

## Cliff Gray—A Good Friend

Terry Haughawout

In 1986 Joan and I were introduced to Cliff and Robbie Gray by my good friend, Dan Slack. We were at the Fremont MBSI Organ rally and the main reason for this introduction was Cliff had just bought a model 79 Wihlem Bruder fairground organ, and I was looking for one to view so I could complete the restoration of my basket case model 79 Bruder.



Cliff Gray and the author at a COAA rally in Holland, Michigan, a few years ago.

Photo: Terry Haughawout

I remember that meeting like it was yesterday, he was a massive man and he let you know right off that he was born in Texas. He took me under his wing and told me all about his purchase. We went back to his van and sat for a long time listening to tapes of the model 79 Bruder—I was in 7th heaven. In our conversation Cliff invited Joan and I to visit him and Robbie in Picayune Mississippi, I couldn't wait to go!

Still working, I had to set up some vacation time to make the trip to Mississippi. In late summer of 1986 Joan and I headed for the Gray's. We were greeted with open arms—Joan and Robbie hit it off and Cliff and I were starting a life-long friendship. We really had a good time and we talked organs for three days! I took many measurements

and pictures of the model 79. We stayed in touch by phone all winter talking organs, we couldn't wait to see them at the first rally in 1987.

This relationship just kept growing over the years; Cliff and Robbie would stay with us during the summer so they could attend all the organ rallies. We had so many good times in what we called the sleeping room. When we got back from a meal we would go to the sleeping room where Cliff would talk and I would sleep; then I would talk and Cliff would sleep. We solved all the problems of the world plus reviewed all the organs of the last rally

Cliff was always trying to improve the organ image to the public and he was the first to put an organ in a permanent trailer, displayed at the MBSI rally at Fremont, Ohio, in 1983.

Cliff was also one of the first to sell tapes on a grand scale. Cliff made more tapes than any other hobbyist. He had tapes of his model 79 Bruder, 52-key Bruder, and his famed Style 150 Wurlitzer.

New up—to—date music: Cliff always told me if we are to promote organ music we must give the public music that they know and remember, Cliff had more new music transposed and arranged by Wayne Holton than any other hobbyist.

Cliff had a music room where he made cassette tapes and punched new cardboard music. He made sure that every year he had at least one new tape of music, Cliff punched thousands of meters of music to pro-

mote the hobby. He loved to play you his new tunes of the year, He would smile at me and say "what do you think, boy?" I would just shake my head and tell him "you done good."

I never heard Cliff complain about how far the rallies were from Jefferson Texas; Cliff and Robbie just came! One year he brought TWO organs from Texas! To accomplish this he drove 6,000 miles just to get them to the rally and back home. I just smile at people today when they say the rally is just too far away.

In late December 2005 I got to see my best friend for the last time; we had one of our good bull sessions with lots of laughs and reviewing good times. We said our normal goodbye and left it at that.

Looking back at this relationship Cliff was a driving force in promoting organ music in America. He did it by example and we usually followed his example, I know of no other individual who loved the hobby like Cliff—it was his life. He will be missed by us all, but we must remember that to know Cliff Gray was knowing a gentle giant that loved our hobby more than any of us.

Personally I will miss Cliff a lot! But, I know that I am a much better person for knowing him, he will always be in my memories and in my heart.



Cliff's Wurlitzer Style 150 (Style 20A deKleist) military band organ. This organ was very popular at the circus festival in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for many years.

Photo: Ron Bopp

## Cliff H. Gray, Jr. 1920-2005

Fred Dahlinger, Jr.

I'd just bought a Model 79 Wilhelm Bruder Sons band organ and was in the process of securing it in the trailer the opening day of the 1985 MBSI Mid-Am rally. Dan Slack, the rally host, called asking when I was going to get there. It seems that another guy had a similar organ at home and was anxious to see mine. He wasn't just anxious, he was pacing. I arrived in Fremont, Ohio a few hours later. Before I could turn off River Road onto the Slack property, this huge, friendly guy with a big smile appeared from no where, leaned in the door window and started talking about organs. It was like we were already old friends. I only wish it had been so, as the many hours spent during the next eighteen years in fellowship, talking organs, laughing and reflecting on life in general have passed all too fast. Thankfully, special circumstances assured that there were always several days each year when we'd be together. That same rally brought the two of us into friendship with another new "48er" that neither of us knew, Terry Haughwout, the mix resulting in much learning and enjoyment. We shared something far more valuable than gold.

Like many others in the hobby, Cliff started with player pianos while living in the Washington, D. C. area. When specialized surveying assignments took him to Michigan's Upper Peninsula he came back with some dandy coin pianos from places far off the beaten path. Then he learned about organs, mostly from seeing Jim Wells stuff, and got to know Bruce Miller, who also enjoyed them. One of his early organs, a dandy DeKleist 20A in very original condition, was completely restored by a youthful Durward Center and remained a favorite for years. Cliff connected with a Virginia showman

named Ferrante that always seemed to be able to turn up another organ that ended up back at his home. The frequent rebuilds honed Cliff's skills so that he became quite accomplished in the work. Later, for some of the specialties like pumps, he called on Mike Kitner. Like most pros, Mike didn't do partial jobs, but knowing the quality of Cliff's own



Cliff Gray enjoying the company of Kim Pontius. This was Cliff's last COAA rally (Knoebels Grove, 2004).

workmanship meant that taking on part of it was OK. It also offered the opportunity to enjoy the personal hospitality that Cliff and Roberta shared with callers to their home.

Cliff once owned a show, Gray Bros. Circus. It didn't travel much, but the people of Jefferson, Texas enjoyed it for a while. He had special posters printed and some of them have fooled the circus experts. You see, Gray Bros. was a folk art quality miniature circus carved back in the 1930s and 1940s. Cliff rehabilitated it, set it up and then sold it to Ripley's in San Antonio, where thousands now enjoy it. It was one of the first things that he did after relocating from his Picayune, Mississippi residence to Jefferson, Texas, where he and Roberta chose to spend their retirement.

Cliff loved the circus showgrounds, the sights, the sounds, the people, but especially the smell, and it wasn't Lake Michigan. He liked his band organ (and his "Texas Cadillac") to be parked near the elephants, and if not there, then by Dave and Maxine Hale's unsurpassed petting zoo with its exotic aromas. The real showmen that played the spot always looked forward to seeing Cliff, as he kept them well supplied with good quality tapes that they played on their machines. Cliff was one of the first to make and stock tapes, and later compact disks. Their sales helped to defray some of the out of pocket expenses, but it also provided a means to enjoy his merry music when you went home. With a half dozen other organs about, food in an outdoor cookhouse and an appreciative audience, the circus gig was hard to beat. Cliff and Roberta continued to participate long after others would have settled into rocking chairs, and they made a major contribution with their presence.

Maybe it was his geologist's insights, but at rallies he always figured out the best spots with the most shade, the fewest problems and the best setting to enjoy good music. When asked, he just gave you one of those big smiles. He often arrived early, scouted out good places to eat, figured out what should be done, and then shared the intelligence freely with others. You learned to make a point of visiting Cliff early, because he just knew.

A reporter once asked Cliff what "made" it for him and he replied "a good march." He had plenty of them, first with the fine Model 79 WBS, with the Style 20A DeKleist and later an equally enjoyable Model 107 Gebrueder Bruder. The gentleman that had the latter organ tele-



Cliff watching over his beloved 52-key Bruder fair organ at a past rally.

phoned me about a guy from Texas who was willing to trade him a restored Wurlitzer 105 for it, as he desired. I was asked if he did good work, which was assured. It was a pleasure to see the trade follow through, as that Bruder brought a lot of happiness to many thousands of listeners in more states than I can recall. It was likely the most traveled of all band organs, Cliff and Roberta journeying far and wide to share time with many friends. We all had a special journey to Jefferson one year, when the Grays hosted a rally. Boy, it was hot, but the Black Swan dished up great jambalaya and the people in the heritage conscious community loved the music. You'd have thought Cliff was born there and not Terrill, he and Roberta were so beloved by their local friends. The best time was in the Gray's back yard, just being together while the Chairman presided benevolently over all.

In the later-1980s we were all getting geared up to make books and punch music, but being retired Cliff moved ahead of everyone in actually doing it. He not only did it first, he improved the technique and went on to make more new books than just about anyone else. Obtaining arrangements at reasonable prices is always a challenge but

Cliff found some great sources. Reg Turlington in England turned out an armful of good Bruder tunes until he passed away. A young man also in Texas, Wayne Holton, found his horizon broadened with the many commissions that Cliff gave to him. There was always new music to hear when Cliff arrived, broadening appreciation of

native Texan tunes, Mexican favorites from his youth and re-cuts of Gustav Bruder's best. He found a local gal, Lexie, a real steamboat girl, that could do facade painting and she did a fine job with the second Bruder. Other locals proved equally adept at helping on trailer projects or other things that supported his interest.

Band organ friends were challenged in friendly battle by Cliff to do something a bit new or different each year. It added a new dimension to enjoying the rally experience and having a good time with friends that enjoyed the game. One time it was remote start and stop playing, another time chaser lights were seen, chairs with monogrammed names and all sorts of toys that just brought laughs, smiles and winks, and that big grin and laugh from Cliff. I think Cliff won the war when he showed up with the first

blue trailer, and it framed his newest Bruder just great. Cliff was one of the first band organ owners to mount an instrument in a cargo type trailer and was frequently sought out for advice on what to do and how when making a purchase.

Unlike almost everyone else, Cliff had a son that followed in his foot steps with an interest in organs. Foot steps was accurate, for Cliff III punched books at the well-used punch and also took a crack at arranging, and did well with it. He and I plotted an unannounced visit to Jefferson when a business trip once took me to Dallas and we were able to drive over together for the day. You can't imagine the double take Cliff did when I walked around the corner of the house and came into view. By then we were old friends and the big bear hug showed it. More than once Cliff and Roberta packed up giant boxes of pecans from their trees and sent them north, cultivating a personal taste for pecan pie. Cliff also introduced me to some of the best pralines I've ever eaten, bought from a local lady.

Cliff was always there with good counsel, whether it was cautioning about trailer bearings that the builder didn't grease properly, selecting a special glass cup to fold tagboard, confiding a winning technique to seal zephyr skin or suggesting insights about some difficult aspect of real life. We knew he was special, he was indeed the "Chairman of the Board." It was made totally clear to us after he and Roberta had endured another long drive from Texas to Michigan. Though the welds had cracked all around the rim, one of his trailer wheels didn't fall off until he



Armed with a good sense of humor, Cliff (center) affixed a fake moustache at a Germanfest along with Terry Haughawout, Bill Kavouras, Ron Bopp (not fake), Galen Bird, John Washburn, Randy Simons and Bill Pohl.

turned into the motel parking lot at slow speed. Any time before then in the over-thousand mile trip would have been disastrous. Someone was watching out for them.

So long, buddy. I know you're in good company. Play *Heaven's Artillery* for Ken, Dan and the boys.

## Memories of Cliff Gray

Bruce Miller

I left active duty in the Navy and moved to Virginia in 1969. I joined the US Naval Air Reserve and served at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. One day, after completing a flight, I ventured out the back gate of the base. Not far down the road, I discovered a wonderful, eclectic antique shop that was operated by a very friendly couple, Cliff and Roberta Gray. Little did I know then, that this would be the beginning of a friendship with the Gray family that lasts to this day.



Cliff appeared with organ friends in front of Dan Slack's Wurlitzer 153 in the early 1980s. Included are Herb Brabandt, Cliff, the late Terry Borne and Dan Slack, Bruce Miller and the late Ken Smith. Photo: Dan Slack archives

Cliff and Roberta welcomed me into their home and before long our families were doing things together. Young Cliff was in the age range of my daughters and they all seemed to be growing up together.



Another early 1980s photo show Jerry Biasella, Bob Gilson, Cliff, Chuck Pfeiffer, Mike Argain, Dave Ramey and Rick Crandell in front of Cliff's Wurlitzer (deKleist) Style 150. Photo: Ron Bopp

My interest (and knowledge) of automatic music instruments was in its infancy then, and Cliff was a wealth of knowledge and information, which he freely shared. Back in those days, these musical wonders could be found by research, ads, lots of talking, and lots of driving—in other words, beating the bushes. Cliff and I did a lot of that together, and we had a great time. Those were very memorable days.

During our journeys, Cliff and I located quite a few music machines, and passed on a number of them (hard to believe these days). Every once in a while, we would come across a machine from Europe. I liked many of them, but Cliff definitely did not. He would always tell me "You don't want one of those damn European things!" As years passed, Cliff's favorite organ turned out to be his Bruder (a European machine which Cliff and Roberta trailered to many, many band organ rallies).

We once went to a small town in Pennsylvania and found an old man who told us a story that will bring nightmares to any collector today. Back during the depression, this fellow, and his brother, would buy band organs for \$100 (usually from carnivals,

etc.), restore them, and then sell them for \$300 (mostly back to carnivals). As the depression wore on, business got worse and worse. Eventually they had 10 band organs in the shop—and no sales. They were renting the shop for what, now, seems like a pittance (\$10 or \$15 a month, I believe). They got behind in the rent and had no money to pay for it. The landlord evicted them and demanded that they empty the building and clean it out. Having nothing else to do with the

band organs, the brothers grouped them outside and burned them.



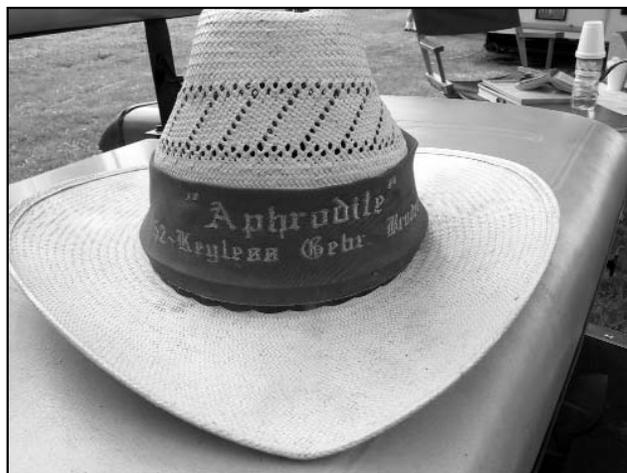
Cliff was "thumbs-up" about his organ music. Phot taken in Holland, MI, in 2000.

Photo: Ron Bopp

There was a politician in Maryland (a long-time office holder) who, annually hosted a large, by invitation only, picnic for his friends and constituents. It was actually a big beer and crab feast. He hired Cliff every year to bring his band organ and liven up the day. I went along as Cliff's assistant. What an event it was. Bushels of crabs by the dozens. Several beer trucks. I loved it! When the Grays left Maryland and moved to Picayune, Mississippi, I could have taken over the gig, but my band organ, while playing, badly needed restoration. I was working on it, but did not get it finished in time, so I missed out. I have been sorry about that ever since.

I have always appreciated the way that Cliff and Roberta accepted us and made us like part of their family. It was the best of times and the best of friends. When all is said and done, that is what life is all about.

I am privileged to have known Cliff and his family. His departure leaves a void that can never be filled. He was my friend and my mentor.



Cliff's hat carried the name of his favorite organ, "Aphrodite." This 52-keyless Bruder fair organ allowed him to construct and punch hundreds of meters of enjoyable music.

Photo: Ron Bopp