

Thomas Dieffenbach Pipe Organ

built for

Eppler's Union Church, Leesport, PA.

by Jack Umholtz - 2009

My affiliation with the Thomas Dieffenbach pipe organ originally built for Eppler's Union Church in Leesport, PA. began in the late winter of 1970. Having taken organ lessons since summer of 1969, my brother, an antique enthusiast, ask me if I knew of the pipe organ in Spring Glen, Pa. He told me he saw it one night while driving by when the lights were turned on in the building. My father, being of the type to aid his sons in their quests, must have done some asking and made arrangements for us to go and see this instrument.

My first time there was an experience. The instrument was fully playable, in perfect tune, and completely functional. The owner, Mr. Leo Erdman, was not a musician, and not remotely musical, but loved music. He also owned several player pianos and an Estey 2 manual reed organ that were located in the same building. Mr. Erdman was very mechanically inclined and would take apart and put back together just about anything from automobiles to household appliances to pipe organs! I'm sure this was a skill developed from having been raised during the Great Depression and having to keep anything functioning as long as possible.

Mr. Erdman, or Leo, as I got to know him, showed me how he purchased an electronic tuner to tune the Dieffenbach, but could not get the organ to come up (down?...I don't remember) to pitch. He added newspapers to the tuning sleeves to get the organ to A=440 pitch on the tuner. I didn't know better at the time to tell him it probably wasn't an A=440 pitched instrument, but, then, neither did he. I also remember Leo telling me that he added bricks to the bellows (reservoir) in the summer and took them off in the winter because if he didn't the tone of the organ would hurt his ears. I'm assuming the change of relative humidity in the air would sharpen or flatten the pitch, and rather than re-tune the entire instrument, he discovered he could alter the pressure and in that manner could compensate for the pitch change. He told me it especially hurt his ears...he described it as an "edge" to the tone...in the winter unless he removed some bricks from the reservoir.

Leo never told me the entire story on how he got the organ, though. The only thing he would say was that he "traded" some (anthracite) coal for it. However, in 1984, Columbia Organ Works was rebuilding the Moller in Simeon's Lutheran Church in Gratz, PA. (OHS organ # 31607), about 5 miles west of Spring Glen. I was involved in that rebuild, and would periodically stop in on my commute home from work to check on the progress. One afternoon, the workmen and I got talking about old organs, and I brought up the 2/16 Dieffenbach located about 5 miles away. They started telling me about it! They were very excited, as they told me the OHS lost track of it 15 to 20 years prior to that time, and asked about arranging a visit, which I eventually did. The Columbia men told me the OHS tried to find out what the last known owner (who I now know to be Walter Christ) did with the instrument, but Mr. Christ was uncooperative. It was then that I pieced things together, and came up with the following events.

It is a fact that Leo Erdman and his brothers were partners in a family owned anthracite coal mine (Spring Glen is located in the western-most section of the Pennsylvania Anthracite Coal fields, and family owned "coal holes" were and still are not uncommon.). At some point in time in the mid 1960's, the sale of coal was slow (summer, warm winter, I'm not sure). The Erdman brothers kept mining, but

were accumulating a stockpile of coal. Without selling any coal, there was no income for the brothers. Therefore, Leo went on a mission to sell some of the stockpiled coal to keep the money coming in.

It seems that Leo somehow met up with Walter Christ (Pine Grove, PA is about 14 miles southeast of Spring Glen), and Mr. Christ was interested in the coal...possibly doing speculation for the upcoming winter/or cold snap. Mr. Christ agreed to purchase the coal, and Leo delivered it in the company dump truck. After several loads and no payment, the logical question arose...where's my money? At the time, Mr. Christ told Leo he didn't have the money, and told Leo of the Dieffenbach pipe organ he had. They worked out a trade. Leo would get the Dieffenbach, and he'd work the debt off with his brothers at the mine.

About that time, Leo was building or having built a two story house for his family. After acquiring the Dieffenbach, part of the 2nd floor was removed or possibly never installed from ½ of the house, and, after the structure was finished, with a missing part of the 2nd floor, the Dieffenbach was installed there. This is reasoning on my part due to seeing the 2nd floor electrical outlets installed in the drywall the proper distance below the 2nd floor windows in the half of the building that had no 2nd floor. The building is about 20' x 50', and the Dieffenbach occupied the west half of the house without the 2nd floor, with the Kinetic blower in the basement. Leo told me he also had the entire hand pumping mechanism for the instrument. This house was used as a music building/recreation room for the Dieffenbach, player pianos, and the Estey reed organ. Also installed there was a pool table for the sons, and, after installing a roll up garage door, turned into the heated garage for maintaining the family vehicles. The building was not used as a home.

The instrument had 54 note manuals and an interesting flat, 18 note, "reverse radiating" pedalboard... the pedalboard was narrower at the front than at the back.

The instrument was located there from the mid to late 1960's to around 2005. I would visit as time would allow (in hindsight, not near enough were made), and play this magnificent instrument for Leo's enjoyment. I made a few recordings for Leo on an early battery operated cassette tape recorder, but they were of exceptionally poor quality and are no longer in existence.

During the visit with the Columbia men in 1984, Leo expressed interest in selling the organ. When asked how much he would want for it, he would never give an amount, but would say "I won't give it away! I'll chop it up and burn it first!". From that point on, an effort was made by Columbia and others to find a home for this, the largest Dieffenbach pipe organ built, but to no avail. I last showed it to a local Lutheran Church in the extremely late 1990's/early 2000's, but they could not use it due to a lack of floor space/height.

Not too long after this showing, Leo Erdman passed from this earth, leaving his widow and sons.

Around 2005, I received a phone call from the proprietor of the local hardware store asking if I knew of an old pipe organ in the area, as someone walked in off the street asking about it. I told him of the Dieffenbach at Leo Erdman's, and he told me the person doing the inquiring had visited the Erdman home and was told that "last summer, we got tired of looking at it, so my brother and I loaded it into two dump truck loads and hauled it to the dump" (at the intersection of I-81 and PA Route 25).

Having known the sons, I looked one of them up and asked about the organ. He told me the same thing...that they hauled it to the dump.

Therefore, the largest Dieffenbach is no more...having fallen victim to a family that wanted space, did not recognize what they had in their possession, and rather than donate it to someone or some organization in order to preserve it for its historical importance, paid to unceremoniously dispose of it at the local landfill.