

Reflections on Harvey N. Roehl

Bob Conant

My wife, Cheri, and I first met Harvey and Marion Roehl in 1972 at a tour of their mechanical music collection that had been arranged by a mutual friend. I remember being impressed, not only with their wonderful music machines, but also with Harvey's keyboard expertise. At several points on the tour, Harvey would belt out a few bars of some familiar tune just to show that underneath all the mechanisms were real pianos that could be played just like any ordinary piano. During the lower level room tour, a tune was started playing on the Pianolin, usually a rag. At the same time, across the room, Harvey played the same tune note for note on the keyboard of a Seeburg E. Later in the tour, Harvey accompanied a silent movie on their Style 25 American Photoplayer, enhancing the action on the screen with appropriate music and sound effects. I was enthralled by the sights and sounds of the instruments but, most importantly, I made a new friend that night and, over the years, Harvey Roehl was to demonstrate that friendship many times. This was typical of Harvey as he made friends with almost everyone he met. He befriended and then mentored hundreds of newcomers to the hobby, encouraging them in collecting and restoring instruments and then in sharing these instruments with other people.



Figure 1. Harvey and Marion Roehl.

covered the mechanical music hobby. Harvey, therefore, gathered material he had accumulated and wrote *Player Piano Treasury* and later, *Keys to a Musical Past*. He published these himself, as they were not of interest to any mainline book publisher. This was the start of the Vestal Press which went on, for over 35 years, to publish major books in the field of mechanical music and to reprint sales and service information on many different machines. They also offered these publications by mail order along with recordings of band organs, player pianos and music

Harvey and Marion started to collect mechanical musical instruments in the late 40s and early 50s. (I must include Marion because, for over 52 years, they were partners in marriage, business, travel and the friendships they made and shared, **Figure 1**). At the time they started, they could find almost nothing in print that covered

boxes and a whole raft of “nifty” items related to mechanical music, railroads, steam engines and the like. The Vestal Press educated a whole generation of enthusiasts and provided them with the material they needed to collect and restore these machines. During this time Harvey was making friends and contacts all over the world and the office at the Vestal Press often became like Grand Central Station as the phone rang and visitors dropped in with great frequency.

When the Roehls finally retired from the Vestal Press, they continued to make and sell a fine line of audio-cassettes and CDs of the mechanical music machines in their own collection. *Marion Roehl Recordings* featured player pianos, music boxes, instruments for accompanying silent movies, band organs and the calliope that they owned.



Figure 2. Harvey manually playing the calliope, as he often did.

Calliaphone was fully capable of playing rolls, Harvey loved to sit at the keyboard and play it by hand (**Figure 2**). He always thought that it was more interesting to the public to dress the part and put on a show. One of Harvey's greatest thrills was when he played the steam calliope on the Mississippi River boat, Delta Queen (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3. On the Delta Queen river boat, Harvey had chance to play the steam calliope.

The Roehls also had two monkey organs that they often brought to the rallies. The first is a Fratti barrel organ of 27 keys

and the second a Molinari with 20 notes. Mike Kitner has restored both and the cases rebuilt by George Melnyk and feature magnificent marquetry by the late Jack Garside. For many years the Roehls have owned a Wurlitzer 146B band organ with a completely original façade. The organ was fully restored mechanically and is featured on a number of the *Marion Roehl Recordings* tapes and CDs.



Figure 4. Harvey, proudly making a point about his 57-key Gavioli fairground organ.

A focal point of the Roehl collection was their 57-key Gavioli fairground organ (Figure 4). This was found in very complete and original shape and was fully restored to magnificent condition. It had a bandmaster in the form of an orchestra conductor dressed in formal tux with tails. They called him Arturo Agard, a reference to the conductor of our local BC Pops orchestra. For a long time, Harvey didn't record this instrument because of the limited book music available for it. Then George Melnyk designed and built a fixture that attached to the key frame and operated the organ keys without making any changes to the organ at all. This fixture was connected to a computer and allowed MIDI files to be played directly on the organ. Harvey then contracted to have Tom Meijer of The Netherlands arrange a

number of tunes for the Gavioli including one of Harvey's favorites, *The Dodge Brothers March* (of automobile fame) written by Victor Herbert in the 1920s. These songs were recorded and the CD was marketed.



Figure 5. Harvey, the elf, playing a Deagan Unifon in a Christmas parade.

Harvey was one of a rare breed; he was an engineer who had a wonderful command of the English language. It is a sign of a language expert when they can make jokes by twisting the rules of grammar and spelling. Hence, the name Roehl, which rhymes with rail, resulted in a motor home with the name "Roehl Road Car" spelled out on the side. It also made sense when one realizes that another of Harvey's interests was rail-roading, both full size and models.

One of Harvey's favorite pastimes was finding misspellings and mis-usages in signs and texts. He would then photograph them and give slide shows that told their own humorous story. Another thing he loved to do was write limericks. He would

write them anytime and anywhere, often on the back of a napkin at dinner. Many of these are lost forever but a few have been published. The following is a fitting close to this article for the *Carousel Organ* and is taken from *A Carousel Of Limericks* by Harvey Roehl, illustrated by Pat Hyman and published and copyrighted by The Vestal Press in 1986.

*The lions and tigers go 'round
to that wonderful carousel sound.
Kids ride them all day
to hear the band organ play
while great fun and laughter
abound.*

Harvey Northrup Roehl passed away on June 21, 2000, at the age of 76. We will miss him very much.

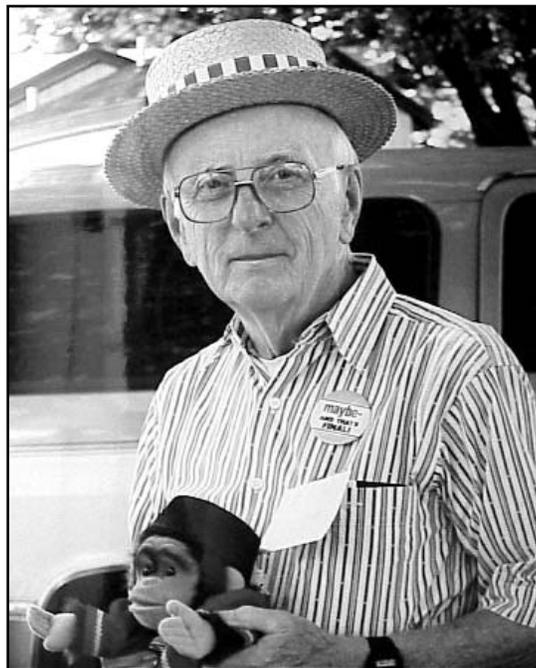


Figure 6. Harvey Roehl — one last look at a pioneer of fostering and maintaining the collector's interest in outdoor mechanical music.

COAA Directory Information

The COAA has grown over the past two years and in order to provide information for members a yearly Directory has been planned. Gary Stevenson is putting together this information and needs help from every member. Necessary information includes: Name(s), address, phone and fax numbers as well as email address, and also up to three listings of outdoor mechanical musical instruments.

Please mail (or email) this information to Gary at 801 Eichelberger, St. Louis, MO. 63111 or gstevens@dtd1.slps.k12.mo.us