

## Pipe Organ part of 1912 Cathedral Heritage

[written for *The Catholic Advance*, April 20, 2007]

The two most costly gifts to the new St. Mary's Cathedral in 1912 were the altar, carved and constructed of imported Italian marble, and the large pipe organ, built by the George Kilgen & Son firm of St. Louis. In a *Wichita Beacon* article of March 27, 1912 ("Rich Donations to the Cathedral"), both altar and organ are cited: the altar at a cost of \$10,000, the gift of Mr. & Mrs. Ted J. McDonald; and the organ (elsewhere valued at \$10,000), the gift of August Rosenberger.

For perspective, we should note that \$10,000 then would equal over 200,000 of our current day dollars — and, further, that building a *new* such organ nowadays would cost closer to \$1M! It should also be pointed out that the beautiful marble tabernacle we now know in the west transept of the Cathedral, and the reredos behind the Episcopal chair were originally parts of that elegant marble altar.

As late as July 1912, though the altar was finished and in place, it was thought that the organ would not be ready in time for the September 19 dedication. *The Wichita Eagle* of Thursday Morning, August 1, 1912 ("To Have Finest Organ in State for Dedication"), said: "Announcement that the big organ will be installed in time for the dedication came as a surprise to the church people in charge...yesterday.... [A]rrangements for other means of providing the chief music had [already] been made." However, "Dr. John Maher, Rector of St. Patrick's Church and Editor of the *Catholic Advance*, stated last night that there is no longer any [such] danger...."

An incidental note from that same article: "Vocal music at the dedication will be furnished by a male choir, singing the famous Gregorian chant, as recommended for the mass by His Holiness, Pope Pius X. This choir will be brought from St. Louis especially for the dedication ceremony." The *Beacon's* September 18 issue also gives a captioned picture of "Fr. Jules M. Monnier, Rector of St. Mary's, Who Will Direct the Dedication Choir."

On Thursday, September 19, the day of the dedication, the *Beacon* "review" counted that choir at 80 voices! Given what is even still quite limited choir space in the gallery, one wonders where they put the 80 singers!

The same issue also contained a side piece ("Description of New Cathedral") with a sub-title reading "Altar, Organ, and Pulpit Are Notable Features of the Structure — The Exterior is Most Attractive." In this article is found the most complete description of the pipe organ published at the time, excerpted below.

The grand organ, said to be one of the largest and most complete in Kansas, occupies the entire gallery over the main entrance to the Cathedral. It has a console with four [keyboards..., and its] huge quadruple bellows are connected with a three-horsepower motor...; a special dynamo is attached for the action.

A 250-foot electric cable from the console runs through the walls to the Echo organ, located on the north side of the sanctuary.... There are 32 stops and 2,000 pipes, as well as 34 accessories in this splendid instrument.... The individual valve system prevails throughout, while each pipe is provided with a pneumatic motor.

The organ was...donated by Mr. A. Rosenberger, the well-known broom corn factory owner of Wichita and Baltimore. [A coincidence...? *James Cardinal Gibbons, also of Baltimore, our first American Cardinal, was the prelate who made the long train trip to Wichita to dedicate St. Mary's Cathedral.*]

The successful firm of George Kilgen & Son had been established in New York in 1851, moved to St. Louis in 1873, and in their heyday built organs for both theaters and churches, up until 1960. After the St. Mary's instrument, they installed a large pipe organ in the St. Louis Cathedral in 1915; and two large, connected organs at either end of New York's cavernous St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1928. These notable instruments, and many other Kilgens, survive to this day.

Like St. Mary's organ, they have experienced some alterations over the years. Our Cathedral organ has seen major renovations two times in its nearly 100-year career, according to Cathedral Music Director Jim Jones, who oversaw the more recent reworking in 1987. The original gallery organ action was tubular pneumatic, with air pressure in tubes running from the organ key to the pipe valve; thus the keys had to be close to the pipes, and the console was attached to the organ case itself. Only the Echo division used electro-pneumatic action, fairly new in 1912; with an electric connection to open the pipe valve, the pipes themselves could be at some distance.

In the first, 1948 renovation, the entire organ was converted to electro-pneumatic action, changing the wind chests under the pipes and adding three new sets of trumpets. The action change also allowed a rebuilt console to be moved to a more suitable location in the gallery.

Then, due to a combination of circumstances in the 1970's remodeling for Vatican II, the Echo organ at the front of the room was removed. Although electro-pneumatic action had *allowed* the luxury of the distant division, it was often difficult to keep in tune with pipework far away in the main organ — due principally to the differing temperature conditions in the two locations — and the change, though not exactly “minor,” was not uncommon for the day.

The second major work on the instrument, in 1987, brightened it considerably — certainly as compared to the original “orchestral” sound that would have been the norm in 1912. The wind chests were changed to much more compact direct electric action, allowing not only the addition of some higher pitched stops, but also making about five more feet of much-needed room for the choir in the gallery. The Cathedral's tour brochure quotes the cost of the 1987 renovation at \$76,500. In today's dollars, that would be just over \$141,500 — even so, much less costly than a new instrument.

Pipe organs do need occasional major work; this one will undoubtedly need it again in the future. However, the amazing fact is this: that the main parts of the instrument are still there and functioning, after nearly 100 years! [How many electrical devices do we have in our homes that are over even 25 years old?]

It is often said that the *room* in which an organ plays is, in fact, “part of the organ.” This is so true at St. Mary's! Thanks to the hard surfaces and high spaces, the Cathedral has wonderful acoustics that are sought out by various choral groups in the City. In this space the organ is also truly a musical jewel. St. Mary's is one of the few places in the State where the acoustics are actually reminiscent of the great European cathedrals; but, because of the dedicated work, foresight, and sacrifice of our forebears in 1912, we have it in Wichita, a part of our wonderful Diocesan heritage!

— C.H.

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STOPLIST: Kilgen, 1912 / Smith, 1948 / Miller, 1987

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GREAT: Open Diapason 16', Principal 8', Hohlflöte 8', Viol 8', Octave 4', Flute Harmonique 4', Principal 2', Mixture IV, Trumpet 8', Clarion 4'; Gt. 16, u, 4; Sw.– Gt. 16, 8, 4; Ch.– Gt. 16, 8, 4

SWELL: Bourdon 16', Geigen Diapason 8', Stopped Diapason 8', Salicional 8', Voix Céleste 8', Octave 4' (ext.), Flute 4', Violina 4', Nazat 2 2/3', Piccolo 2', Mixture III, Cornopean 8', Oboe 8', Trumpet 4' (ext.), tremolo; Sw. 16, u, 4

CHOIR: Rohrflöte 8', Dolce 8', Unda Maris 8', Spitzflöte 4', Principal 2', Quint 1 1/3', Clarinet 8', Chimes (on man. IV); Ch. 16, u, 4; Sw.– Ch. 8, 4

PEDAL: Resultant 32', Open Diapason 16', Subbass 16', Bourdon 16' (Swell), Octave 8', Bassflöte 8' (ext.), Cello 8', Choralbass 4', Mixture II, Trombone 16', Trumpet 8', Clarion 4' (ext.); Gt.– Pd. 8, 4; Sw.– Pd. 8, 4; Ch.– Pd.