

Ozward “Ozzie” Wurdeman A Lifetime Love of Mechanical Music

Ron Bopp

The lifetime and history of Oswald (Ozzie—as his friends and associates knew him) Wurdeman spanned a time from selling and maintaining coin-operated pianos (the Western Electric brand) as well as the Mills Novelty Violino Virtuoso, new in the 1920s, to restoring and preserving the same coin-operated pianos and band organs for the collecting trade in the 1960s. Ozzie Wurdeman was born in 1901 and died in 1972. His father, Ed Wurdeman, took over the Mills Violino franchise in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1921 and opened the “Electric Violin Company” which was located at 824 Marquette Avenue in Minneapolis, (Figure 1). Ozzie was factory-trained and did the service work for the new business.



Figure 1. Art, Ozzie and Ed Wurdeman in the office of the Electric Violin Company, circa 1920s.

During the 1920s the Electric Violin Company had about 300 violinos playing in the Minneapolis area. In 1928 Ozzie married his wife Edna. As time went on (and with a booming business) the company took on Western Electric coin-operated pianos. In 1928, when the phonograph became the rage, they also handled Western Electric coin-operated phonographs (at this time the business name was changed to the “Electric Music Company”). The business was big enough that it required the use of four trucks.

The Electric Music Company provided rolls, in addition, for use on the coin-operated pianos. Preservation of these rolls was not foremost in the minds of the Electric Music Company, as Dave Bowers recounted:

I remember that Ozzie also used to tell about rolls—he used to sell rolls for different types of coin pianos and he encouraged customers to destroy their rolls. He said Well, you don't want to have the same rolls over and over again. You don't want to just keep them on hand, so throw them out or we'll throw them out for you. This, of course, was a popular philosophy through the coin piano trade. But

its interesting to contemplate the many thousands of nickleodeon rolls that went through Ozzie's hands.

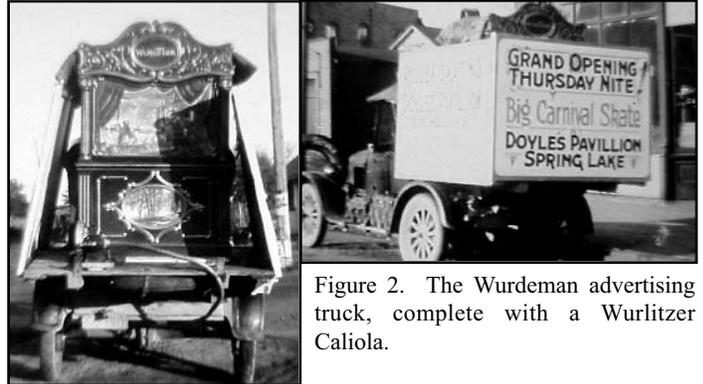


Figure 2. The Wurdeman advertising truck, complete with a Wurlitzer Caliola.

When the depression hit, the family moved their business to south Minneapolis at 818 W. Lake Street, which was near Ed Wurdeman's home. This was an older building with lower rent—away from the downtown area. They tried to survive, but in the process ended up losing everything. The instruments were too big to store and they couldn't afford to pay the rent on the buildings for storage. Subsequently, Ozzie would remove all of the metal parts and sell them to the local scrap dealer for money for groceries. The wooden cases made excellent fuel for heating the house.

After the depression, when things (financially) started to pick up, Ozzie started fixing band organs for the local carnivals. This wasn't real profitable because the carnival owners were usually broke—especially if they had a rainy season. It was at this time that Ozzie decided to take on the Wurlitzer dealership—buying and selling band organs, Caliolas and rolls (Figures 2 - 4). He also started selling Tanglely Calliopes. Being closely associated with roller rinks (because of the musical machines), Ozzie had a chance to get involved with the skates themselves (repairs) which then led to him developing a machine for grinding the skate wheels to make them even again. He made and sold these to the local skating rinks. All the while he still continued to work on band organs.

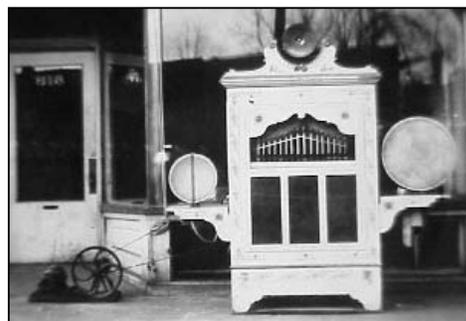


Figure 3. An example of a band organ put on location by Ozzie Wurdeman. This is either a very plain Wurlitzer style or a re-worked deKleist band organ.

**Off a Reporter's Cuff
D.A.W.
November 6, 1934
Minneapolis Star**

Now that the howling is all over, we can refer the noisy politicians to Mr. Oswald Wurdeman, of 1061 Central Avenue NE, who will do a good, workmanlike job of overhauling, repairing and tuning their vocal equipment . . . reasonable . . .

Mr. Wurdeman is, by profession, a calliope and band wagon (band organ - R.B.) tuner. And a very good one, too. In fact, he is the only professional calliope or band wagon tuner in the northwest . . . We can think of no more fitting person for most of the politicians to call upon . . .

You might be inclined to sniff at the calliope and band wagon tuning profession. But laugh this off: while all other businesses have been down in the dog pit, the calliope and band wagon tuning profession has been going great guns this year . . . Steam calliopes haven't been so hot-but band wagons and regular calliopes-Wow! There never has been a season like it!

"I've been going every minute this year," Mr. Wurdeman told us last night. "I'll bet I've tune every band wagon and calliope in the northeast . . . Well anyway, it seems that way."

The reason for it is the unusual weather. The big dust storms early this summer may have been heck on the farmer. But to Mr. Wurdeman, they were a blessing. The dust, you see, gets down in a calliope's throat and makes it gasp for breath and sort of rattle. And the only thing an operator can do is to bring it in to get it tuned . . . And, as we said before, Mr. Wurdeman is the only calliope cleaner and tuner in the northwest.

Then the heat wave: it may have sent the farmer howling to the Great White Father in Washington, and ruined the Great White Father's corn reduction program, too . . . but the heat wave was duck soup to Mr. Wurdeman . . . it warps the pipes.

Then the heavy rains in the past two months: It may have been floods to the rest of you mugs, but it meant cracked reeds and moisture heavy flageolets to Mr. Wurdeman.

Altogether, a very good season indeed . . . There are about 50 more or less, calliopes and band wagons left in the northwest. They've

been on the downbeat for the past decade, but in the last two or three years interest in them has picked up again. Advertising trucks are responsible for most of the renewed interest. But the public is going for merry-go-rounds more this year. And every merry-go-round has a band wagon in it! And every band wagon must be tuned . . .

Few citizens know it, but that suave, polished, worldly gentleman of the equally suave joy-spot, the Hollyhocks Inn—we refer to Mr. Jack Pfeiffer—is the proud owner of a merry-go-round, band wagon and all (But that's a different yarn).

The difference between a band wagon and a calliope is this: A band wagon has pipes that make noises like trombones, trumpets, saxophones, and all the other instruments in a band . . . while a calliope just puffs away in one style, gulping in compressed air or steam and spitting out guttural snorts and hoots, with a complete indifference to the effect is having on its audience . . . Steam calliopes are almost extinct. Compressed air does the business with less effort and less machinery-and less chance that it will blow up on a G chord.

Mr. Wurdeman doesn't rely entirely on calliope tuning for his living. He also sells and rents calliopes. He rented one to the Community Fund the other day. He sold one to an unsuspecting gentleman here for the Shrine convention. He rents a lot to politicians . . .

Mr. Wurdeman also is a dealer in hand organs and hurdy-gurdies—although he admits this is mostly a gesture. He hasn't sold a hand organ for years, and only rents one out now and then for a party, or such. . . Minneapolis hasn't had a hand-organ operator, with a monkey, for about 12 years. The last hand-organ Mr. Wurdeman can remember belonged to an Italian gentleman whose name he can't recall just now, but who lived up on Johnson Street, NE. It was mounted on a two-wheel cart and pulled by a horse. The Italian gentleman's horse danced for the crowds while the Italian gentleman ground out such tunes as Alexander's Ragtime Band. He did most of his business in Minneapolis' Little Italy. But finally even the Italians got tired of it. The owner died. His son became a grocer. The thing is still stored in a garage on Johnson Street, for all Mr. Wurdeman knows . . . Mr. Wurdeman does sell a few hand organs to the eastern trade,

however . . .

A few people around the northwest really love calliope music. Lenny Burton, for instance. He's register of deeds at Fairmont, Minn. He bought a new one a couple of years ago and plays it for his own amusement . . . Harry Wilcox, the Minneapolis manufacturer, has had one in his basement for a long time, to play for his friends. He hasn't brought it in to have it tunes for quite a while, though, so Mr. Wurdeman isn't so sure Mr. Wilcox still has it . . .

Don't think life is just a song for Mr. Wurdeman, though. He has his troubles . . . he started out tuning mechanical pianos and gradually worked up to calliopes, taking over the trade of the late Mr. Weinhold when he died . . . right then is trouble started. He located his first shop on Lake Street, but there was a rooming house upstairs. And every time Mr. Wurdeman would sound his "A", to tune a calliope, the landlady would come storming downstairs and the whole neighborhood would come running to complain about the racket . . .

So Mr. Wurdeman moved his shop way out on Adams Street NE . . . but once more luck beset him. Calliope tuning, for some reason, is indescribably fascinating to children. Every day, scores of children would gather around Oswald's shop and stand, listening in open-mouthed awe, to the fearful shrieks and moans and unearthly howls emitted by the out-of-tune calliopes, as Mr. Wurdeman nursed them back to health . . . Well, it seems there were a lot of children in the neighborhood, and their parents could never get them to come home to dinner on time-so fascinating was the calliope tuner's shop . . . so the neighbors passed around a petition asking Mr. Wurdeman to move . . . He did . . .

Now Mr. Wurdeman has solved the whole thing. His shop at 1061 Central Avenue NE is ideally located for calliope tuning. It hangs in mid-air, squarely over the Great Northern railroad tracks, beside the Central Avenue Bridge. Here he can hoot to his heart's desire . . . the only trouble is that, now and then, a freight train chugs by under his shop and the engineer blows the whistle . . . it's apt to throw Mr. Wurdeman off key . . .

"It's a good enough business" Mr. Wurdeman summed it up to us . . . "The only thing, its kind of hard on your ears" . . .

Ozzie's success as a businessman in mechanical music was promoted by an interesting article (above) in a Minneapolis newspaper, *The Minneapolis Star*, dated November 6, 1934 in which reporter D.A.W. noted:

You might be inclined to sniff at the calliope and band wagon [band organ—R.B.] tuning profession. But laugh this off: while all other businesses have been down in the dog pit, the calliope and band wagon tuning profession has been great guns this year . . . Steam

Calliopes haven't been so hot—but band wagons and regular calliopes—wow! Mr. Wurdeman told us last night "I'll bet I've tuned every band wagon and calliope in the Northwest . . .well, anyway, it seems that way."

During the time from 1940 to 1953 he kept band organs going for local carnivals as well as working for a local slot machine operator (illegally) who had slots in small road houses

around the city. During this “tour of duty” he also worked for a pinball operator in Minneapolis until 1953.



Figure 4. Ozzie Wurdeman’s band organ and calliope store located on the corner of Broadway and Central Ave N.E. in Minneapolis, MN.

In 1953, Charlie Bovey, a Minnesota native, was restoring the town of Virginia City, Montana (the state’s second territorial capitol). Located on Alder Gulch, it sprung up after gold was discovered in 1863. Mr. Bovey had bought an old coin-operated piano for his saloon and found one of Ed Wurdeman’s business cards inside. The number was called and he was informed that Ed Wurdeman had passed away in 1945, but his son, Ozzie, was around and he should be contacted. The contact was made and this was the beginning of a second career—restoring and servicing coin-operated pianos and band organs.

Ozzie and Edna celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in Virginia City restoring pianos and organs (and for the next 19 summers as well). While Ozzie maintained the instruments in Virginia City (and newly-constructed Nevada City) Edna manned the variety store—a location loaded with arcade machines, and even a Seeburg G orchestrion.

Collectors from all over the United States would come out to visit him and see the fine collection that was being assembled—at that time it was one of the largest collections in the country. With Ozzie as an ever-present serviceman, everything was kept in playing condition. One of the prize pieces was the Wurlitzer theater organ in which Ozzie had put a player mechanism using an “O” roll. Harvey Roehl remembered this instrument and the tale behind it in a phone interview with the author:

Behind the enclosure over there is a Wurlitzer theater organ which was all set up to play on “O” rolls. It didn’t exactly sound like a theater organ when played that way but it amused the tourists very greatly. It had a quarter slot on it and the tourists could listen to the thing and watch all of the drums and traps operate and Ozzie had it rigged up in such a way that when it had completed a quarter’s worth of music all of the traps would play in sequence. The drums would beat and the triangle would clang and the castanettes would wiggle, and so on. It was quite a thing! [Popular demand resulted in a long-play record entitled *Organs and Orchestrions from Historic Virginia and Nevada Cities, Montana*—R.B.]

Reflections on the Bovey Collection Art Reblitz

One of the attractions in Virginia City is the Opera House, where fine, authentic Victorian melodramas and musical revues are performed each summer. The first season that I worked there, the orchestra pit had flooded and frozen during the preceding winter, leaving the bottom twelve inches or so of the large Cremona photoplayer (see photo below) encased in a big block of ice. My job was to get it playing again during the last week of rehearsals before opening day. Completing the job in the barely thawed pit in the unheated building was only made possible by one of those noisy, smelly outdoor kerosene heaters. With the help of the curator, John Ellingsen, we got the photoplayer fixed well enough to be played manually by the end of the dress rehearsal the night before the opening performance.

Ozzie Wurdeman and his family had spent the whole summer each year maintaining the collection, but I only had time to spend two or three weeks there annually. From the first visit, I decided not to work on the dozens of arcade machines, but instead focused my time on the 40 or so automatic pianos and organs. This gave me time each year to tune them as necessary and to provide enough servicing and repairs to keep them in presentable playing condition for another season.

Charlie Bovey and his wife Sue founded the Bovey Restorations in 1943. After Charlie passed away in 1978 funds for music machine maintenance became even more limited than they had been. In 1980, I built my present shop and hired several employees. The requirements of managing new employees made it temporarily impossible to spend weeks at a time away from my shop, and I stopped making the annual service trip to Virginia City. John Ellingsen, the curator who worked very hard to arrange for the purchase of the Bovey Restorations by the state of Montana several years ago, together with a few other people unknown to me, have taken care of the instruments since then.

One of the greatest antiques that Charlie and Sue ever owned was the spectacular Eden Palais Salon Carousel, which is now in the Sanfilippo Collection. It was set up in a large combine shed on the Bovey’s ranch in Great Falls, Montana. The Boveys rarely showed it to anyone, due to their concerns over security. After I worked for them for several years, they invited me to see it.

Although I had collected musical scales for automatic instruments since the 1960s, it was this collection, together with an equally large group of German orchestrion scales from Eugene DeRoy of Belgium that I acquired through Dave Bowers, which gave me the idea to write *Treasures of Mechanical Music* with Dave in 1981. While I still have Xerox copies of all the B.A.B. scales, the originals mysteriously vanished from Virginia City after Charlie willed them to me, but before I had a chance to pick them up. Hopefully, they will show up again sometime in the future. It will be interesting to learn who has been taking care of them for all these years.

From *Bovey Collection in Virginia & Nevada Cities, MT*
by Art Reblitz, MMD Archives July 30, 2000



Figure 5. Tom Wurdeman working on the Cremona photoplayer in the 1960s.



Figure 6. The Wurdeman Music Hall was located in Nevada City,

Many of the pianos and organs were located in the Bale of Hay Saloon in Virginia City. Others were found in a Nevada City Music Hall (Figure 6) including a 89-key Gavioli which was converted by Ozzie to play paper rolls; a large Marengi organ with an original unpainted front and one of six Wurlitzer Style 180 military band organs. All in all, nearly 140 pianos and organs were ready for the drop of a coin.



Figure 9. Ozzie Wurdeman and Charlie Bovey together at Virginia City, Montana.

In 1958, Charlie and Ozzie went to New York where Charlie had purchased the B.A.B. Organ Company. In the interview I had with Harvey Roehl in 1987, Harvey remembered:

He had gone with Charlie Bovey, who at one time had been state Senator in Montana, to New York and had purchased the contents of the B.A.B. Company and the Molinari business in the Bronx. They just moved the whole thing out there to be in Virginia City.



Figure 7. The church in Virginia City that housed Ozzie's workshop.

One of the items found in the move was an Acme Roll Perforating Machine which B.A.B. used for cutting rolls. This remained in Ozzie's possession for years until sold in the 1980s.



Figure 8. B.A.B. masters filed away for future use in the upstairs of the Molinari Building.

Tim Trager Remembers Virginia City

Somewhere along the line, the Boveys discovered mechanical music. I believe that the discovery was probably related to the coin operated pianos sold throughout Montana by the Butte Piano Company of Butte, Montana. The vast amount of mining activity in Montana resulted in many saloons and houses of affordable affection, which were the prime market for coin pianos and orchestrons.

The Bovey's discovered Ozzie Wurdeman of Minneapolis, who was a former Violano distributor (see photo above). (By the way, the Boveys had their roots in Minneapolis/St. Paul.) Ozzie began spending his summers in Virginia City working on the music machines. Ozzie also exposed the Boveys to other pioneer collectors such as the Klavestads of Shakopee, Minnesota, and Paul and Laura Eakins.

Ozzie also got the Boveys into the Excelsior Amusement Park in Minneapolis, where they purchased the penny arcade games and a Cremona "J". Later on Charlie bought the B.A.B. Organ Company of Brooklyn, along with the Molinari Organ Company, and moved everything to Montana. This purchase was a treasure trove of mechanical music! It included a number of fairground organs as well as all the shop equipment, including a perforator, barrel pinning equipment, and the book punching machinery.

These instruments and equipment were displayed in Nevada City. Ozzie Wurdeman took the perforator to Minneapolis to recut organ rolls. I first visited Virginia City and Nevada City in 1964 as a very small child. I can still remember the electric thrill of listening to the large Gavioli at the back of the log music hall, as well as the Seeburg G in the Bale of Hay Saloon! When everything was working well the place was an enthusiasts dream! Our family visited each summer for the next 11 years. During that time we got to know the Boveys. Those visits are fondly remembered.

After Charlie and Sue passed away their son, Ford Bovey, inherited everything. Estate taxes took the cash necessary to subsidize Virginia City and Nevada City. Auctions and private sales were considered. The curator, Nevada City resident and vintage printer John Ellingsen, started a push to save the collection. Eventually the State of Montana purchased the majority of the collection. Ford did keep a number of items including the items in the Kruse auction.

The State of Montana now owns the fair organs which are displayed in the Nevada City music hall. They also own the B.A.B master rolls and the Molinari organ shop, as well as a number of nickelodeons. The inventory book listing the items which the State of Montana purchased is nearly two inches thick! The State plans on restoring the instruments and considers each one a treasure.

Courtesy Ford Bovey Estate Auction & Charles Bovey
by Tim Trager, MMD Archives — July 25, 2000

Upon arrival the contents of the Molinari factory were stored in the church in Virginia City (Figure 7). Resembling a trip to the end of the rainbow for today's collectors, the church was filled to the brim with at least eight complete organs and parts for many others. Later, the factory was recreated in a separate building in Nevada City. Upstairs were kept the B.A.B. masters (Figure 8) as well as the pinning machine used for barrel-operated organs. Numerous parts were also cataloged and stored in their place in this building.



Figure 10. Ozzie working with the many organ parts from the Molinary factory.

Ozzie's reputation as a piano and organ technician as well as a monument of a person was widely acclaimed, and in 1969 an article entitled "The Music Man of Alder Gulch" from the *Great Falls Tribune* noted:

As a technician, Wurdeman is a perfectionist and undisputed expert in his field. As a person, he has the dignity and striking appearance of a musician of the old school. On summer evenings in Virginia City he can usually be seen at the Wells Fargo dining room where a glass-fronted nickelodeon containing two violins plays delicately and liltingly for the diners, or later, he may be seen with friends at a table in a dimly lighted room at the Bale of Hay Saloon, quietly listening to the nostalgic strains of *Roses of Picardy* that flow from a grand old Coinola Reproduco.

In the late 1950s, Paul Eakins, of Sikeston, Missouri, heard about Ozzie Wurdeman and soon Ozzie was going down to Sikeston to work on instruments in the Gay Nineties Village. Ozzie had done a lot of work in the 1960s and 1970s, both in Sikeston, and at the Gay Nineties Melody Museum in St. Louis.

Ozzie had three sons but only one, Tom, took interest in the business. Tom had helped his dad work on things since he could walk. He used to help Ozzie work on the pinball machines while he was in school and he spent many a night helping him hook up wall boxes for the jukeboxes. Working with his dad gave Tom chance to gain experience in mechanical musical instrument repair as well as help with the chore of maintaining the large volume of work in Virginia City and Nevada City.

What kind of man was Ozzie Wurdeman—a person who had spent an entire lifetime working and enjoying mechanical pianos and organs? In my conversation with Harvey Roehl he reminisced about Ozzie and said:

He went to his quarters and he dug out all of his literature that he had on music machines. He had quite a stack of it and he let me borrow the whole kaboodle, which I felt was pretty generous for a complete

stranger to have done. He let us bring it all home and we had it photographed—a lot of that material found its way into the early edition of *Player Piano Treasury*.

Ozzie Wurdeman was a person that we would all love to know, as Dave Bowers reminisces:

He was a quiet, soft-spoken man. I don't recall hearing him shout or lose his good nature. He tended to be soft-spoken and gentle.

Ozzie Wurdeman passed away on December 8, 1973, after 45 years of marriage to Edna and many more to his profession. His death occurred before many of us had our feet wet as far as an interest in mechanical musical instruments but his impact on the field of collecting and restoring has been enormous.

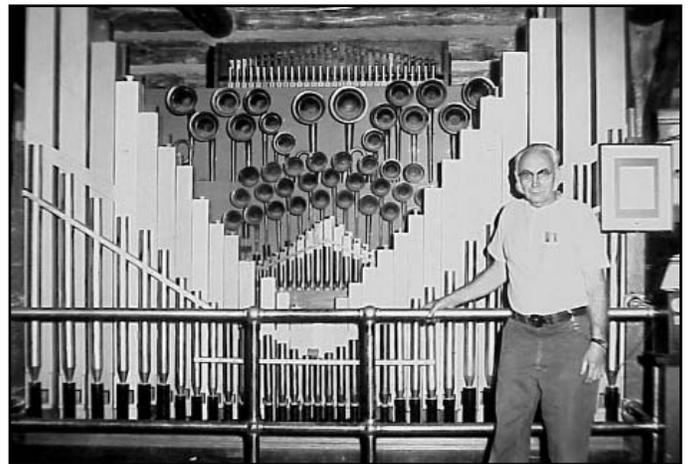


Figure 11. Ozzie tuned and maintained the Wurlitzer 180 band organ in the Bovey collection.

Virginia City, Montana

Gold and silver was discovered in Alder Gulch in 1863 by five prospectors. Within a year nearly 10,000 people inhabited the 11 mile long gulch. Virginia City was the Montana Territory's capital from 1864 to 1875. By the late 1800s gold mining was gone and Helena, MT became the capital. The town remained, however, surviving the usual fires and, because of the dry climate, the ravages of bugs and rot.

According to reports of the time between \$30,000,000 and \$100,000,000 in gold and silver ore were mined from Alder Gulch by 1928.

In the late 1940s the Gold Medal Flour heir, Charles Bovey, came to town, bought the town and furnished the town with antiquities complementing the era of the 1800s. In 1961 Virginia City was designated a National Historic Landmark and in 1976 was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

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- Roehl, Harvey; personal communication, 1987
- Wurdeman, Tom; personal communication 1986 (plus all photographs)

Ron Bopp is currently Editor of the *Carousel Organ* and has enjoyed outdoor mechanical organs and calliopes for over thirty years.