

WURLITZER'S MONSTER AND OTHER GOOD TIMES

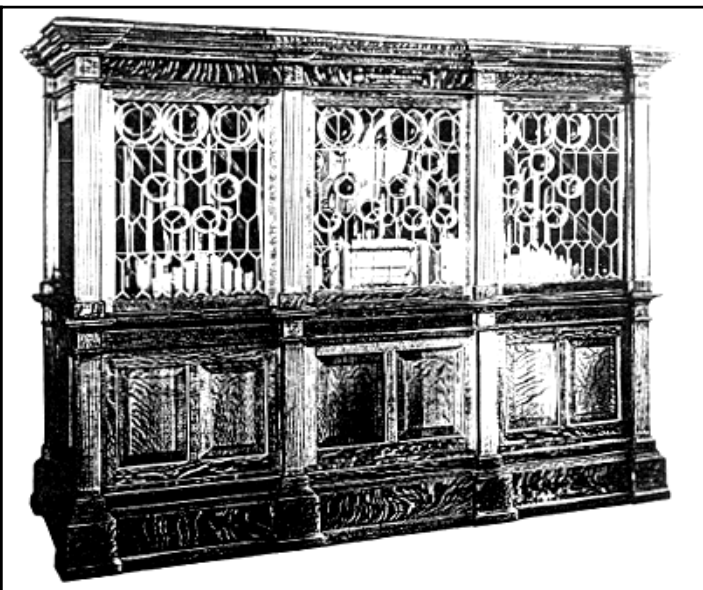
by Bill Black

Back in 1972 when I first visited Mike Kitner's shop, there it was! The Monster! Of course I'd never seen a band organ that big before in person and it was very impressive. Mike had placed a sign on the top which said, *Gee Dad, It's A Wurlitzer*. Also by the side of the organ was a box with a sign which said, "Eye Teeth." That was for the folks who would give their eye teeth for that organ.

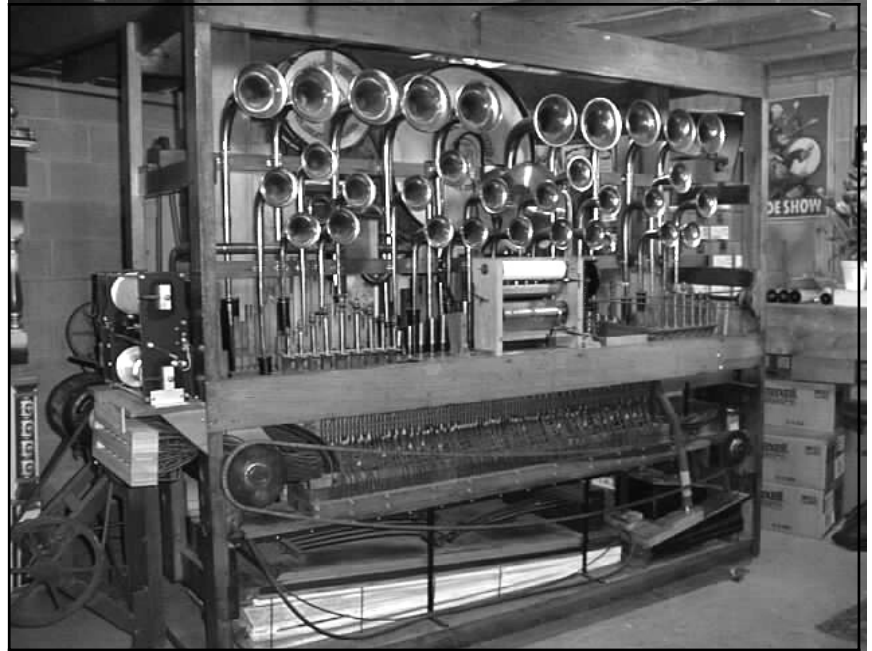
To go back a bit in time, my interest in band organs went to the period when I was in school and worked at Hersheypark during the summers. I was hired to be a cashier in a food stand. It was within earshot of their carousel and in the evenings when things calmed down a bit on the rides, I could sit in my booth and listen to the sound of the band organ. It was captivating! So, at the end of the season, I asked the boss if I could work on the carousel next year. He said, "sure."

For the next seven years, I worked on the carousel. There were usually four of us working on the ride, taking turns operating it, taking tickets or as cashier. The only thing we were allowed to do in regard to the organ was to change the music rolls. During the first few years, the Wurlitzer 153 played pretty well. It was being maintained by a fellow by the name of Buckley from Philadelphia, I believe.

The park usually opened at noontime. Employees came to work about a half hour before opening and once in a while Buckley would be there working on the organ. I always tried to look over his shoulder. Occasionally he would bring a new roll or two for the organ. These were Ralph Tussing rolls. He would throw the rolls he took off in the trash can, box and all. Of course, after he departed I would promptly retrieve them. You never know when you might need something like this. Actually, if you can't have a band organ, some satisfaction can be achieved by owning the music roll!



The Wurlitzer Style 155 (Monster) as depicted in an original factory photograph.



The Wurlitzer Monster as it appears today. Even without the decorative case this organ gives a massive appearance.

Over this period of time, I tried to quell the desire to own a band organ by collecting records. Having discovered a Paul Eakins record in a music store in Philadelphia, I tried to collect all his recordings. The recording of his 153 was my favorite, listening was just like going back to the park. I also traveled around to various places where organs were located to make tapes. One particular experience sticks in mind. As a child, the family would spend our vacation at Ocean Grove, NJ. Next door was Asbury Park. They had several organs back in the 1940s. This was now around the late 1950s and the Palace Amusements in Asbury Park still had two operating band organs on their carousel. I paid a visit and asked permission to make a recording of the organ just for my personal use. They said "yes" and I set up the machine. Next to the carousel was a scooter bumper car ride which was making a terrible racket. The park manager actually shut down this ride so I could record the organs. A courtesy which I remember to this day.

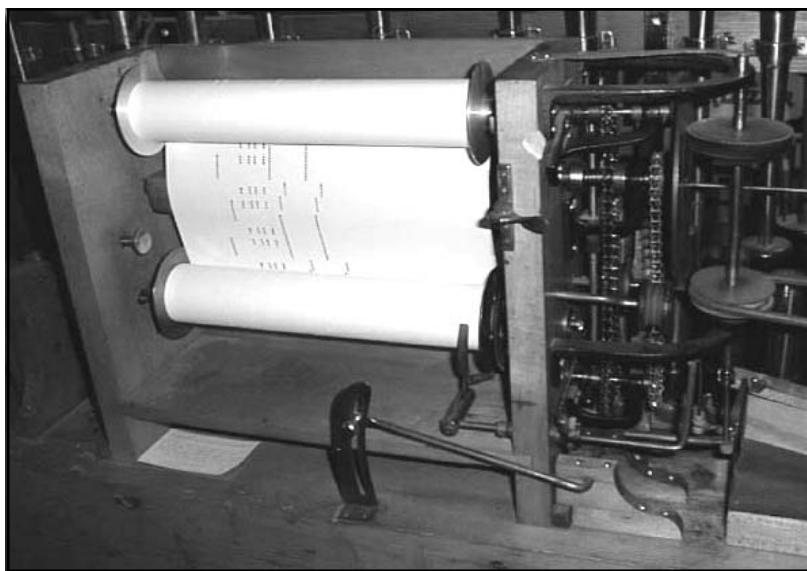


Viewing the Monster from the back we can see the large amount of pipework and the conspicuous absence of a spool frame.

my own. He said "Well, here's where you can get one." He handed me a copy of G.W. MacKinnon's catalog. WOW! Look at all this stuff! The desire was again only dampened by the constraint of my pocketbook. My purse would just barely permit the purchase of a Wurlitzer 146. They played the organ over the phone for me and I was sold. The princely sum was \$3500. After all, I had several rolls retrieved from the trash can which would play on that machine.

Now, with the 146 in my basement, I realized that it would need some work to make it perfect. Although it would play with the help of a vacuum box, I wanted it to be the best it could be. I had discovered that there was a museum close to Harrisburg which had a large collection of mechanical music machines and antique cars. It was Zimmerman's Automobile Museum. I went to visit and found a Wurlitzer 125, a calliope and a large assortment of automatic pianos and orchestrions. Everything was in beautiful condition and perfect playing order. Each machine had a small business card attached. "Mike Kitner's Mechanical Music Instrument Restoration." Curtis had already met Mike and said I should talk to him, because he does excellent work.

I called Mike and told him I had purchased a band organ which needed some work. He invited me to visit. As mentioned above, he had the monster in his workshop, owned by Jim Wells. Mike worked on my 146 and we became good friends over the years. I often traveled with Mike when he made calls to work on machines or to lend a hand with loading machines on to his truck to take back to his shop for restoration. Mike and Jim are good friends and Mike would often go to Jim's. I would tag along and always looked forward to seeing the huge collection of organs, pianos, amusement park stuff etc. which he had collected. There was always something new to see as Jim was constantly searching out these things and buying them. Each time I looked at the Monster which was relegated to a spot sort of in the back of the huge building. Mike and I had discussed this machine many times and I knew that there were only 17 music rolls for it. It also had no case, just the chassis. But, it was all intact in regard to the mechanics. 100 keys! This machine had been located in a skating rink in Flat Rock, Michigan. When the organ was sold, the cabinet remained with the rink as part of the wall.

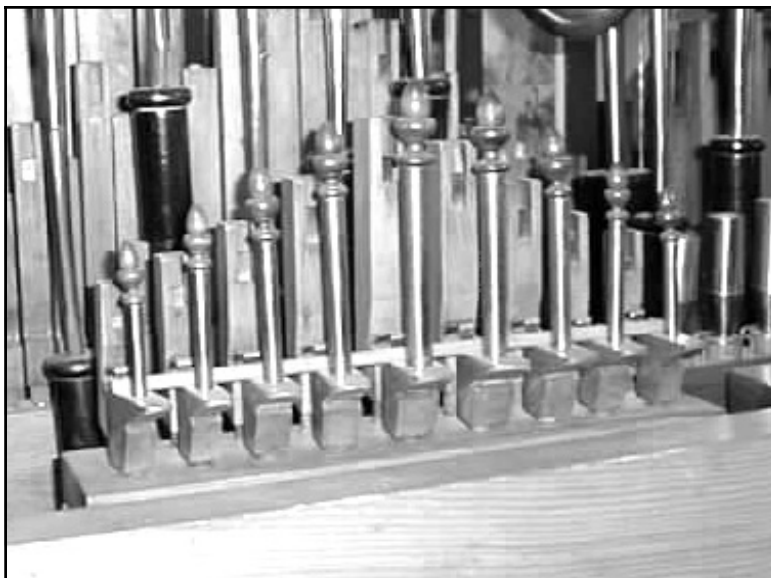


The original Monster spoolframe playing 100 note music.

Having completed my schooling, I moved back to my boyhood town to begin working. I learned that there had been a small local park which had a carousel and an organ. Checking around, I found the name of the man who had bought it. A call to him produced the name of the man he had sold it to — Jim Wells. A call to Jim produced an invitation to see what he had for sale. Lots of stuff to see! There were several 153s. However, the price was beyond the budget in those days. So, it was a very enjoyable visit but no band organ returned with us. While we were listening to a 153, my wife made the comment, "It might be nice to have one of those." Oops! A remark she now wishes she could take back! I continued to buy records and books on the subject.

One day I was reading the local paper and saw an article about a local man who was restoring a BAND ORGAN. I couldn't believe it! Here's a band organ right in town. Curtis Lawyer was his name. He was an electrical contractor and the organ was in his business office. I went to visit and we became friends. I expressed my dream of having a band organ of

It didn't seem that there was much interest in the machine by collectors back then. I guessed that it was due to the small supply of music and the likelihood that no more would turn up. The existing music rolls were not in good condition with parts missing and some had the paper stretched so that it would "snake" all over the place when you tried to play it. You could play them if you "rode" the tracker bar to compensate. During one of our discussions, I asked Mike if he thought the organ could be made to play a 165 roll and the 155 rolls both without changing anything on the machine except "teeing" into the tracker bar tubing. We compared the scales of both rolls and Mike said he could build a "coupler" which would do this using an external 165 roll frame. A deal was struck with Jim and I was the owner of the Monster. Jim was kind enough to deliver it to me with one of his trucks. After unloading it in the driveway, we found it was just a bit too tall to pass under the garage door. Oops! We decided to lay it on it's back and move it into the garage that way. We could then stand it up again. I keep my organs in my basement where I have them at home and can play them. We completely dismantled it and took it to the basement piece by piece where we reassembled it. Fortunately, the frame for the chassis is assembled with screws.

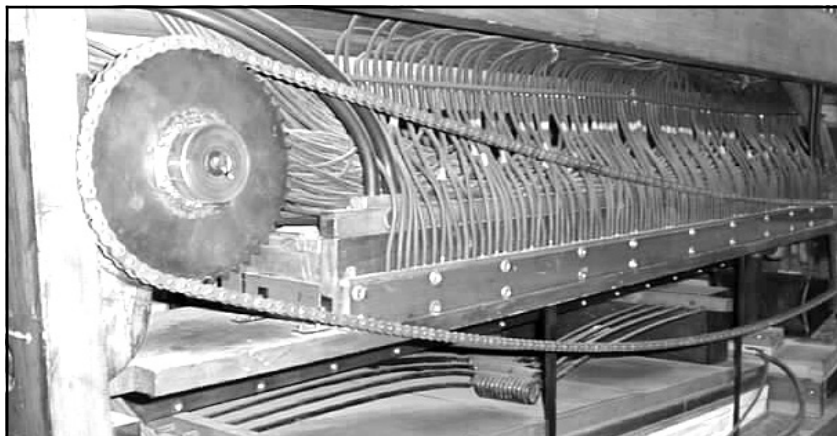


One half of the 18 note piccolo section which had its own counter melody ability.

Now I could examine it more closely. I had already heard all of the music that was with the organ. Mike had recorded the rolls when it was in his shop. There are 17 original music rolls. Three rolls have a single song, eleven rolls have two songs and two rolls have three songs. A total of 32 songs. Only a few were in decent shape and the others have portions of the beginning of the roll missing. Quite a few were the red paper rolls. Some were on tan colored paper, fairly fragile. Songs which we could identify were: *Merry Widow*, *Aloha De*, *Turkey in the Straw*, *Dixie*, *The Diplomat*, *Royal Trumpeters*, *Waltz from Coppelia Ballet*, *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, *Over the Waves* and *Begin*. I first thought that these rolls were not speed compensated, but measurement with a caliper showed that they are.

The main crankshaft had a wooden pulley which was connected to another wooden pulley on a smaller crankshaft by a flat leather belt. This smaller crankshaft served to drive the vacuum pump which was on the other end of the organ. Despite the addition of an intermediate pulley to put more tension on the belt, it was always slipping. Belt dressing helped for awhile. Mike said over the years, a piece would be taken out now and then to shorten it up to compensate for the stretching of the leather. He estimates about a foot was removed over a period of time. So, we decided to replace this arrangement with sprockets and a chain. This solved the problem. (I saved the wooden pulleys).

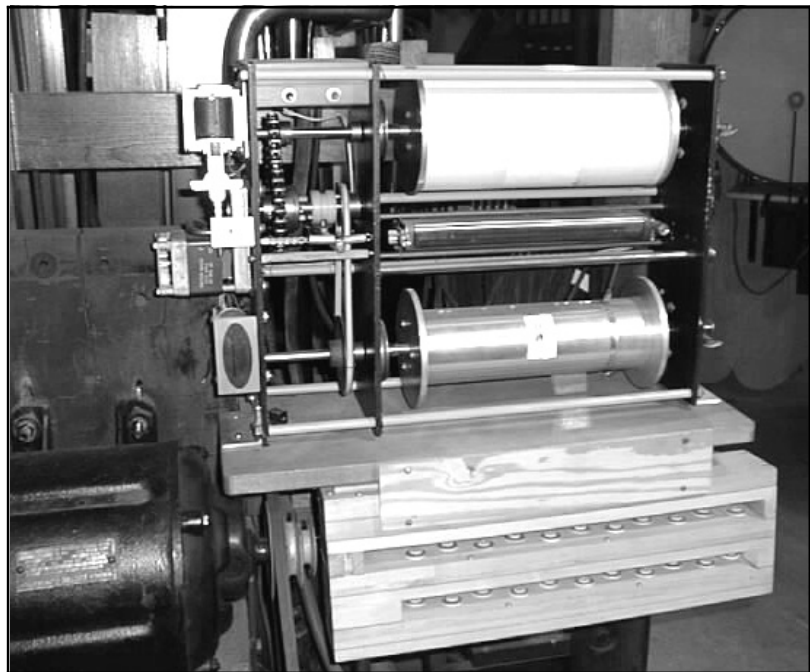
One unique feature of the organ is the separate piccolo section. This 18 note section enables music arrangements which allow this section to play separately from the 25 note melody section. Each note in this piccolo section operates 4 pipes. The organ has lots of brass, 10 trombones, 21 trumpets, 25 clarinets and 18 piccolos. It's loud, you need some ear protection when standing in front of the organ.



The long chain drive at the front and bottom of the case.

There are no automatic register controls on the organ. There are 5 manual draw stops: one for the brass piccolos and violins, a second for the clarinet rank, a third for the trumpet section, a fourth for the flageolet and stopped flute and a fifth for the trombone rank. This makes it possible to turn off all the brass pipes. As there are a lot of wooden pipes in the organ, you can play it just "on the wood" and it is not loud and has a very pleasing sound.

The tracker-bar is wooden and has 100 holes. The wind-chest has 95 keys and has two levels.



The additional Wurlitzer Style 165 roll frame coupled to the side of the organ chassis.

The pressure pump runs about two-thirds the length of the case and can't be removed without a major disassembly of the organ.

Ron Bopp's book, *The American Carousel Organ* and the section written by Art Reblitz, offers more detailed information on the mechanics of the Monster.

As I wanted to be able to just turn the organ on while working on a project and not keep adjusting the roll, the installation of the 165 roll frame was accomplished. Mike designed and built the coupler and the machine now has a good supply of 165 music. Of course, some of the pipe-work would not be used by the 165 scale. However, the 165 music sounded good on the machine, sort of similar to a 164. Since the case is missing, the 165 roll frame and coupler was mounted temporarily on the side of the organ chassis.

My machine is one of three known to survive. I'm told it was made around 1907. Another is located on a carousel in Burlington, CO and is under the care of Art Reblitz (see photograph below). That machine is the only one which still has the original cabinet. It was playing 165 rolls but has recently been converted back to the original 155 roll format

in a project conducted by Art. Also included in this project was the repair, restoration and re-cutting of some of my original music rolls. Art also arranged some new music in the 155 format. So, the original music for the organ will be preserved in the re-cut rolls. This project was an interesting story involving a number of people. Since this was Art's project, perhaps he will relate it in a later article.

The third example to survive is the one owned by Gordon Forcier. This machine lacks the cabinet and has been converted to play BAB rolls.



It's unfortunate that the case for my 155 and the chassis were separated. I often wonder what became of the case. . .

The Burlington, Colorado carousel and complete Wurlitzer Monster (Style 155). Art Reblitz had restored this organ for placement on the carousel and recently converted it back to play the original Wurlitzer Style 155 music roll.

Bill Black, Chambersberg, PA, is well known for his recordings of band and fairground organs.