

How Did I Get Involved?

David S. Smith

Some time back, I received an e-mail from Ron Bopp, with whom I have been acquainted for some years—we have corresponded and occasionally swapped organ items. We met and became better acquainted at the last Waldkirch International Organ festival in 1999. At the time of the e-mail, the COAA was just becoming established and Ron announced that he had agreed to become the editor of the new society's newsletter, to be called, the *Carousel Organ*. He asked me if I would consider contributing an article for inclusion in a future issue of the magazine. I immediately agreed to do so, not knowing at the time that I was soon to be in a similar situation to Ron, and would find it very difficult to find five minutes to do anything for myself. To cut a long story short. I recently confessed to Ron that I felt guilty at not having fulfilled my obligation to him. His reply was that as I felt guilty, he had a lever to ensure that he got an article. So, not wishing to be guilt ridden for ever, I set to thinking what I might write about, and that is when I got to wondering, how did I ever get involved in the world of organs? I have been a fan of mechanical organs for as many years as I can remember and I have often been asked the above question. The truth is, I don't really know. I just seem to have liked them forever.



Figure 1 (left). Irvin's Gallopers—some of the horses are in white paint following their restoration after the ride was in a crash.

Figure 2 (below). The 89-key Marenghi.



The first organ I ever remember is still one of my favorites. It is the 89-key Marenghi on the set of gallopers which was until recently traveled and operated by Benny Irvin (Figures 1 & 2). I come originally from the riverside town of Henley-on-Thames which the more athletic of you may know as the venue of the

famous Royal Regatta the world's premier rowing regatta. This annual event is always accompanied by a large fun fair and when I was a kid., the gallopers, then owned by Benny's father, George Irvin, would stand in the center of the fair. I can't remember if they were operated by steam at that time, but I suspect that they may have been since my dad always said he couldn't understand how I ever got to be interested in fairgrounds and organs as he remembered taking me for a ride on the horses when I was very small and the operator, or riding master as he was known, insisted on sounding a very loud whistle on the machine every time I passed by (I became hysterical so that Dad had to yell at the guy to stop the ride and let me get off). Some years later, I got my first job on the fairground working on a bingo stall which was sited right next to the gallopers and I well remember listening to the organ's entire repertoire many times over during the week I was there.

As an art student in the mid 60s, I became a bit bohemian in appearance and manner. Who remembers beatniks? Well, there I was! A crowd of us danced in front of the organ one year and one enterprising member of our group passed a hat around and for some unknown reason, the fair-going crowd threw in enough money for us to buy a crate of beer. The party went on for quite a while. I then got married and moved away from Henley and lost contact with the organ until many years later when I had become an "enthusiast" (a word I hate). Some friends were operating the newly restored famous Switchback Ventures "Rodeo Switchback" at the Great Dorset Steam Fair and as there was no organ with the ride at that time, they had borrowed the 89-key Marenghi. They invited my son Mathew, a friend and myself to become gavimen for the weekend. Can you imagine my delight to be standing at the key-frame of my favorite organ in the center of the ride everybody wanted to see and ride. Heaven couldn't be any better.



Figure 3. *De Lekkerkerker*, a 92-key Carl Frei Dutch Street Organ
Photo: Gerard Kattenbeld

Sometime just before I got married, I was off work ill and I was bored so Dad offered to take me into town. In the local record store I noticed an LP record of the Carl Frei Dutch street organ, *De Lekkerkerker* (Figure 3). I had always prided myself on having a broad interest in music, and so I bought the record and took it home to see what a Dutch barrel organ was. I was hooked. (The record still remains one of my all-time favorites). Pretty soon I was visiting steam rallies, which in those days were not so large or plentiful, and buying more records. I began to be able to differentiate between the different makes and types of organ, but as a reasonably shy person, I didn't get involved with anyone, so all my knowledge came from books and observation.

When I met my future wife, Sylvia, she lived only a stone's throw from the showman, Jimmy Williams, who at that time was travelling a set of gallopers. He was later to sell the gallopers (complete with 87-key Gavioli) to a buyer in the States who operated them in an amusement park in Atlantic City where I believe they still languish in disuse. Jimmy also owned the Rodeo Switchback, which he also sold to the same owner, but the story of the rescue and restoration of that ride is well known. At that time I was able to observe the work that was being carried out on the rides. Also, Sylvia had a rather nice camera and I began to take photos of what I saw, and so began a new facet to my hobby. Jimmy Williams was to sell the rides and later purchase another set of gallopers, with a 65-key Gaudin, which he restored to his usual high standard of excellence.

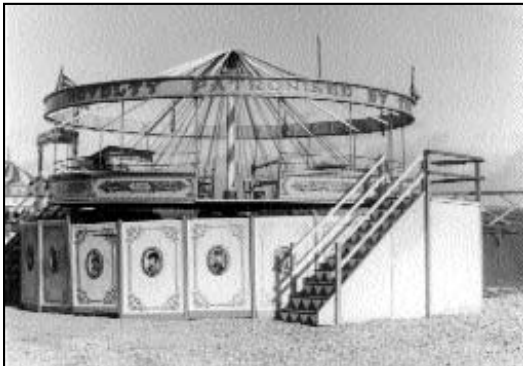


Figure 4. The unique Razzle Dazzle at Penwith Pleasure Park, built ca. 1908 by the Howcroft Carriage and Wagon Works.

maybe took them on too many as these days, their interest has waned but mind you, there are the grandchildren now!

At around the time I started taking the kids with me, I met Colin Middle, who was operating a sales stand for the FOPS and he gave me a membership form—foolish man! I joined the society, and I don't think my wife has ever forgiven me. Colin and I became good friends and when he became a member of the committee, it was Colin, who knowing that I worked in the printing industry, persuaded the committee to let me print the covers for the *Key Frame* in full color. That was a great success with the members and over the years we have expanded that to include calendars, postcards and so on.

I became even more involved in the world of organs and fairground one year when I was out in my car and very close to

my home, I spied a Showman's steam Traction Engine parked up on a low loader. Nobody seemed to know who it belonged to and I watched it until the crew came and drove off. I followed it to a place where a steam attraction had operated some years before, but was now closed. I couldn't follow the engine all the way as it was private property, so I got out of my car and climbed onto a fence to get a better look. There seemed to be several steam engines and a load of trucks with lord knows what in them. I was so absorbed in the sight before me, I didn't hear anyone behind me. A loud voice shook me out of my thoughts. "Who the hell are you?" I felt like a little kid caught stealing apples. It was Tom Lagar who had purchased all the rides and engines that had recently formed the Hollycombe Steam Fair and which were about to become part of Penwith Pleasure Park (Figure 4). 'Uh, I'm interested in these things and I was just being nosy.' "Oh," he said, "Do you know anything about organs, because we've got four of them and nobody knows a thing about them." Can you believe my luck? There I was with four organs, an 89-key Gavioli, a 48-key Bruder (Figure 5), a 35-key Limonaire and a 28-keyless Chiappa to play with, and Christmas had passed us a week previously. For the next three years I was in my glory with seven old-time, steam-driven rides, four organs and a load of old time attractions less than a mile from my house.

The attraction was not to last as it was in the wrong place and badly managed. It was sold again, but I suppose the best thing that came from my brief connection with the park was all the people with similar interests with whom I became acquainted. I made a lot of friends, many of whom I am still in touch with today. It was sad to see the rides leave Cornwall, but today they are in good hands and the rarer ones are destined to form part of the much-mooted English Fairground Heritage Museum.



Figure 5. The figures on the 48-key Bruder at Penwith Pleasure Park.

The result of me having become involved with the printing of organ pictures has culminated in me becoming a member of the FOPS committee, and more recently, I have taken over the job as Editor of the *Key Frame*. But mostly, I value the friendships and acquaintances I have made with people all over the world who share the same interests and love of the *Happiest Music on Earth*.

When did I first become involved with fairground organs? I haven't the faintest idea!

(All photographs by the author except where noted.)

David Smith is the current Editor of the *Key Frame* (Fair Organ Preservation Society). He has produced many beautiful postcard sets of fairground organs from both England as well as Europe.