

The Story of Captain John Leonard's Fascination with Military Band Organs Captain John Leonard

I grew up in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and my family vacationed at Toronto Island, just south of Toronto, an important shipping port on Lake Ontario. Hanlan's Point, one of the three sections of the island, boasted of a large amusement park in the 1890s. The island was a major tourist area.

Naturally, there was a carousel with a band organ. I recall riding to the park on my bicycle and listening to the organ. I don't remember any of the tunes, but remember the banging of the beater hitting the big bass drum and cymbal. The carousel rounding boards had pretty scenes painted on them. One of the boards had the words "Herschell Spillman & Co., North Tonawanda New York, USA Builders." The carousel was a two-abreast model and all the horses were rockers. There were also two chariots for those who wanted to sit. One rocked and the other did not.

The carousel was operated by Mr. William Reed, whose nickname was "Pud." He also had a refreshment stand where he sold pop, ice cream, and candy bars, etc. Reed always dressed in dark and looked like a preacher. They used a real brass ring to offer riders a chance to win a free ride. Reed's wife sold tickets and he would sit on a bench and keep his eye on the entire operation. The operator would ring a bell to signal the start of the ride, then he would throw in the clutch to engage the carousel. As soon as the carousel was at full speed, he would walk over and turn on the band organ, which ran by pulley off the main drive motor. After one tune, he would shut it off then walk back and turn off the carousel. Not a very long ride, especially on a 10-tune roll, but the cost was only 5 cents, which I guess was quite a lot back then. If you caught the brass ring, of course you got a free ride. During the great depression, Pud at least kept a couple people working, which was a good thing.

I later learned that the carousel was shipped from North Tonawanda, NY, to Centre Island in 1914. It's cost was \$2,000, but I don't know if that included the band organ; probably not. I never saw the back of the organ but was told it only had a single roll tracker bar. I also don't know what style it was but I think it was a 146 Wurlitzer. Reed told me the rolls cost \$12 each. Sometime around 1937 he replaced the music with a 78 RPM phonograph and the organ wasn't used after that. I can still recall one of the songs: *The Merry Go Round Broke Down*. As I stood there as a child I recall wishing

that it would. I think Reed was one of the very first to use recorded music on his carousel. About 1939 he got the organ repaired by Eatons, a large department store in Toronto. I don't know what they did, but the organ finally played again. Unfortunately, Reed decided not to use the organ, even though it worked. I remember how sad I was that he wouldn't use the organ.

There is a sequel to this story. About 1957 the city of Toronto decided to rejuvenate the park. The carousel and building were dismantled. They sold the carousel and organ to Eatons. I tried to locate the organ, but was not successful. They sent me on a wild goose chase, but I had no luck at all. I told the Carousel Society and Alan Herschell III about what happened, with the hope they would have better luck, but never learned the organ's fate. Eatons is now out of business and what happened to the carousel and organ is anybody's guess.

Hanlan's Point boasted of an honest-to-goodness amusement park with a three-abreast Dentzel carousel, a Wurlitzer duplex 165 band organ, a grandstand, roller coaster, steam railroad and lots of other rides. The park was named for the family who settled there in the 1850s. They established a hotel for summer visitors and featured all kinds of attractions such as scuba diving, etc.

Like most amusement parks, the place was started by a street railway company. They ran the streetcars to the docks where one could board a ferry to the island. There was a separate entrance to the park so that the transfer from the streetcar would not permit entry to the park. The railway company built the grandstand around 1900 and big ball games were featured there. Legend has it that Babe Ruth once hit a ball out of the park and into the bay. The ball was never found.

In 1920 the franchise for the street railway reverted to the City of Toronto and they decided not to renew it but rather took over the operation as a government entity. At

that time the company then sold the streetcars, ferryboats and the park to the highest bidder, who was Lawrence Soloman, who also owned the Toronto Maple Leafs baseball team. Soloman arranged a deal with the city to start up a new amusement park. The city-owned streetcars ran right past the location, it was close to the lake, and easily accessible with the then newly-popular automobile. The park was named Sunnyside and



Figure 1. Captain John Leonard with his freshly restored North Tonawanda Musical Instrument Works Style 173 circa 1996

it remains to this day. Soloman purchased a new Spillman carousel, a four-abreast model with Wurlitzer 165 band organ. The organ now resides at Disneyland in Anaheim, California. Soloman also purchased a Derby (horse) Ride made by Pryor and Church which also had a Wurlitzer 165 organ. The ride has since been sold at auction and its whereabouts and the fate of the band organ are unknown. The park at Hanlan's Point was taken over by the Island Airport and Toronto Harbor Commission in 1936. The old grandstand and stadium was torn down, but the Dentzel carousel remained and a few of the other rides as well. A few of the ferryboats stayed too, but business was nothing like it was in the old days as only one boat was used. The three-abreast Dentzel carousel was kept with the Wurlitzer organ and the organ was played all the time, whether the carousel was running or not, under the new management at Hanlan's Point. It was a happy time to go and listen to the band organ play all those tunes of the 1920s, like *Oh Katerina*; *Oh, How I Miss You Tonight*; *Chicago*; *Always*; and many others. In addition, the operator, Tommy Neale, was a friendly sort and a veteran of World War I. He'd talk with me, but never let me go behind the organ. He said someone from the office might report him and he could be fired. This was the depression, and if one looked sideways at the boss, you could get fired.

I spent so much time there I was beginning to be a bit of a nuisance and the park employees tried to shoo me away. I finally did get a job with a fellow who ran some of the concessions in the park. Luckily for me, I worked almost next to the carousel, so I made money and could listen to the band organ. Sort of a young fellow's version of paradise, as it were. Also, there were lots of girls around. I'd give away free candy from the Ball Game concession that I managed, so it was a happy time. I worked there all of one summer and part of the next.

By this time World War II had started and I applied for a job sailing on lake boats and so around the 1st of July I reluctantly said good-bye to Al Colton and shipped out. I stayed there for two years and then joined the Canadian Navy. In 1943 I was quartermaster in the naval barracks at Toronto and had lots of time off, which was spent around Hanlan's Point. I even moonlighted for Mr. Colton on some of my days off and also for another concession stand. Tommy Neale, the carousel operator, had joined the veteran's reserve army and a new man was running the carousel. He was a conscientious objector who was a bit on the religious side. He tried to preach to me, but I just let him talk. However, he did let me go behind the organ and watch the duplex roll system work. Eventually, I was able to change the roll while the organ was playing.

In 1944 I was drafted and soon was on my way to duty in the North Atlantic. One advantage to duty in this area was that I was able to dock in and out of New York City and generally, while we would be waiting, a convoy would spend 5-6 days in Staten Island. There I was able to visit Coney Island by taking the ferry for a dime. Those were the days. I had a great time riding the Steeplechase, Feltmans, and Luna Park. The organ on the carousel was a Wurlitzer 146A which was destroyed in the fire there in 1945 or so. I also got to Palisades Amusement Park and spent time listening to the big BAB band organ. The roll frame was on the outside of the organ, very unusual. I also vis-



Figure 2. A much younger Capt. John Leonard in 1962. At 39 years of age he was the proud owner of his new organ which he displayed for the first time at the Milton steam show in Milton, Ontario.

ited the old B.A.B. factory in Brooklyn and the man there, I believe his name was Antonuzzi, showed me around the place and told me lots of stories. I was not sure who he was, he was a big man and smoked Italian stogeys and he knew band organs. He told me a story that one time he was called to a carnival where the owner said he was having trouble with the band organ. It apparently played at the last location, but stopped working after being moved. Upon investigation, he came to learn that when the roustabouts moved the organ into the carousel, they rolled it end over end instead of carrying it. No wonder band organs had such a short life on carnivals and the workers hated the organs. I heard another story about a band organ being thrown off a bridge as the carnival moved from one town to another.

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By 1945 the war in the Atlantic theater was over and there was quite a celebration in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that nearly ruined the city. I used to go up there to Halifax Common, where the Bill Lynch show was performing, and listen to the band organ on the carousel. It seemed to me it was a Wurlitzer 146A. Later that summer I was drafted home on leave of 60 days, prior to going to the Pacific theater. I got back to Hanlan's Point a few times, but also visited the park at Sunnyside. By that time the Wurlitzer 165 had been converted to play Caliola music rolls and a lot of the notes were missing. I could never hear the music

on the Derby Racer as the ride made so much noise because the horses ran on a railroad track and it was noisy. I don't know what happened to this organ. The park was dismantled about 1957 and as I was walking through the park I saw a roll frame laying on the ground, but it was from a Wurlitzer 150. That's all that remained from that beautiful organ.

As it turned out, I did not go to the Pacific theater because when I returned from leave the Japanese had surrendered and the war was finally over. By October I was a civilian and returned to sailing. The years that followed did not allow much opportunity to listen to band organs. But I made one last visit to Hanlan's Point in the summer of 1947. I had a couple weeks off

offered \$25 for it, perhaps I bid too low, but Ralph Tussing of TRT Mfg. Co., told me, at that time, that's about all it was worth. I did not see the organ again for about 25 years and by that time I had been promoted to first mate on the ships and one day I took some time off to go over to the island and look at the place where I had spent so much time in my youth.

It sure was sad. The carousel was still there, but nobody was around. Vandals had stripped just about everything off of it. The organ was only a shell, just the four sides. I couldn't find anything except a tracker bar, which I put in my pocket as a souvenir. I turned the carousel by hand and got on for "one last ride." I don't know what happened to it, but there were some plans around from Alan Herschell Co. and I heard that the carousel went to Knott's Berry Farm in California in 1961, but I really don't think that's happened.

Today I live in what was formerly known as Port Dalhousie, on Lake Ontario, which is the port that I sailed out of when I first got in the business in 1941. At that time I worked a passenger ship. Today the port is known as St. Catharines, but we prefer to still call it Port Dalhousie. In days gone by there was an amusement park here with lots of rides and a four-abreast carousel with working band organ. When I was off duty I would go to the park and listen to the band organ. It played style 150 rolls and had the name Wurlitzer stenciled on the façade. Later I learned it was really a Frati organ which was built in Berlin, Germany. I don't know what the real story was, but I suppose the organ was imported to America then sent to Wurlitzer where it was changed to the roll system. It originally was a barrel organ and the door to gain access to the barrel was still on the side of the organ.

Back in the old days (1941), the C.N. Railway owned the park. Later, about 1950, they sold the park to Sid Brookson, who was the agent in the park. Brookson maintained the park, to his everlasting credit. As he got older, he sold off the amusement rides, except for the carousel. After a lot of dickering, the city finally purchased the carousel for \$20,000. The citizens had to come up with the money before the city would buy the carousel. They did this with walk-a-thons, public subscriptions, etc. Finally, they got the money and the city bought it. They asked Fred Fried, the noted carousel authority, for assistance in determining who made it and he said "Looft." He was partly right, but not totally. The maker of the framework, platform, rounding boards and machinery was actually Geo. Kremner of Long Island City, NY. However, the animals were made by Looft. The carousel sits in the park today with its cannibalized band organ.

I had another shipping job in the 1950s and we would go into Port Dalhousie. I was first mate and I would go listen to the organ when we were in port. I knew the park foreman and he let me look at the organ, even the back. We reciprocated by providing the grease necessary for the organ gearwork. One time



Figure 3. Capt. John's North Tonawanda Military Band Organ with actor Robert Redford on the set of *The Natural*. While the organ wasn't actually seen in the movie the music from the organ was used in the background.

and spent some time around the old carousel. The organ still played on the Dentzel carousel. By that time Tommy Neale was a mate on one of the ferry boats to the island. After that I was off to the lake boats again and never saw the carousel or band organ after that. One time in 1949 the ship I was on came into Toronto with a load of grain about 10:00 at night and I looked over towards Hanlan's Point and could see the old carousel running and the lights twinkling; but I didn't have the chance to get off the ship as I had to prepare it for unloading.

During this time of my life I had a long period with something that affects a lot of sailors, alcohol, and I was no exception. I spent many a night ashore in a bar soaking up the suds. Eventually I had to seek treatment and I have been sober since, for which I am grateful. One time between jobs (which was a frequent problem in those days), I returned to Hanlan's Point where I saw the carousel still running, but without a band organ. The man running it told me the organ was broken and couldn't be fixed. I think I know what happened. You see, in those early days they had a man by the name of Horace Malton repair the organ. But by this time Malton had retired and there was no one to repair the organ. In Canada at that time there were church organ experts, but they did not know how to repair band organs. Malton was unique because he was able to repair either. I wrote to the street railway company, owner of the park, and offered to buy the band organ, but they declined, saying they were going to repair it themselves. As it turned out, they never did. I only

they broke a gear wheel so we sent it to the ship's machine shop for new teeth, gratis, in exchange for their friendliness. All around it was a good deal. At that time there was a lot of vandalism at the park. They broke into the carousel and smashed the carved organ figures. This prompted an article in the newspaper and it garnered lots of publicity. A local art teacher arranged for her students to help restore and redecorate the facade and figures. This was a great improvement and fostered even more interest in the carousel and organ. At that time I finally decided "I am going to buy an organ."

In 1955 I wrote to Ralph Tussing and noted that I was looking for a Wurlitzer 165. I thought that if they abused the old organ at Hanlans Point, there would be lots of 165s around. Tussing wrote back to say that he had just sold a 165 to a Mr. Walton in Mentor, Ohio, and he didn't have any other 165s, but he did have others and so he invited me to pay a visit. At that time I didn't have a car or license to drive so I couldn't do it. However, that summer I did have a month off and a friend was driving to New York City and I asked if I could go along. So off we went. When in NY I went to the old B.A.B. factory and saw Mr. Brugliatti (I think that was his name) about buying an organ. They had what looked like a Wurlitzer 146A but they had changed the roll system. I asked how much and he said \$2,500. Of course I had no where near that much money, so I said I'd be back and left. I decided I was going to have that organ so back to work I went to save the money. I worked two jobs that year and the following summer I had the money to buy the organ. A friend went with me to New York City; alas, when we got to the B.A.B. factory we learned the organ had been sold! He did have a smaller organ, equivalent to a style 125 with wooden pipes and he was asking \$750 for it, but it was not my kind of organ. He played a big Gavioli organ in his shop and told me it was the same type as the one at Euclid Beach, Cleveland, Ohio, but that isn't what I wanted either.

I don't know why I didn't buy any of the B.A.B. organs, but I guess I thought it would be too hard to get rolls and ship them to Canada. At that time there was quite a high duty charged by Canadian Customs on band organs. One had to pay extra as they were classified as "amusement devices." Today they are classified as antiques and no duty is required. I again contacted Ralph Tussing at TRT Mfg. Co. in North Tonawanda, NY. So one day a friend and I visited Tussing and he showed me an organ for sale, although he didn't know the maker. He thought it was an Artizan, I thought it was a Wurlitzer. I liked the price and bought it. I had to save some money and he agreed to keep it until I returned. When I did he mentioned that he had an organ that would be \$100 cheaper. He played it for me and because it had brass trumpets, I liked it even better so I bought that instead (Figures 1 - 3).

Because I had never imported anything into Canada, I had a lot to learn. Tussing had all the paperwork done, but it was for export, not import into Canada. It turned out the paperwork was no good at all. So the battle began. The Customs authorities didn't believe me. They phoned Tussing (at my expense). He confirmed that I bought the organ from him. They wanted to

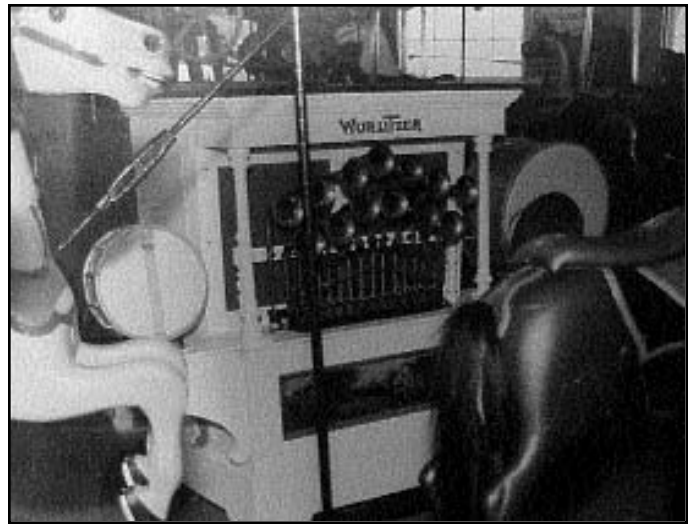


Figure 4. The Wurlitzer Style 125 band organ featured on the carousel at the Herschell Carrousel Factory Museum was formerly in the collection of Captain John Leonard.

know the value of the organ - I think he told them \$1,000. They charged me extra because it was an amusement machine. They also charged me duty on the rolls: \$3.27 per roll. Tussing told me that when carnival people used to buy rolls, they would rub them in grease and dirt so they would look used and they'd get away not paying the duty, but I wasn't that smart.

I took the organ to Toronto and put it in my dad's garage. Later I moved it to a storage garage and finally to my farm in St. Catharines. I rented the farm and the renter watched the organ for me while I was at sea. That year I made it to the rank of captain so I didn't have any time to take out the organ, but I did play it whenever I was at the farm. Finally, in 1962, I took the organ out for the first time to a steam show in Milton, Ontario. I guess it was a hit as they asked me to come back the next year.

Later I bought two band organs from a carnival operator. One was a Wurlitzer 125 and the other a Wurlitzer 146A. I got them real cheap and then had Tussing at TRT Mfg. Co. repair them and again had to go through all the hassle to get them into Canada. To make it worse, I also had trouble getting them out of the USA. Had to hire a bonded carrier, etc., etc., but finally got them home. For years I wouldn't take the organs into the U.S., but finally things changed and for the past 25 years or so I've had no trouble getting the organs out of and back into Canada.

I sold the two Wurlitzers that I bought from the carnival. The 125 is now on the carousel at North Tonawanda (Fig. 4) and the other I bought back just last year for quite a bit more than I paid for it years ago.

For the past quarter century I've had the good fortune to travel to many band organs, mostly in the U.S.A. The friends I've met has made it all worth while. I wouldn't trade any it for the world, what with all the good friends and good times. So I will leave you now, even though I haven't said enough. But then I never will!

Captain John Leonard and his wife, Pauline, live in Port Dalhousie, Ontario. Capt. John is a frequent visitor to organ rallies in the states, attending both Mid-Am as well as COAA rallies.