who a lot of people said she played better than he did. I dunno, they both of them played pretty good only they was different on acct. Mrs. Crawford like to play fast jiggy kind of music while Mr. Crawford he was espeshally good on the slow stuff. Then they is another little bitty blonde I been hearin a lot around here lately who is Candy Carley and pretty cute. Candi is espeshal remarkable because she is blind but she finds her way around them stops better than a lot of organ players I have heard who can see

what they is doin.

I got to noticin about lady organ players because in the last one I just got of this magazine they was a peace about Candi Carley with a cute picture of her and then they was two ladies who got mentioned in a peace about the big organ in the Wana-maker store that was Miss Mary Vogt who played on it for almost fifty years and then in a peace by Mr. Bill Reeves he tells about a Polish lady who could play real good and her husband Sam he built her a organ with five keyboards for the cocktail joint they owned and I happen to know who it was it was Miss Madeline Frank and they called the place the 588 Keys I think it was because it has 588 keys which kind of reminds me of Miss Kumagai who was playin in a reherrsle in church for a quire and the quire driector he asked her for the key so she got up and handed him the key to the organ.

But I got to thinkin about lady organ players when I read a colyum by Mr. Lloyd Klos called Nuggets From The Old Days and he had a lot of little notices back in the twenties he had collected out of papers and magazines about 22 different organ players and they wasnt a gal in the whole lot. And when you think back to all the good lady organ players like Rosa Rio and Irma Glen and Edna Sellers and Billie Campbell and Ramona Gerhard and Luella Wickham and Rose Diamond who was all great in there day and some of them is still goin strong why you can see what I mean. □