

THE PIZZA/PIPES EXPERIENCE

PART I

Story & Photos by Gary Konas

The decade of the 1920s was a golden one, both for silent movies and for theatre pipe organs. Thousands of organs were installed during that time to provide musical accompaniment for the movies. Today, over half a century later, most of the theatres have been razed for parking lots and other important new structures, and any surviving organs have had to look for new homes. Around sixty of them (plus several others broken up for parts) now reside in restaurants, mostly pizza parlors, from Alaska to Florida. Here they provide nightly entertainment for customers much as they did when they were new.

In Part I of this article we'll trace the history of the first pipe organ-equipped pizza parlor. Next we'll talk about several of the places that have sprung up in the West since then. In Part II we'll cover the places located east of the Rockies. Then

we'll touch upon several issues involving the pizza/pipes situation in general. For simplicity we'll use the word "pizza" while acknowledging the fact that 10% of the restaurants with pipe organs are not pizza parlors at all.

San Lorenzo, California: Where It All Began

Back in the dark ages of the 1950s before there were pizza/pipes restaurants, there were pizza parlors that provided other types of musical entertainment, for example a "Straw Hat" type of rinky-tink piano and banjo act. Two such places in the San Francisco Bay area were owned by a man named Carsten Henningsen, along with a business partner, Fred Finn, who in 1966 became nationally known along with his wife by starring in the TV variety series *Mickie Finn's*, played in one of them. This live entertainment

created excitement and stimulated business. Eventually the two partners decided that they would each take sole ownership of one location. Henningsen took Ye Olde Pizza Joynt in San Lorenzo, an East Bay community south of Oakland.

We pause to look briefly at the career of George Wright, whose presence has been felt in nearly all areas of the modern theatre organ world. By 1960, George had released over a dozen albums under the Hi-Fi label. The popularity of these albums helped to kindle renewed interest in the theatre pipe organ. Further evidence of this interest was the fact that thousands of people were turning out to attend George's midnight concerts at the San Francisco Fox Theatre. In addition, the home (electronic) organ market was beginning to blossom at this time. These events did not go unnoticed by Henningsen, who began to consider the possibility

Bill Langford can take much credit for the Pizza Joynt's continued success. The console from San Francisco's Warfield Theatre.

The Joynt is a relatively small structure.



of putting an organ into his Pizza Joynt.

All that remained was to find the right organ. After some shopping around, an acquaintance of Henningsen's named Bob Denny, found a 2/9 Wurlitzer, originally from the State Theatre in Fresno, Calif. After it was purchased, the problem became how to install it in the existing YOPJ. The building was not overly large to begin with, and now a chamber had to be built. This was done, with no more room than necessary being given up to the chamber. The organ was installed in 1962, with Denny doing most of the work, and it was ready to start making music to eat by.

The historic first night was July 25th, 1962, and Dave Quinlan was the organist. Dave stayed on for fifteen months, after which time he left in favor of a job closer to home.

Finally it is time to introduce the final protagonist of this story. The year was 1963, and Bill Langford had recently come to the Bay Area from Phoenix. A local ATOS (then ATOE) group asked Langford to play a Sunday morning concert for them at the California Theatre in Santa Rosa which had a 2/7 Wurlitzer. Since he had a job that kept him playing until 2 a.m., he didn't think he could play a morning concert so far from home. He suggested they might find an available organ closer to home. The program was moved to the Pizza Joynt. After hearing Langford play, Henningsen asked him to become the regular YOPJ organist. After a little coaxing Bill accepted.

Soon the organ was expanded. A three-manual console from San Francisco's Warfield Theatre was restored and installed, along with four more ranks of pipes. The organ now

sports a couple of interesting additions, namely a Tangley brass calliope and a French celeste accordion, along with a grand piano. After seventeen years, though, no change has been made in the organist. It's still Bill Langford, an experienced entertainer with many stage shows and broadcasts under his belt.

Beyond San Lorenzo

A lot of mozzarella has melted since those early days, and much has been done to make the pizza/pipes experience more entertaining and informative for the listener. Windowed chambers to make pipes, often colorfully lighted, visible have long been *de rigueur*. Today, glass shutters with superior sound control qualities are being developed to further enhance visibility. Solid-state relays and/or combination actions are being added to many organs to give greater flexibility and dependability. One new invention that could have far-reaching effects is the automatic rhythm unit now being installed on some organs. This device, which plays various rhythm patterns using the organ's drums and traps, has the potential to make pipe organ music more entertaining, provided it's used wisely and skillfully.

We'll tour the West now, going from Phoenix to Fairbanks to look at several of the more interesting installations. A word in advance to those who plan to visit any pipe-equipped restaurant. As a general rule you'll find the organ is played nightly from around 6 to 10 p.m., and until 11 or later on Fridays and Saturdays. The information given below is subject to change, so if you want to hear a particular organist on a certain night, it would be wise to phone beforehand.

Let's start our journey across the Bay from YOPJ, where Bill Breuer started the first "chain" of pizza/pipe houses. From the first "Cap'n's Galley Pizza & Pipes" in Santa Clara, opened in 1968, the number grew to seven as three more were opened in the Bay Area and three in the state of Washington. The California quartet was sold this year, but no major changes are anticipated.

The organ now in the Santa Clara Cap'n's Galley is a straight stoprail twelve ranker that's had an interesting history. It started out in the Wurlitzer showroom in New York City in 1929. Ten years later it was re-installed as the official organ of the New York World's Fair. After a few years in storage it went to the Long Beach, Calif., Municipal Auditorium, where it stayed until finding a new home in this pizza parlor.

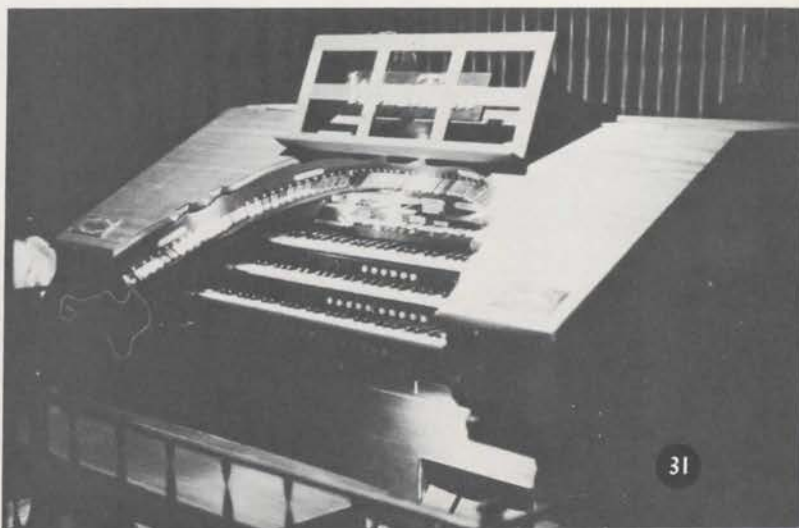
A few miles south, in Campbell, lives one of the truly famous theatre organs: Buddy Cole's 3/26 Wurlitzer-Morton. After Buddy's death in 1964 the organ was moved to the east coast and was subjected to poor storage conditions. In 1970 Bill Breuer rescued it, had it refurbished, and installed it in Campbell. In its present setting it sounds different than it did when Buddy was coaxing those wonderfully breathy sounds from it, but it's good to know that the instrument still exists.

Now, going north on Highway 101, past Palo Alto, we exit at Redwood City to find yet another Cap'n's Galley. The organ here is considered by many, including some pros, to be the finest to be found in any food establishment. At 26 ranks it's far from the largest, but its sound possesses both beauty and power. The original 4/18 Wurlitzer nucleus came from the opulent Fifth Avenue

The Serramonte Cap'n's Galley console sports a bobbing mechanical monkey.



The "Pizza Junction" installation at Rheem is a split level affair.



Theatre in Seattle.

Continuing north towards San Francisco, Cap'n's Galley No. 4 is in the Serramonte shopping center in Daly City. The building is the largest of the four. Seating is on two levels: a lower level near the console and chambers for those who want to be closer to the music, and an upper level, for those who want to look down on the console and be farther removed from the sound of the 3/22 Wurlitzer.

Back to the East Bay now. "Pizza Junction" is a real find, if you can find it. We leave freeways behind at Lafayette and take a country road to a little town called Rheem. Here we find a place with a unique interior designed by the daughter of owner Jerry Whaley. It's a real split-level affair: kitchen and some seating downstairs, the organ, console and all, and some seating around the perimeter *upstairs*.

The 3/9 Wurlitzer (Opus 394) was installed in 1921 in the Warwick Theatre in Kansas City. From 1935-1974 the organ was owned at various times by radio station WHIO in Dayton, a Catholic church in Cincinnati, and Junchen-Collins Organ Corp., before ending up at Pizza Junction. The organ is played only on weekends, by Don Reynolds on Fridays and Saturdays, and Harvey Blanchard on Sundays.

Not too far from Rheem, the two locations of Bella Roma Pizza provide a study in contrasts. Both have medium-sized Wurlitzers: 3/16 at Martinez, and 3/18 at Concord. However, the settings are quite different. Martinez is an intimate, low-ceiling affair, with the console within arm's length reach of people at the closest tables. One feels personal contact with the organist. Concord is

much larger (capacity 400, high ceiling, two-level seating), with tables and chairs instead of picnic benches. The organ now has a solid state relay. Other prominent additions include an ebony grand piano and animated dancing puppets. Organists at the present time are Rick De Rose and Harvey Blanchard in Martinez, with Ken Simmons and Aura Edwards in Concord.

A 75-mile drive northeast to Sacramento brings us to Arden Pizza & Pipes. This is the home of a Wurlitzer that is a combination of two organs. The two came from Chicago's Tiffin Theatre and the Strand in Madison, Wisc. They were joined by the Replica Record Co. of Des Plaines, Ill., who used the resulting 4/20 for recording purposes. After spending time in Doc Lawson's home in Montreal, it was finally bought by Bob Breuer (brother of Bill), who brought it to its present home in 1972.

Playing this organ is an unusual experience, mainly because almost none of the reeds are directly available on the Great manual. They must be coupled down from the Orchestral or Solo. One nice feature, though, is a second set of (Barton) percussions and toy counter under expression. This is good for concert playing when greater subtlety is desired than can be coaxed from the exposed bongers.

The organists here are Stu Boyer and Emil Martin. In addition, a second Pizza & Pipes is located in Fresno. It has recently been covered in depth (THEATRE ORGAN, June 1980), so we won't add anything here.

"Fats" might not recognize it today, but there it is — the "Moon River" Wurlitzer now residing at the

Big Top Pizza in the Sacramento suburb of Carmichael. The organ that Fats Waller used to play on the air late at night for WLW radio in Cincinnati has been considerably expanded to reach its present 3/18 (soon to be 22) status. In addition a new "computer" combination action now being installed gives head organist-technician Dave Moreno and associate organist Jim Brown twice as many pistons to work with. "One never knows, do one?" as Fats put it.

About sixty miles south of Big Top, in Stockton, is the Pizza Machine. Here is a smaller organ, a 2/10 Wurlitzer originally installed in San Francisco's Lyceum Theatre in 1921. Head organist Don Wallin tells us that the organ is now equipped with an electronic traps player, one of the first in California to feature this new invention. A second Pizza Machine, a little farther south in Modesto, features a 2/9 Wurlitzer.

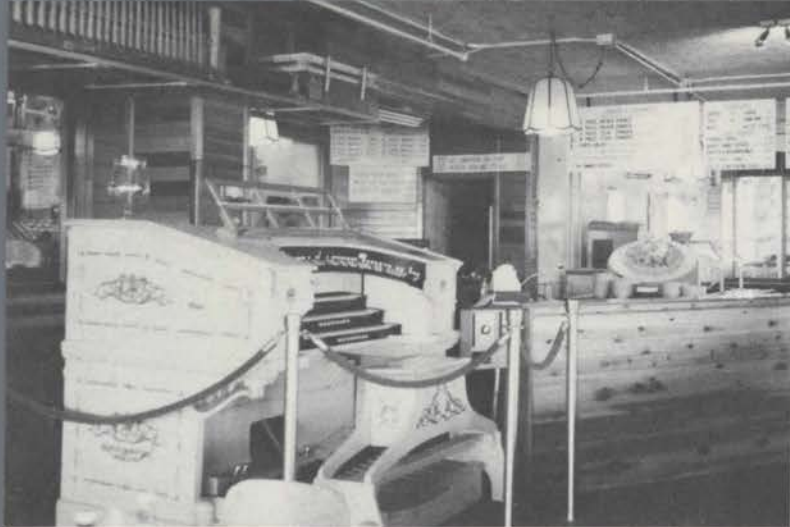
Going all the way down to the San Fernando Valley, we locate the Great American Wind Machine in Reseda. As of this writing "GAWM" is the lone remaining pizza/pipes restaurant to serve the eight million person Los Angeles area.

Although the operation began under different ownership in 1968, Mike Ohman has expanded the original 2/10 Wurlitzer installation, the organ being from the Beverly Theatre in Beverly Hills. Besides adding seven ranks of pipes and an electronic string bass, Mike had a beautiful new white three-manual console built, and had it filled with such modern goodies as digital relays and combination action, along with magnetic stop actions and pistons. The result of all this was heard at the 1979 ATOS convention, and it was a hit.

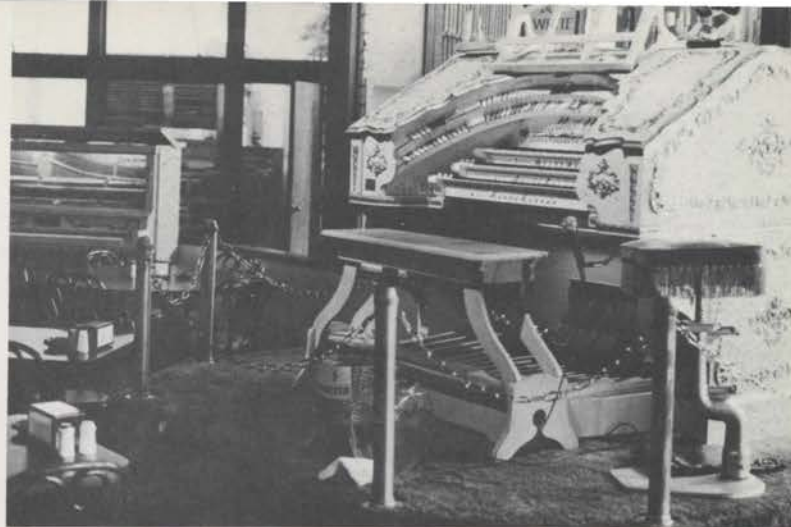
Former staffer Dave Reese is shown at the Bella Roma 3/18 console at Concord.

This newly-built console controls "GAWM's" 3/17. It was originally a 2/10.





There are not many Robert Morton organs in western eating places. Fairbanks, Alaska, has one.



The Bellevue "Pizza & Pipes" console came all the way from New York.

Since then, George Wright has played a sold out concert on the 3/17.

Mike, Dan Bellomy and Candi Carley each play two nights a week, and the organ rests on Monday.

After losing several unsuccessful pizza/pipe operations the San Diego area now has a new Organ Power Pizza to serve them. Owner/organist Tommy Stark has turned a former Lemon Grove theatre into a pasta palace prepared to receive the 4/28 Wurlitzer from Chicago's Uptown Theatre. As of February, 1981, Tommy was playing a Lowrey electronic, assisted by Maddie German on drums, while the Wurlitzer was being restored. Eventually the organ will be 4/33, including exposed 16' Posthorn and 32' pipes. All this, along with antique furniture from the Uptown in the lobby/ordering area, should combine to make an

entertaining dining experience.

The 400-mile drive through the desert to get to Phoenix is a bore, but a great reward awaits: Organ Stop Pizza. Owner Bill Brown buys excellent organs (he has a warehouse full of them), puts them in well-designed buildings, gets the best available young organists to play, and serves the best pizza to round out the experience. It even seems as though the customers are better informed, making fewer trite requests.

The first-built (in 1972) is in Phoenix. A 3/14 Wurlitzer from Grauman's Hollywood Egyptian Theatre was installed and brought up to 4-manuals and 29 ranks. One of the ranks is a Trompette-en-Chamade located over the kitchen which, along with the Serpent (sort of an enraged Posthorn), is used for some great effects by head organist Walter Strony. We wish that Walt could be

cloned and put in every pizza parlor with an organ.

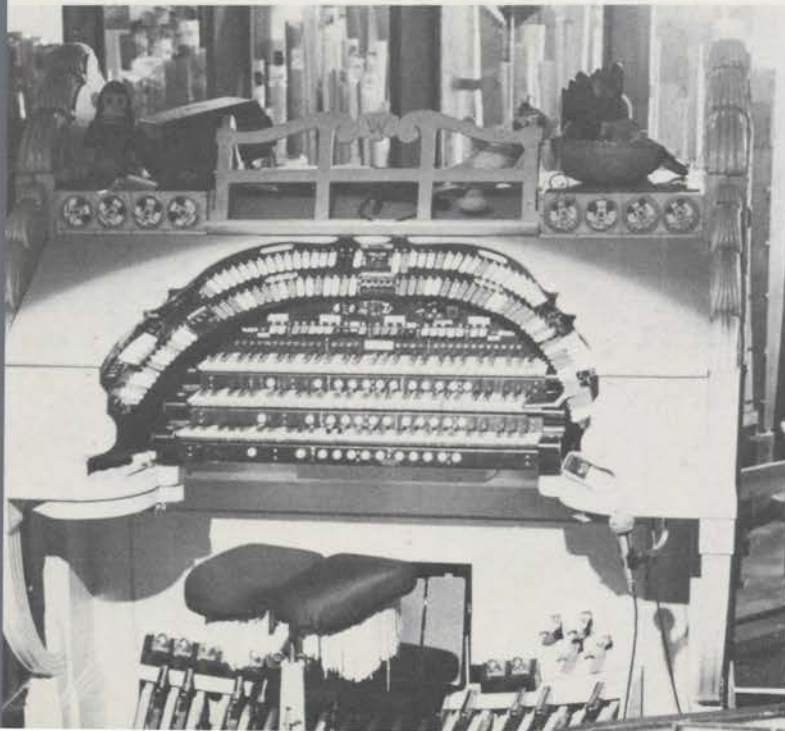
Organ Stop #2 opened in 1975 in Mesa. The building was really designed with the organ in mind: a lobby for taking food orders to lessen noise, theatre-style sloping floor, a console lift and surrounding curtain for dramatic openings, etc. The organ itself is a white console beauty, a 3/25 Wurlitzer from the Denver Fox. Ron Rhode is another one of the best of the current crop of young organists, and the sophistication of crowds that come to listen and eat pasta are incredible.

Up and coming Lew Williams is Associate Organist at Organ Stops #1 and #2. Betty Gould, a true "veteran of the console," plays at lunchtime on weekends in Mesa.

Organ Stop #3 has recently opened in Tucson. Jim Conners, formerly of Pipe Organ Pizza in Houston, is the

Pizza & Pipes console in Tacoma.

The Mesa "Organ Stop" console came from the Denver Fox. Lew Williams is on the bench.



latest addition to Brown's staff of fine organists.

The scene shifts now to the Pacific Northwest. Another of the finest installations in the U.S. is the Organ Grinder in Portland. Many details about this huge installation can be found in a recent THEATRE ORGAN article (February 1980), but we'd like to offer our opinion of why the Organ Grinder is such a successful operation. We see three factors: 1) The head organists, Jonas Nordwall and Paul Quarino, both fully deserve the title. They play copious amounts of expertly-played music. They also know how to use the new automatic rhythm device effectively. 2) The format is quite formal — no requests, no kids running around, no chat between organist and audience — yet everyone, young and old, seems to enjoy it very much. We wish more places, especially new ones not having an established clientele, would try this format. 3) The pizza is very good. We've had several

crackercrust, ketchup-sauce pizzas, but never in the most successful places. People won't come back regularly for the music if the food is indifferent. In summary, the Organ Grinder manages to be popular by professionalism rather than by reaching for the lowest common denominator of popular taste.

A little farther north, in Washington, are three more Pizza & Pipes locations, in Tacoma, Seattle, and Bellevue. All three feature now 3/17 Wurlitzers with white and gold consoles. They were originally installed in the Fort Wayne, Indiana Paramount, the Salem, Mass., Paramount, and the New York Academy of Music Theatres, respectively. Each place has a different building design and chamber configuration. The organists at Tacoma are Sherrie Mael, Andy Crow, and veteran Jane McKee Johnson. Former ATOS President Dick Schrum, Bob White, Greg Smith, and Gary Christianson share playing duties at Seattle and

Bellevue.

Our Western journey ends just south of the Arctic Circle at Steak & Pipes Restaurant in Fairbanks, Alaska. This is the home of a 3/9 Robert Morton. The organ began as a 2/6 in a Kansas City theatre. While still in the theatre a third manual was added at the expense of the second touches. In a unique move the current management plans to go back to a completely restored two-manual Kimball console, and several Skinner ranks are being added. During the week Glenn Cooper plays, with Jim Eales taking over on weekends.

What Next?

We've come to the end of the road for now. A table listing addresses and phone numbers of all the places we know of follows, along with a list of references for those desiring more information on some of the places we've visited. Next installment: the Midwest and East. □

WHERE THE PIZZA ORGANS ARE IN THE WEST PART I

California

<i>Ye Olde Pizza Joynt</i> 19510 Hesperian Blvd., San Lorenzo 94541 3/13 Wurlitzer, Wednesday thru Sunday (415) 785-1866	<i>Marin Pizza Pub</i> 526 Third St., San Rafael 94901 3/13 Robert Morton (415) 454-6844
<i>Cap'n's Galley #1</i> 3581 Homestead Rd., Santa Clara 95051 3/12 Wurlitzer, Except Mondays (408) 248-5680	<i>Pizza Piper</i> 2310 Mendocino Ave., Santa Rosa 95401 (707) 528-8000
<i>Cap'n's Galley #2</i> 821 Winslow St., Redwood City 94063 4/26 Hybrid, Except Mondays (415) 365-6543	<i>Arden Pizza & Pipes</i> 2911 Arden Way, Sacramento 95625 4/20 Wurlitzer (916) 488-5470
<i>Cap'n's Galley #3</i> 1690 S. Bascom Ave., Campbell 95008 3/26 Wurlitzer, Except Mondays (408) 371-5000	<i>Big Top Pizza</i> 5800 Winding Way, Carmichael 95608 3/18 Wurlitzer (916) 488-6004
<i>Cap'n's Galley #4</i> 146 Serramonte Center, Daly City 94015 3/15 Wurlitzer (415) 994-2525	<i>Pizza Machine</i> 7562 Pacific Ave., Stockton 95207 2/10 Wurlitzer (209) 957-5831
<i>The Thunder Mug</i> 3132 Williams Rd., San Jose 95117 3/13 Wurlitzer (408) 243-6095	<i>Pizza Machine</i> 1221 E. Orangeburg Ave., Modesto 95350 2/9 Wurlitzer (209) 527-4411
<i>Pizza Junction</i> 504 Center St., Rheem 94570 3/9 Wurlitzer, Friday thru Sunday (415) 376-1111	<i>Pizza & Pipes</i> 3233 N. First St., Fresno 93726 3/22 Wurlitzer (209) 226-4250
<i>Bella Roma Pizza</i> 4436 Clayton Rd., Concord 94521 3/18 Wurlitzer (415) 825-8343	<i>Great American Wind Machine</i> 7500 Reseda Blvd., Reseda 91335 3/17 Wurlitzer (213) 881-4900
<i>Bella Roma Pizza</i> 4040 Alhambra Ave., Martinez 94553 3/16 Wurlitzer (415) 228-4935	<i>Organ Power Pizza</i> 3459 Imperial Ave., Lemon Grove 92045 4/33 Wurlitzer (714) 463-6977

Outside of California

<i>Organ Stop #1</i> 5330 N. Seventh St., Phoenix, AZ 85014 4/29 Wurlitzer (602) 263-0716	<i>Pizza & Pipes #1</i> 100 N. 85th, Seattle, WA 98103 3/17 Wurlitzer (206) 782-0360
<i>Organ Stop #2</i> 2250 W. Southern Ave., Mesa, AZ 85202 3/25 Wurlitzer (602) 834-5325	<i>Pizza & Pipes #2</i> S. 19th & Mildred W., Tacoma, WA 98406 3/17 Wurlitzer (206) 565-3848
<i>Organ Grinder Pizza</i> 5015 SE 82nd, Portland, OR 97266 4/41 Wurlitzer	<i>Pizza & Pipes #3</i> 550 112th NE, Bellevue, WA 98004 3/17 Wurlitzer (206) 453-1444
<i>Uncle Milt's</i> 2410 Grand Blvd., Vancouver, WA 3/18 Wurlitzer (206) 695-6895	<i>Steak & Pipes Restaurant</i> 124 N. Turner St., Fairbanks, AK 99701 3/9 Robert Morton (907) 456-2591