

Recollections of the Kimball, Smallman Frazee

Wayne Johnson – August, 2021

Let's take a trip back to 1993 when I had my first encounter with the pipe organ at 7 years old. After a church service one Sunday afternoon, I was able to sit down at the large 4 manual console at First Lutheran Church in Lynn, MA. I distinctively remember the blower firing up and the wind leaking as I pulled stop number 77; the Great 8' Trumpet. Having only taken piano lessons at the time, I wasn't familiar with this large instrument, but I was instantly intrigued! After tinkering around for a bit, I was offered a tour of the pipe gallery and after a short climb up a ladder, we were inside the instrument! The organ had about 2,500 pipes crammed into a 36 foot by 16 foot chamber at the rear of the sanctuary.

In 1913, the Boston-based firm of Kimball, Smallman and Frazee completed their Opus 16; a large 4 manual, 67 rank instrument for Boston's Harvard Club. By 1958, the instrument saw little use and the console, with 30 ranks of pipes and various other mechanical parts, were sold to First Lutheran Church in Lynn, MA. The original church, located on Lawton Ave, housed a circa 1910 Mason & Hamlin organ of 2 manuals and about 10 ranks of pipes. In 1958, the Congregational was overgrowing the small church and it was decided that a new church was to be constructed on Broadway in 1959. These two instruments, along with a few other miscellaneous sets of pipes, would be combined in the new building to form one of the largest pipe organs on the Massachusetts North Shore.

Head organist, Sture Olson, took charge of installing the instrument in the new church along with the original 10 rank Mason & Hamlin pipe organ from the previous church. It was a labor of love as many church members were involved in various tasks including running wires, cleaning pipes, installing pipe chests and so on. By the 1970s, the original 1913 console was showing signs of aging and a contract for rebuild was signed with William Organ Company of Swampscott, MA. In 1973, the Williams Company rebuilt the console with new keyboards, new stop jambs with electric action, new contacts throughout, a new coupler rail and refinished the interior and exterior along with a Solid State (for the time) electronic combination action.

By 1981, the last set of pipes were added, the Swell 8' Cornopean, which played on homemade windchests built by Sture Olson. Mr. Olson passed later that year, unable finish his dream. My Grandmother, Carolyn Johnson, worked alongside Mr. Olson for years as the assistant Organist and Choir Director. Upon Mr. Olson's passing she continued as the Organist and Choir Director. For over 40 years, she played the organ at FLC for church services, weddings, funerals and her favorite; choir concerts! Her concerts were known all over New England and drew crowds of hundreds of people with much publicity. She officially retired in 1992 although you could find her substituting at churches throughout the North Shore.

Fast forward to the 1990s when the entire instrument was showing signs of aging and an Organ Committee at First Lutheran was formed to address the various problems. Just a few of the issues were that many of the 1913 Frazee pitman chests were failing, reeds weren't staying in tune, the organ chamber was not insulated and the instrument was tuned to A=435. I remember my Grandmother telling me that the Swell 8' Aeoline was the only stop with all pipes playing as the other ranks had pipes pulled due to ciphers. It was decided the best course of action would be to replace the instrument, and work continued to find a suitable builder.

In June 1995, my Grandmother sat down at the console for the last time and pulled out all the stops as she played Boellmann's "Toccata from Suite Gothique", which was amazing! After playing the last Postlude, the rolltop was closed and locked thus ending another chapter in the history of First Lutheran Church. Week after week, the organ was removed until there was nothing but an empty chamber one Sunday afternoon and plywood covering where the console once was. Fortunately, I was able to save many of Sture's notes and books and I educated myself on the pipe organ's inner workings.

A contract with Austin Organs in Hartford, CT was signed for a 2 manual organ of 17 ranks, with a few "prepared for" stops. Funding was cut short and the remainder of the organ was an electronic, built by Copeman-Hart of England. In 1998, the new instrument containing 11 ranks of pipes, was dedicated and remains in use today. The Great 8' Cremona, which was the Choir Clarinet from the Harvard Club installation, along with 25 note Deagan chimes are all that remain from the previous instrument. The Clarinet was thought to be built by the Samuel Pierce Company of Reading, MA as they supplied many builders with ranks of pipes.

Summer 2019 was huge for me as I discovered some of the FLC/Harvard Club pipework had been installed in a church in Saratoga Springs, NY. After contacting the builder, Daniel Lemieux, I learned he retained the 4-manual console in his barn and had no plans for it! I set out as soon as possible to retrieve it and after an almost 5 hour drive, I had arrived. There it was, sitting there just as I remembered! The same keys my grandmother played week after week, my first exposure to the pipe organ.

A local friend, Michael Soucy, who is also installing a pipe organ in his home, volunteered to help me build new stopjams and a new coupler rail. The original black walnut veneer particle board was chipping and falling apart and warranted replacement. I have been working endlessly to wire the instrument for several ranks of pipes in my basement with the eventual goal of someday adding Hauptwerk.