

Ex-mayor's family gives to restoration of Organ



-Milnar Organ Co. and Ms. Barbara Kelly with her donated Toy Counter-

By Susan Pierce – Staff Writer “Times Free Press Chattanooga”

Another step in the restoration of the 1924 Austin Pipe organ in Memorial Auditorium was made last week with the installation of a new percussion section, according to Evelyn Gibbs, organ restoration chairwoman.

The \$13,000 section of mechanical instruments was given by the family of late Ralph Kelly. Judge Kelly served as Chattanooga's mayor from 1963 to 1969 and as a federal bankruptcy judge for more than 30 years. “Ralph always liked to beat the drum for Chattanooga, so I thought this was appropriate,” his widow, Barbara Kelly, said.

Ms. Gibbs said the percussion, or toy counter as it is referred to in organ circles, consists of a 14-inch snare drum, a 26-inch brass drum, 18-inch brass cymbal, steel triangle and 34-inch Chinese gong. They are part of the organ's Solo division, the final section of the organ to be restored. The instruments may be played from the keyboard of the organ, controlled by use of console tabs, Ms. Gibbs explained.

“This organ is one of seven of this vintage remaining in the country,” Ms. Gibbs said. “When the restoration is finished, the music club wants to bring Bob McDonald, who at Radio City Music Hall, to Chattanooga to play theater music. He’d bring a silent movie and accompany it, using the percussion section all the way through.”

The organ restoration has been a project of the Chattanooga Music Club since 1985. Mrs. Kelly said she is a club member, as was her late husband. Club members expect to complete the restoration in the spring and dedicate the organ in July.

They have raised \$750,000 date through donations, grants and a \$20,000 gift from the city. Milnar Organ Co. in Eagleville, Tenn., is restoring the organ. Ms. Gibbs said when complete, the restored organ will be valued at more than \$2 million.

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The Milnar Organ Company

"Region's Leading Organ Company Calls Eagleville Home"



It started with a knock.

A young 18, with his wife expecting their first child, Dennis Milnar spent the winter of 1961 going door-to-door seeking employment in his hometown of Tonawanda, New York. In the midst of a recession, the unemployment rate was high, his experience low, but Milnar was fortunate.

His knock was answered by a man who ran an organ company, who offered him a temporary job holding keys during their Christmas tunings. He started work, and, in his own words, “fell in love with it right away.” As Milnar recalls, “He saw I was mechanically-inclined so they offered me an apprenticeship and I grabbed it.”

Soon after starting the apprenticeship, he was offered a job in a local paper mill for three times the pay, creating a dilemma for the young couple. Milnar remembers, “After one week in the organ company, I thought, ‘I don’t want to work in a paper mill,’”

His wife, Connie, graciously left the choice up to him, both agreeing they could struggle at minimum wage. “I made very little money as an apprentice,” says Milnar. But the experience he gained in the following seven years was invaluable. The Delaware Organ Company introduced Milnar to all phases of organ construction and maintenance.

But by 1968, the organ company was sending him out of town for 2-3 weeks at a time, leaving Connie at home with their four small children. “When one got sick, they all got sick,” he remembers, “and we had only one car.”

In spite of those early challenges, he couldn't imagine leaving the organ business. "I guess it's one of those things...it gets in your blood," he confides. So, they decided to start their own business. "We wrote to cities all over the south to find the area of need," Milnar relates. "Nashville had hundreds of churches, but no organ company listed in the yellow pages." So they moved and started their business, The Milnar Pipe Organ Service, out of the basement of their Green Hills home.

"When we first came here, we were going to give it a year," says Milnar. "I have no business background at all. And we almost didn't make it." He worked as a carpenter to make ends meet, wife Connie balanced working as office administrator and caring for their children, now a full handful. Exactly a year after their move, the company was hired to rebuild an organ at what is now Tennessee State University, and Milnar Pipe Organ Service was established and growing.

Growing so much, in fact, that in time they outgrew their basement in Green Hills. Previously the couple had purchased acreage just north of Eagleville as an investment, leasing it out to friends. In 1976, however, the property became home to both the Milnar family and the Milnar Organ Company. Milnar remembers, "We really never thought we'd move out to the country, we've always been city people." However, the adjustment was easily made, the family purchasing of a herd of cattle and an ATV for exploring the nearly 150-acre farm. Since their move, the organ shop has thrived in its beautiful setting located on a hilltop named "Cole Knob" overlooking a pond, grazing cattle, and rolling hills. Today, it's expanded to a large 6,000 square foot facility divided into the many departments – woodworking, pipe servicing, voicing area, solid state electrical, and leathering, to name a few – required to build and refurbish pipe organs, including an erecting building with a 24' ceiling allowing them to completely assemble an instrument on-site.

The company primarily builds and redesigns pipe organs, almost exclusively for churches. "While the organ was first designed 2,000 years ago for entertainment, it's been used in churches since the fifteenth century," explains Derek Milnar, the Milnar's eldest son. The company's projects are not small undertakings...their typical organs range from \$125,000 to well over \$300,000 in value, with an estimated completion time of 1 ½ to two years per instrument. Due to

the lengthy completion time, they are typically working on three or four big projects at any one time, in addition to maintaining about 200 organs in 65 cities throughout the southeastern states. The company is currently maintaining ten's of millions of dollars worth of pipe organs in the greater Nashville area.

Like many family-owned businesses, the children grew up alongside the business. "All four of my sons started working when they were really young during weekends and summers," Milnar recalls. And, apparently, they liked it, for they all still work for the company, all becoming partners in the business after incorporation in 1995. The Milnar's only daughter, Lorrie, is a registered nurse and works in the healthcare field.

The sons hail from Murfreesboro, Bell Buckle, and Brentwood, but all return to their childhood farm each day to work at the family business, each contributing specialized skills to accomplish the company's work. Each of the men heads up a crew for about three months each year traveling and servicing pipe organs within a 400 mile radius of Nashville. While the traveling is a necessary part of their business – Derek logged 35,000 miles of travel last year, and son Todd was on the road at least that much –they try to limit their road trips to 2-3 nights away from home at a time. To that end, they try to keep most of their projects somewhat close to home, in Tennessee, Alabama, and Kentucky. They have many local projects in their portfolio including the First United Methodist in Murfreesboro, First Presbyterian in Franklin, First Baptist Manchester, Saint Rose of Lima in Murfreesboro (Dennis Milnar's home church), and the Saint Timothy Lutheran and First Baptist, both in Hendersonville.

Derek, 44, recalls starting at the age of 12 holding keys. "We didn't have to, but it was what we could do to make some money," he remembers. By high school, he knew that he wanted to make his life in the field, going to Nashville Tech for architectural and electrical engineering. "My education has been incredibly valuable with every aspect of the business-not just the drawing," Derek relates, gesturing to his office bookshelf full of resource books, "I use my college texts all the time. There's so much involved in the business, you have to be good at many different things."

Jeff Milnar, 41, worked for the business since the sixth grade and now utilizes his talents and interest in woodworking, specializing in the woodworking aspects of organ building, creating cabinetry, chests and consoles for the organs.

Todd Milnar, 39, worked summers for the company, after high school pursuing a psychology degree at MTSU, Todd returned to the family business in 1986, realizing the satisfaction involved with the creation and revitalization of organs. He has since studied pipe voicing and scaling in Belgium, using his skills on the voicing, or tonal work, of the pipes on the organ to make the correct pitch, and also works with the leather on the organs. "Each pipe has to be fitted and toned for the instrument and the building," Milnar confides.

Greg Milnar, 33, the Milnar's youngest son, also worked in high school for the business, later graduating with a business degree from MTSU. He spent four years working with a software firm in Brentwood, until he too returned to the family business. He uses his computer skills to oversee the company website, www.milnarorgan.com, and does wiring for the electrical components. Many parts used for the organ in the movie *The Haunted Castle* were purchased from the Milnar organ website, the men mention proudly.

The elder Milnar, while overseeing the facility and his employees, primarily works with the customers and administrative issues. "It's very nice having my sons here," he adds. "They take over a lot." Since the mid-1980s, their extra help has allowed Connie to devote her time to managing the couple's real estate rental business.

In addition to their sons, the company also relies on some talented craftsmen and administrative help to assist in all other aspects of running the company. Tim Murphy brought valuable experience to the company in 1990, Eagleville native Kevin McGrath has been apprenticing with the Milnars for over three years, Chris Sias from Murfreesboro works as a technician, and Melanie Duncan has assisted them with managing the office since 1997.

Milnar estimates that they've built about 50 new organs and also redesigned about 50 thus far, which can involve moving an organ from one building to another, refurbishing a very old one, or increasing the

size of one, all with equal satisfaction for a job well done. “We enjoy working on projects like that as much as building new ones,” he confides. “We really enjoy all of it. It’s exciting, and it’s interesting. We’ve never built two organs alike.”

While electronic organs have always been a popular alternative to the pipe organs, the family doesn’t hesitate to explain the difference. “There’s just no comparison,” attests Milnar firmly. “When you listen to individual notes, my ear can’t tell the difference. It’s when you put them all together into chords that you notice the difference. Every pipe is like a speaker, and that sound just can’t be reproduced electronically.” So, to make the music that only a pipe organ can make, the men use materials that have been used for centuries: many different woods, leathers from varying animals with varying thickness (to include kangaroo!), reeds, and pipes made of both wood and metal, just as it’s been done for centuries.

Not that they shy away from technology: Aside from the fundamental and artistic challenges of building and installing the organs, they implement technology into almost every aspect of the process. “Technology is a big part of what we do,” Derek explains. “Before the Industrial Revolution, organ building involved the highest skilled laborers in the workforce. Since then, organ builders have evolved with it.” In the shop, tables contain delicate parts called actions that run with tiny electromagnets, and when activated they open the bellows to provide air for the pipes to sound. Nearby, a wooden chest with a simple exterior contains a huge motherboard. Derek summarizes the joining of the two aspects: “These are old, old technologies incorporated with new technologies. The best way to do it’s been proven for hundreds of years, so why reinvent the wheel?”

The group is used to people’s interest in their occupations. “It’s different work,” Milnar agrees, gesturing to a pile of newspaper articles that have been written about them. “So many things – science, math, and art – all come into play.”

“It’s not a quick study,” Derek interjects. “In Europe, there’s families in the sixth generation of organ building, and that’s what it takes to build a reputation. Here, the top names in the country tend to be a little older because it takes so long to learn the stuff.”

“Most organmen don’t retire,” he adds, mentioning a Nashville man who, typical in this line of work, died at the age of 78 in the midst of doing the thing that he loved most.

As for Milnar, on the verge of retirement age, this is something he can understand. “I still put in 40 hours or so, but I’m planning on slowing down in the next few years,” Milnar concedes. “but I think I’ll always stay involved. It’s just in my blood.”

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