

## Michael L. Kitner 1944 — 2000

Bill Black

Mike was born on November 22, 1944, in Danville, PA, and was brought home to Carlisle, PA, shortly thereafter. He was the son of Maynard L. Kitner and Edith M. (Knauss) Kitner. As I did not know Mike until about 1972, I would like to thank Mike's younger sister, JoAnn, for providing pictures and information about Mike prior to that time.

Except for the time he spent in Washington, D.C., at the Capital Institute of Technology, and in Texas while in the Air Force, Mike lived his entire life in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Mike was always an inquisitive child who was interested in mechanical objects and how they worked (Figure 2). As with most children, he loved to take things apart to see how they worked. JoAnn relates that the difference was that he could always put them back together again. Often they would then work better than before. In grade school he had an unusual thirst for information on technical and scientific subjects. At one point, his parents were called to school for a conference about Mike. It seems that the teacher was concerned because Mike preferred staying inside to read science books at recess instead of going outside and playing ball with the other boys. The teacher was firmly informed that while Mr. and Mrs. Kitner realized he was different, they did not see reason for concern or to change their son in any way. Time has proven them right.

Mike's first exposure to mechanical music was on a carousel. His parents noticed that he preferred to sit on one of the stationary interior horses instead of the outer horses that went up and down. It seems he was leaning in trying to get a good glimpse of the huge machine in the center, which was producing the wonderful music. Mike's cousin had an old player piano in the basement, which was a source of constant amazement to him. As with most mechanical things, one day it broke. He allowed Mike to take it apart unaware that he was opening the door to an illustrious career in the area of mechanical musical instrument repair.

Although Mike had an IQ in the gifted range, he chose to take the Vocational Shop course of study in high school. Since he was endowed with innate high level reasoning and problem solving skills, especially in the areas of math and science, he was permitted to take some of his science credits in college prep classes. This Vocational Ed. student was frequently asked by the college prep students to explain the concepts being taught and to help them with assignments.

After graduation from high school (Figure 3), Mike enrolled at the Capital Institute of Technology in Washington, D.C. While there he became noted for his intricate and clever electronically wired "room jobs." He would rig a friend's room to have lights going on when they should go off and vice versa, music would play when the door would open, etc. He received his Bachelor's degree from CIT in electronic technology.

Next, Mike spent three years in Texas in the Air Force. Since this was at the height of the Viet Nam War, he always considered himself lucky in that he never left Texas during his entire enlistment. It was while in the Air Force that he met his good friend, Art Reblitz. They discovered a common interest and became friends. Art was an accomplished musician and they later collaborated in the production of custom music rolls with Art doing the arranging and Mike punching the rolls. Art also opened a restoration business and they often shared information and assisted each other on restoration projects. Mike and Art also co-authored a book titled *The Mills Violano-Virtuoso*. Good friend, Harvey Roehl's publishing company, The Vestal Press, published this book, along with several of Mike's technical articles.

Following his time in the service, Mike returned to Carlisle to live in his parents' home and work in a local crystal manufacturing plant. During this period, he worked on restoring player pianos in his parents' garage and basement. A local restorer of player pianos, Russ Ostrander, served as his tutor in this endeavor.

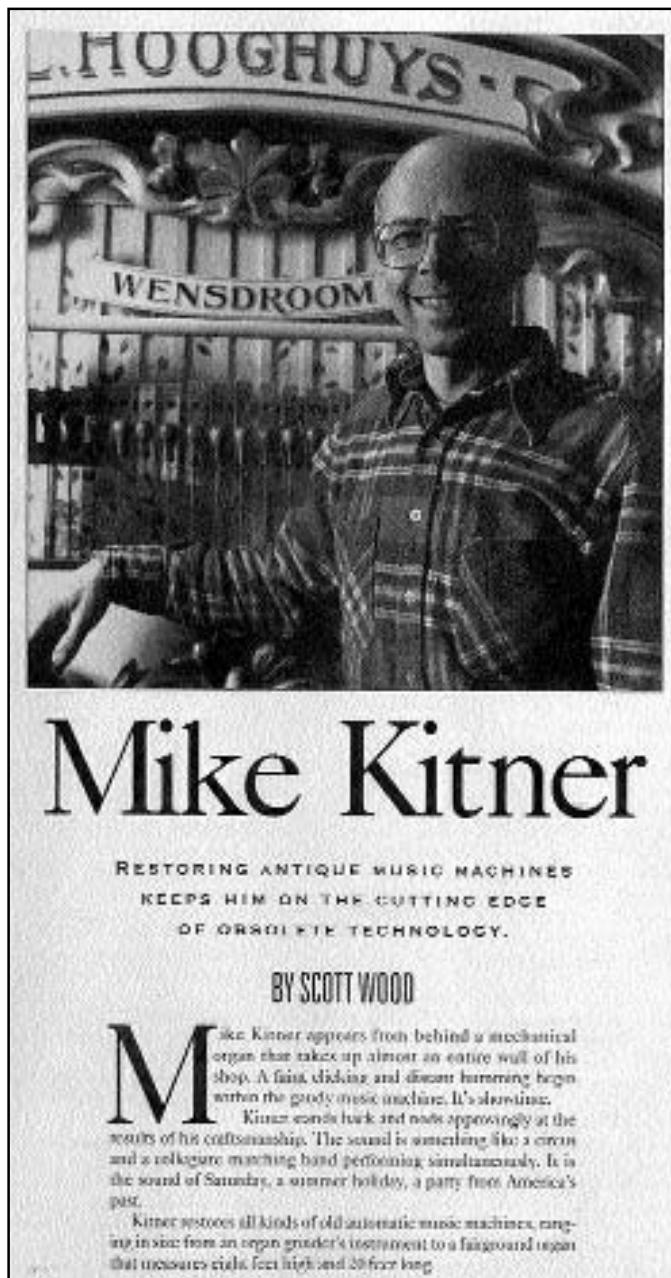


Figure 1. The lead page from an article which appeared in the February 1992 issue of *Apprise* magazine (written by Scott Wood of Carlisle, PA.).



Figure 2. Mike as a child

About 1971 his work came to the attention of Gene Zimmerman, who owned “Zimmerman’s Automobilearama” in Mechanicsburg, PA. This was mainly a collection of vintage automobiles in a multistoried building accompanying a motel, which he also owned. At some point he had acquired quite a large collection of mechanical musical instruments, including a 125 band organ, several Tanglely Calliopes, and numerous automatic pianos. Mike was given the job of restoring and

maintaining these machines. His career was truly launched.

About this time I had acquired a Wurlitzer 146 band organ. A friend of mine, also a mechanical music enthusiast, told me about the collection of things at Zimmerman’s Museum and about the man who kept them running, Mike Kitner. I paid a visit to the museum and was enthralled with the machines and the beautiful condition they were in. I called Mike on the phone and asked to visit.

Mike had acquired his shop on Factory Street a short time before this. My first visit to the shop was impressive. There was the “Monster,” the Wurlitzer 155, which was owned by Jim Wells and was there for restoration. Mike had placed a bucket on the floor along side of the machine with a sign which read “Eye Teeth” for those of us who would have given our eye teeth to own this machine. He had also placed a sign on the organ which said, “Gee Dad, it’s a Wurlitzer!” This was Mike’s sense of humor.

Mike’s association with Zimmerman’s Museum also produced another friendship. Duward Center of Baltimore, Maryland, visited the Museum in 1971. He saw Mike’s small business card on one of the machines. He visited Mike and their common interest resulted in a friendship that lasted until his death.

Mike’s shop was located at 735 Factory Street. The shop was located in a section of Carlisle, which was the home to the Carlisle Tire and Rubber Company, just across the street. As you might imagine, there is a bit of noise involved with the manufacture of tires and this was an ideal location for the shop. Mike figured that the neighbors were used to noise and would not complain about the loud music when organs were being tested and tuned. On the contrary, the sound of the organs’ music would attract the children, and some adults, from



Figure 4. Mike participating with a municipal band parade.

the neighborhood. They would come running to listen and marvel at these wonderful machines.

The main part of his shop consisted of three rooms. First was a display area where he kept the machines he owned including a Wurlitzer 146 (Figure 5), a 60 key Hooghuyts (Figure 4, pp 8 of *Carousel Organ* #7), a 43 key Frati (Figure 7), an 80 key Bruder (Figure 9), and a Link piano. Next a visitor would enter the main room which was his work area. In the far back was a small room where he had power tools. Since these produced considerable dust, everything was hooked up to a dust collection system, which was routed to a small shed outside the shop. He later enlarged his front door to allow the larger machines to be taken into the shop. He also built a second level on the front portion of the building for storage and later to house the music roll perforating business.

Alongside the shop was a small building which was a “mom and pop” type of restaurant. This had served the employees at the Tire Company. Mike was always concerned that the restaurant posed a potential fire hazard. He was later successful in buying the property after the restaurant went out of business. He tore the building down to expand his shop. His fears proved to be well-founded as the wiring in the restaurant was very poorly done. After much legal haggling with the town’s borough council, he was able to expand his shop with the construction of a large garage and storage area.

Mike liked to listen to classical music while he worked. Sometimes he listened to music on vinyl, tape, or CD, or he would listen to the local public radio station’s classical music programs. Drawing on his education in electronic technology, Mike constructed an elaborate surround sound system for this purpose. He also had a TV and VCR so that he could listen to the evening news, watch an occasional game show and indulge his sense of humor with some Monty Python and other shows of that nature.

When Mike opened his shop on Factory Street, he was still doing work locally for Zimmerman and beginning to do work for Jim Wells in the Washington, D.C. area. These gentlemen were his first major clients. Mike rigged up his pickup truck with a hand-crank winch, ramps, and side frames to load machines and secure them. A lot of the work in the beginning was fairly local and Mike and I moved a lot of machines to the shop and back to the owner when they were finished. I greatly enjoyed these trips and there was usually something interesting to see in other collections. I always marveled at Mike’s skill at moving these machines without breaking them or our backs. He was very skillful in using lifters, dollies, leverage, etc. to move these heavy machines. We always got the job done. Later, as his reputation in the restoration field grew, the machines were coming from greater distances. So, a moving company or the owner was now transporting them. Eventually, he was doing work for collectors throughout the US. He also did work for amusement parks, traveling shows and museums.

Mike eventually moved from his parents’ home to a house, which he had purchased. This was conveniently located two blocks from the

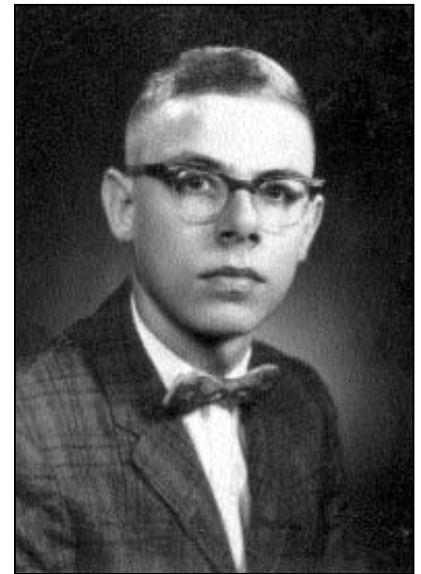


Figure 3. A high school graduation photograph.

shop. Two elderly women had occupied this house. One lived on the first floor and the other on the second. There was a kitchen on both floors. Mike had the kitchen on the first floor removed and installed a Reproduco organ in its place. He had the upstairs kitchen remodeled to reflect a small kitchen circa 1930. He rarely did any extensive cooking here. Essentially, if he couldn't pour it, microwave it, or boil it he didn't make it. He was able to do some baking in a toaster oven, which he kept inside the oven of the old cast iron stove. He ate a lot of cereal. Mike took great pride in the house and everything was carefully placed and decorated with vintage household furnishings. The downstairs was used for entertaining and was something of a museum.

He lived mostly on the second floor. His personal machines in the house included the previously mentioned Reproduco, an Ampico grand, an Orchestrelle, a single Mills Violano, an Electrova piano, an upright Duo-art, a Wurlitzer Pianino, a large collection of band and orchestra instruments, and many smaller collectible musical items. He also had quite a collection of old radios, a Victrola, and an old Wurlitzer juke box. He had a garage constructed behind the house. Here he kept his vehicles and machines waiting restoration.



Figure 5. Mike's Wurlitzer 146 military band organ on location at a picnic.

When Mike still lived at his parents' house he became aware of the fact that there were machines existing which could be restored but were lacking in usable, untorn music for them. So, music rolls would need to be created to bring these machines to life again. Collectors were willing to lend existing rolls for duplication. Mike went to work creating a machine to duplicate various types of music rolls. This machine was operated by a punch driven by compressed air. The machine had removable index bars which allowed it to punch rolls with a variety of spacing formats. While this allowed for the punching of a variety of different rolls, the disadvantage was that the machine was hand operated, punching a single hole at a time on paper which had the holes marked, also done by hand. This was a labor-intensive endeavor and Mike found that he preferred to spend the time on restoration. Mike's mother was interested in doing this punching work and for many years was the person who operated the machine. Mike then trimmed the paper, wound it on the core, and placed the tab. Many scarce music rolls have been copied and the music preserved which would otherwise have been lost forever. Usually, the collector, who was generous enough to supply the original rolls, received a copy of his roll at no cost.

The roll-making business reminds me of an interesting story. As I recall, Hugh Hefner, of *Playboy* magazine fame, had an orchestration, which he had purchased as a gift for Barbie Benton, in the Playboy Mansion. There was a favorite roll for the machine, which was wearing out. Somehow, they had learned that Mike could recut this roll. Mike was contacted and asked if he could make a copy of this roll for them. Mike said he had quite a bit of work lined up for the perforator, but they persisted and Mike agreed to copy the roll. As a thank you for this favor, Mike received an invitation to attend one of the famous Playboy Bunny parties at the mansion. I was impressed and asked if



Figure 6. Debbie Smith and Mike enjoy a break while biking.

he was going to go. He said, "NO! I have too many machines waiting to be restored and I can't spare the time." I was disappointed, hoping to get a firsthand report on what that was like!

Later in his life Mike became interested in learning to play the clarinet. He took lessons and was a member of two local municipal bands. He greatly enjoyed this. On one occasion there was a problem. The one band decided to purchase uniforms to wear for parades and concerts. It was difficult enough to get Mike to wear a necktie; uniforms were going to prove to be a real challenge. Mike said they reminded him too much of his days in the Air Force. Eventually his love of the music won out and he relented. He wore the uniform once or twice before he got too ill to participate any more.

Mike entered the cyber world late in life also. Actually, according to JoAnn, he was somewhat dragged kicking and screaming into it. His friend, Don Neilson, presented him with a complete new computer outfit. When it arrived at the shop, I was anxious to help him set it up. Despite repeated pleas on my part to get it out of the box and play with it, he declined. He said he didn't want to set it up until he had decided exactly where it was to go in his house. He wanted to build a cabinet in a certain location in the house. This planning proceeded slowly, to my frustration. But, finally, the cabinet was prepared and we set it up. It was a marvelous gift! I spent several evenings showing him how to operate it. In the next few weeks, he was delighted to discover that his connection to the Internet and e-mail allowed him to correspond with many of his friends who had e-mail accounts. After awhile, he had accumulated a huge number of e-mail addresses in the address book in his computer. He greatly enjoyed this gift.

When Mike first opened his shop, it was his custom to work from nine in the morning until ten at night. The weekends he spent working on his personal machines or traveling with his friends. He was very health conscious and loved to ride bicycles. He worked out with



Figure 7. Mike, Durwood Center, Brian Jensen kneeling; Keith Green, George Epple and Skip Kahl standing in front of Mike's 43-key Frati fair organ.



Figures 8 & 9. Mike posing with his 80-key Bruder fairground organ. On the right is a photograph of the entire organ in all its splendor.



weights and seldom ate junk food. In the 1980s Mike was diagnosed with having diabetes. This required injecting insulin before every meal. He was always careful to monitor his blood sugar.

Eventually, he cut back on the number of hours he spent working on machines, preferring to sleep later in the mornings and not working so late at night.

In 1997 Mike was not feeling well. Blood tests revealed that he had a type of bone marrow cancer called Multiple Myeloma, which produces excess plasma cells. We were all shocked and hoped this wasn't what he actually had. Sadly, it was true. Mike researched this disease extensively and knew what he was up against. It was generally always a fatal disease with most victims seldom living beyond 4 years, usually less.

An intensive effort began to treat the disease with drugs, high doses of steroids. Eventually, a stem cell transplant was done which required a stay at Johns Hopkins Hospital and some recovery period in Baltimore, as they wanted him close to the hospital. Fortunately, Durward and some of Mike's other friends lived in Baltimore. They gladly looked after him during this period. Mike took his clarinet with him on this sojourn and quickly became known and loved by the staff at the hospital as the "Flute Man." They expressed to JoAnn, on one of her visits, how much they admired his talent and his courage.

During this time Mike had the opportunity to meet baseball great, Cal Ripkin. It seems that his father was also in the same ward as Mike. One afternoon, while Mike was in the floor lobby, playing his clarinet, a handsome, athletic-looking man sat down beside him and struck up a conversation. When he introduced himself, Mike was unphased. It seems Mike never had developed an interest in sports. (That same trait that concerned the 5th grade teacher way back when.) They went on to discuss Mike's condition and Mr. Ripkin's father. It must have been nice for Mr. Ripkin to talk to someone without being hounded by his celebrity. Later the staff told Mike who the man was and that he was of great renown. But, to Mike, he was just another kind person unfairly being subjected to the trials of the disease of cancer.

Multiple Myeloma's condition is measured by blood tests and the results of Mike's stem cell transplant looked good. He was back to work and feeling good. After about nine months, upon returning from a fantastic vacation in Italy with one of his closest friends, he was feeling tired again. Blood tests indicated the disease was back. Drugs were again tried, this time it was Thalidomide. It worked for the first

two or three months. Then the next attempt to beat the disease was planned, a bone marrow transplant with JoAnn as the donor. The time is now late 2000. Drugs were administered to prepare for the transplant, but there was a problem getting the blood chemistry just right.

By this time Mike was getting very frail, but he continued to work in the shop.

Then, one weekend in December, Mike was feeling worse and spent the weekend at home with one of his friends. By Monday he was feeling no better but went to work in the shop that afternoon. He did a bit of work on a 146, which he and I had been working on together. One of the nasty side effects of what he was going through was a recurrent nosebleed. That evening, he had a bad one and called a local friend to take him to the hospital. The people at the emergency room told his friend to wait an hour or two and then he could go home. About midnight, the friend was advised that they wanted to keep him overnight. He was having severe abdominal pain and his abdomen was distended and rigid. They gave Mike a sedative to help him rest and something to ease the pain. He never regained consciousness. At around 3 PM on December 12, my friend passed away. He was blessedly with three of his closest friends and his sister when the end came.

We were all shocked again, never expecting the end to come so quickly. Mike always planned ahead and had made arrangements for this situation. He had asked Durward to take charge of the disposition of the contents of the shop, his collection of music instruments, and seeing that customers instruments under restoration or storage would be returned to the owners or to another restoration facility. The last machine that Mike completed was a Wurlitzer style 153 band organ owned by

Matt Jaro. Under restoration was a large Gavioli and a Wurlitzer style 146 band organ.

Durward completed this huge task in about six months. The collection of organs and pianos were sold to various collectors along with machinery and parts in his shop. The remaining contents of the shop and house were sold at a public auction, which lasted an entire day. The shop was sold at the auction and the home was sold later by a real estate company.

According to his wishes, Mike was cremated. A memorial service was held shortly after his death. Many friends attended, some coming from as far away as Washington state. Phil Jamison brought a small barrel organ to the service to provide music Mike would have liked. It was a service and memorial truly fitting to the man and his life. After the services everyone went back to his house and shop to listen one last time to the music of the man known at the Carlisle Post Office as the "Music Man."

In closing I would like to quote a passage Durward wrote in a memorial article for the carousels.com web site:

*As all who knew Mike will agree, his kindness and generosity were invaluable. He was always willing to help anybody genuinely interested in mechanical music. Mike dearly loved these instruments and it was obvious in the quality of his work. His death is a great loss for the field of mechanical music. He was a very good friend and will be sorely missed by all who knew him. The instruments he restored over the years will speak highly of him for the years to come.*

A Post Script: The following article was written by Mike's friend Gerald Robertson, who accompanied Mike on his final trip to the hospital. This article appeared in a local newspaper.

### Carousel Music Man

*Children and children at heart lost a dear friend on Tuesday. This was the man who restored and kept in service the band organ at Hersheypark. This man was Michael Kitner of Carlisle. I imagine that almost all of us have ridden the marvelous carousel that dominates Carousel Circle in Hersheypark. I asked my granddaughter, Stephanie, what was her favorite thing at Hersheypark. She immediately replied "The Carousel." We have all enjoyed the music that joyfully comes from the Wurlitzer band organ. A carousel without that fantastic music would be like ice cream without Hershey's Chocolate on top. Farewell to Michael Kitner, who passed away on Tuesday. He was a marvelous technician of mechanical musical instruments. He was my dear friend and we made a lot of music together. Every time you ride the carousel at Hersheypark, listen to the music and remember Mike Kitner.*

Bill Black has contributed previously to the *Carousel Organ*. Those COAA members that attended the 2001 annual MBSI meeting in Baltimore and chose the his home tour were in for a real treat as many styles of Wurlitzer band organs were present as well as a well-restored 52-key Gasparini fair organ.

*(Hurdy-gurdy Society. . . continued from page 12)*

one of a roving instinct and an acquisitive disposition is that of a monkey organ-grinder. The monkey organs being manufactured right along are sold to traveling grinders, who commonly make, my authority affirms, as much as fifteen and twenty dollars a day. They get their monkeys very young and train them themselves. Where? Why, there is a place near by here. And, who are the talented men that are hatters and tailors to organ monkeys? The grinders themselves; each suits his own fancy as to handsome dress for a monkey. These modern minstrels carry their own skillets for bite and sup. When the first breath of chill arrives in this climate of rigorous winters, and pennied people begin to be concerned with indoor affairs, they may make Charleston a starting point, going thither in the steerage of a coast-liner, and from there make a grand tour, turning up as far north as Buffalo when spring arrives. Some organ souls with a spirit in their feet wander from town to town as far as the orange groves of far-off California.

A hurdy-gurdy is operated by means of hammers and strings, a monkey organ has little pipes and a bellows.

Most of us, I think, are inclined to regard the instrument variously known as a barrel organ, grinder organ, street organ, hand organ or monkey organ as very much the same sort of animal in its innerds as the hurdy-gurdy. In fact, the pedigrees of the two instruments appear to be quite different. The encyclopedias instruct us, in substance, somewhat as follows:

The barrel organ, or hand organ and so forth, is defined as a musical instrument, generally portable, in which the music is produced by a revolving barrel or cylinder, set with pins and staples, which open valves for admitting wind to pipes from a bellows worked by the same revolving cylinder. The pieces are played with an harmonic accompaniment. Elaborate instruments of this kind were early used in churches and chapels, and were in great demand for playing hymns, chants and voluntaries during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The origin of the barrel organ, it seems, is clearly established, and is found in the Netherlands as early as the middle of the fifteenth century.

In England these organs were known as "Dutch organs," and the name clung to the instrument even in its diminutive form of the hand organ of the itinerant musician. In 1737 Horace Walpole wrote of a thing that will play

eight tunes, Handel and all the great musicians say that it is beyond anything they can do, and this may be performed by the most ignorant person, and when you are weary of those eight tunes, you may have them changed for any other that you like. The organ was put in a lottery and fetched 1,000 pounds.

The hurdy-gurdy, whose name is now loosely used as a synonym for any grinding organ, you will find is a strictly a medieval drone instrument with strings set in vibration by the friction of a wheel. The hurdy-gurdy originated in France a the time when the Paris School or Old French School was laying the foundations of counterpoint and polyphony. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries it was known by the name of Symphonia or Chyfonie, and in Germany Lira or Leyer. Its popularity remained undiminished in France until late in the eighteenth century.

At the Bureau of Licenses in New York you will be told, if you ask concerning the matter, that only seventy-three licenses for hurdy-gurdies were issued last year. There has been a steady decline in the number for the past dozen years. In 1914 a hundred and nineteen licenses were issued for the city.

### Obituaries

**Wayne Cospers** (1923--2001) recently had gone into the hospital for an infection in his foot. No one expected that he would not be coming home. Wayne passed away on August 11, 2001.

Wayne had been a farmer all his life as well as an active Stuben



County councilman for 30 years; a past board member of Angola State Bank and Norwest Bank of Hamilton; Hamilton Cemetery Board President for many years; and a corn salesman for the past 36 years.

Visits to Wayne were always interesting—one of his barns were filled with a collection of old vehicles and tools. He was very proud of his beautifully restored 1954 Corvette. It was in a special room on the house that also had an old marble soda fountain with back bar.

Along with his wife Wandalee, they were members of MBSI Mid-Am and COAA. At the organ rallies Wayne was always next to Wandalee and their 20-note Pell organ.

Wayne was a good listener and along with his white beard and hair this made him an excellent Santa Claus. At Christmas Wayne and Wandalee would dress as Santa and Mrs. Claus to the delight of many children.

One of the most spectacular things that Wayne did was foster the beautiful wetland restorations and ponds. He was very proud to point out a few of the ponds he had built. The wildlife of Stuben County has lost a wonderful friend as well as man of us organ grinders that had the opportunity to meet him.

**Eugene Ceton** of Brookfield, Wisconsin passed away October 19, 2000. He is survived by his wife, Joyce.