

## The Pipe Organ

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For music and history lovers alike, one of the most beloved artifacts on the SHSU campus is the pipe organ which currently resides in the Peabody Memorial Library building. Today we take a look back at this instrument's history and the winding path it took before finding its final home.

The Opus 139 pipe organ was built circa 1888 by M. P. Möller, Inc., of Hagerstown, Maryland. It was installed in the State Normal Institute in Huntsville, TX, in 1894, and is said to have been donated by an anonymous person.

The organ, which sported two manuals (or keyboards), 18 registers, and ten ranks, was long housed in the chapel of the Old Main building on the campus, where it was played at weekly chapel services.

It is often said to be the oldest pipe organ west of the Mississippi, though that may be an exaggeration; however it is certainly one of the oldest organs still in use in Texas. It is also said to be the first organ of its kind installed in a tax-supported institution in TX.

In late 1914, President Estill communicated with Mr. L. Von Hofe of Houston, TX, and had an electric motor installed in the pipe organ. Shortly thereafter, the organ was apparently damaged in a 1915 storm; President Estill contacted Mr. L. Von Hofe in late Sept with a request to repair those damages.

As the campus grew over the years, the college found it needed to make more room for the Drama Department. The organ was moved to St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and Ave L; the exact date of this move is unknown, but it appears to have been sometime during the 1920s.

When the Episcopal Church building was sold to the Assembly of God Church on Oct 22, 1940, History professor J. L. Clark negotiated to return the organ to the college, but there was a lack of good options for storage. From 1940 until 1958, the organ was kept in the Carriage House on the Sam Houston Home Grounds: no other building owned by the college had a roof high enough to accommodate the pipes, which needed a 12 foot ceiling.

In the late 1950s, Ms. Grace Longino, director of the Sam Houston Memorial Museum, led a campaign to have the historic organ restored and relocated to the Museum. The restoration was done around 1958, by Mr. Otto Hoffman of Austin, TX, for the cost of \$3,350.

Hoffman, raised among German Texans on a cotton farm south of Austin, studied music and acoustics at the University of Texas at Austin and founded his own firm in 1949. As a Pipe Organ Architect and Builder, he was a master craftsman, performing all his own electrical wiring and woodworking. He built the first contemporary mechanical action tracker action organ in America in 1955, thus earning himself the epithet "father" of tracker action movement in America. He was also central to the organization of the International Society of Organ Builders.

Much of the necessary funds for the organ's restoration came from various alumni and local donors, with the collection overseen by the Ex-Students Association. Mr. William Z. Hayes of Dallas, TX, Class of 1895, was chairman of the restoration fund-raising committee. Also instrumental in the fund-raising was Mr. Lee Drain, Class of 1950, namesake of the campus' Lee Drain building. Also noteworthy were funds raised by two men's clubs at the university, the Esquires

and the Dons, who played a football game at Pritchett Field called “The Organ Bowl” and donated the proceeds to the organ fund.

It took Hoffman about nine months to complete the organ restoration. During the process, Hoffman sifted through loose earth in the floor of the Carriage House to find broken parts that could be salvaged and reused in the organ. Missing parts were fashioned out of organ material from the same period. Only one anachronism, an electric organ blower, was added to the instrument, replacing the hand-pumped organ bellows for providing air pressure for the pipes.

A dedication ceremony for the restored organ took place on Feb 16, 1959, at the Museum, and drew a large audience. Mr. William Z. Hayes served as Master of Ceremonies, and an invocation was given by Dr. J. L. Clark, who was instrumental in returning the organ to the college’s control. Mr. Thomas Oliphint, an SHSTC alumnus and the organist for St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Beaumont, played on the organ a selection of pieces by Bach, Schroeder, Brahms, and other composers.

Over time, the organ’s age took its toll and the instrument sustained some damage. Eventually it ended up disassembled in pieces in the Museum.

Interest in a new restoration project surfaced in the 1980s. Some research and planning for this project carried on through the 1990s, but funding was not available at the time, and unfortunately the restoration was not achieved in time to be celebrated on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organ’s installation at the university.

In 2003, there came another strong push for restoration when Sam Houston Memorial Museum Director Patrick Nolan and Curator of Collections Mac Woodward approached the SHSU Alumni Association about project funding.

The Association became instrumental in raising the needed funds, including over \$10,000 donated by alumni board member Mrs. Susan Smith Lenamon in memory of her mother, Mrs. Frankie Walker Smith. The Association’s fund raising project was led by George Miles, chair of the Alumni Association Board of Directors Development Committee, and one of the young men who played in the original “Organ Bowl” in the 1950s.

The organ was restored by the Loper Pipe Organ Service Company of Corsicana, owned and operated by Gary and Cheryl Loper. The Lopers cleaned, repaired, and reassembled the instrument. Nolan and Woodward worked with President Gaertner to secure a home for the organ on campus in historic Peabody Library building.

The efforts for a second restoration finally culminated in a rededication ceremony on August 3, 2007. The public was invited to a celebration at the Peabody Library to honor the 113-year-old organ; Ms. Charlotte Tull played a selection of musical pieces as part of the event.

In an article about the 2007 rededication, George Miles summed up the importance of restoring and maintaining the historic pipe organ: “We felt that the instrument could be a wonderful connection to the university’s past and that it deserved to be in a place on campus where it could be enjoyed by everyone now and in the future.”

### Sources:

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