

A New England First . . .

PIZZA, PIPES & PANDEMONIUM

by Walter J. Beaupre

The grand opening on September 28 of New England's first pizza/pipe restaurant complete with mighty Wurlitzer was a success story which may well have begun in an iron lung. Once upon a dream . . . Bob Ayrton was a Waterford, Connecticut, building contractor with a lovely wife Esther and a bright future. Then polio struck, and Bob had consider-

able time to think while recuperating in an iron lung. What would he do differently with his life if and when he ever got out of that contraption? When Bob announced to Esther that he thought he would like to play the organ, she said, "Then let's buy one!"

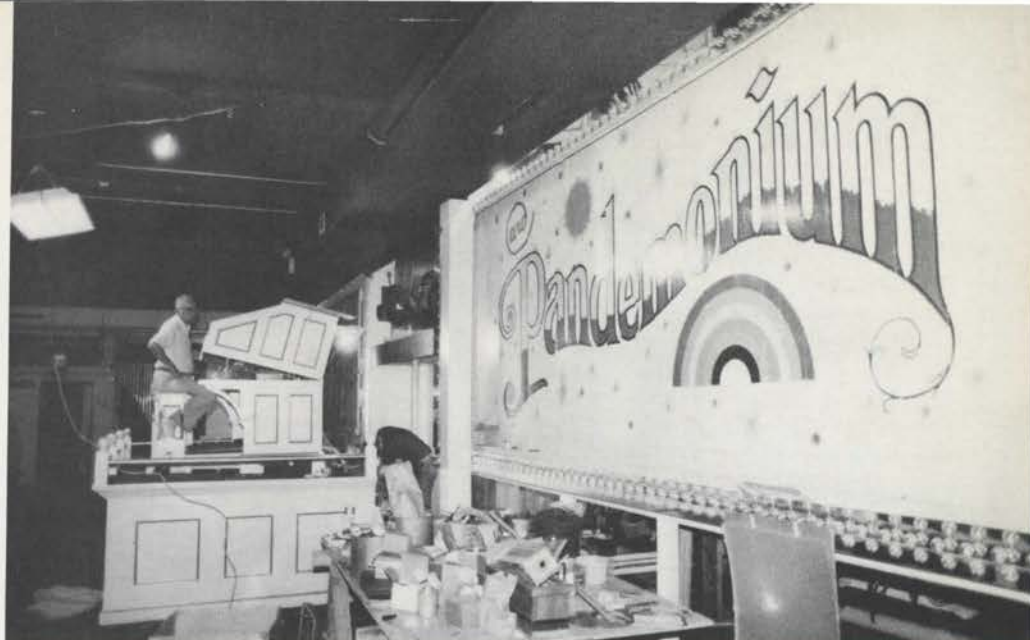
Bob Ayrton wasn't interested in formal lessons — he just wanted to

play. Eventually he found himself playing nightly for 7½ years in the Golden Spur Pancake House where he was also manager. Sure, Bob had heard theatre pipe organs, including a final concert by Rosa Rio on the Crown Theatre instrument in New London, but that was back in '42. As fate would have it, he played his first theatre pipes while visiting in Beaumont, Texas. This was the instrument in the Jefferson Theatre saved by Al Sacker. Bob Ayrton was now hooked on pipes.

Fortunately for Bob and Esther there were others in eastern Connecticut who shared their enthusiasm. One was an accountant named Carlton Swensen, who just happens to be the stepson of the late Stillman Rice. Need more be said? Jack and Pat Lewis of Waterford also decided to take the plunge. For seven long years this courageous quintet dreamed and schemed. They visited pizza/pipe restaurants all over the U.S. They even invested in a 13-rank Wurlitzer.

When the A&P Supermarket in a Groton shopping center became a vacant building, they decided to act. Organist Andy Kasparian was contracted to spearhead the drive. It was soon decided that the 13-ranker probably wouldn't fill the large space effectively. Andy asked his agent and "gal Friday," Margaret Sabo, to scour the country for just the right available instrument.

Opus 1002, a Wurlitzer of 15-17 ranks (the original specs are fuzzy) had first been installed in the State Theatre, Long Beach, California. It was later moved and expanded to



Pandemonium a few weeks before opening. Bob Waldeck on key-holding duty.

(Beaupre photo)

Entrance lobby has old movie house ambiance.

(Beaupre photo)



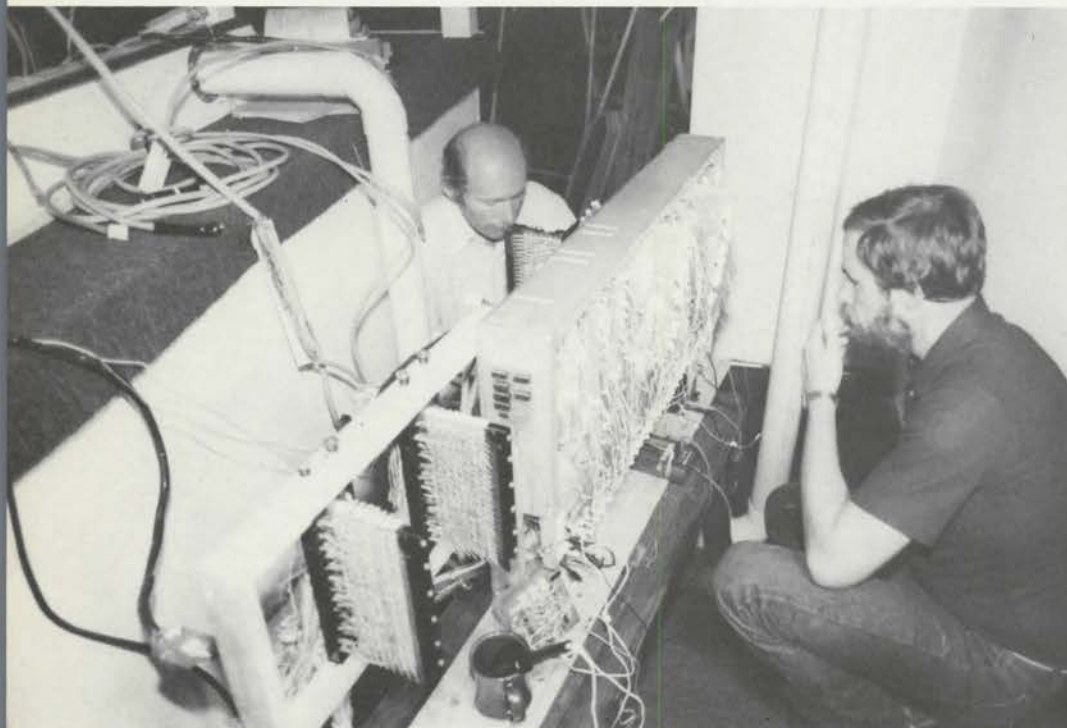
thirty ranks elsewhere in the state. When its second home was sold the new buyers weren't interested in the organ to serenade an office building or parking lot. Opus 1002-plus was available.

The augmented Wurlitzer was packed into two semi-trailer trucks and shipped east. You guessed it: damage in transit! The metal Diaphone, Ophicleide and 16' strings

were flattened, and the relay box was wrecked beyond reasonable repair. All this arrived at the former A&P late in April, and on May 3 work began. Andy Kasparian was chief of organ operations and Margaret Sabo, Don Wallin and Phil Preston signed on to assist. Lyn Murdoch, from Pawtucket, Rhode Island, soon joined the organ crew, and local telephone engineer Bill Perkins volun-

teered his wiring expertise. Engineer Bob Walton from TRACOR arrived in August, as did Bob Waldeck who works for an aircraft company and is also organist at Faith Lutheran Church in Groton. Early in September Allen Miller took over direction of the organ crew to supervise tonal finishing and work out some of the "bugs."

Bob Ayrton confessed to this



Perkins and Walton wire solid-state relays.

(Beaupre photo)

Manager Bob Ayrton — gleam in his eye?

(Beaupre photo)

Crew chief Kasparian up to his elbows.

(Beaupre photo)



Californian Phil Preston does some off-chest drilling for Trumpets.

(Beaupre photo)

Veteran technician Margaret Sabo proves that a woman's place is in the chambers — under the chests!

(Beaupre photo)




ATOS interviewer that he should have hired a full-time carpenter at the outset. The construction required for adapting a theatre installation to a pizza parlor was unbelievable! The main and solo chambers are completely lined with silver metallic insulation for maximum live acoustics. The organ was rebuilt entirely — down to the screws in the chests.

Steve Schlessing and Don Wallin will alternate as featured artists. Steve, a student of Lyn Larsen, played first in Phoenix and then four years in the Houston Pizza & Pipes. This talented youngster has played SENETOS concerts in Providence and demonstrated his prowess at Eastern Massachusetts open console sessions, so he already has a southern New England following. Don Wallin



Organist-turned-technician Don Wallin does some remedial "reading."

(Beaupre photo)



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started life in Seattle, studied organ with Olympia's Phil Raboin, played the Big Top Pizza in Sacramento for four years and the Pizza Machine in Stockton for 3½ years. If the opening night response to Don is any indication, he'll soon have many fans in southern New England. How did the Wurlitzer sound? With all the percussions and toy counter working along with two Tibias, Open Diapason, Trumpet, Post Horn, Brass Saxophone, Vox Humana, Diaphone and Gamba, the sound was rich, lush, spine-tingling, acoustically very live, and at times overpowering. One wife (who is not precisely what you'd call a theatre organ fan) was heard to say — loudly — "I haven't had so much fun since those beerhalls in Germany!" That says it all.

Will the busy manager of *Pizza, Pipes & Pandemonium*, Bob Ayrton, ever take a turn at the console for paying customers? Modestly he says he'll leave the playing to the professionals, but he had a gleam in his eyes which said, "I wouldn't be too sure about that." □



Youthful U.R.I. Grad Lyn Murdoch rebuilds the chests from scratch — or in this instance, varnish. (Beaupre photo)

Steve Schelling plays one more set for the ATOS camera. Thanks, Steve.

(Beaupre photo)

