

May 7, 2018

Comments by Michael Quimby Regarding Skinner Opus 190

This is indeed the pipe organ with nine lives. Ernest Skinner Opus 190, built in 1912, was caught up in the changing winds of fashion, as Nelson Barden, the famous New England organ restorer likes to say, "Fashion wears out more organs than playing ever will." However, in it's day, before the Organ Reform Movement became fully entrenched, this was considered to be a world-class organ in Kansas City, every bit as important then as the new Casavant organ in Helzberg Hall is today.

This Skinner organ and the four-manual six-division Austin pipe organ at Independence Boulevard Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri, were the premier concert organs of their day and were not to be usurped in this role until Aeolian-Skinner installed their Opus 1309, completed in 1959, at the RLDS Auditorium in Independence, Missouri.

Much of the history of the organ is described in Dr. John Speller's 2012 article "A Skinner Centennial – Opus 190 at Grand Avenue Temple..." Today, we listen to an organ that is now 106 years

old and is girding its loins to play on the par with the new Richards-Fowkes at Village Presbyterian Church in Mission. It is an amazing feat, considering the complexity of an early electro-pneumatic pipe organ that I would assume is the most complicated remaining piece of mechanical equipment from the early twentieth century that survives to the present time in Kansas City.

Most of this organ's smaller compatriots have now departed because of geographic change and fashion. The day of the fine 19<sup>th</sup> century tracker organs that once existed in the Kansas City area are now in the ash heap of history, except for the pipework of Grand Avenue United Methodist Church's Sunday School organ, which was the original organ before the existing Sanctuary was constructed. This latter organ, in a new case and on new slider windchests, as found when we purchased it, is still playing in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on the Outer Banks. This older organ is one of the few pipe organs to bear a nametag: "Rebuilt by Ernest Skinner."

If anything, Opus 190 is of a type of instrument is what the public loved and not that espoused by the academics, in their ivory

towers, who came back from World War I and World War II after hearing instruments that sounded wonderful in their splendid acoustics, but which were certainly not of a type that accompanied church in the United States. Finally, the course correction is at hand and those who do have E. M. Skinner organs, treasure them.

At that time of these celebrations we forget, with all the wonderful music, the people who are significant in assuring the life of this pipe organ. I first became acquainted with this instrument when it was 58 years old and I was only 21. At that time, one could still enjoy the rumble of the 32' Open Wood before the addition of the enclosed annex at the back of the Sanctuary, under the balcony. You could still feel the might of those pipes, when the wavelength in the building was long enough, to shake the air around your body. At that time, my love affair with this instrument began. I became actively involved in 1970 when there were thoughts that it would be wonderful to cut off string voices to make mutations and other ranks that would have would have reduced any historical value of the organ. I don't know how I convinced the then-present organist, Kenneth Fletcher, that this was not a logical approach, but he listened and

there were no tonal changes, and the organ remains as the Skinner company built it, with the only changes being those accomplished by Mr. Skinner himself in 1948. As with Aeolian-Skinner Opus 1309 in the Auditorium, Independence, Missouri, misinformation about Opus 190 still abounds.

Time moves on, and other significant organists who were important in making sure the instrument remained playable were Mr. David Lewis, St. Joseph, Missouri, who scrubbed up enough money so the reservoirs and double-stage primaries could be releathered. This work was accomplished for QPO by Jerry Dawson and, now deceased, Ernest Fagrell, who were retired employees of the McManis organ company. Another life-changing event in the story of the organ was Dr. Frederick Hohman's recording of the instrument in 1995, which brought the organ to the attention of the International pipe organ world.

Another significant event was the recital, played by Fred Hohman, in the sweltering heat of 90 degrees at the Kansas City Regional AGO Convention. I will always remember that Steven Dieck, then of the Fisk Organ Company, was flabbergasted at the excellent tuning stability of the reed in such heat. The secret to that stability had been lost during the Organ Reform Movement

and it was not related to wind pressure. Another great moment for the organ was when Don Crowley was organist and with the encouragement of Rev. Jackie Moore, an attempt was undertaken to accomplish further restoration work. Unfortunately, at that time, money was scarce and the console, in a very decrepit state, was totally restored without any change by Eric Johnson, presently Head Voicer of Quimby Pipe Organs. Additionally, we replaced the keycoverings, which were definitely showing their age. This was done at no cost to the congregation. Also, the Skinner reeds were cleaned with corrective voicing by John Hendriksen, former Head Flue Voicer for Aeolian-Skinner and provided with new spotted metal bells below the scrolls by Thomas H. Andersen, former Head of the Pipe Shop at Aeolian-Skinner, and Chris Emerson of QPO, which had been damaged severely over time due to incompetent tuning.

Then, the impossible occurred: the arrival of the organ's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday---a rare event for any pipe organ built in the United States of America, regardless of action type. The year before this event, Steve Greene formed a committee to undertake fundraising for this grand event, which involved the replacement of all the pitmans in the Great and Choir solo duplex chests. This work

was accomplished by Richard Nickerson and Jimmy Marchant with the assistance of Eric Johnson and others from QPO. The organ was masterfully played with a splendid concert by Dr. John Schwandt of the University of Oklahoma, which featured some of the original works played on the instrument from the time of its dedication.

Remarkably, Skinner Opus 190 will be 106 years old on May 12, 2018. This year has been one of the nine lives of the organ. The original 15 HP Spencer blower for the organ caught fire before Christmas, even though the 1912 starting controls survived. The decision was made, since the rectifier that supplied the high-voltage DC for the blower was now over fifty years old, since Kansas City stopped supplying DC power after a fire in the last DC substation for Greater downtown Kansas City, the best decision was to replace the motor with an AC motor and a variable frequency drive, which allows the motor to come to speed slowly, instead of instantly. The new AC motor and required changes wiring changes were accomplished under the direction of Pat Shelley, and Eric Johnson.

The rebirth of the organ with the blower in tip-top shape fittingly occurred on Easter Sunday 2018.

Now to the final score: the organ will be played by the brilliant organist Dr. Damin Spritzer from the University of Oklahoma, who understands the organ intimately, for the 2018 National Convention of the American Guild of Organists. For this event, our goal was to restore the Swell offset windchests, so that the larger pipes in the Swell would play. These had been unplayable for several decades. This was in process, and after discoveries, our hopes of making these pipes playable for this event did not occur as planned. The final event that would have prevented this performance tonight was the courtesy of a well-intended parishioner who zealously overwatered poinsettia plants on the console lid. Unfortunately, with the style of construction of the lid, the water was channeled down right onto the primary pneumatics that control the setter functions for the small pistons and toe studs controlled by the organist, as you will see used tonight. This was a great mechanical innovation in its day, allowing the organist to pre-set and change registrations with the push of a button. These were releathered over the course of 2-1/2

days by Eric Johnson, who thought he would never see the inside of that primary again in his lifetime.

Restoration work on this organ has been practical and logical, but much remains to be done. As far as we know, it has never been cleaned inside, since 1912, and pieces of green carpet that was originally installed in 1912 in the aisles, were put on the reservoirs, and were put back again when restored.

We hope you enjoy this evening's program on this historical organ – the largest extant four-manual Ernest Skinner organ in the United States which is unaltered, except for changes made by Skinner himself in 1948. Enjoy.