

Dan Slack (1945 - 1987) A Pioneer in American Organ Rallies Fred Dahlinger

Foreword: This tribute to Dan Slack was originally composed shortly after his passing. Portions of it were incorporated into a program celebrating his life presented by Ron Bopp at the 1990 MBSI Mid-America Chapter Organ Rally held in Fremont, Ohio. The article that follows is an altered and updated version of the original paper.

Our shared interest in mechanical musical instruments brings us together, but it is the friendships that are generated from that fellowship that bind us together. I can think of no one who exemplified this aspect of our hobby better than the late Dan Slack. Dan's enthusiasm for mechanical music was unsurpassed, but it was his friendship with so many people for which he was renowned.

Dan was an early baby boomer, the first child born to Bud and Alta Slack. He entered the world at Standish, Michigan on May 10, 1945. As a child Dan was already inquisitive. He trained to be a ham radio operator and also took keyboard lessons after his family moved to Albion, Michigan. His proficiency on the organ was unknown to most of his music friends, possibly a concession to his interest in mechanical instruments.



Figure 1. Dan was never much for formality, but he did stand still long for this business portrait to be taken about 1985.

Dan graduated from Albion High School and attended college while working full time. His aggressiveness as a roofing salesman in Battle Creek led to a promotion as manager of the Fremont, Ohio branch. Mastering this business, Dan turned his attention to cars and sold them for a couple years but tired of the repetitive routines in short order.

Airplanes had been a passion of Dan's ever since he started to take flying lessons at Fremont in 1966. Two years later an opportunity came along that was too good to be true. A job with Cessna Aircraft was available and Dan jumped at the offer. In the course of the eighteen years that he spent with Cessna Dan became their stellar salesman, winning all major sales contests. His achievements culminated in a September 1980 effort when he sold 33 airplanes, the greatest number ever sold by anyone with the firm within a one-month period. Dan had progressed to the position of Regional Sales Manager (Figure 1), responsible for nine states and three Canadian provinces, when Cessna decided to close down their Piston Engine Division in 1986. He could have gone higher in the company, but a promotion would have meant relocation to Wichita,

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Kansas. Dan liked to be near his family and the city was too far removed for maintaining family ties.

His ability to sell airplanes served Dan well in his next job, marketing boats bearing the famed Chris Craft name. His position as District Marketing Manager meant traveling a territory spanning from Ohio to the Dakotas. The demands of the job reduced the frequency of Dan's visits in his last year or so, and one sensed a waning of his enthusiasm as his travels forced him to spend more time away from his home and family. More than once in his last year he toyed with the idea of buying his own business near Fremont, one that would have provided him with more time at home.



Figure 2. Marilyn and Dan during a visit to Hong Kong. Dan was always on the lookout for new experiences. An opportunity to play a Chinese emperor was too good to pass up.

The most important event that happened to Dan as a result of his move to Fremont was to make the acquaintance of a lovely lady named Marilyn Binsack. She matched his level of activity, no mean feat in itself, and brought stability and organization to the life of this away-from-home bachelor with the strong personality (Figure 2). They were married in 1970 and subsequently blessed with three children, Danny Jr., Andrea and Erica.

Dan and Marilyn built their comfortable home on South River Road, south of Fremont, in 1976. Within a year or two they erected the music building that proved such a beacon to friends, collectors and visitors alike (Figure 3). The house was Marilyn's kingdom, a welcome rest haven provided for by a very genial and warm hostess. The building was Dan's hideaway, his respite from the long hours of traveling and the travails of business. You didn't have to knock there, just walk in; typically Dan was on the phone. A strong handshake or friendly hug, a flashy smile and a "Hi buddy, what's new," was the typical greeting. Despite all the activity that swirled around him, Dan made a sincere effort to make everyone who visited him feel welcome, comfortable, and the focus of his attention. Well, at least until the phone rang again. I personally think that his



Figure 3. Excitement was palpable when band organ aficionados pulled up the driveway of Dan and Marilyn's Fremont home the day a rally commenced. Organs were parked everywhere and happy music flowed freely.

As was the case for many of us, Dan's introduction to mechanical musical instruments was a chance affair. The late Jim Miller owned an airport in Reed City, Michigan, and Dan called on him in his capacity as a Cessna representative. An invitation to Miller's residence revealed a fine collection of mechanical musical instruments. When Miller sold the airport he also had a substantial accumulation of spare airplane parts to sell. Dan said he could make the sale for him and in two or three days made good on his word. When he came to collect his commission, Dan told Miller he didn't want money, he wanted one of those neat music machines. Miller gave



Figure 4. An airplane propeller, a fiberglass elephant, a hot air fan, a beer pump, and organs and pianos galore filled Dan's music room. Duck literature was in the bathroom.

him his pick and Dan took a coin piano. Exactly which one it was no one seems to remember. However, it proved to be the seed from which Dan's large and varied collection grew. Dan let go of that early instrument, but in 1973 he had already formed the beginnings of a broad collection. He acquired a Wurlitzer 103 band organ, a Mills Violano, a Wurlitzer "A" roll piano with flute pipes and a 15-1/2 inch Regina.

Dan's enthusiasm for collecting the old, the rare and the unusual wasn't limited to mechanical musical instruments. Among the other items to catch his fancy were arcade and slot machines, steam and gas engines, hot air devices, fans and light bulbs (Figures 4 & 5). Friends often started him on these new interests, but it was Dan, with his wide spread network of contacts, that

sincere warmth for people was the source of his great success. It certainly resulted in legions of friends across the earth, many of whom looked upon Dan as a best friend. He had a lot of heart to give, and he did his best to give part of it to everyone.

proved to be the ultimate searcher. He was always seeking that next out of the ordinary find to share with amazed friends.

Big purchases and sales were a matter of everyday life for Dan. Deals that would make other collectors tremble only caused Dan to pursue them more aggressively than before (Figure 6). An extremely able negotiator, the pursuit and arrangement of a tough deal brought Dan his greatest satisfaction. The greater the ability of his adversary, the more Dan relished the negotiations. His ability to arrange deals carried over into his friendships among the music fraternity. Once Dan was asked to negotiate for the purchase of a Decap dance organ. The buyer was adamant; the asking price stated was firm. Dan said that he had something better than a firm price

and that was an offer. The organ changed hands at about the amount Dan offered. Numerous collectors acquired pieces via deals Dan had arranged. If he said he'd take care of it for you, you knew that he would, and without pecuniary gain for himself at your expense.

Dan's preoccupation with large, ornate and costly toys didn't diminish his appreciation of the simpler pleasures in life. A ten-dollar bill won years ago from a friend in a bet was a sentimental keepsake he kept in his wallet to the end. Near it was a picture of his pride and joy. No, not a picture of Marilyn and the children or a big band organ, but a color photo of a can of Pride furniture polish and a bottle of Joy dish detergent. I, along with many others, laughed with Dan, as he'd spring this little jest on unsuspecting acquaintances.



figure 5. A visit to Dan's music room was always a time of fun and enjoyment. His desk was usually staggering under a load of letters, mailings and other interesting materials devoted to his hobby interests.



Figure 6. Arthur Prinsen, Jim Miller and Ken Smith joined Dan (far left) during a flying visit to Miller's large collection in Michigan. These were heady times in the hobby, with frequent and revealing discoveries and opportunities.



Figure 7. One of Dan's great acquisitions was the 89-keyless organ that Carl Frei, Sr. built new in 1959 for John F. Reid's Happyland Shows. It was the first organ built new for an American showman in several decades.

Dan was always an astute buyer, whether the quarry was phonographs, music boxes or pianos, but it was with band organs that he made his greatest advances. Among the first was a Wurlitzer 105 that played *Blue Skirt Waltz*; it was a childhood memory, the first organ he ever saw. Years later he tracked it down and bought it from his good friend Rod Link, who had operated it at the fair in Michigan years before. Dan eventually bought and sold a variety of American roll operated organs, but his 1974 purchase of a 72-key Carl Frei street organ which played books opened up a new field for him (Figure 7). No one really wanted these beasts. They were large, books weren't readily available and no one really wanted to work on them. But, when they were maintained and fed good books they dispensed such beautiful music that few of the largest American organs could equal their virtuosity.

Some of Dan's early organ activities strained relations with the neighbors. Residents on South Street in Fremont in 1975 didn't like it when that big trailer sat out front of Dan's place, and they liked it even less when the big 89-keyless Carl Frei organ inside it boomed out a rousing march. Taking control, Dan moved out of town and bought the properties around his place so that he could stage his own rallies without neighbors calling the police. Visitors to the 1983 and 1985 MBSI Mid-America Chapter (M.B.S.I.) organ rallies will recall the private rallies at Dan and Marilyn's home as two of the high-lights.

The enthusiasm Dan had for book organs caused him to visit Europe several times in search of the roots of these extraordinary creations of man (Figure 8). The European ral-

Figure 8. R. Charles Hooghuyts posed impatiently with Dan during a visit to Belgium in 1986. R. Charles had music to play for his American guests, and it was wonderful. He delayed a scheduled fashion show so that he could play the famous "Condor" organ for his friends.



lies, with their multitudes of organs, traction engines and people, fired his imagination, and he pushed the issue in America until the MBSI consented to hosting its first organ rally in 1976 (Figure 9). Dan brought the biggest organ that was present at that rally, and participated in every subsequent Mid America rally the MBSI hosted. The two biggest events to date, the 1983 and 1985 rallies, were hosted by Dan himself (Figure 10). Despite "them" infamous little chickens that refused to be cooked, everyone who came to one of Dan's rallies went home happier than when they arrived. No wonder, as Dan spared no effort to have as many machines in attendance as possible, all of them dispensing "The Happiest Music on Earth."

The two Carl Frei organs were followed in short order by a number of other book instruments. At last count there were seven, including his prized 57-key Hooghuyts, a 78-keyless Richter with a stunning new paint scheme devised by Dan himself and a great Model 38 Ruth. The Ruth organ was another first for Dan's account. As part of the total restoration, Dan carefully planned its return to book operation. It was the first very large European book organ in the United States to be restored back to its original configuration and playing capability. The day that it made its debut was a time when all of us reflected upon the many ways in which Dan Slack enriched our lives with his friendship, deeds and foresight.



Figure 9. The attendees of the very first MBSI organ rally gathered in front of the big Carl Frei organ for a group photo. That's Dan in the dark glasses, to the left of Frank Rider and Bruce Miller. The organ's owner, Herb Brabandt, stands on the far left.

Epilogue

It's been thirteen years since Dan's passing and much has changed in the interim. Marilyn continued to receive friends and visitors and shared with them the many collections that Dan had built during his lifetime. Her own enthusiasm for his passion led her to host the July 27-28, 1990 MBSI Mid-America Chapter Band Organ Rally. Perhaps in tribute to Dan, more large organs were at that event than at any other rally ever held before or since in the United States. Making its debut the day before the rally at Marilyn's home was Dan's greatest band organ, the Model 38 A. Ruth & Son instrument that he had so fervently pursued. A total restoration, accomplished by Mike Kitner, yielded the best sounding Model 38 Ruth anywhere on



Figure 10. A television-view of a 1985 rally revealed a great feature of one of Dan's rallies—Bob Brown's 105-key Decap dance organ. Many rally participants and visitors enjoyed its merry melodies during an evening banquet and throughout the rally.

earth. Listeners literally stood in amazement before the great music machine.

With time, Marilyn moved on with her life and it was appropriate that she disseminate the collections to other interested parties. Many people benefited from her sharing of Dan's collections. The 92-key Decap, long a fixture and the biggest machine at Svoboda's Nickelodeon Tavern in Chicago Heights, went back to the Chicago area to Jasper Sanfilippo. Jasper also purchased Dan's favorite organ, his 57-key Hooghuy's. Dan had personally talked to R. Charles Hooghuy's about the history of the organ in 1986 and learned that it had been packed away, incomplete, in crates during World War I. The 79-keyless Richter, a former favorite in a particular area of Holland, also went into the Sanfilippo collection.

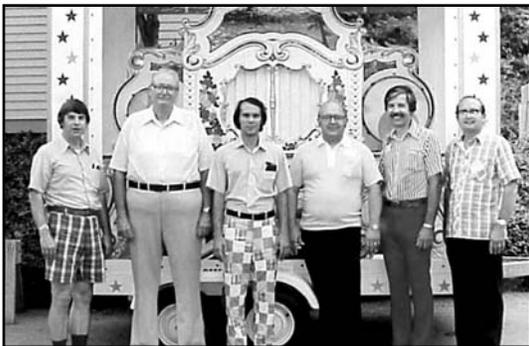


Figure 11. Dan's style 153 Wurlitzer band organ served as the backdrop for this gathering of Herb Brabandt, Cliff Gray, Terry Bourne, Dan, Bruce Miller and Ken Smith.

the restorers, but the Hooghuy's is a proud, and loud, specimen in Jasper's magnificent carousel and organ building. It packs a musical punch far larger than its modest size would suggest.

The former Gooding Amusements Caliola and its unique truck, went to a local person outside the hobby.

The Wurlitzer 153 that Dan took to offsite rallies went to Paul Cuoco, who subsequently sold or traded it to another collector (Figure 11). Cliff Gray traded a Wells-Cargo trailer to Marilyn for

an unusual and incomplete hand organ bearing the name "August Kluge" on the case. The trailer became the new home for the 153 before it went to Paul. The converted boat trailer that previously hauled it to many rallies went to non-organ people, but the license plates that read "A-153" went to two organ pals.

The 72-key Carl Frei Street Organ was sold to Marty Roenigk, but it can now be seen and heard in Frank and Shirley Nix's collection. Under the current façade paint one could read the name "Gavioli," but no one has yet fully documented the story of this fine sounding organ.



Figure 12. During one visit to Texas Dan served as Gaviman for a fine Limonaire organ owned by Alan Bies and Steve Boehck. It was situated in the center of a carousel.

The mighty Ruth organ was the last organ to be sold. Fittingly, it recently went to Terry Haughwout, a close friend that performed yeoman service for many years to both Dan and Marilyn. Most people didn't know it, but Terry had repaired or placed in working condition many of the pianos, organs and other items that Dan bartered to other collectors. The Ruth can now be heard across the cornfields in the vicinity of Bloomdale, Ohio, booming out rousing marches and fantastic overtures. Terry recently completed a project to put an appropriate visual perspective on the organ, but he will tell you about that some time in the future. Terry also acquired one of the smallest organs in the Slack collection, a Wurlitzer style 105, the first one that he remembered hearing as a child. In past years it provided musical accompaniment to the carousel at the Sandusky Carousel Museum.

The band organ rally enthusiasm that Dan brought to this continent flourished and diversified (Figure 12). The MBSI continues with their annual Mid-America Chapter rally in mid-summer and a few other infrequent chapter rallies. AMICA chapters also host organ rallies but two new groups, The American Band Organ Association, founded by Ken Smith, and our own COAA, now host the majority of the rallies scheduled in the U. S. Dan would be pleased to see how many people actively enjoy "The Happiest Music on Earth" as a result of his interests and activities.

N. B. For those who desire to read more about the Slack band organ collection, *Carousel News and Trader* contained a feature story about it in the May 1987 issue, pages 13-15.

Fred Dahlinger, Jr. currently serves as Director of Collections and Research at the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Mid-Am MBSI members will remember Fred early on as author and editor of the "Silver Book" that was the organ guidebook published for Dan Slack's rally in Fremont, Ohio, in 1985.