

From British Bioscope to American Organ Icon **The Origin of the Royal American Shows Gavioli**

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New discovery and understanding can take place at almost anytime. The event that inspired this story took place in June, 1999, over the Atlantic Ocean. I was returning from a European organ expedition by airplane, scanning my newly purchased copy of *The Traveling Cinematograph Show* by Kevin Scrivens and Stephen Smith (New Era Publications, 1999). This comprehensive accounting of the multitudinous bioscopes, the traveling tented film shows that entertained British fair goers in the early part of the 20th century, included a variety of newly published images of bioscope show fronts. Many of these incorporated grand band organs, primarily of French manufacture.

A casual glancing at the text and images came to an abrupt halt when I spied a representation of one organ with which I was very familiar. It sparked one of those moments when a “finally!” or “eureka!” might have been heard by those dozing wearily nearby. Despite being airborne, the amazement at seeing a particular image sent me even higher. The origin of a famous “American” band organ had finally been determined. An opportunity was at hand to update the known history of the instrument. A good number of fairground organs from the heyday of the instrument survive in England. Now we could declare that one of them was exported to America quite early and entertained untold thousands of Americans between about 1909-1910 and 1917. Later it became an icon of America’s mightiest midway and enthralled millions of North Americans.

The instrument in question is the 89-key No. 4 scale Royal American Shows Gavioli. This well known organ entertained literally millions of visitors to the Royal American Shows (hereafter RAS) midway between its debut presentation in 1956 and final tour on the road in 1977. RAS had the greatest sched-



Figure 1. The RAS Gavioli was often given a commanding position at the entry to the carnival. Here it’s shown in the late 1950s on the levee at Davenport, Iowa, to the left of the famous RAS marquee. The enormous midway of games, food joints, shows and rides is arrayed behind it. Author’s collection.

ule of any American carnival ever. The annual route included the Class A Canadian fair circuit (Winnipeg, Brandon, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon and Regina), dates in St. Louis, Memphis, Little Rock, Davenport, and the state fairs of Oklahoma, Mississippi, Louisiana, Kansas, Wisconsin and Minnesota. RAS provided the midway at St. Paul over an unprecedented six decades. The Gavioli was an RAS icon, a trademark of this storied public entertainment behemoth that traveled on its own special train of ninety, yes, count ‘em, 90 extra-long railroad cars. One could rationally argue that the Gavioli was seen and heard by more North American residents than any other similar instrument. Beyond favoring the public with its melodies, the organ also inspired many of today’s band organ enthusiasts, those that had the pleasure of enjoying it at one of the big RAS fair dates (**Figure 1**).



Figure 2. The earliest known view of the RAS Gavioli in America is this extremely rare view from circa 1915. On the entablature is the legend “C. W. Parker/Gavioli/Leavenworth, Kan.”

Print courtesy Barbara Fahs Charles

The placement of the fabled organ at Circus World Museum by the Sedlmayr family in 1992 sparked an extensive search for the history of the instrument.¹ It was already known that a photograph existed showing the machine while in the ownership of Charles W. Parker (1864-1932), the well known ride and carnival builder from Abilene, Kansas. The view was taken after Parker’s 1911 relocation to Leavenworth and before he quit the business in 1926 (**Figure 2**). It’s generally thought that the organ was retired to storage after use on one or more of Parker’s railroad carnivals in the 1910s. The instrument was “rediscovered” somewhere in Kansas in the mid 1950s, likely by a Parker family member, perhaps Parker’s widow, or son, Paul, who continued the business in a reduced fashion. Presumably they had known all about it for years, but by the early 1950s it was time to do something with the large and silent device. It may have been retained as a favored memento of a glorious career in a splendid business. An attorney representing

the owner approached Carl J. Sedlmayr, Sr. (1886-1965), the legendary owner of RAS, at one of the show's 1955 Kansas fair dates. Sedlmayr and his son, C. J., Jr. (1920-2001), inspected the silent but still beautiful organ in its dilapidated wagon and falling down barn, finding it hard to conceal their excitement. They skillfully negotiated the purchase via a sort of Mutt and Jeff banter, leaving Kansas with the old organ loaded on their train. It arrived in the show's winter home of Tampa, Florida that fall. Old-time organ man A. L. "Tony" Crescio (1890-1962), known to the elder Sedlmayr from work done years before, was recruited from the Midwest to rebuild the big organ. The Sedlmayr presentation of the Gavioli in 1956, and the publicity that the old-time feature enjoyed in local media coverage set off a mini-revival of carnival band organs in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Figure 3). Except for a few smaller American made organs, there had not been a big European instrument on an American railroad carnival for several decades. They were gone, but not forgotten.



Figure 3. A. L. "Tony" Crescio worked long and hard to bring the Gavioli back to life for Royal American Shows in 1956. In this rare view he's making a minor adjustment for the benefit of the cameraman. Author's collection.

The discovery of the Parker photograph and the Sedlmayr recollections left the pre-Parker history of the organ to be determined. Despite extensive searches and contacts, nothing concerning the Gavioli before about 1915 came to light. In the past I speculated that somehow Louis Berni (?-1936), the super salesman of band organs, might have been involved in the importation. Direct evidence confirming that association is still

lacking, but the fact that the instrument came out of England to the U. S. certainly adds further circumstantial evidence to that hypothesis. Berni visited Europe, buying second hand organs from showmen. His family also scoured the continent for instruments, often available at a fraction of the price of new machines from the factory. All that they needed was some reconditioning in a shop.



Figure 4. The general arrangement of Gavioli model 704 could be found in both Gavioli and Marengi organs fabricated about 1904-1906. This particular one went to Chiappa in England, for a British bioscope customer.

In an era when bigger and louder meant something meaningful on the fairground, British showmen frequently bought a better or larger band organ, yielding their previous instrument surplus. There was an active trade in such instruments, with some exported to American buyers. At least two or three examples of the same "banner" style Gavioli, as some British enthusiasts have labeled it, can be found in America. One appears in an interior view of Gavioli's New York factory, managed during part of its 1906-1909 existence by Louis Berni. Another similar 89-key No. 4 scale machine traveled with the Francis Ferari carnival circa 1905-1910.²

The image that astonished my eyes at over 35,000 feet was one of the RAS Gavioli situated on the front of the William and Henry Thurston bioscope show, taken at the Barnet Fair in Great Britain in 1908. Both Gavioli and Marengi made a number of organs similar to it for British showmen in the first decade of the 20th century. One example is in the circa 1906 Gavioli catalog, style number 704 (Figure 4). Others of the Gavioli make can be found in John Proctor's "Royal Bioscope" (c.1905) and Annie Holland's "Palace of Light" (1906). Similar samples made by Marengi include Relp & Pedley's (1904); Enoch Farrar's No. 1, Jacob Studt's and Hancock's (1905); and Senator James Leo's "American Show" (1905?). Some of these were placed on the earlier two-wagon type show fronts, others were built as or eventually became part of organ fronted shows, in which the instrument facade was integrated into the entire decorative presentation. Fortunately for us, the William and Henry Thurston organ has a unique combination of figures and

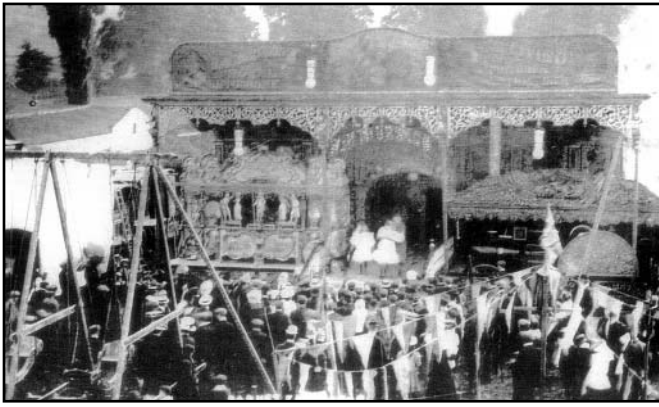


Figure 5. The Henry & William Thurston bioscope show was probably the original owner of the instrument that eventually became the icon of the Royal American Shows. This view was taken in 1908.

Photo courtesy Barry Norman/WKVL.

other carvings that makes it unlike any other similar 89-key Gavioli or Marenghi instrument known to the writer. While on the Thurston show, the organ had a large carved upper facade panel, one that was deleted by the time it was placed in American service.

The Thurstons were a well-known family in the British fairground business. Their extensive story is chronicled in a number of resources. The scion of the family was Henry Thurston, Sr. (1847-1917), who reportedly owned and operated a children's roundabout in 1868. He had three sons that followed him into the outdoor show business, each of them owning splendidly decorated rides, shows and organs in their time. The first owners of the RAS Gavioli were William Thurston, Sr. (born 1873) and his half-brother, Henry Thurston, Jr. (1881-1964). They organized their own bioscope operation about 1904, styling it as Thurston Brothers' Picture Palace. It was a two-wagon front operation, with the Gavioli on the left of the facade and a Burrell showman's engine, #2668 "Britannia" on the right (Figure 5). As with all bioscope operations, the resplendent gilded decorations, flickering naphtha flare lamps, hissing moist steam, pungent coal smell and loud but mesmerizing music served as a backdrop for the paraders on the stage out front. It must have made a wonderful sensory experience in those lush Edwardian times, particularly at night when all the senses are heightened. In later years, a built-out canopy supported on simple poles protected the instrument from the elements if the wind was blowing the wrong direction. The design of the entire operation appears to have been derived from the layout of the bioscope owned by their brother Charles Thurston, his Royal Show of 1902. That enterprise initially entertained with a barrel organ, then an 87-key Gavioli, only to be followed in 1905 by an 89-key No. 4 scale Gavioli nearly identical to that on the Thurston Brother's Picture Palace. It was further adorned with dozens of electric lights, which must have been something of a novelty at the time. At one time a canvas shield was used to protect the instrument from the elements.³

Exactly when it happened has not been determined, but eventually the RAS 89-key No. 4 scale Gavioli on the William and Henry Thurston bioscope was replaced by a louder 89-key violin-baritone scale Marenghi. The ultimate disposition of the

Gavioli has never been satisfactorily stated in any British source examined by the author. Very likely it was either traded in or sold for export following the arrival of the newer instrument. The Thurstons offered the entire show for sale as early as 1908 and William, who became the sole owner, eventually removed it from touring circa 1913, storing both the engine and Marenghi organ against future use following World War I. Essex wrote that the Gavioli was later installed on the Golden Gondolas switchback that William Thurston had purchased by 1920 from another British showman, the famous Pat Collins. We believe that this is in error, as the Gavioli was stated by both Father Greville and Scrivens and Smith to have been replaced previously by the Marenghi. It was the Marenghi that was placed with the Golden Gondolas and was consumed by fire in 1924.⁴

One of the legends that has swirled around the RAS Gavioli was that it is a Ruth organ. The story was actually initiated, in good faith, by the Royal American Shows. A beautiful souvenir postcard that the show sold for years declared that it was a Ruth organ. Accepting the postcard caption at face value, Dave Bowers reproduced it in the Ruth section of his seminal *Encyclopedia of Automatic Musical Instruments* (1972, page 922). Bowers correctly suggested that the organ may have originally been a Gavioli that was converted to play Ruth music. Indeed, the fact that it was originally a Gavioli can hardly be disputed by the evidence. The general design, pipework (including "Gavioli" stamped on violin freins), a pipe layout that matches the 89 No. 4 Gavioli scale and the serial number, 9018, all argue for a Gavioli pedigree.

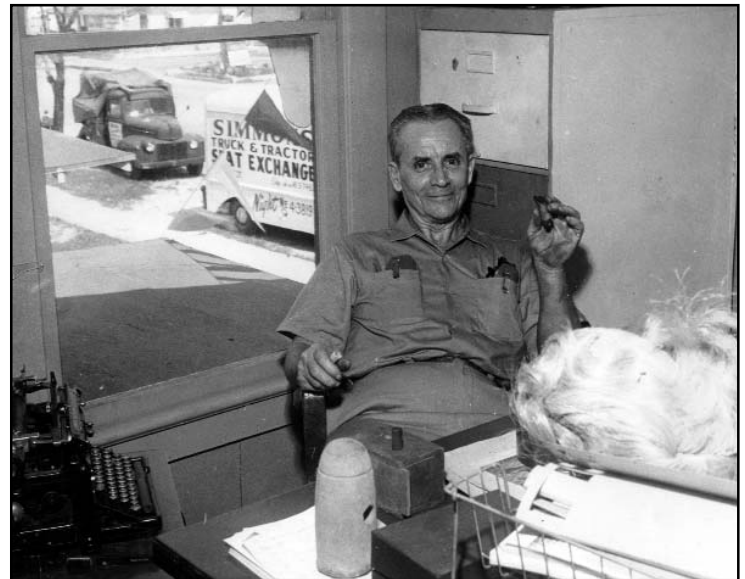


Figure 6. Pete Logan was the proprietor of Logan Showcraft in Miami, Florida. A former police sergeant, he eventually rebuilt and altered a number of band organs during his retirement career.

Author's collection.

Presumably the original Gavioli books were too far deteriorated to be used. Copying was about out of the question because the last firm that could have done it in the U. S., the B. A. B. Organ Company, was just about out of business. Tony Crescio contacted Heinrich Voigt of Höchst (Frankfurt),

Germany as he commenced rebuilding the organ for 1956. The Voigt firm was one of the few capable of supplying the hardware and the music to operate the organ in those times. Chiappa, in London, England, could have also filled the bill, but their music and technology was of the keyed variety. Crescio's training had been in Germany and he was presumably oriented towards keyless operation. It was Voigt practice to convert any other

make of organ to a Ruth scale. For the RAS Gavioli, the choice was made to have it play Model 36 Ruth music. Several crates of endless music were supplied to RAS by the Voigt firm, but the origin of the key frame installed has yet to be determined. The music played came to define the organ. It became a Ruth, a German marque, an association quite satisfactory to the Sedlmayr family, which had a German heritage.

The notes of the late James Leo "Pete" Logan (1904?-1975) fill in the rest of the story. He, and not Jack Schott, converted the organ from books to duplex Wurlitzer 165 operation about 1963. By that time the instrument apparently had major playing problems and was worthy of another rebuild. The Sedlmayrs' need was disclosed to someone named Jack Kaplan, an obscure figure known to many in the business. He sent Logan a telegram on February 25, 1963 stating that the show needed his help (Figure 6). Logan drove to Tampa and on April 4, 1963, charted the original 89-key scale and how it had been coupled to work on the smaller 78-keyless Ruth scale. He then proceeded to remove the book system and replace it with the even smaller Wurlitzer 165 scale roll system. The choice was driven by economics. A 100-meter, five-tune case of music from Voigt cost \$600, while a ten-tune 165 roll cost just \$40. The valve chest was altered so that it could be operated by a vacuum stack. A variety of sketches were made showing how the tubing would be connected. The work cost the show \$521. It reduced the musical capability of the organ, but kept it playing for another generation of fair goers to enjoy. Logan's initial work didn't solve all of the organ problems. He was back in Tampa in the spring of 1964 to do another \$776.50 worth of work, charged at a rate of \$7.00 per hour.⁵

All of the conversion work of 1963 was documented, removed and preserved when the organ was restored back to its original 89-key No. 4 scale specification in 1995. The commis-



Figure 7. The Royal American Shows Gavioli was restored to its original specification by Dick Lokemoen, who now maintains the beautiful instrument in top condition. The bell register missing in the photo was later fabricated and installed by him.

sion was accomplished by Dick Lokemoen of Merrill, Wisconsin (Figure 7). As a young man, Dick served an apprenticeship with Stan Peters (1913-1996) of Monticello, Iowa to learn the organ restoration trade. In addition to the entire restoration of the original materials that survived, Dick, aided by Jim Rhoda and several of his family members and friends re-fabricated missing parts in the style and quality of Gavioli manufacture. As with many

major organ restorations, support assistance was also derived from contact with other organ experts. He now maintains the instrument for Circus World Museum, where it has earned accolades from discriminating foreign and domestic guests.

Once again the Royal American Shows organ is playing as intended by the talented designers and craftsmen of Gavioli et Cie. of Paris, France. The sounds of a typical British bioscope show and two significant 20th century American carnivals can be enjoyed again

Notes

1. The previously known history of the organ was presented in the sixteen-page booklet accompanying the compact disk recording of the organ issued by Circus World Museum in 1995.
2. The "banner" is the entablature over the pipework, where the firm's name and location were usually painted. See Fred Fried, *A Pictorial History of the Carousel* (1964), page 207, the original of which is now in the author's collection.
3. Photo, Scrivens and Smith, page 155, also *Carousel Organ*, July 2001, page 3, Figure 2, bioscope on the left.
4. In addition to the Scrivens and Smith book, pages 158-159, also see G. W. Essex, *The Famous Thurstons 1868-1968* (The Fairground Society, 1969?) and the Friendship Circle of Showland Friends *Merry-Go-Round*, IV, 4, page 3; IV, 10, page 19; IV, 11, page 12; V, 6, page 15; VI, 7, page 7; and VII, 11, pages 2-3.
5. All of the Logan documentation is in the author's possession. It could not be determined if Logan or others at a later date replaced the Roots blower that fed wind to the organ in 1956. When received in 1992, a hugely oversized pressure blower and vacuum exhauster powered the organ and operating actions.

While submitting this article, Fred Dahlinger observed that a single photograph sparked an entirely new line of historical discovery. Photos, serial numbers, inscriptions, catalogs and organ histories all play a roll in understanding and explaining the culture and heritage of the band organ in America. Contributions along those lines are always welcomed by historians.