

TIMES-GAZETTE

Music to his ears: Renewing a 1915 Hinners



Todd Milnar, front, and Ryan Milnar remove the last of the pipes from the First Baptist Church Shelbyville, TN organ. (T-G Photo by Derrick Hill)

Inside First Baptist Church, there's a lot of activity taking place on a Monday morning. There are workers from several companies working inside the large sanctuary. In one area, windows are being measured and taken out. In another, workers from Milnar Organ Co. are carefully deconstructing the large pipe organ that largely makes up the rear wall of the sanctuary. Ryan Milnar, grandson of company founder Dennis Milnar, scales up scaffolding to assist in removing the final pieces of the organ. As First Baptist Church renovates its sanctuary, the company is restoring and updating the Wicks organ that accentuates the already impressive structure. Pastor Jeff Rasnick watches as the company quickly disassembles the complex instrument. "We love our organ. We want everyone to know we aren't getting rid of the organ," Rasnick said. "We are having it restored. When it comes back it will be better than ever."

To look at the organ -- the complex pipes and wooden components and seemingly endless wires and mechanisms-- it's hard to imagine that most of it was taken down in only a few hours.

Milnar takes a brief moment to stand back and take it all in. "We work so fast," he says before jumping back in helping to move the organ's lengthy pipes onto the company trailers. The pipes and equipment will be taken to the company's workshop in Eagleville where they will begin the lengthy process of restoration. Milnar, who resides in Bell Buckle with his father Derek, has been assisting with the company since he was a young boy.

Milnar Organ Co. was started by Dennis Milnar following his seven-year apprenticeship with Delaware Organ Co. Following his apprenticeship, Milnar and his wife, Connie, moved to Nashville. It took time, many days and nights of persistent hard work, to establish their name in the area. The company had its humble beginnings in the basement of the Milnars' home in the Green Hills area of Nashville. As Dennis Milnar and his wife laboriously worked, the company grew and so did the need for a bigger facility. Milnar purchased 150 acres in Eagleville and moved the company and his family to their current home. Milnar Organ Co. now services organs across the Southeast. The company handles everything organ related: from complete rebuilds, new instruments, restoration and relocations to re-leathering and tuning.

It's an impressive, unique operation and one that the third generation Milnar is happy to be a part of. As a graduate of Cascade High School, Ryan takes great pride in his family's business and is excited about learning all aspects of organ construction. Milnar fondly remembers his earliest days with the company, working summers while attending school and helping when needed. One instance in particular stands out for Ryan. Milnar worked the summer with the company and had saved up his money to buy a bicycle. He and his friends were riding their bikes one day and left them chained together while they went about their business. When they returned, all their bikes were gone. A reflector from the bike is still attached to Milnar's toolbox.

Milnar's knowledge of the family business and the rich history surrounding organ construction is impressive. He describes the type of organ being handled at First Baptists and tells of how the company that constructed the organ started out building airplanes. Ryan talks about the history of organs and tells about his granddad installing organs in Tennessee in the 1960s while still working for Delaware Organ Company. Since becoming full time with the company, Milnar has had the opportunity to travel all over the Southeast and assist in working on some of the nation's most impressive organs.

"I always had work with the company," said Milnar. "It's easy for me because it's very physical. I like physical labor. It's not until you are trained on the specifics that it becomes more technical." Training on the specifics takes time. As an apprentice to the Milnar company, it takes up to seven years to learn all the different aspects of organ construction.

Even then, only time joined with hands-on experience and problem solving can make one truly qualified. "I've always known that I was going to do it. The electrical work is what I'm specializing in. It's one of the most difficult parts," said Milnar. "Tuning organs is going to be the hardest part for me. It's going to take a long time to get good at that. They are extremely hard to tune."

Milnar notes that there are tuning devices, but says it's largely dependent upon the ear of the person doing the tuning and the person holding the keys. If we tune the organ for three hours, they'll have a tuner in their hand for maybe 60 seconds," said Milnar. "They find out what the pitch is and that's it. It's all ear." While Milnar is a third generation family employee, his son Noah is the fourth. On July 9, 2013, Noah Milnar made his first service call, an announcement that the family proudly displayed on their webpage.

Perhaps the best way to sum up the legacy that the Milnars continue to build is by the company philosophy statement found on their website. "When completed, the instrument is capable of serving in its role of accompanying instruments and voices as well as successfully rendering a broad cross section of literature. Our goal is to build pipe organs of the highest musical integrity and mechanical reliability, qualities which never go out of style." Qualities which "never go out of style" a philosophy that the Milnars work diligently to uphold, each generation only attesting to its success.



