



Using the old handle, ex-organ pumper Allister MacDougall demonstrates how he filled the bellows to make music in the First Parish Church United. He is shown with Rev. George E. Downey, pastor for the past twelve years, and Mrs. Harriet Leggat, organist and choir director for over thirty years.

The lowly organ pumper - a vanishing breed

By Gordon B. Seavey

WESTFORD) Among the vanishing professions are the coal and ice delivery men, the milk man and the home delivery grocer. And too, there is the lowly organ pumper whose salary was infinitesimal.

To be an organ pumper required much patience, not skill. Pipe organs are fed air under pressure by mechanical means. The instruments have a chest or air box which is filled by moving a handle up and down to activate bellows which in turn fill the chest.

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

The job of the organ pumper was to keep the box loaded with air under pressure. The chest had to be filled at all times and a lead gauge on a string rose as the pressure dropped.

Similar to pumping water, he must maintain a constant pressure. When indicated by the gauge, slow, steady and quiet pumping was required. Jerky motions were taboo, too distracting to the worshippers and much consternation to the organist.

With the dawn and bloom of electric motors, organ chambers are not filled with inhuman blowers, causing membership in the Guild, like the ice business, to go down the drain.

In Westford as surely there must be in other communities are a few old timers who can unofficially acknowledge membership in the Organ Pumpers Guild.

As a kid growing up in a town any boy who had the post of pumping the local organ for a couple of hours on Sunday and an hour or two for choir rehearsal on Thursday nights had it made financially.

Light Music

Pumpers would appreciate when the organist chose sweet, soft-toned pieces which did not waste air. But when all stops were pulled for say the Hallelujah Chorus, then the pumper earned his pay of 35¢ an hour.

The importance of a pumper could not be ignored. Some 75 years ago in the old meeting house at the Common, Rev. Benjamin Bailey was ready to start the service. The choir, although small in summertime, was awaiting the organist's signal for the opening hymn. No air!

Allister F. MacDougall of 46 Boston Road, now 90, recalls he was rushed from Noah Prescott's blackberry patch to substitute for the absent blow boy.

Appearing in his overalls but 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. That Sunday's service was saved! Perhaps Parson Bailey's sermon in some part applauded the virtues of being an organ pumper.

Living almost in the shadow of the First Parish Church at the Common, I had the opportunity to see various blow boys come and go. Eventually, when my older brother gave up the post, I took over after having been carefully schooled to keep very quiet in the bowels of the church's music box.

There was a well-respected man in town whose nickname was "Gawky," but we kids never called him by that name. He was dubbed his moniker in his youth. As a blow boy, he would join the worshippers during the sermon up front near the instrument and stare around the sanctuary.

Guild Members

There are others who recall being among the pipes of the old organ, which is still considered a gem. 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.

The blow boy 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 of the Liberty Boys of '76.

The roster of names of the 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.

Organ pumping was an art according to Oliver Wendell Holmes who wrote a poem in tribute to the patient organ blower. In part, I see his figure sink and rise, still measuring out his deep salaams through quivering hymns and panting psalms, he penned.

It was a great day for the parish when in 1871 its Wilcox 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 came into use 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 75 cents.

The link for the blow boys came about when fifty years later, electricity took over in 1931 the pumping of the venerable Wilcox organ.

The history of the organ reaches back to the Mediterranean culture of more than 2,000 years. Always there has been a person or several pumpers in the case of large organs who furnished the muscle to fill the bellows. Could these old-time Westford blow boys be designated as unsung heroes of ancient times?

There is a humorous poem attributed to the Amalgamated Pumpers Association. It reads like this:

More, More Air!

Let there be air, the organist cried.

Seated one day at the keys,

If you what? the pumper inquired.

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