

Westford resident recalls

Church-organ pumper a vanishing breed

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
Sun Correspondent

WESTFORD — The coal and ice delivery men, the milkman and the home delivery grocer all have one thing in common — they are vanishing professions.

But another profession which is also disappearing is that of a church organ pumper — a job which required much patience, not skill.

Pipe organs are fed air under pressure by mechanical means.

The instruments have an air box which is filled by pumping a handle to activate bellows which fill the chest with air.

With a key on the console, a valve will open at the base of a specific pipe, letting through air to produce the desired tone.

Similar to pumping water, constant pressure must be applied.

Today, electric motors are used to pump air into the organ chambers.

In Westford, as may be the case in other communities, are still a few old timers who can unofficially acknowledge membership in the Organ Pumpers Guild.

As youngsters growing up in a town, a boy assigned to pumping the organ on Sunday or for choir rehearsal, had it made financially — at 35 cents an hour.

Those doing the job were pleased when the organist chose sweet, soft-toned pieces which did not waste air.

The importance of an organ pumper cannot be ignored.

About 75 years ago in the old meetinghouse at the Common, Rev. Benjamin Bailey was ready to start the service.

The choir was awaiting the organist's signal for the opening hymn. Suddenly, no air!

Ninety-year-old Allister F. MacDougall of 46 Boston Road, recalls the event.

He was in a blackberry patch at the time and appeared at the Com-



Viewing the past

Former organ pumper Allister MacDougall, left, demonstrates how the bellows was filled to make music in the First Parish Church United in Westford. With MacDougall is Rev.

mon in his overalls.

With aplomb, he marched to the allotted spot inside the chambers of the organ, grasped the walnut handle to the bellows, and soon there was music and the Sunday service was saved.

"Living almost in the shadow of the First Parish Church at the Common, I saw various organ pumpers, recalls MacDougall, "eventually, when my older brother gave up the post, I took over after having been carefully schooled to keep very quiet

George E. Downey, pastor of the church the last 12 years and Mrs. Harriet Leggat, organist for more than 30 years.

in the bowels of the church's music box.

MacDougall said there was a well-respected man in town whose nickname was "Gawky," but "we kids never called him by that name. He was dubbed this moniker in his youth."

The Westford veteran said there are others who recall being among the pipes of the old organ, which is still considered a gem.

He recalls, "my brother Morton, a retired Concord school principal,

Richard Wells, a former postal worker living in Florida, and two or three others, are 'Guild' members, he said.

The organ pumper spent most of his time behind the facade of the organ in a narrow space called the organ loft.

A curtain backed the exposed sanctuary pipes, blocking the pumper from view.

Over the years, small peep holes poked in the curtain permitted him to view the congregation from a vantage point. During the sermon, he could catch up on his Tom Swift stories or the "Liberty Boys of '76."

The roster of names of the organ pumpers is recorded on the unpainted pine casing of the old organ.

Boys with jack knives usually found time to carve their names in the soft wood during a lull in their duties.

The profession was an art, according to Oliver Wendell Holmes who wrote a poem in tribute to the "patient organ-blower."

It was a great day for the parish when in 1871 its Willcox tracker organ was installed at a cost of \$2,400.

Rev. George E. Downey reminds us that in early days, all singing was done a cappella.

It was not until 1824 that a bass viol was used to support the singing.

Sopranos were forced to sing an octave or two higher. The old viol was finally retired and "put up at auction and struck off to Samuel Hartwell, Jr., for cents."

Then in 1931, electricity pumped the venerable Willcox organ.

The history of the organ goes back to the Mediterranean culture of more than 2,000 years.

"Always there has been a person who furnished the muscle to fill the bellows. Could these Westford boys be designated as unsung heroes of ancient times?