



Operators of Milnar Organ Company near Eagleville are Dennis Milnar, center, and his sons, Todd, Jeff, Greg and Derek Milnar, who make and repair pipe organs for churches across the region.



The ripple effect of an opened door in upstate New York in 1961 continues in Rutherford County 44 years later.

During a 1961 snowstorm, 18-year-old Dennis Milnar was seeking work to support his young wife, who was pregnant with their first child. Milnar knocked on a door in the industrial area of North Tonawonda, N.Y. What happened next would ultimately impact church pipe organ music in Tennessee and surrounding states.

"Literally we were down to our last few dollars, and the unemployment rate was 8 percent," recalled Milnar, now 62, a resident of Rutherford County since 1976. "We were hungry."

The door Milnar knocked on happened to be a pipe organ manufacturing company.

"They said they could use help holding keys while a tuner was inside the organ tuning pipes," said Milnar. "I was mechanically inclined, and they saw that right away. They decided to offer me a job as an apprentice."

During a seven-year apprenticeship at Delaware Organ Co., Milnar was introduced to all the different phases of organ construction. During that time, the New York company put 13 organs in New York City but also did work in the South and Midwest.

"Traveling came to be excessive," he said. "You have four small children and only one automobile. It got

to be too heavy on my wife with me traveling."

Dennis and Connie Milnar contacted a number of cities but got the best response from Nashville.

"They gave us a great deal of literature and encouraged us in a personal letter," Dennis Milnar said.

"Then they sent us a photocopy of 750 churches in a Nashville phone book, and there was no listed organ company."

The couple moved to Nashville in the summer of 1968, and the first year there was tough for them.

Dennis Milnar was a carpenter during the day and took another job at night.

"Dennis worked at different jobs to survive," said Connie Milnar. "He worked for Baird Ward Printing Co."

The owner of the printing company paid for an organ at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville, supplied by Milnar.

"I didn't let him know I was working for his business at night," Milnar said. "We almost didn't make it" the first year in Music City.

The entrepreneur got a contract to totally rebuild an organ from what is now Tennessee State University, and Milnar Pipe Organ Service blossomed.

The Milnars' real estate agent found a 150-acre tract seven miles from Eagleville. The Milnars bought the property and leased it to someone else for a couple of years before moving the business to the Rutherford County farm in 1976.

"Our business had expanded so much we needed to build a new shop for the repair business," Dennis Milnar said. "We were already traveling a 200-mile radius of Nashville. We didn't have to live in Nashville."

Since moving to Rutherford County, Milnar Organ Company has expanded from one to three buildings totaling between 5,000 and 6,000 square feet. The number of Milnars working in the business has grown too.

Connie Milnar worked in the business with her husband into the 1980s and still manages the real estate

rental business for the family. The couple's four boys have become partners in the organ business with their father.

Derek Milnar, 43, the oldest son, began helping his father at age 13 in 1974.

"We weren't forced to help, but it was the thing to do to make some money," said Derek, a 1979

Riverdale High School graduate. He graduated from Nashville Tech in 1981 in architecture.

"I do administration, electrical and design work," said Derek Milnar. "I can't think of another business where you have to be so good at so many things. Organ building takes every discipline and puts it into one field."

Jeffrey Milnar, 41, began helping in the family business during the summer months from the time he was in the fifth grade. The 1982 Eagleville High School graduate attended MTSU for a year and a half before beginning to work in the family's organ business full time.

"It was something I wanted to get into, woodworking especially," Jeff Milnar said.

He makes the custom cabinets, chests and consoles for the organs, using mainly Tennessee yellow poplar. Red and white oak, walnut and mahogany are also used.

"We try to make the organ look like it's always been there," he explained. "We usually match the stain in the majority of the wood (in the church) and try to incorporate the design in the church archways or windows in the caseworking."

Todd Milnar, 39, also worked summers at the shop. The Riverdale graduate studied psychology at MTSU before going to work in the family business.

"In my early 20s, I realized the enjoyment and fulfillment to see something completed," he said. "It was an awakening. I was familiar with (the business) and enjoyed it."

Todd Milnar does the voicing (tonal work) of the pipes on the organ to make them sound a certain way.

He also oversees the leather department.

Gregory Milnar, the youngest son, began helping out with some of the repetitive aspects of the business at age 12.

The 1995 MTSU graduate (business administration/marketing) gave technical support for a software firm before returning to the organ business. Greg Milnar takes care of the company's Web site (www.milnarorgan.com), which has been two to three years in the making. He also heads up a tuning crew, like his brothers and father.

Keyboards, benches, draw knobs, music racks and pedal boards used in the movie "The Haunted Castle" were purchased on Milnar Organ's Web site, Dennis said.

The boys spent the summers from grammar school through college helping in the organ shop at their father's encouragement.

"Actually, I did want them to be involved in the business," Dennis Milnar said. "It gets in your blood. That's why four of my kids are actively involved (now)."

Lorrie, the daughter of Connie and Dennis, is a registered nurse.

Dennis Milnar spends his time bidding on jobs and working with customers.

"I am usually involved in the initial setup of the organ on site, and I go out on voicing projects," he said.

"We adjust pipes physically and do what we need to do to get the sound that's needed."

Roughly 50 percent of the business is in new construction, and the other 50 percent is in restoration or rebuilding of older organs.

The Milnar Organ Company has been instrumental in the building and maintenance of several pipe organs in Rutherford County.

In 2003, the company nearly doubled the size of the organ at the new home of First Methodist Church in Murfreesboro on Thompson Lane in Murfreesboro.

"We originally built that organ about 25 years ago for the old location (downtown)," said Dennis Milnar.

"We are now in the process of adding 12 more ranks to the organ, including a copper-belled reed behind and above the choir. We hope to finish that project this summer."

The process will include adding between 600 and 700 pipes.

Members of the church are already delighted with the sound of the present organ.

"It's marvelous, and the organist is one of the reasons it's so good," said First Methodist member Ruth Sundberg. "It adds a great deal to the worship service."

Jim Dickson, another member, said the sound of the organ is beautiful.

Several years ago, St. Paul's Episcopal Church built a new sanctuary, and Milnar Organ helped move the church organ into the new facility.

The Moller organ originally was from St. Thomas Hospital in Nashville, and Dennis Milnar helped find a new home for it in Rutherford County.

St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church had its Schantz organ expanded by the local organ company in 1990.

"We knew they would be top quality because we had seen other organs they had installed," said the Rev. Wiatt Funk of St. Rose, who is also an accomplished organist.

Mary Ann Curtis, a longtime parishioner of St. Rose, said the church is blessed.

"We are blessed to have (the organ) and to have a pastor who is so appreciative of music and so musically talented himself," Curtis said. "He loves music. As a result the whole parish benefits.

Curtis said her preference is for a pipe organ — if the size of a chapel can handle it.

Milnar Organ built the organ St. Mark's United Methodist Church used at its old location on East Main Street in Murfreesboro.

"It is in storage until they build their new sanctuary," Dennis Milnar said.

He also rebuilt the organ at First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro many years ago and releathered the organ at First Presbyterian Church.

Dennis Milnar estimates that his family business has built between eight and 10 new organs and has restored or rebuilt another 50 or 60, and he gets equal satisfaction from both. Most of the business comes from Tennessee, Kentucky and Alabama.

Dennis Milnar said some churches have gravitated to electric organs to save money, but they end up paying more in the long run.

"The (initial) cost for a pipe organ is more, but the electronic organ after so many years seems to

become obsolete," he said.

The problem is the lack of available parts for electric organs. A pipe organ, he said, can last 50 to 75 years before work is needed on it. Derek Milnar said an electronic organ may work well for eight to 10 years, but two models later, a church may have to buy another one.

Derek Milnar said the sound of a pipe organ is much better as well.

"It is impossible to make an electronic organ sound like a pipe organ," he said. "The electronic organ speaks through just a few speakers, whereas every pipe in a pipe organ is a speaker."

Dennis Milnar thinks the pipe organ is a quality instrument and that it will always be produced.

Many churches have gone to praise and worship music, using drums or pianos, but the Milnars aren't threatened.

"This praise and worship music is another fad," Dennis Milnar said. "I think traditional music will always have a place. Look how long it has been around."

From all indications, so will the Milnar Organ Company.

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