

around the city. During this “tour of duty” he also worked for a pinball operator in Minneapolis until 1953.



Figure 4. Ozzie Wurdeman’s band organ and calliope store located on the corner of Broadway and Central Ave N.E. in Minneapolis, MN.

In 1953, Charlie Bovey, a Minnesota native, was restoring the town of Virginia City, Montana (the state’s second territorial capitol). Located on Alder Gulch, it sprung up after gold was discovered in 1863. Mr. Bovey had bought an old coin-operated piano for his saloon and found one of Ed Wurdeman’s business cards inside. The number was called and he was informed that Ed Wurdeman had passed away in 1945, but his son, Ozzie, was around and he should be contacted. The contact was made and this was the beginning of a second career—restoring and servicing coin-operated pianos and band organs.

Ozzie and Edna celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in Virginia City restoring pianos and organs (and for the next 19 summers as well). While Ozzie maintained the instruments in Virginia City (and newly-constructed Nevada City) Edna manned the variety store—a location loaded with arcade machines, and even a Seeburg G orchestrion.

Collectors from all over the United States would come out to visit him and see the fine collection that was being assembled—at that time it was one of the largest collections in the country. With Ozzie as an ever-present serviceman, everything was kept in playing condition. One of the prize pieces was the Wurlitzer theater organ in which Ozzie had put a player mechanism using an “O” roll. Harvey Roehl remembered this instrument and the tale behind it in a phone interview with the author:

Behind the enclosure over there is a Wurlitzer theater organ which was all set up to play on “O” rolls. It didn’t exactly sound like a theater organ when played that way but it amused the tourists very greatly. It had a quarter slot on it and the tourists could listen to the thing and watch all of the drums and traps operate and Ozzie had it rigged up in such a way that when it had completed a quarter’s worth of music all of the traps would play in sequence. The drums would beat and the triangle would clang and the castanettes would wiggle, and so on. It was quite a thing! [Popular demand resulted in a long-play record entitled *Organs and Orchestrions from Historic Virginia and Nevada Cities, Montana*—R.B.]

Reflections on the Bovey Collection Art Reblitz

One of the attractions in Virginia City is the Opera House, where fine, authentic Victorian melodramas and musical revues are performed each summer. The first season that I worked there, the orchestra pit had flooded and frozen during the preceding winter, leaving the bottom twelve inches or so of the large Cremona photoplayer (see photo below) encased in a big block of ice. My job was to get it playing again during the last week of rehearsals before opening day. Completing the job in the barely thawed pit in the unheated building was only made possible by one of those noisy, smelly outdoor kerosene heaters. With the help of the curator, John Ellingsen, we got the photoplayer fixed well enough to be played manually by the end of the dress rehearsal the night before the opening performance.

Ozzie Wurdeman and his family had spent the whole summer each year maintaining the collection, but I only had time to spend two or three weeks there annually. From the first visit, I decided not to work on the dozens of arcade machines, but instead focused my time on the 40 or so automatic pianos and organs. This gave me time each year to tune them as necessary and to provide enough servicing and repairs to keep them in presentable playing condition for another season.

Charlie Bovey and his wife Sue founded the Bovey Restorations in 1943. After Charlie passed away in 1978 funds for music machine maintenance became even more limited than they had been. In 1980, I built my present shop and hired several employees. The requirements of managing new employees made it temporarily impossible to spend weeks at a time away from my shop, and I stopped making the annual service trip to Virginia City. John Ellingsen, the curator who worked very hard to arrange for the purchase of the Bovey Restorations by the state of Montana several years ago, together with a few other people unknown to me, have taken care of the instruments since then.

One of the greatest antiques that Charlie and Sue ever owned was the spectacular Eden Palais Salon Carousel, which is now in the Sanfilippo Collection. It was set up in a large combine shed on the Bovey’s ranch in Great Falls, Montana. The Boveys rarely showed it to anyone, due to their concerns over security. After I worked for them for several years, they invited me to see it.

Although I had collected musical scales for automatic instruments since the 1960s, it was this collection, together with an equally large group of German orchestrion scales from Eugene DeRoy of Belgium that I acquired through Dave Bowers, which gave me the idea to write *Treasures of Mechanical Music* with Dave in 1981. While I still have Xerox copies of all the B.A.B. scales, the originals mysteriously vanished from Virginia City after Charlie willed them to me, but before I had a chance to pick them up. Hopefully, they will show up again sometime in the future. It will be interesting to learn who has been taking care of them for all these years.

From *Bovey Collection in Virginia & Nevada Cities, MT*
by Art Reblitz, MMD Archives July 30, 2000



Figure 5. Tom Wurdeman working on the Cremona photoplayer in the 1960s.



Figure 6. The Wurdeman Music Hall was located in Nevada City,

Many of the pianos and organs were located in the Bale of Hay Saloon in Virginia City. Others were found in a Nevada City Music Hall (**Figure 6**) including a 89-key Gavioli which was converted by Ozzie to play paper rolls; a large Marengi organ with an original unpainted front and one of six Wurlitzer Style 180 military band organs. All in all, nearly 140 pianos and organs were ready for the drop of a coin.



Figure 9. Ozzie Wurdeman and Charlie Bovey together at Virginia City, Montana.

In 1958, Charlie and Ozzie went to New York where Charlie had purchased the B.A.B. Organ Company. In the interview I had with Harvey Roehl in 1987, Harvey remembered:

He had gone with Charlie Bovey, who at one time had been state Senator in Montana, to New York and had purchased the contents of the B.A.B. Company and the Molinari business in the Bronx. They just moved the whole thing out there to be in Virginia City.



Figure 7. The church in Virginia City that housed Ozzie's workshop.

One of the items found in the move was an Acme Roll Perforating Machine which B.A.B. used for cutting rolls. This remained in Ozzie's possession for years until sold in the 1980s.



Figure 8. B.A.B. masters filed away for future use in the upstairs of the Molinari Building.

Tim Trager Remembers Virginia City

Somewhere along the line, the Boveys discovered mechanical music. I believe that the discovery was probably related to the coin operated pianos sold throughout Montana by the Butte Piano Company of Butte, Montana. The vast amount of mining activity in Montana resulted in many saloons and houses of affordable affection, which were the prime market for coin pianos and orchestrions.

The Bovey's discovered Ozzie Wurdeman of Minneapolis, who was a former Violano distributor (see photo above). (By the way, the Boveys had their roots in Minneapolis/St. Paul.) Ozzie began spending his summers in Virginia City working on the music machines. Ozzie also exposed the Boveys to other pioneer collectors such as the Klavestads of Shakopee, Minnesota, and Paul and Laura Eakins.

Ozzie also got the Boveys into the Excelsior Amusement Park in Minneapolis, where they purchased the penny arcade games and a Cremona "J". Later on Charlie bought the B.A.B. Organ Company of Brooklyn, along with the Molinari Organ Company, and moved everything to Montana. This purchase was a treasure trove of mechanical music! It included a number of fairground organs as well as all the shop equipment, including a perforator, barrel pinning equipment, and the book punching machinery.

These instruments and equipment were displayed in Nevada City. Ozzie Wurdeman took the perforator to Minneapolis to recut organ rolls. I first visited Virginia City and Nevada City in 1964 as a very small child. I can still remember the electric thrill of listening to the large Gavioli at the back of the log music hall, as well as the Seeburg G in the Bale of Hay Saloon! When everything was working well the place was an enthusiasts dream! Our family visited each summer for the next 11 years. During that time we got to know the Boveys. Those visits are fondly remembered.

After Charlie and Sue passed away their son, Ford Bovey, inherited everything. Estate taxes took the cash necessary to subsidize Virginia City and Nevada City. Auctions and private sales were considered. The curator, Nevada City resident and vintage printer John Ellingsen, started a push to save the collection. Eventually the State of Montana purchased the majority of the collection. Ford did keep a number of items including the items in the Kruse auction.

The State of Montana now owns the fair organs which are displayed in the Nevada City music hall. They also own the B.A.B master rolls and the Molinari organ shop, as well as a number of nickelodeons. The inventory book listing the items which the State of Montana purchased is nearly two inches thick! The State plans on restoring the instruments and considers each one a treasure.

Courtesy Ford Bovey Estate Auction & Charles Bovey
by Tim Trager, MMD Archives — July 25, 2000

Upon arrival the contents of the Molinari factory were stored in the church in Virginia City (**Figure 7**). Resembling a trip to the end of the rainbow for today's collectors, the church was filled to the brim with at least eight complete organs and parts for many others. Later, the factory was recreated in a separate building in Nevada City. Upstairs were kept the B.A.B. masters (**Figure 8**) as well as the pinning machine used for barrel-operated organs. Numerous parts were also cataloged and stored in their place in this building.