

Meet Your Member: Neil & Debbie Smith

Debbie and I are both natives of Chillicothe, Ohio where we still reside. We have no children. I retired from a 27-year career at Sears in the Display Department in 1993. I now spend my time in my workshop at home. Debbie is in her 31st year of teaching, and is currently teaching 2nd grade. She plans to retire in four years.

As far back as I can remember, I have been interested in carnivals and circuses. Normally, we would have one or two circuses come during the summers in my hometown of Chillicothe; and the Gooding Amusement Company of Columbus, Ohio would bring the excitement and sounds of the carnival about three times a year.

I was always drawn to the “sound of the merry-go-round.” I didn’t know what made that sound, but I liked it and knew what it meant...fun! None of that has changed!

I have been mechanically inclined all my life. When the neighborhood kids were playing ball, I was making something with my erector set, working on a bicycle, building a model airplane, or playing carnival! It was not unusual for me to have a “Pitch ‘Til You Win” game set up in my backyard complete with microphone and loud speaker, especially if a carnival had recently been in town.

I returned from the Navy in 1966, and bounced around from one mechanical hobby to another. In 1968 I bought a player piano and set out to make it play. I soon learned of Harvey Roehl’s Vestal Press, Larry Given’s book *Rebuilding*



Debbie and Neil Smith with the freshly restored Wurlitzer 146 band organ.

the Player Piano, and Durrell Armstrong’s *Player Piano Co.*

It wasn’t very long until I had made an “O” roll-playing “Built-up” orchestrion from another homestyle player piano. Also, during these early years of my introduction to mechanical music, I finally learned what made the “sound of the merry-go-round,” and I haven’t looked back since! In hopes of learning more and feeding my band organ interests, I joined MBSI and FOPS in 1968.

In the early 1970’s I had the good fortune of becoming acquainted with Ken Smith, Jerry Betts and Don Stinson. Band organs, specifically Wurlitzer, became much of my life, and they still are.

In 1973, while working in the Display Department at Sears, I met a 19 year old “preacher’s kid” by the name of Debbie Allison. Debbie and I were married in 1975, and the best years of our lives began. That’s now been over 32 years, and band organs have always been, and still are, a major part of our lives.

As for Debbie, we spent part of our honeymoon at Ohio’s amusement park, Cedar Point. At that time, it proudly exhibited four Wurlitzer organs. That was Debbie’s first experience with band organs. She was elated, to say the least. From that time until the present, she has shared this fascination of band organs, and the love of their beautiful sound with me.

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2008 Organ Rally Dates

<u>Event</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Contact Person</u>	<u>Date</u>
COAA Rally #1	Lake Winnepausauka Chattanooga, TN	Charles Walker 404-892-0065	May 24 - 26, 2008
COAA Rally #2	Koebels Amusement Park Elysburg, PA	Ted Guillaum 615-226-5098	June 28 - 29, 2008
COAA Rally #3	Olcott Beach Amusement Park Wolcott, NY	Dan Wilke 716-825-7266	July 26 - 27, 2008
COAA Rally #4	Dutch Village Holland, Michigan	616-396-1476	Aug. 23 - 24, 2008
COAA Rally #4	Riverside Park Findlay, Ohio	Terry Haughawout 419-454-3671	Sept. 12 - 14, 2008

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For many years, I had aspirations of building a Wurlitzer 105 band organ, but never could stick to it long enough to make it a reality. Then in 1988, Debbie and I purchased our first organ, a 20-note Hofbauer crank organ, the one we named "Gypsy." We still have it and enjoy sharing it with the kids at school and the public.

In the 1980's, we also met Cliff Gray, a man that we would admire and respect for keeping band organs on the road. In 1994, we purchased our early style 146-B Wurlitzer band organ from Cliff. The organ was in pretty bad shape, but for the most part, it was all there. We set out with the task in mind of

restoring it to its original 1922 condition, and with plans to trailer it in order to once again use it for its intended purpose—entertaining the public. We do not have it finished and on the road as of yet, but the plan is still there to do so—God willing.

Band organs, organ rallies, and the people we've met in this hobby remain a huge part of our lives. Over the years, we've made lasting memories, and have been blessed with many friends that mean so much to us as a result of our interest in band organs.

Finally, it troubles us that band organs are rarely seen or heard on carousels these days, and to think that generations to come

may not have the opportunity to experience hearing the enchanting sound of the merry-go-round...the band organ. We, who are band organ enthusiasts, have the opportunity, and probably the responsibility, to keep that joy alive for the future. We are the keepers of this piece of Americana, this part of our history that seems to be so rapidly disappearing! We, like so many of you have done for some time, are truly looking forward to being able to share our organ and its beautiful sound with all who will listen!



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