

Archival Article

Some Comments from an American Collector
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By
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My Ruth organ, a Style 38 of 96-key specification, was used for many years by the Gooding Amusement Company of Columbus, Ohio. The organ, mounted on a large trailer with folding side doors, would be put into place, the doors opened, and a fence put around the front so that spectators could not get too close. On the backside of the doors was (and still is) lettered a program of hundreds of different tunes. With the doors in the open position the program could be easily read. The music books were numbered, and a special “tune indicator” on the front would tell the viewers which music book was playing at a given time. The listener could then refer to the program and determine what tunes were going to be played. Each music book was made as a composite of a dozen or so tunes pasted together end to end in a stack of folding cardboard music about four feet high (and weighing it seems, 100 pounds or more!).



The Gooding Ruth as it appeared in 1972. Note the cut-out at the top of the trailer extension to allow for display of the total façade.

Photo courtesy of Neil Smith

Although no admission fee was charged to listen to the organ, recordings were available for sale nearby, and this produced additional revenue. The music books were arranged by Carl Frei and Heinrich Voight and are in the “popular” style. There are, to be sure, a number of well-known classical and semiclassical tunes, but there are also enough old-time popular melodies including, believe it or not, cowboy songs, as well as Stephen Foster melodies and the like.

Central amongst the massive façade of the Gooding Ruth was this conductor figure.

Photo courtesy of Neil Smith



Mr. Gooding prized the organ so highly that he directed in his will that it be played at his funeral, which it was. Following his death the instrument passed to the Miller Collection, then to a deal in Texas, from whom I acquired it. Last year the instrument in all its glory was on display at Clark’s Trading Post, a tourist attraction in Lincoln, New Hampshire, in the heart of the White Mountains district.

Clark’s Trading Post is no stranger to automatic musical instruments. On display there are many fine pieces, including examples of Wurlitzer and Artizan band organs, a model CA-43 Tanglely calliope, and a goodly number of orchestrions and coin-operated pianos. The gift shop at Clark’s, said to be the largest in the State of New Hampshire, is dominated by a magnificent Wurlitzer Style LX orchestrion which plays upon receipt of a quarter. I don’t know how much the instrument earns in a given month, but it seems that each time I visit there it is playing almost continuously!



Dave Bower’s Ruth organ as it appears today in the Bob Gilson collection. The organ has recently been restored to its former glory.

At Clark's the organ is positioned with its doors open facing an arena in which trained bears give a show under the direction of the owner, Murray Clark. Before the bear show begins the organ plays. The volume is such that it can be heard all over the place. While it is difficult to describe the total quality of any organ in words – listening to one tune is worth many paragraphs of text – I can say that it has a very “full organ” sound, quite well balanced, perhaps more so than the typical Gavioli organ (which has dominant violin and string tones) or the typical Bruder (which tends to have dominant flute tones). For want of a better comparison it sounds quite a bit like a theatre pipe organ. There are enough pipes and enough wind pressure that the instrument is ‘full’ and has a complete ‘presence’ without being overly loud. That is, one can stand ten feet from the front of the organ and while conversation is not possible at this distance, the music is not uncomfortable either.

Murray Clark has told me that on several occasions people have come to him after seeing the organ, with its doors open and ready to play, and have said: “When will you be playing the organ? I want to take a picture of it.” Seeing that the people in question had still cameras, it really made no difference whether the instrument was playing or not playing or, for that matter, whether or not it was even capable of playing! But, for some reason, people don't like to take pictures of the instrument unless they can listen to it at the same time!



The Gebr. Bruder Military Symphony Orchestra “Selection” as seen this year in the Museum Mechanischer Musik-Instrumente in Bruchshal, Germany. Completely restored it conveys the grandeur of those first wonderful days of its life on

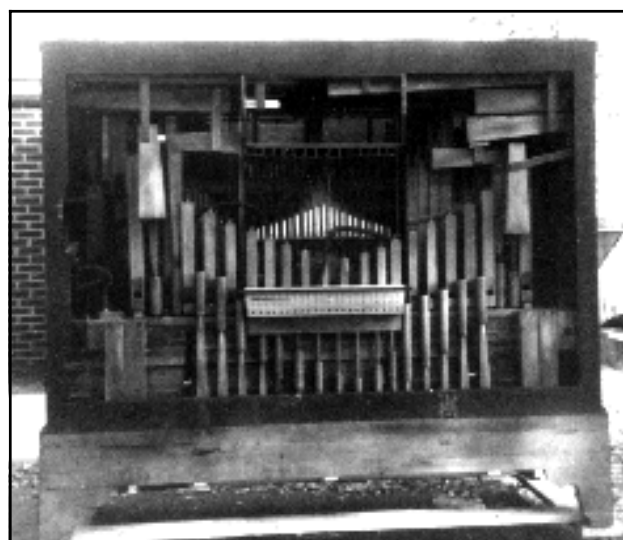
In my collection I have another large and interesting organ, a 94-key Gebr. Bruder “Military Symphony Orchestra-Selection” originally sold for use on a merry-go-round in Coney Island. At the time of installation, shortly after 1910, the instrument cost \$10,000, a tremendous sum for that era. The unit played for many years and, according to carousel historian Frederick Fried, “You could hear it a block away as you came down Surf Avenue, the main street of Coney Island.” The instrument eventually fell into disrepair, the organ changed hands, and its melodies were forgotten. A number of years ago, the unit was stripped of the tiny mechanical figures, 15 in all, which formed a “band stand” on the front and which moved their eyes and instruments as the organ played. And, the music books for it disap-

peared.

Two owners later I acquired the instrument, missing the small figures and without any music. The organ is now presently being restored by Mike Kitner of Pennsylvania, and experienced craftsman who has worked on many fine units. As luck would have it, recently I received information from John Hovancak, a Wisconsin organ fancier, that the tiny figures might still exist. I tracked down his lead and before long I acquired them! It seemed as though they had been sold to a man who had intended to mount them on a display wagon. His ideas changed, and the figures were never used. So, now I have a couple of cardboard boxes full of mechanical dolls and parts and am looking for a restorer for them.

The Bruder “Selection” sans façade in restoration at Mike Kitner's workshop in the early 1980s.

Photo courtesy of Mike Kitner



(left) One of three ranks of trumpets in the ‘Selection,’ this set rested on top of the case and was hidden by the top of the façade.

Photo courtesy of Mike Kitner



The Bruder "Selection" Military Band, now restored and playing for any crowd.

The music? There was one tiny leaf, a six-inch section of one of the music books remaining – but that was it. I wrote to Carl Frei in Waldkirch, to Marcel Von Boxtel in Holland, Arthur Prinsen in Belgium, and a couple of others, but so far I have not come across any *original* 94-key Bruder music or masters for it. (I might say here that if any Key Frame readers know of such, I would be very grateful. I can be reached at: Dave Bowers, Box 1224, Wolfboro, New Hampshire 03894, USA). Marcel Von Boxtel is, however, arranging new music for the instrument, so when the restoration is completed, probably two or three years from now, there will at least be some nice melodies to play. But, unquestionably it would be nice to have some original music arrangements from years ago.

In America, Wurlitzer band organs achieved the greatest fame. While most really large rides and parks imported Gavioli, Bruder, or other instruments, the need for organs for hundreds of travelling shows, skating rinks and other installations was filled by several domestic manufacturers, the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company dominant among them. Wurlitzer organ music found in several popular sizes known as Style 125, 150, 165 and Caliola rolls. These are the four main types. In addition, limited numbers of other rolls were made for such now-rare organs as the "Monster," "Mammoth," "Style 180," and so on. In my collection I have an instrument to take each of the popular roll types.

The smallest, a Caliola, was used for many years at Randall's Skating Rink in Chenango Bridge, near Binghamton, New York. It was 'rescued' from that location by Roy Haning and Neil White, prominent Ohio collectors and connoisseurs of the field (they had had some of the finest organs I have ever seen!), who restored it. From them I acquired it a number of years ago. Interesting, the exterior, painted in green with black crackle finish, is just about in the same condition as when the instrument was first made.

The Style 125 Military Band Organ has brass trumpets on the front and was apparently used years ago in New England. I don't have much information concerning its origin, but one of these days I will visit Tim Westman, who restored it, and find out what he knows. I have always found that learning the history of an instrument adds quite a bit to its sentimental value. The Wurlitzer 125 organ, logically, uses Style 125 paper rolls.

Next up the scale in my Wurlitzer collection is a Style 150 with brass trumpets and horns on the front. The instrument is quite unrestored and awaits some future effort, if indeed I decide to keep it in my collection. Why would I dispose of it? Because I recently acquired a Wurlitzer Style 153 organ, which also uses the same 150 rolls, which was used on the merry-go-round at Rock Springs Park, Chester, West Virginia. As a collector of merry-go-round memorabilia I find that his connection is quite fascinating, so this may be the organ I elect to keep. Incidentally, I might mention at this point that the Play-Rite Music Roll Company, of Turlock, California, recuts and makes available at reasonable prices new rolls for the Wurlitzer Style 125, 150, 165 and Caliola. Now, no collector with these instruments will ever be without a truly large collection of music.

Next up the line is a beautiful Wurlitzer 165 Military Band Organ being restored by Hayes McClaran, himself a very dedicated and knowledgeable collector. This instrument was originally sold in 1918 to the merry-go-round at Playland at the Beach, San Francisco, California right next to the world-famous Cliff House (a restaurant and seaside resort). So, that is an overview of my Wurlitzer collection. To round out my collection of band organs I am in the market for a large Gavioli. This would go nicely with the Style 38 Ruth and 94-key Bruder. I guess that no one ever really has a truly complete collection, for part of the fun of the hobby is adding new things now and then.

Q. David Bowers of Wolfboro, NH, has authored many publications on mechanical music including the *Encyclopedia Of Automatic Musical Instruments*