

## Ralph Tussing

by Matthew Caulfield

The Tussing family was important in American band organ history, especially with regard to the North Tonawanda segment of the industry. The Tussings were a musical family, as attested by a 1915 picture of the Tussing Family Band (**Figure 1**). Ralph Tussing, then aged 20, is on the left, holding a trombone. Henry Tussing, one of the principals of the North Tonawanda Musical Instrument Works (NTMIW), and later the Artizan Factories, Inc., is the third seated figure, with his French horn in his lap. Henry was an arranger for both companies and also Music Department foreman at NTMIW.

Ralph Tussing, who was Henry's nephew, born December 22, 1894, had a varied career until the end of World War II, as shown by listings for him in the Tonawandas directories. Tonawanda and North Tonawanda, N.Y., are twelve miles north of Buffalo, along the Niagara River. The two Tonawandas are separated only by the Erie Canal, whose western terminus is at the Niagara River. While all the band organ companies were located in North Tonawanda, many employees, including Ralph Tussing, lived across the canal in Tonawanda. John W. Tussing lived thirteen miles away in Niagara Falls, N.Y.



Figure 1. Jean Robins identifies the nine men in the Tussing Family Band as: (first row) John Tussing, Christian Tussing, Sr., Henry Tussing, George Tussing (Augusta, Ga.); (second row) Ralph Tussing, LeRoy Tussing, John William Tussing (Niagara Falls), Christian O. Tussing, Raymond Tussing. LeRoy and Raymond were twins, as were John and George.

John William Tussing, Henry's son and one of Wurlitzer's principal arrangers from 1930 (or even earlier) until the company discontinued its roll business at the end of World War II, is standing in the middle of the back row, holding a trumpet. After Wurlitzer left the roll business, John W. continued with Wurlitzer as a music teacher until his death July 14, 1955.

An interesting fact is that North Tonawanda rivaled Chicago, even passing it one year, as the leading port in the U.S. for the importation of lumber. During the heyday of the musical instrument industry whole families spent their lives in the employ of deKleist, Wurlitzer, NTMIW, Niagara Musical Instrument Manufacturing Company, Artizan, or of the

carousel manufacturers there, Armitage Herschell, Spillman Engineering, Herschell Spillman, and Allan Herschell. For example, the 1935 directory shows six members of the Wurl family working for Wurlitzer.

It is commonly believed that Ralph Tussing was a major arranger of Wurlitzer's band organ music, but this flies in the face of evidence to the contrary. The Rudolph Wurlitzer Company archives, now in the Archives Center of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, ought to be a good source of information. But sadly, whoever was responsible for culling the important from the ephemeral when assembling the record of Wurlitzer's history (1856-1988) was more interested in financial reports, sewer and water maps, and product promotion than in personnel matters. The most pertinent personnel record in the archive is a payroll ledger from 1918, which lists Wurlitzer's approximately 700 employees. Ralph Tussing is carried there as employee #99.

The entries are rather cryptic and would require a great deal of study to properly interpret them. For each week of the year all 700 employee names are entered in a neat bookkeeper hand on successive pages. Each employee's hours and earnings are entered in the appropriate column across the page, according to the type of work they did during the week. Wages are usually noted as "full" or "cont." "Cont" probably means contract work, but that is not proven. For the week of June 6, Ralph Tussing is recorded as working "full" in the category "music rolls, non-productive labor." Likewise for the week of June 13, where Ralph was one of seven men so entered.



Figure 2. Masters in the library of the Herschell Carousel Factory Museum showing the name of "Benz", apparently a Wurlitzer roll department inspector.

Two names listed there following Ralph's ring a bell: Fred Benz and Chas. Nelson. Those names may explain some heretofore mysterious notations on many surviving Wurlitzer music roll masters that are now in the Herschell Carousel Factory Museum. Some masters have the circled initials "C.N." in blue pencil on their leaders; others have "Benz" flourished in blue on them (Figure 2). It seems clear now that these were approval marks by people in the Wurlitzer Roll Department.

Following the names of the men in the 1918 payroll ledger are the names of fourteen females, all but one shown as "cont" and doing "productive labor, music rolls." The one exception, Ida Luttmann, shown as "full" and doing "non-productive labor, music rolls." Preserved here in the 1918 payroll ledger are probably the identities of the ladies pictured in the well-known March 1919 photograph of the Wurlitzer roll-perforating room (Figure 3).

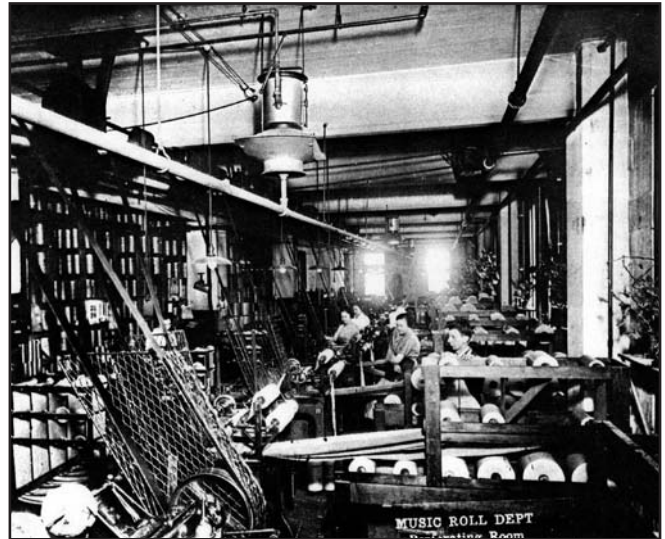


Figure 3. The music roll department of the Wurlitzer factory.

In the weeks of August 1, August 29, and September 26 (random samplings), Ralph Tussing is shown as doing "productive labor, instruments." By the month of December, Ralph was working both in "instruments" and in "music rolls." So in 1918, at least, Ralph Tussing was employed in a couple of capacities at the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company, although seemingly as a contract worker, as were many employees.

A check of the Tonawandas directories shows Ralph Tussing living in 1923 at 33 Scott Street, Tonawanda, and working as music arranger for both Wurlitzer and the Rand Company, which had purchased NTMIW in 1917. The 1929 directory shows him as a music arranger for Artizan. That is the last directory to show Ralph working for a band organ company. Gordon Tussing reports that his father got his start in the band organ business at an early age working at NTMIW with his cousin, John W. Tussing.

In 1930, Ralph is listed as working for "G P Co" (General Plastics). The directories from 1932 to 1935 list him as partner with Edward J. and Harold Tussing in a business operated out of his Scott Street home called Tussing Delivery. The Tussing Delivery enterprise consisted of trucks picking up groceries and produce from wholesalers at Buffalo's Washington Market and delivering them to retail stores in the Tonawandas and Niagara Falls. Tussing Delivery continued operating after 1935, but Ralph was no longer connected with it. He worked for Durez Company, according to the 1936 directory, and then from 1937 to 1946-47 for Spaulding Fibre



Company, manufacturers of Bakelite, where he is shown in the 1942 directory as a buffer for Spaulding.

At some point while working for the Wurlitzer Company, Ralph lost three fingers of his left hand in a sawing accident. In most photos taken of him, he is careful to conceal the loss. But it didn't deter Ralph from continuing to play the piano on occasion in order to arrange music for his music rolls.

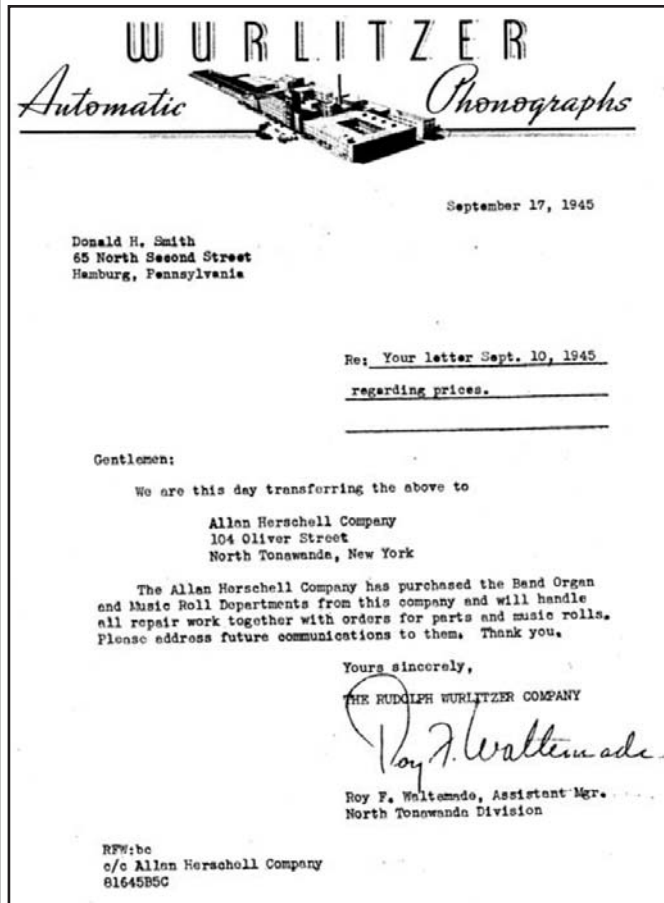


Figure 4. A Wurlitzer letter indicating the sale of the Music Roll Department to the Allan Herschell Company on September 17, 1945.

In 1945, as World War II ended, the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company returned to peacetime work and decided to quit the band organ and music roll business entirely (Figure 4). One can imagine the effect this news had on the Allan Herschell Company, which needed music for its rides. Ralph Tussing recalls getting a phone call from Herschell's president/owner, John Wendler, asking him to go to the Wurlitzer plant and select for Herschell everything that he deemed useful for setting up a band organ department. Ralph was then hired to run that department. This recollection is not documented, but what is known is that Wurlitzer's last style 125, 150, and 165 band organ rolls were issued in early 1945 (February 28 for the 150 roll) and in 1946, Herschell issued under its own label one (or two?) style 165 rolls and two style 150 rolls. Lou Rosa, a Wurlitzer employee at that time, wrote in a letter dated January 14, 1987: "I was responsible for turning over the roll cutting equipment to Ralph Tussing in 1946. The Wurlitzer Co. was no longer interested in roll cutting."

It appears that Herschell found the band organ business too unprofitable, because they soon divested themselves of the new operation, selling it to Ralph Tussing and two partners, Ralph's son Gordon Tussing, Sr., and his son-in-law, Lloyd Robins. Max Nowicki reportedly wanted to buy the equipment from Herschell, but the Tussings were able to raise the money before he could (Figure 5). The new business was incorporated as the T.R.T. Manufacturing Company on January 13, 1947. Its first 125 and 150 rolls appeared in January and February 1947, followed by a 165 roll in early 1947.

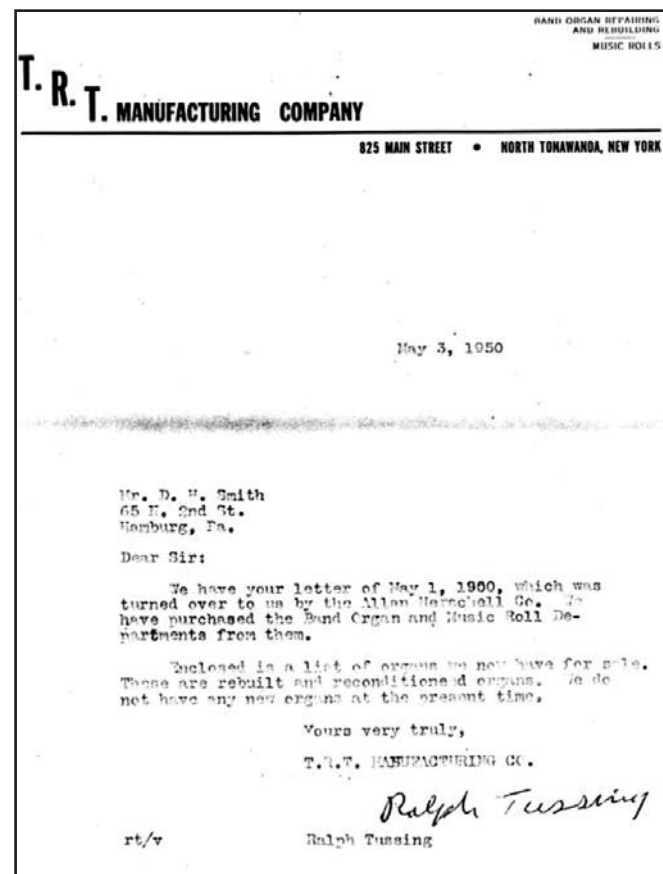


Figure 5. Tussing's letter indicating he had purchased the Band Organ and Music Roll Department from Allan Herschell.

If Herschell was compelled to enter the band organ music business to ensure that they could offer their customers the proper music, it may be their development of the Merri-Org that allowed them to exit the field almost as quickly as they entered. The Merri-Org was basically a three-speaker sound system playing 78-R.P.M. records through a large amplifier, housed in a cabinet behind a band organ façade. For pictures and detailed description of the device, see p. 257-260 of *The American Carousel Organ*, by Ron Bopp. The records were produced by the Howell Recording Studio, Buffalo, N.Y., recording at the Herschell factory a band organ playing style 165 rolls. The sound is not exactly that of a Wurlitzer 165 organ, leading to speculation that Herschell had an organ spe-

cially made or modified to play Wurlitzer 165 music. John Wendler, in a cover letter dated June 17, 1948, to Dick Bowker, Pittsburgh, Pa., attached to a complete list of records made for the Merri-Org, claimed: "These records are actual recordings of band organ music, made here in our plant from a large band organ which we had built expressly for the purpose of making records." The Merri-Org allowed Herschell to gracefully exit the real band organ business.

The T.R.T. Manufacturing Company was originally located at 825 Main Street (now 825 River Road), North Tonawanda, in an old barn, still standing, but crumbling. The paper racks for the two Wurlitzer perforators T.R.T. had acquired are shorter-legged than the racks shown in old Wurlitzer factory pictures. On being asked about that, Gordon Tussing admitted that he and his father had sawed off the legs to make the racks fit in a corner of the shop. While it does not appear that Ralph Tussing did much music arranging for the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company, he was the arranger for the T.R.T. Manufacturing Company. In fact, T.R.T. was pretty much a one-man operation, although Ralph did receive some assistance from Gordon, who worked there full time for more than a year, and along with other family members.



Figure 6. The exterior of T.R.T. Mfg. Co., 138 Miller St., North Tonawanda, NY.

Eventually Ralph moved his shop to 138 Miller Street (Figure 6). Ralph's granddaughter, Lynn Robins Tuck, has vivid memories of her grandfather's Miller Street shop. She remembers her grandmother, Helen O. Tussing, working upstairs cutting the heavy cardboard masters for music rolls, using a mallet and punches of different note-lengths, making the holes in the positions that Ralph had marked. Lynn's mother, Jean Robins, and Gordon's wife, Vivian, did the book-keeping and paid the royalties for the business.

Gavin McDonough (d.b.a. today as the B.A.B. Organ Company) acquired a background in organ construction and pipe voicing from working under George Losh, of the Midmer-Losh Pipe Organ Company, Merrick, N.Y., in the 1960s. Gavin was associated with Nunley's, Baldwin, Long

Island, where there were five band organs. Wanting to learn band organ work, Gavin went to visit Max Nowicki around 1964. Max, who is now 87 and still doing band organ repair in Milford, Conn., would have been about 44 years old then. Gavin found Max to be, like many men in the trade, defensive of his acquired knowledge and skills, passed on to him by his father, who was also a long-time band organ repairman. Max told Gavin that it was "in the family" and that he was not interested in taking on a student or sharing his knowledge.

So Gavin journeyed 500 miles north to T.R.T.'s storefront organ shop in North Tonawanda, in the days before a good highway system made travel a breeze, taking an organ vacuum pump needing to be re-leathered. Gavin found Ralph open and willing to talk about organ matters while he recovered the vacuum pumps over a period of a few days, with Gavin watching every step. Later Gavin brought more pumps for Ralph to work on, and thus began a friendly apprenticeship that spanned two summers. Ralph told Gavin he did not have money to pay a helper and there was not much work. But Gavin signed on, taking a room in a local railroad boarding house at \$30 per week, with one meal a day.



Figure 7. A view of a very cluttered Tussing workshop.

Ralph would fix organs brought into his shop, but did not travel out of state to do route work. Gavin was kept busy rebuilding unit valve blocks, making finger pneumatics, etc. The shop was cluttered (Figure 7) and cold in the winter, even with the warm-air furnace. Ralph would leave early some days, "to take the Mrs. shopping." Most of the organs Ralph worked on were small machines owned by carnivals or carousels, and they were usually in rough shape. Ralph did not do "restoration" or painting. As Gavin learned the ropes, he asked more questions and always found Ralph ready to share his knowledge. When asked how band organ rolls were made to accommodate the speed-up of the paper as the take-up spool circumference increased, Ralph took Gavin to the basement where the roll perforating equipment was located. He explained the operation of the tempo-compensation mechanism. The basement was a damp, dingy place with only ceiling light bulbs for illumination. Gavin was amazed that Ralph could work down there very long in the winter months.

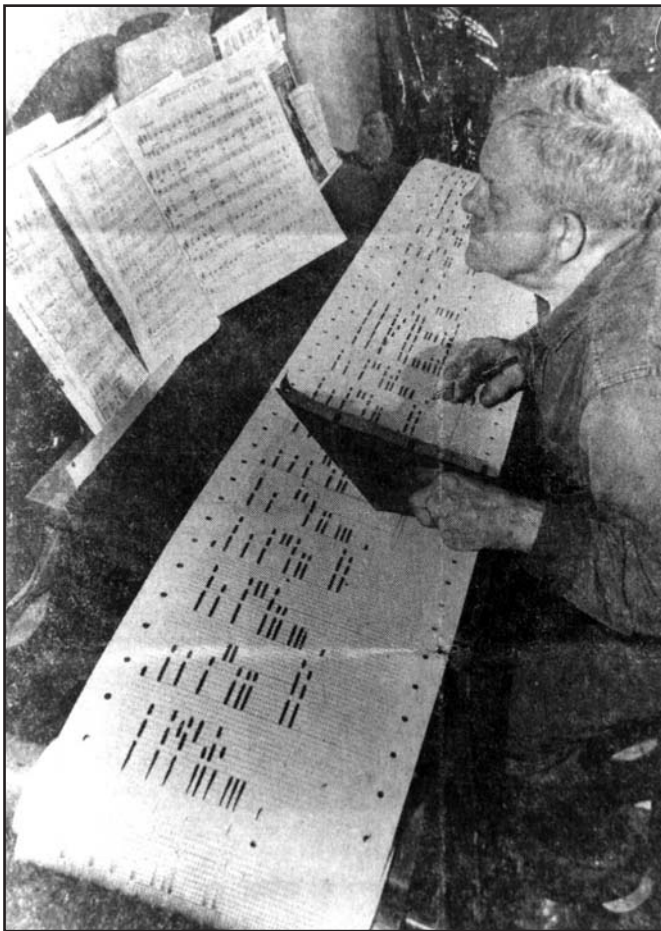


Figure 8. Ralph Tussing at his composing table working on a master for a band organ tune. Photo: Fred Dahlinger, Jr.

Gavin remembers Ralph saying, concerning arranging organ music: "Some days you get up and come to work and everything goes smoothly, and you get ideas easily of how to do a particular tune; and other days you feel bad, you don't have any ideas, and things go real bad" (Figure 8).

North Tonawanda during that time was a German/Italian/Polish area, with heavy manufacturing, factories, railroad sidings, smokestacks, and lots of traffic. With some factories running around the clock, 24 hours a day, the air was smoky and you could smell chemicals most of the time. Gavin seldom got back to the boarding house in time for his one meal a day, but there were plenty of diners and grills where he could get a nice meal with dessert for \$5.

Gavin was told by Joe Brugnotti, son of Dominic Brugnotti, one of the three partners in the B.A.B. Organ Company, Brooklyn, that at the end of World War II, Wurlitzer proposed merging its band organ operation with B.A.B. But B.A.B. was not interested in such a merger, and history took a different course.

From 1947, when he started the T.R.T. Manufacturing Company, to 1964, Ralph Tussing arranged thirty-one style 125 rolls and forty-four style 150 rolls. His style 165 roll arranging extended to 1967 and amounted to thirty-one rolls.

Each roll he arranged contained six tunes. Apparently Ralph did not arrange any rolls in the last seven years of his life, and it is not known how active his band organ repair business was during that period.

### OBITUARY

Reprinted with permission from the Tonawanda News, July 1, 1974. Tonawanda, N.Y.

**TUSSING**—Ralph Tussing, 79, of Tonawanda, Saturday evening (June 29, 1974) at De-Graff Memorial Hospital after a brief illness. A native of Tonawanda, he was the husband of Helen O. (nee Rummell) Tussing, who died in 1972. Mr. Tussing had been employed at Musical Instrument Works in North Tonawanda and The Wurlitzer Company for many years, and for the past 27 years owned and operated the TRT Manufacturing Co. in North Tonawanda, specializing in repairing and cutting music rolls for player pianos and for various amusement manufacturers throughout the United States including the Allan Herschell Co. and Astizan Band Organ Co. He was a life member of Local 209, American Federation of Musicians, a life member of Tonawanda's Post 264, American Legion Band and life member of the Gastown Sportsmen Club.

He is survived by a son, Ralph P. Tussing Sr. and a daughter, Mrs. Lloyd (Jean) Robins of Tonawanda; four grandchildren, Mrs. James A. Tuck of St. Johns, Newfoundland, Mrs. Robert J. Mitchell of Cape Elizabeth, Maine, Gordon P. Tussing Jr. of Kenmore and Miss Barbara Tussing of Tonawanda and four great-grandchildren; two brothers, Raymond C. Tussing Sr. and Harold O. Tussing of North Tonawanda, and several nieces and nephews.

Figure 9. Ralph Tussing's Obituary.

Info: Tonawanda News  
July 1, 1974

After Ralph's death (Figure 9) on June 29, 1974, Gordon Tussing, as executor of his estate, offered the T.R.T. business, equipment, and building for sale at \$120,000, or \$80,000 for the business and equipment alone, consisting of the following:

- 2 perforating machines
- 1 paper slitter
- 1 master roll punching block
- 1 music arranging table
- Over 1800 roll masters
- 1 printer for printing master cardboard
- 1 voicing table
- 1 partially built band organ
- 1 tracker frame layout
- 1 A-frame driving rig for band organs
- 1 motorized vacuum for checking bellows and unit valve blocks
- Metal casting patterns, all types
- Wooden pipes, all sizes, and reeds
- Snare and bass drums, drum heads
- Leather skins for bellows and unit valve blocks
- Brass trumpets
- Replacement parts for organs
- Used bellows
- Assorted chest and pipe channels
- Music rolls, music paper, boxes
- Music roll cores, assorted sizes
- Repair parts for unit valve blocks
- Clamps
- 2 glue pots
- Rubber tubing
- 1 unit valve block fixture (holds 24 blocks at onetime)
- 12-inch wood band saw, with stand and motor



- 1 Walker Turner bench drill press and motor
- 1 belt and disc sander with motor
- 1 double-end motorized bench grinder, 1/2" shaft
- 10-inch table saw and motor
- 1 one-ton punch press
- 6-inch metal lathe, accessories and motor
- 12-inch motorized planer
- 6-inch motorized joiner
- 12-inch-swing, 48-inch-bed metal lathe (quick change gears, 2 HP motor)
- Many small hand tools, small equipment
- 1 large office desk
- 1 metal 2-drawer file cabinet
- 1 metal 2-door storage cabinet
- 2 hand paper cutters
- Sheet music
- Intent-to-use rights and forms
- Blueprints of organ parts
- Royalty records
- Original music roll labels, tabs, etc.
- List of clientele
- Good will

In 1975 the inventory of the T.R.T. Manufacturing Company was purchased by Doyle Lane, d.b.a. Player Piano Centre, Vancouver, B.C. Assumedly some of this inventory is still owned by Doyle, now living in Middletown Springs, Vt. However the perforators, paper slitter, and roll masters are now back in North Tonawanda, on display in the Herschell Carrousel Factory Museum, after a long odyssey described elsewhere. The music arranging table is owned by Tim Trager, and into the surface of that table is scratched the name of Sylvia Schultz, along with the date April 2, 1925 (plus one other name that has not been deciphered, with the date February 2, 1919). Sylvia is known to have been a Wurlitzer arranger around 1920-1921, per the testimony of the late William Haessler, who was the Rand Corporation's music arranger in those years and who dated Sylvia Schultz.

It is hoped that this biography helps to sort fact from fiction, without adding too much additional fiction to the band organ history that is disappearing into the mists of time. Ralph Tussing himself sometimes added to the fiction in small ways. He claimed credit for much Wurlitzer arranging that was clearly the work of John W. Tussing. In a 1964 interview for the *Tonawanda Record*, titled ““Music Man” Ralph Tussing Alone Now In Fading Trade” and accompanied by a striking picture of Ralph in his final decade (**Figure 10**), Ralph states, when asked what T.R.T. stands for, that it stands for “Tussing, Ralph Tussing.” But that could easily be a misquote. Another common misunderstanding connected with the Tussing name is its proper pronunciation, which is "Two-sing," not "Tuss-ing."

Vivian Tussing commented, when reviewing a draft of this article: “Music ability has not left the Tussing family. Gordon Sr. still plays the piano, our daughter Judy also plays the piano, our son Gordon Jr. plays the trumpet, our granddaughter plays the flute and marimba, and our grandson plays the trumpet and the guitar. So you see we are still in the swing of things.”

[Sources: *The American Carousel Organ—An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, by Ron Bopp (Grove, Okla., 1998), with additional material supplied by him; records in the Wurlitzer archives (Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History); numerous email exchanges with Douglas Hershberger (North Tonawanda); letter of March 16, 2007 from Gavin McDonough (Richmond, Va.); directories in the Historical Society of the Tonawandas; communication from William Haessler, January 8, 1989; information from Gordon Tussing, Lynn Robins Tuck, Jean Robins, and Tim T. Trager; inspection of Wurlitzer and T.R.T roll masters (Herschell Carrousel Factory Museum, North Tonawanda)]

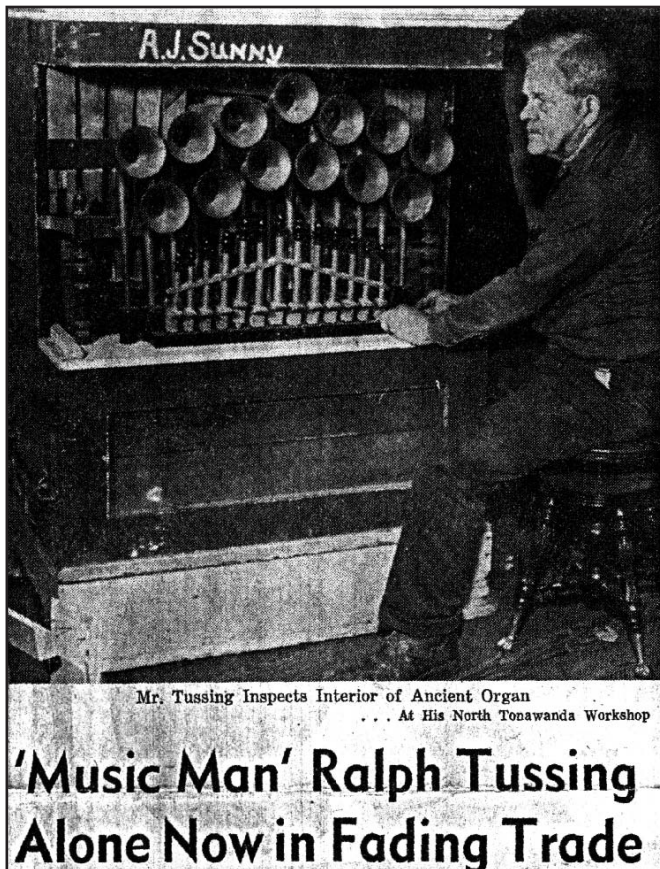


Figure 10. A 1964 article appearing in the *Tonawanda Record* detailed that period of Ralph Tussing's life.

Matthew Caulfield lives in the Rochester, N.Y., suburb of Irondequoit, one mile from the shore of Lake and Seabreeze Park, where he runs the Merry Go Round and maintains its 165 band organ.