

## A deKleist Barrel Organ

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Collecting mechanical music takes on an entire spectrum of activities ranging from owning an actual mechanical music piece; restoring yours or other's mechanical items; researching an item or a collection; and yes, even authoring articles about this interesting hobby. These different areas of our specialization will make the heartbeat race when any or all are encountered. Such was the case when I attended a recent annual meeting of the Musical Box Society International (MBSI) in Las Vegas in late August of 2008. The “highlight” of the meeting was an auction co-sponsored by the MBSI and the Victorian Casino Antique firm, located in Las Vegas.

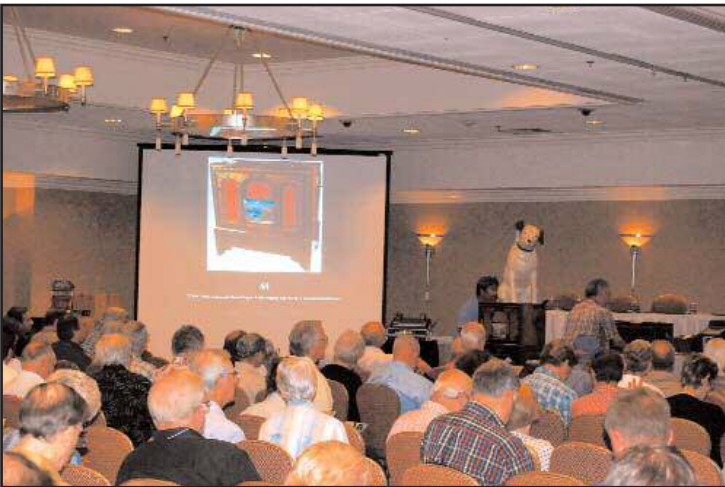


Figure 1. The 25-key deKleist shown on screen as it was auctioned in Las Vegas in August, 2008.

A catalog was sent to all those who had registered—unfortunately most of the items offered were of very little interest to an advanced fair and hand organ enthusiast such as myself (Figure 1). There was one item, however, which did ignite a little fire within me, from a listing of item #44 “25-key North Tonawanda Barrel Organ, 9 air, original lake scene with beautiful inlaid front.” Thinking this was a barrel organ produced by the North Tonawanda Musical Instrument Company (NTMIC) the “little fire” remained somewhat diminutive however. I normally take my camera to such meetings to document anything organ related and COAA member, Fred Dahlinger, had also requested I photograph this organ as well.

To my surprise this was not a NTMIC organ but rather, one marketed by Eugene deKleist (Figure 2). The organ was marked with the “North Tonawanda Barrel Organ Factory” label inside (Figure 3). The North



Figure 2. A close-up of the 25-key deKleist barrel organ with an attractive inlay case.

Tonawanda Barrel Organ Factory was Eugene deKleist’s first American endeavor in the mass production and marketing of organs for the carousel and roller rinks. The factory opened in 1893, a year after his arrival in America from England. The business operated under that name until 1903 then the deKleist Musical Instrument Manufacturing Company name was adopted and used until 1908 when Wurlitzer took over the factory. For more information about Eugene deKleist see the partial text



Figure 3. The tune label showing the name of the “North Tonawanda Barrel Organ Factory” at the top. Eug. deKleist’s name is also present.

extracted from Lloyd Graham's *The Story of Rudolph Wurlitzer Family and Business* (Figure 4).

Why was I more than excited about this find? The organ is from an early American mass-producer of organs; it was in very good condition; and, as we will discuss in the end of this article, it's origins raise some questions.

### The Organ

The dimensions of the organ were 24" wide, 23.5" tall and 13 ¼" deep (Figure 5). Overall the organ's appearance was very attractive with a generously inlaid front. Closer inspection revealed, what appeared to be a very nice, un-restored (or restored quite early in it's life) barrel organ that had not been subject to mistreatment. The rest of the organ case was in a dark, reddish wood case, simi-



Figure 5. A rear view of the deKleist barrel organ.

## *The Story of the Rudolph Wurlitzer Family and Business*

(Excerpts about Eugene deKleist)

### Lloyd Graham

Farney (Wurlitzer) went to France and spent about six months in a brass musical instrument plant which was one of the chief Wurlitzer suppliers. This plant was at Lyons, then known as Pelisson Guinot Blanchon et Cie, at 273 Cours Lafayette. . . . It was during the months in Lyons, France, that Eugene deKleist, with whom Farny was to have so much to do later, looked Farny up and invited him to take a trip to Switzerland with him. Already, deKleist was selling Howard Wurlitzer instruments for the company from his plant in North Tonawanda.

Farny and deKleist journeyed from Lyons to Geneva and thence to Chamonix at the foot of Mount Blanc. . . . on to Martigny in Switzerland . . . hired a horse and buggy and drove up to the Great St. Bernard Pass. After the night at St. Bernard, Farny and deKleist drove down to Aosta, Italy. Next morning Farny left deKleist and went back to France over the Little St. Bernard Pass. . .

deKleist was born "von" Kleist in Dusseldorf about 1867 (he changed the "von" to "de" while living in Belgium). He was of that family which produced so many generals for the German army. Well educated, he became an expert pianist and organist. While still a relatively young man, he became associated with Limonaire Freres in Paris. This company made and sold merry-go-round organs and music cylinders. There came a time when he was transferred to the London office of Limonaire Freres.

One day in 1892 while deKleist was in the London shop of Limonaire Freres, he noticed an elderly man of an appearance bordering on the grotesque standing outside the

shop window. After some delay, the man entered the shop and talked at length with deKleist. He was William Hershell, a Scot down to London from Dundee.

The Scot explained that he had two brothers, George and Allan Hershell, in America at North Tonawanda, New York, engaged in the manufacture of merry-go-rounds. Before he left, the strange Scot astonished deKleist by placing a large order for merry-go-round horses to be shipped to the Armitage Company in North Tonawanda, the purchase being made at the request of the Scot's brothers. . . . In a short time, old William Hershell prevailed on Eugene deKleist to make a trip to America. High tariffs had made the purchase of merry-go-round barrel organs abroad almost prohibitive for the Armitage-Hershell Company. So the Hershell brothers were eager to obtain a source of barrel organs in America for their merry-go-rounds. Thus it came about that Eugene deKleist made his first trip to America and North Tonawanda in 1892.

This trip resulted in his decision to emigrate to America permanently. Accordingly, in 1893, Eugene deKleist started the North Tonawanda Barrel Organ Works. He brought one expert, Charles Neilson, with him from London. Later, Frank Morganti, another Londoner, joined the m.

deKleist bought the machinery of the defunct Hewitt Furniture Company of North Tonawanda and was business, starting with seven men. In the meantime, the Armitage-Hershell Company in anticipation of deKleist's arrival had built a three-story brick factory (in 1892) on the site of the present Wurlitzer plant at a cost of \$7,000 including a boilerhouse,

boiler and steam engine.

A restless, inventive, and in many ways a brilliant man, Eugene deKleist soon had the rather limited "barrel-organ" business neatly buttoned up. . . . it was natural that in 1897, deKleist should seek out Howard Wurlitzer in Cincinnati. He tried to sell Howard on the idea that the Wurlitzer Company should take on the sale of barrel organs.

Howard Wurlitzer told deKleist flatly that his company probably would not be able to sell more than one or two barrel organs in a year. But if deKleist could develop a coin-operated piano, the Wurlitzer organization would in all likelihood be able to find a large market for it. deKleist eagerly set to work on Howard Wurlitzer's idea and, during the next decade, he produced and the Wurlitzers sold several different types of automatic, coin-operated pianos and other musical instruments. . .

deKleist showed the first Tonophone samples to Howard Wurlitzer in 1898, and the first produced for the market came the following year. So successful were deKleist's musical devices that they won two gold medals and one silver medal, the highest awards in all classes, at the Pan-American Exposition in 1901, and one of the gold medals was for the Tonophone. . .

From the first, the Wurlitzer's were particularly interested in the 65-note, coin-operated Tonophone. They first ordered 25 and almost immediately followed it with an order for 200. It was soon obvious to deKleist that here was something far bigger than the "barrel-organ" business he had come to America to set up.

Figure 4. Excerpts from Lloyd Graham's *The Story of Rudolph Wurlitzer Family and Business*.

lar to mahogany (**Figure 6**). The hardware seemed original, including the brass feet protectors.



Figure 6. A view of the left side of the case reveals the barrel-changing mechanism and keyframe lift.

Inside the case I found the barrel was not cracked and the pins were not bent or mis-aligned (**Figure 7**). The underside of the lid revealed the typical North Tonawanda Barrel Organ Factory tune sheet (Figure 3) with what seemed to be a replacement, typewritten tune list. The nine tunes included:

1. German Waltz
2. Opera Waltz
3. . . . tuois Pleura
4. Schottisch
5. Mazurka
6. Quadrille
7. Orpheus Dance
8. Polka
9. Der Tiroler und sein kind

Organ No. 1395- - 25 keys.



Figure 7. The pinned barrel and original key frame are seen in this photo. Note the pristine condition of the organ.

Of interest was the second partial tune sheet, but without any tunes listed. This would indicate that the organ had a 2nd barrel in its early life. A second barrel was not with the organ at auction.



Figure 8. A view under the organ reveals many stopped and mitered pipes.

A peek in the base revealed the usual array of accompaniment and bass pipes (**Figure 8**). Interestingly some of the pipes were opened to the bottom, thus potentially allowing for possible damage when placing the organ on an uneven surface. One pipe had a sticker that noted "Specialize Transportation, Los Angeles, CA." This was probably a moving company involved with the organ's travels throughout the years. The barrel changing cover has "1395" imprinted, matching the serial number on the tune sheet (**Figure 9**).



Figure 9. #1895 imprinted on the barrel cover, the same # as on the tune sheet.



Figure 10. The deKleist's key frame and pinned barrel.

Inspection of the key frame reveals there are 25 keys: D, D sharp, C, F, F sharp, G, A, G, H, C sharp, C, D, E, H, F, F sharp, A, G, A, H, C, D, E, C and C (Figure 10).

### The Organ's Origin

One would surmise that since deKleist was brought to America to make and sell barrel organs (Figure 11) that this organ was an organ produced in North Tonawanda. The evidence seems to weigh against this, however. The only deKleist catalog available, dated 1901, does detail a 25-key barrel organ (Figure 12) with 46 pipes. As we will see later in this discussion the measurements do not coincide.

A similar 25-key barrel organ, in the collection of Norm and Tana Otto (Hudson, Ohio), also has nine tunes but utilizes 47 pipes (Figure 13). The Otto organ has an nearly identical bass with exact brass feet protectors and a similar upper façade, but Norm relates that the upper case is new so comparison is difficult. These

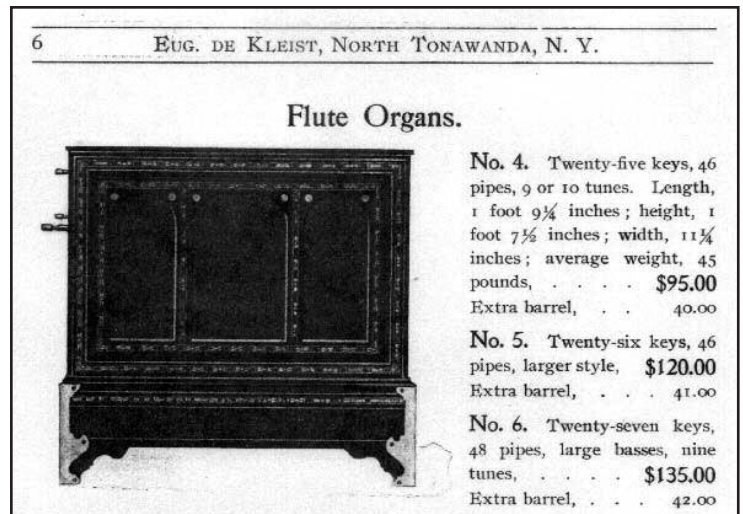


Figure 12. A 25-key organ advertised in the 1901 deKleist catalog.

brass feet protectors are also found in the #4 Flute organ printed in deKleist's 1901 catalog (many manufacturers used common components in the assembly of their organs such as the feet protectors identified here). This organ and Otto organ do share an unusual characteristic, that being a on-demand tremolo mechanism.

These two comparisons still don't answer the question of the origin of the organ. Several factors seem to lend the answer to an organ manufactured (or at least major parts of it) overseas. Considering deKleist's heritage one might consider Germany (deKleist was born in Dusseldorf); England (because he worked in England

prior to immigrating to the America); or France (deKleist was involved with the sale of Limonaires while working in their office in England. At least one early band organ, a No. 18, has been found to have Limonaire components indicating the possibility of importation from France).

**Eugene de Kleist**  
 Manufacturer  
**Barrel Organs & Orchestrions**  
 North Tonawanda, New York

What I have to say to the Public in the Year 1901 [excerpts] . . .

. . .The materials used in the construction of my organs are seasoned to stand the effects of the extreme changes of temperature of the United States. The case is one of the principal factors in a good organ and they are made to stand the climate and guaranteed not to crack or warp, while the cases of most all imported organs which have come to be repaired in my factory were mostly cracked and in pieces. . .

. . .What I have said about cases also applies to all other parts of imported goods, as the method used in preparing these materials in Europe is not suitable for instruments to be used in our climate. . .

. . . My instruments always play the latest American airs, and are built in the most approved and latest style to suit the American taste. . .

. . .These organs are manufactured by American workman, to whom are paid living American wages, and who can put into their work all that the love of their trade and intelligent brains can produce. . .

EUG. DE KLEIST

Figure 11. Excerpts from Eugene deKleist's forward in his 1901 catalog.



Figure 13. Another 25-key organ in the collection of Norm and Tana Otto. This organ has 47 pipes instead of 42 but incorporates the same tremolo mechanism as does the deKleist in question.

Evaluation of the key frame in **Figure 10** lends a little help as some keys are marked with an “H” instead of “B” (B natural). This was a practice of German-playing organs. French and English organs didn’t use the “H” denotation.

Have we deduced that this organ was either partially or entirely manufactured in Germany, and then marketed by deKeist? Certainly the key frame “H” is a convincing

point. Another item is the tune sheet. As Andrew Pilmer pointed out the tunes that are identifiable are primarily German in nature, and if the organ was produced in deKleist’s factory, it would more than likely have familiar American tunes.

Looking into German barrel organ companies and their corresponding documents I found many that did not list a 25-key instrument. The Frati company did, however,

although catalog photographs were not available. A late contribution to this article was the listing of the organ in question by the purchasing dealer who said that they were “pretty sure the organ was made by Frati.” That being said I have constructed a table (**Figure 14**) comparing the organs “vital measurements with the 1901 deKleist catalog, the Otto organ

<b>Comparison of 25-key Barrel Organs</b>				
	<u>deKleist*</u>	<u>1901 deKleist</u> <i>#4 Flute Organ</i>	<u>Otto Organ*</u>	<u>Frati Catalog*</u> #42 <i>Harmoniflute</i>
# of keys	25	25	25	25
# of pipes	42	46	47	?
# of tunes	9	9 or 10	9	9
Width	24.0	21.3	24.8	?
Depth	11.3	11.3	13.8	?
Height	23.5	19.5	22.8	?

\* The deKleist organ in question and the Otto organ both feature a tremolo effect. Frati offers a tremolo effect for it’s 26, 35 and 44-key organs but not the one listed.

Figure 14. A table comparing some statistics of the deKleist organ in question with other organs/catalogs.

and the existing Frati catalog reprint.

Communication with several organ experts found most concurring this was a German-made organ and many considered it to be possibly made by Frati. The jury is still out and we may never know the exact company of origin.

One additional point, however, that points to the Frati Company being responsible for the construction of this organ—many Frati hand organs were fitted with a tremolo mechanism, a feature not found on most other hand organs.

**Conclusion**

We may never know the exact origin of this 25-key deKleist barrel organ. The deKleist catalog and Graham Lloyd’s monograph point to it being produced in North Tonawanda. Similarities to German organs and in particular, the Frati company, tend to lean towards manufacture in Germany. It does represent, however, an interesting piece of early American promotion of organs for the amusement and entertainment industry. Some experts I contacted believe that deKleist never made any of his instruments but based on research for my book, *The American Carousel Organ*, I would heartily disagree with that notion.

If Eugene deKleist did not produce this organ in North Tonawanda but rather, marketed it as one of his own, he was not the last organ distributor to do this. This practice was followed extensively during the early years of Wurlitzer’s domination of the market—a time when the Wurlitzer Company bought organs (that were manufactured by deKleist) and sold them as their own. There is some speculation as well as to whether the Niagara

Manufacturing Company made any organs or resold those of the North Tonawanda Manufacturing Instrument Company.

Never-the-less, this was an exciting and fresh organ to find—one that was very pristine in nature and from an early American organ company.

I wish to thank Fred Dahlinger who gave me ideas for the research of this organ. I also wish to thank Bill Edgerton, Björn Isebaert, Arthur W.J.G. Ord-Hume, Andrew Pilmer, Tim Trager and Hans van Oost for their input into the research for this article.

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Ron Bopp is Editor of the *Carousel Organ*. He has enjoyed all aspects of outdoor organs, both small and large since his first band organ, acquired in 1978.

**In memoriam . . . Dave Miner**

*Although not a COAA member Dave Miner provided quality mechanical instruments for many of our members. I owned a Miner Tangley Calliope and the quality was exceptional as were my dealings with Dave. Dave was 47 and passed away on September 13, 2007. Excerpts from an obituary by Louis Rugani follow . . . Ed.*

“Mr. David R. Miner was president and founder of Miner Manufacturing at 2208 220th Street in Donnellson, Iowa, with 24 years of service. Among his many works was the restoration of five historic PCC streetcars for the City of Kenosha, Wisconsin in 2000. He also manufactured Tangley Calliophone calliopes used on carousels and riverboats, plus self-playing accordions and other vintage musical instruments, vintage railcars, popcorn wagons and trucks and band organs at his facility.

Dave Miner built two special air calliopes for the road show of “Showboat” which were

quiet enough to mimic the sound of a steam calliope inside the confines of a theatre. They operated on 1/4 pound of air supplied by a tiny blower while emitting prop “steam,” which was powder admitted into the blower unit for the calliope. These instruments simulated a larger calliope in that the whistles were mounted on a small air chamber painted black and rounded on the sides to resemble an actual steel-pipe manifold used by traditional steam calliopes.

In 1989 he founded and began building the replica 1930s village of Minerville and the adjoining Fort Madison, Farmington and Western Railroad country branch-line used for excursions and laid on an abandoned right-of-way of the Chicago Burlington & Quincy Railroad. It all opened in 1994 and at their height they attracted 7,000 visitors a year to a remote rural road east of Donnellson.

Dave was also a member of the Southeast Iowa Antique Car Club, where he served a term as vice president, and he enjoyed playing in the

city band.

Survivors include his wife; two daughters, Emily and Sara Miner, both of Donnellson; one son, Nathan Miner of Donnellson; and one sister, Deb Miner of Minneapolis, Minn. He was preceded in death by his parents.”

