

Band Organ Adventure(s)

Don Janisch

In 1959 I had been acquiring player pianos and nickelodeons to add to my collection. During one particular purchase of a KT Seeburg from Clyde Brown's Red Barn Antiques at Ephraim, Wisconsin, I was greeted by Clyde with the question "Want to see my band organ?" I responded very sincerely that I never heard one, never seen one, and in fact I did not know what he was talking about.

Clyde then showed me to the back room of his store where, he pointed out, was a band organ. Curiosity got the best of me and I began to look it over. Mmmmmmmmmmit looked like it played a roll so it must be something interesting in the least. He then said, "Stand back a ways and I will turn it on." Following his instructions I patiently waited for it to begin doing whatever it was supposed to do. All of a sudden I heard the very loud blast of brass trumpets, drums, cymbal, etc. My heart speeded up, my arms went limp, my breathing got deeper, and I felt weak all over. Wow! This has got to be the greatest mechanical music instrument ever built!

As it turned out the machine was a Wurlitzer Model 125 band organ, recently tuned to perfection, by a kid from Manitowoc, Wisconsin. It was done to perfection. Clyde related to me that this kid, who's name was Chris Fiereisen, was there with his folks on vacation and while there, volunteered to tune the organ as it evidentially sounded pretty bad. With fear and trepidation, Clyde approved. Upon seeing his organ being dismantled with the horns and pipes laid out on the floor, Clyde began having second thoughts about this kid.

But as Clyde would later find out, the tuning turned out superb. It seems this organ was from a roller skating rink in Escanaba, Michigan and never had seen much use or abuse. The tune I heard first play on it was *Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom Time*. I can truthfully say that I have never heard a better sounding military band organ in my life, which is almost 50 years later.

I thought about that sound a lot over the next few months and decided that I had to have one of those band organs also. But how, where, when? At that time I did not know of any such machines, where to look, or even how to go about it. So . . . a brainstorm! I would advertise for one to buy. At the library I researched the question and decided to put an ad in a national magazine called *Billboard*. That ad read "Wanted to buy Band Organ, Donald Janisch, Marshall, Wisconsin."

Low and behold, I got a letter in response from a Mr. Richard F. who lived in Georgia. It seems he had a model 148 Wurlitzer Band Organ that he would sell for the then tidy sum of \$350.00. I immediately sent him the money and he said he would ship it within a few days. He also told me it would take a little while longer as he only had one arm after having lost it in a Ferris wheel accident. Well, a few days went by. Then a few weeks. I then thought I should call Mr. F. to see where the organ was. He said the organ was on its way and would be delivered within two days by Yellow Truck Lines. Well, the day finally came. I watched as the truck came up Highway T after turning off of Highway 19. I was so excited, I ran out to our driveway to guide him in. However . . . the truck did not even slow down. I then thought he probably mistakenly missed my house. So I followed him down to the feed mill where he was unloading. No, he answered, he did not have my delivery for me that day and didn't know of any coming up.



A typical Style 148 Military Band Organ.

I began to get worried, so I thought I had better call Mr. F. once more to check on it. Much to my surprise a voice came on the line "Georgia YMCA." I thought at the time it was a strange place for a band organ. Upon inquiring the clerk told me that "yes, Mr. F. is staying here but he is not in right now." Being of a naively suspicious nature, I then asked if Mr. F. had one arm or two. The clerk said that the gentleman definitely had two arms. Oh oh!

But anyway, Mr. F. called me back to reassure me the organ was on its way. Both my mother and I spoke with him regarding the ship-

ment. But . . . the organ never came and Mr. F. had moved out with no forwarding address. Ouch!

The only thing I could think of was to contact Mr. Ralph Tussing of North Tonawanda, New York, who I knew to be the successor to the Wurlitzer Band Organ business, as well as a repairman. Mr. Tussing in no short terms, yes he knew of Mr. Richard F. and he was one of the biggest crooks in the carnival arena. Ouch again!

My next brilliant (I thought) move was to put another ad in *Billboard* Magazine. My ad of January 13, 1962 read "Will Mr. Richard F. please ship the band organ I bought from him and paid for. Donald Janisch, Marshall, Wisconsin."

Again, no results. So I went to the Madison Police Department and sat with my canceled check in hand, asking for help. Again, no help here as I guess they thought was just another worthless check victim. So after an hour or so I left. But on my way out, I noticed an office marked FBI. I thought, why not? So I presented my sad story to the gentlemen there. Surprise! They seemed interested in my problem. So, I showed them my canceled check along with my second ad and the details such as both my Mother and I having spoken to Mr. "Swindler." They said they would get back to me . . . right!

I heard no more until one day I got a phone call (I was still living at home) from Mr. Richard F. He pleaded "Please, please drop the charges. I am here in Madison and they are holding me in jail. I must get out!" I responded, "No Mr. F. I cannot do that, it is in the hands of the FBI and I no longer have anything to do with it." He went on and on about the injustice of it. What seemed to have tripped him up was that both my mother and I heard him making the deal to ship us the organ. What happened was they got him on a violation of an interstate commerce communication law.

I had pretty much forgotten the experience after having graduated from Madison Business College and getting a job way up in Cheboygan, Michigan for the Charmin Paper Company. I was living at the Old Orchard Cabins just south of Cheboygan. Wow, would you believe it? On January 7, 1967, I received a check in the mail from Mr. Bronson C. Lafollette of the FBI office for \$350.

Even though my collecting band organs got off to a rather rough start, I gained much disrespect for crooks and much respect for the law.

The collecting bug bit me at a young age. (16 years old) It began with old cars, then player pianos, then nickelodeons, then band organs, then slot machines, then antiques, etc. Slowed down a little while raising a family but now am enjoying life at 72 years of age.