

## The Craftsmanship of Ken Smith

David Wasson

I first met Ken Smith in 1990 at the MBSI rally in Fremont Ohio. This was the very first rally I had ever been to. Ken brought his Ruth organ to this rally. It was a very large rally, lots of organs, and many of the details are not clear to me, as the whole event was a bit overwhelming. I had so much fun at this rally, that my wife and I decided this would be fun to do each summer.

Although I did see Ken and his organ at the 1990 Fremont rally, I didn't really get to meet him and talk to him until the MBSI Pittsburgh rally of 1994. He went to this rally as a spectator, without an organ. He showed up with Mike Kitner and John Prtljaga. Of course we started talking organs, and Ken and I discovered that we had many things in common. One of these things was our love for old band music, and Ken was surprised that I knew a few of his favorite composers, like Henry Fillmore and Karl King. As we talked about organs and band music, I mentioned that I was considering building saxophone pipes for my organ, and when I arrived home, Ken had sent me his drawings for saxophone pipes. His drawings are real works of art. Not only do his drawings provide all the necessary dimensions, there is usually an isometric view of the organ pipe that includes shading, wood grain, and carefully done lettering. These are first done in pencil, and then completed in ink. Ken had real passion for everything about band organs, and it showed in his drawings.

Ken and I exchanged many letters. It was about this time that he told me about

the American Band Organ Association. This was a club started by Ken himself, and he suggested that I should include an ABOA rally during our next summer trek. It was also about this time that Ken suggested that my wife and I stop by his house and visit the following year. That year the MBSI rally was at Crossroads Village in Michigan. So we planned our "rally-vacation" to include two rallies and a visit to the Smith's, and my life has never been the same since.

My wife and I continued to visit the Smiths every summer during rally season. Ken's wife Marian, and daughter Susan, have always been gracious hosts. The Smith's house became our home away from home, as we sometimes stayed with them for a week or two, with a rally or two in between.

At Ken's house I was able to inspect both his Ruth and Gavioli organs up close, without the distraction of all the things that go on at a rally. His organs are incredible masterpieces of craftsmanship. In fact, his house is filled with things that he has built, including a very large live steam locomotive. After seeing his work, I don't know anybody who is a greater craftsman.

Ken's craftsmanship has become a real inspiration for me to do better work. This inspiration influenced me to the point that I wanted to completely rebuild my band organ after seeing his. Some of my early work I was even a little embarrassed to show Ken. I always thought my work was pretty good, with nothing really well done to compare it to.

So, each summer my wife and I would visit with the



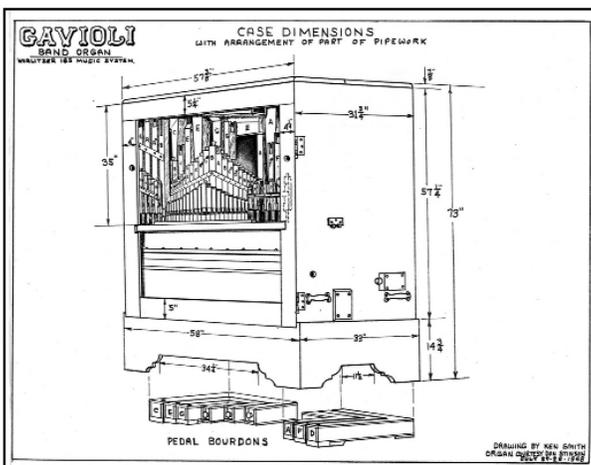
Master craftsman Ken Smith and his home-built 89-key Gavioli organ.  
Photo: David Wasson

Smiths, and I would come home pumped up and ready to do work on my organ. My band organ has changed significantly over the years, influenced greatly by Ken and his organs. I finally did completely rebuild my organ, and I tried to build everything as well, and as neatly as I could. My work will never be as nice as Ken's, but I am very happy with the way my organ sounds. I am also glad that Ken got to hear my organ.

Often while staying at the Smiths, we would caravan together to the rallies. Ken would always try to make sure that we could have our organs close to each other at the rallies. Ken liked to listen to my organ, and I liked to listen to his. He also wanted to be close so we could play our horns along with the organs. Something we also did at his house for hours on end.

The past years have gone by so quickly, and I'm glad I got to meet Ken. I think I am better for having known him. He had become such a fixture in my life, it's hard to imagine a rally season without visiting and socializing with him. Ken had planned this past year to be the last year that he was going to take an organ out to rallies. It is sad, but it has certainly turned out to be true.

Ken has given me much inspiration and many words of wisdom about organ building, and life in general. I am grateful for this. I will miss him.



An example of Ken Smith's drawing capabilities—the case for his 89-key Gavioli fair organ. Ken Smith archives.

## Kenneth L. Smith

November 1, 1928 — January 6, 2005

### Neil Smith

Ken Smith passed away on January 6, 2005 at his residence after having been diagnosed with a brain tumor in mid-November, 2004. Ken is survived by Marian, his wife of 50 years, and his daughter Susan.

Ken was born November 1, 1928 in the small Northwestern Ohio town of Cecil, located in Paulding County. Ken grew up there with his two older twin brothers and a younger sister. Ken also developed three of his lifelong interests at an early age in his hometown. He remained passionate about these hobbies until the last days of his life.

Ken became interested in brass band music at a very early age when his father, Ray O. Smith, formed a community band with Ken, all of his siblings, and the other youth of the Cecil area. He continued to play and collect band instruments, as well as band music, for the rest of his life.



Ken Smith in 1972—the early days of the Gavioli. Ken was age 43 in this photo.

Then, one of the main lines for the Wabash Railroad ran through Cecil. This led Ken into another lifelong passion, his love for railroads and steam locomotives.

The Wabash steam engine #602 made daily runs through Cecil, permitting Ken to watch as it made its many trips through town. In later years, Ken would scratch build an exact 1½" scale replica of #602 which actually operated on coal and steam, and was large enough to ride on. For many years, Ken had a 1½" scale railroad track in his own backyard in order to operate the #602 in complete authenticity.

Ken also scratch-built many "O" scale model locomotives, and rebuilt and detailed many others that he picked up along the way. He had a large model railroad layout in the

attic of his garage, which always remained a work in progress.

Ken was a regular member and exhibitor with the Central Ohio "O" Scale Engineers' Model Railroads Club at the Kingsdale Shopping Center in Columbus, Ohio. Ken was a faithful exhibitor on the 2nd and 4th Saturdays of each month with added showings at Christmas time.

It just so happened that on many summer evenings in his hometown of Cecil, movies would be shown outdoors on the side of one of the buildings by a traveling movie operator using portable equipment. The movies in Cecil created yet another lifelong interest for Ken.

For several years he made his living in the theatre business. He started at the bottom by first working the concession stand, selling and taking tickets, cleaning the theatre, and

after a while, working his way up to projectionist, and later to theatre manager at several theatres. In time, he accepted the theatre management job at a drive-in theatre in Zanesville, Ohio. Later in life, he was even the weekend projectionist for the summer movie series at the beautiful historic Ohio Theatre in downtown Columbus, Ohio.

Ken also built a movie theatre in his basement, with a projection booth with two professional theatre projectors complete with carbon arc lamps. He set up a movie museum in his home housing an extensive collection of projectors, film and related equipment. He was a very accomplished rebuilder of movie equipment, as well.

In 1963, Ken took a job as a machinist at Battelle Memorial Institute in Columbus. Marian and Susan remained in Zanesville while Ken was getting settled into his new routine at Battelle.

To fill in some of his extra time in the evenings, Ken decided to attend the Ohio State Fair that was in progress in August of 1963. He didn't realize it at the time, but as a result of this trip to the fair, Ken's life was about to change forever.

The Gooding Amusement Company had a very large trailer-mounted German concert band organ, a Ruth style 38, exhibited at the fair. Needless to say, Ken spent his entire evening gazing at, and listening to the very ornate "Gooding Ruth." The band organ bug had bitten, and the seeds of yet another passion had been planted in the heart of Ken Smith. Even so, very little information was available at that time about band organs. As Ken would later say, he had his "nose to the glass" for a long while trying to find out anything about band organs.

As time passed, he made the acquaintance of Jerry Betts, a band organ owner and enthusiast. The meeting of Jerry would lead to the acquaintance of Don Stinson of Bellefontaine, Ohio. Don serviced and repaired band organs for several amusement parks and carnivals. Ken and Don became friends and this gave Ken the opportunity to see the "inside workings" of many different band organs. As Don would get in organs for service or repair, Ken would go to Don's to study, measure and make sketches of the organs. He would go home and make finished drawings from these sketches. Over the years, Ken made hundreds of professional quality drawings detailing band organs, band organ pipes and mechanisms.

Sometime in the late 1960's, Ken began work on the "Grand Gavioli," an 89-key Gavioli replica. He did it all. He designed it, built all of its 402 pipes, built the wind-chest, did all of the cabinetwork, carved all of the carvings, painted it, lettered it...everything!



In 1973 Ken was sketching pump details at Don Stinson's workshop in Bellefontaine, Ohio.



Ken (on trumpet), the late Cliff Pollock, Ron Bopp and the late Mike Kitner playing in the ABOA band at a rally in Jefferson, Texas, hosted by Cliff and Robbie Gray.

After this, he began work on yet another organ, “Der Baby Ruth,” a Ken Smith design of a 63-key Ruth replica. The music scale on Der Baby Ruth was Ken Smith’s own design. Once again, he did it all! He built the cabinet, the 330 pipes, the valves, the wind-chest, the pump, the crankshaft, the carvings, the painting, the lettering...all of it!

The Grand Gavioli and the Ruth each took ten years to build. Keep in mind, over that 20-year period, Ken was still a full time machinist at Battelle. The building of the Gavioli and the Ruth was done on nights, weekends and many lunch breaks at Battelle!

For both the Ruth and the Gavioli, Ken made all of the cardboard books for the music. He transposed arrangements to the Gavioli and the Ruth scale. He punched all of the music books for both organs, one hole at a time, using a foot operated punching machine that he had built from a photograph, incorporating some of his own design modifications.

In 1982, Ken decided he would take the 63 key Ruth to the MBSI Band Organ Rally at Zoar, Ohio. He rented a horse trailer and took the Ruth to its first rally. The Ruth was a hit and Ken had a great time.



Ken posing with the 63-key Ruth organ in 1985.

Later, Ken purchased a used horse trailer to transport the Ruth to the 1983 and 1984 band organ rallies. By the time the 1984 season arrived, the rally bug had also bitten.

In 1981, Ken had drawn a membership certificate for the American Band Organ Association. In 1981, there was no association, not even an idea for one. The only thing that existed was a pretty paper certificate, which Ken framed and started displaying in front of his organ at rallies. People began seeing the certificate and started asking Ken many questions about joining, the cost of dues, the meeting dates, etc. They wanted to know how to get one of the membership certificates.

Ken would just explain that there was no association, but he would give them a certificate and take down their names as official members of the organization that didn’t really exist!

By 1984, Ken had decided one organ rally per year just wasn’t enough. So, he announced that the first ABOA Band Organ Rally would be held just across the road from his Blacklick, Ohio residence on October 19, 1985. The American Band Organ Association was now official and the founder and president was Ken Smith.

For the 1985 organ rally season, Ken had a custom made trailer built of his own design by the Wells Cargo Co. of Elkhart, Indiana. By this time, anyone that knew Ken knew that he was serious about band organ rallies—Ken didn’t part easily with money, and the new trailer was a major outlay of cash.

Over the years, Ken took his organs to many regional events: The Great Circus Parade in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and numerous band organ rallies as far away as Kansas and Texas. He took Der Baby Ruth to several organ rallies in 2004.

When Ken formed the American Band Organ Association, its primary goals were to increase the interest in band organs, and to be able to produce more organ rallies each year.

As the membership and number of people attending the rallies continued to grow, a need was felt to establish a formal organization in order to collect dues and to create a publication to publicize the rally dates, and to feature articles of interest for the members. In early 1999, The Carrousel Organ Association of America was formed out of the membership of ABOA. This organization provides the kind of magazine that Ken had always hoped to see published that is dedicated entirely to band organs.

Ken had not been feeling well since mid-October of 2004. In November, he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor.

Ken passed away in his sleep at his home on Thursday, January 6, 2005. He was 76 years old. He was a truly remarkable man with so many talents. His passing will leave a giant, unfillable place in the hearts of those of us who were privileged to know him.

Out of the small town of Cecil, Ohio came a brilliant man who simply loved life and lived life dedicated to the passions of his life, to his family, and to the friends who shared those interests with him.



Neil Smith and Ken enjoying a good time at the last ABOA rally in Marion, Ohio, in 1999.

Ken will be sorely missed by so many of us; but we are grateful to have known him, to have been taught many things by him, and to have witnessed his brilliance in all he did.

We, the people he has left such lasting impressions upon, know today that...

***No brass band is playing on the corner,  
The movie theatre is dark,  
Locomotive #602 is without steam,  
and  
The band organs are now silent.***

Written as a tribute and eulogy for the memorial service January 10, 2005

All Photos courtesy of Neil Smith

Neil L. Smith  
(friend of 31 years)  
Chillicothe, Ohio

## Memories of Ken Smith

Herb Brabant

I first met Ken Smith 30 years ago when he and his wife, Marian, were passing through Louisville. At that time Ken was in the process of building his famous 89-keyless “Gavioli” organ and I was invited up to Columbus for a visit. Shortly thereafter, I found myself at the Smiths’ where Ken explained the Organ was a “work-in-process” as he was still working on the beautifully carved facade and experimenting with the pipe work.

In the early days of our friendship I spent many week-ends at the Smiths—they were so very hospitable and I always felt welcome. From Saturday morning to Sunday evening the routine was very similar. We talked organs, worked on organ-related projects, and listened to organs, with a few hours off for sleep and great meals prepared by Marian and Susan, their daughter.



Ken in his music room in 1988. Photo: Neil Smith.

Ken was certainly one of the most talented persons I’ve ever known. He touched many people in different ways, as he had so many interests. He was a student, a teacher, a craftsman, an artist, a musician, and above all—a great father and wonderful partner with his wife, Marian.

As a student, Ken was extremely thorough and analytical in his approach

to everything. He collected huge amounts of information pertaining to every aspect of organ building and measured every detail of more organ pipes than anyone I know. He experimented with different types of woods, leathers, pneumatics, pipe configurations, cardboard types and many other details related to organ building.

As a teacher, he was considered by many people as the “old master” that everyone sought out for advice and solutions to their organ building problems. He was generous with his time and over the years helped many people with their organ projects.

Ken was a precision machinist in his “working days” at the Battelle Institute in Columbus and his discipline was such that the quality of his work was impeccable and unrivaled. He carved every piece

on every facade of his organs and when it came time to paint the facades, he took a “crash course” in painting and turned out some rather respectable results.

Ken’s many other interests included building a scale model steam locomotive and tender which at one time he could ride on a track layout on his property. This was featured on the front page of a prominent model railroaders magazine. In later years, his railroad-  
i n g  
i n t e r e s t s  
m o v e d  
i n d o o r s

and he created a huge model train layout with a roundhouse/turntable and a sophisticated track layout.

When I first met Ken, he enjoyed running the movie projectors at the

famous Ohio Theatre for special showings. This activity carried over into another hobby of restoring old carbon arc lamp projectors and related equipment. He built a small theatre in his home for projecting 35mm theatre films and furnished it with chairs so comfortable that on several occasions I found it difficult to stay awake.

Anyone who has ever visited the Smiths’ knows there was a nice collection of brass musical instruments in the music room. One of Ken’s favorite past-times was getting together with a group of friends and jamming. He played the trombone, trumpet, Sousaphone, and tuba. Many of us remember some of the lively entertainment sessions playing the old favorites late into the night at various organ rallies.

Ken was also able to arrange music for his organs and did so for the 89-key Gavioli scale and also for the unique scale he designed for his “Bebe Ruth” organ.

Ken will really be missed by the many organ friends with whom he interacted over the years. I know the sting of his passing is difficult for Marian and daughter, Susan, but I think they would agree Ken lived a very full life and they were the most fortunate ones to have shared more of his life than anyone. I consider myself fortunate to have known him as I did. I will miss him. He was my friend.



Ken playing the baritone horn accompanied by David and Darlene Wasson at a 2004 COAA rally. Photo: Neil Smith.