

## Wanderings of A Small Band Organ

By  
Matthew Caulfield

In 1956 I was teaching school in a small town in New York State's southern tier. Having time on my hands and money to spare, I decided to buy a band organ. Naturally I headed to North Tonawanda to see what Ralph Tussing's T.R.T. Manufacturing Company could do for me. In those early days there was no Internet to facilitate communication, and either it was the time before Hathaway & Bowers began gathering instruments and offering them for sale or else I just wasn't aware of them then. But I did know that Ralph Tussing was still carrying on the old Wurlitzer band organ business. So I headed north. I can't recall how I got there; I had no car, so it must have been by bus. But I do remember my first glimpse of Ralph's shop, dark, cluttered, stuffy, filled with parts, tools, machinery, and a few band organs.

Ralph let me look around the shop and told me a bit about his work, but I don't recall any of our conversation except his explaining the wide variety of pipe freins and other small parts he had to stock and showing me the wooden patterns for pressure bellows gaskets hanging on one wall over a cluttered workbench. My mind was on buying a band organ. He didn't have a 165 in his shop, and I do remember him saying that even then they didn't come along very often. He did have a Wurlitzer 146A for sale, serial number 3665, which I now know indicates it was originally shipped from the factory in mid-1924. Ralph started it up to show how well it worked, and it played "How Much Is That Doggie In The Window." A 146A plays the style 150 roll and has 106 pipes, bass drum, snare drum, and 3 manual stops. I really wanted an organ with bells, but being impatient, I took what was available and wrote Ralph a check for \$600 for the organ and a few starter rolls.

Our town's local garbage man drove up to North Tonawanda in his truck and fetched the organ down to the small garage next door to the Catholic church in the center of the town, which I had rented as its new home. For the rest of the school year my band organ and the Catholic church co-existed peacefully: the organ didn't play on Sunday mornings and the Catholics were quiet during the week. The organ played most rolls pretty well, but it couldn't quite handle the vacuum demands of heavily cut rolls with tunes like "Under The Double Eagle." When summer came I returned to Seabreeze Park in Rochester to run the food operation, and the 146A came with me. It stayed with me at the park until 1962, when I left for a position with the Library of Congress in Washington.

In 1958 I decided to tackle the problem of insufficient vacuum. Not knowing then some of the things that I know now, I decided that the organ needed larger vacuum pumps. If only someone had asked, "Don't you suppose that Wurlitzer knew what they were doing when they made the organ?" I removed the vacuum pumps and broke them down, saving the reservoir and the valve boxes for re-use. Everything else I made larger, cutting new boards out of poplar, increasing their length by about a foot while keeping their other dimensions the same. After assembling them and giving them up several coats of orange shellac, I bought a huge cowhide to cover the new pumps. That hide was just big enough to cover the four bellows without any splicing, because I didn't trust my ability to skive and glue a seam so that it wouldn't later come apart in a place where it couldn't be reached. The leather wasn't as airtight as kangaroo and its hair side was unsealed, so many applications of neatsfoot oil, Lexol, and other coatings were required to make it tight.

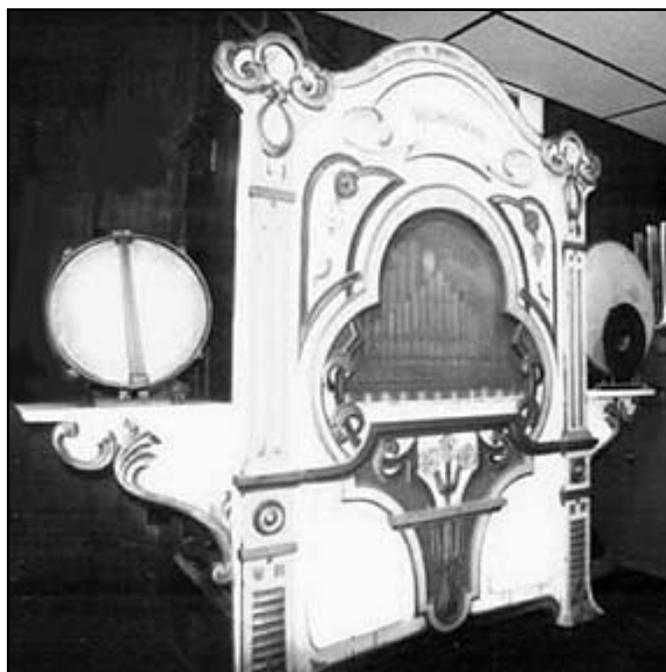


Figure 1 The Wurlitzer Style 146A carousel organ (number 3665).

*Lesson #1:  
"The original builders knew  
what they were doing"*

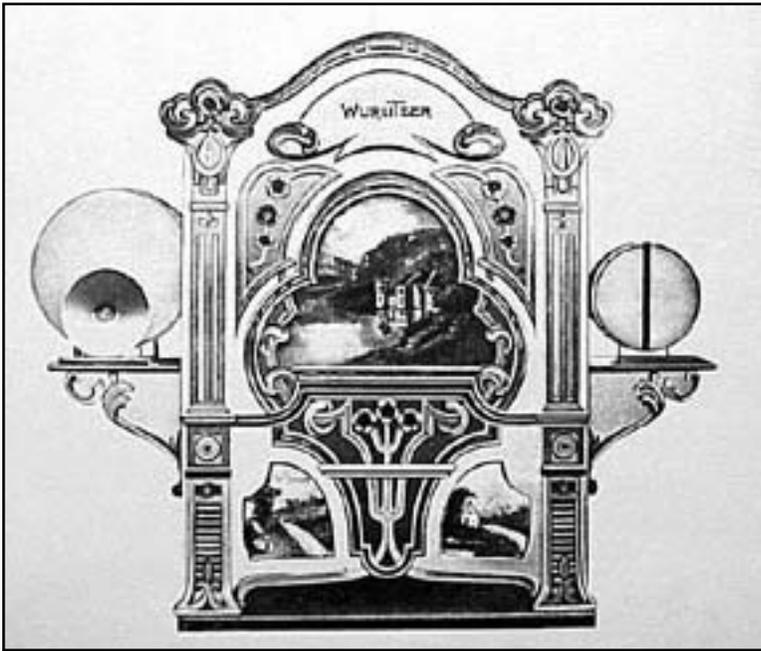


Figure 2 Wurlitzer 146A as depicted in the 1923 Catalog (check this date)

and re-installed the chest in the organ. Fingers crossed, I fired up “Under The Double Eagle.” There was considerable improvement in the way it played, but still not perfection. So I unscrewed a few unit blocks from the chest and removed the top caps to get at their valve facings. I imagined that a nice new rubber valve facing would seal a lot tighter than the leather Wurlitzer had used. I replaced the old leather with rubber and re-installed the group of “improved” unit blocks.

*Lesson #2*  
*“Hundreds of tiny pinhole leaks*  
*add up to one big leak!”*

That's when I learned lesson number 3: Don't try to improve on what the factory used. The organ wouldn't even play “How Much Is That Doggie In The Window” now! So I determined to start over with the unit blocks and to rebuild them completely, using the same materials the factory had used: tan pouch leather for the valve facings and zephyr skin for the pouches. But the metal caps were becoming slightly deformed in the removal process because of the soft metal from which they were made, and I needed a substitute for the wooden rings used as pouch retainers, because they usually broke in the removal process. Somehow Californian Ross R. Davis and his band organ man, Herbert N. Vincent, came to my rescue. They supplied new caps made of stainless steel and phenolic pouch retaining rings, as well as advice on rebuilding the unit blocks. A few days of assembly-line work found me becoming pretty proficient at unit block overhaul. The only part I never fully mastered was Wurlitzer's technique for covering the bottom of the unit block. They used fabric-covered cardboard and were able to make a 45-degree angle on the edges, while still neatly trimming the fabric. I finally resorted to using shellacked cardboard, trimmed to the edge of the block, with no angling.

Finally my band organ played perfectly, hitting every note on every roll. So it was time to have it tuned. The tin ear I was born with had not been improved by years of hearing the big Wurlitzer 165 on the merry-go-round, so I hired a professional to tune it. I wasn't there when he came to do the work, and he later told me, “I had trouble pulling up some of the pipe stoppers. The handles came out, but the stoppers wouldn't budge. So I tuned the whole a few cents sharp.” The organ sounded better than before, so I didn't argue.

I kept that 146A for another three years or so. Only a limited number of rolls were available for it, and they were all post-war T.R.T. products. If there were any original green-paper Wurlitzer 150 rolls for sale anywhere, I didn't know about them. And my little machine always lost out in comparison with the big 165 on the merry-go-round. To raise its status, I added two features that no 146 ever came with: a triangle and a set of swell shutters. Swell-control perforations are already in the style 150 roll, but no triangle perforations. So I had to add them by hand to all my rolls, which I willingly did.

That new set of pumps was my pride and joy. It completely filled the upper organ, with the reservoir sitting now over the tracker frame instead of to its right. George Koeberle, the park electrician, used to say, “Listen to the bellows when they run. If they say, ‘Chevrolet, Chevrolet, Chevrolet,’ then they aren't pumping evenly on every stroke; but if they say ‘Studebaker, Studebaker, Studebaker,’ then you know they are running like a top!” The new pumps passed the Koeberle test, but tunes like “Under The Double Eagle” still didn't play any better. Lesson number 1: The original builders knew what they were doing.

Learning lesson number 1 brought understanding of lesson number 2: hundreds of tiny pinhole leaks add up to one big leak. Some testing proved that the vacuum pumps were delivering plenty of vacuum to the chest, but it was being lost through old pneumatic cloth that wasn't airtight and through leaky valves (unit blocks). I decided to tackle the easier job first. So I cracked loose all the finger pneumatics and recovered them with the same thin pneumatic cloth that Wurlitzer had used, re-glued them in their original places with hot hide glue,

When I was hired by the Library of Congress in 1962, I was faced with the choice of moving the organ, storing it, or selling it. I decided to sell. The details are fuzzy in retrospect, but I remember a man coming to look at it and offering me \$900 for it, \$300 more than I originally paid. Sold!

*Lesson #3*  
*“Don't try to improve on  
what the factory used”*

In the 1970s and 1980s even small band organs were fetching dazzling prices on the market and there was an abundance of good music being produced by Play-Rite Music Rolls, Inc. I began to regret selling my organ and to wonder where it was and whether I'd ever see it again. Every park and band organ rally I visited and every issue of the MBSI and AMICA publications I received offered the chance that I'd recognize the lost organ. But it never happened.

On January 7, 2000, I received an email from Mr. James Arnold, of Trafford, PA, telling me that he found “1958 M. CAULFIELD” inscribed inside the suction reservoir of his family's recently-acquired band organ. An Internet search led him to me, hoping that I might know something about the organ. A rapid exchange of emails and a long phone conversation answered a lot of questions for both of us.

When Jim Arnold was 10, he went with his father to a suburb of Beaver Falls, PA, and there saw the amazing “big toys” that Mr. Clyde Lightfoot had collected. A lasting friendship developed between the Arnold and Lightfoot families, and Jim was always allowed to operate the Lightfoot instruments, including his Wurlitzer 146A, so long as he took good care of them. Jim recalled seeing swell shutters and a triangle on the Lightfoot organ. But everyone he later told of this said, “No, impossible. The 146A never came with swells or triangle.”

Clyde Howard Lightfoot died April 1998, but Jim remembers Mr. Lightfoot saying that he bought the 146A at an amusement park on a lake in New York State, where they also had a Berry-Wood orchestrion and a couple of big band organs. Mr. Lightfoot's mother took special care that the Arnold family should have the 146A. When the organ was delivered to the Arnolds in Trafford, PA, it indeed had no swell shutters or triangle.



Figure 3 The penciled inscription inside the bass drum pneumatic reading: “Leo A. Lazus, Mt. Wash., Pgh, Pa. 5-15-33.”

I don't recall putting my name in the organ when I rebuilt the vacuum pumps, but if I hadn't—and if it weren't for the Internet—neither Jim nor I would have had the opportunity to get answers to some of the questions surrounding this little wandering organ. The organ now has a library of 30 rolls, not so many by today's standards, but a huge improvement over the number that I owned. Jim is naturally disappointed that I can't tell him anything about the organ's previous owners. I never thought to ask Ralph Tussing such questions back in the 1950s. Jim hopes that the Wurlitzer shipping records owned by Don Rand will show where it went in 1924.

One mystery remains: there is a pencilled inscription inside the large pressure pneumatic that beats the bass drum, in a hand that is so clear that there is no doubt to its reading: LEO A. LAZUS, MT. WASH., PGH, PA. 5-15-33. But a search of today's Pittsburgh telephone directory turns up not one family named “Lazus.” If that name means anything to you, Jim and I would both like to hear from you. Our email addresses are [mc707@earthlink.net](mailto:mc707@earthlink.net) and [kb8vvt@nb.net](mailto:kb8vvt@nb.net).

Jim is currently restoring the organ to correct some damage from humidity. He plans to add to the inscriptions in the organ the name of Clyde Howard Lightfoot and James E. Arnold. On our side, my wife and I look forward to the Arnold family's visit to our Rochester home and to Seabreeze Park.

Matthew Caulfield is well known for his historic expertise on the Wurlitzer 165 and its hundreds of rolls and currently is curator of the Wurlitzer 165 at Seabreeze Park in Rochester, NY.