

Jan 1968

built on the Bennett system

A history of the Bennett Organ Company

by Robert E. Coleherd, Jr.

(The author is deeply grateful to the following persons whose generous cooperation made possible this article: Richard W. Dirksen, Benjamin F. Sperbeck, and Milton Sanku, former employees of the Bennett Organ Company; and Mrs. Ruth McGinty, daughter of Robert J. Bennett)

When young John L. Lancashire crossed the Atlantic in the fall of 1864, he could have scarcely dreamed that his journey would mark the beginning of a pipe organ enterprise that would span 66 years. From a modest beginning in Ripon, Wisconsin, the firm he helped found progressed in Milwaukee and then in Moline, Illinois, to become a leading mid-continental builder of pipe organs in the late 19th Century and to continue operations until 1930.

As a representative of the world-renowned English organbuilders, Willis of London, Lancashire's mission was to deliver and install a pipe organ in the Grace Episcopal Church of Ripon. The parishioners at Grace Church were fortunate indeed to number among their members four wealthy brothers, George, Thomas, Edward, and Octavius Marshall who had emigrated to the English settlement of Ripon, acquired large land holdings west of town, and entered the cattle business. George, the eldest and first to come over—in the 1850's was a merchant. Thomas had arrived in 1864 after a 19 year career in the British Navy. He went to sea at the age of 14 and rose to the rank of Captain. Edward, a physician, had received his medical training at Heidelberg University. Octavius, the youngest, was born in Tottenham in 1841 and educated at Eaton. The Marshall Brothers reportedly were each given \$10,000 when they came to

America. One of the brothers—probably Edward—purchased the organ while on a visit to his native England. The Marshalls took particular pride in the new instrument which they gave to the church in memory of their parents and the arrival of the organ created much excitement in the small northwestern hamlet.

With money to invest, the Marshall Brothers suggested to Lancashire that he join them and together they would open an organ manufactory in Ripon. Lancashire was enthusiastic and soon he persuaded three other Willis-trained Englishmen, Charles S. Barlow, Edward "Ted" Harris, and William H. Turner to join the venture. As was characteristic of this firm throughout much of its history, those who financed the enterprise took title to the nameplate, so the shop opened as the Marshall Brothers Organ Company. In 1867, Phillip Odenbrett, who had been building pipe and cabinet organs and melodicons in Waupun, Wisconsin joined the firm. According to the *Ripon Commonwealth*, operations were now on a "large scale" and "at the new shops in the city, every part of the organ will be manufactured, including the renowned 'spotted metal' pipes."

In March, 1870, the company was just completing an organ for the Spring Street Congregational Church in Milwaukee when a disastrous fire struck, destroying the factory which the *Commonwealth* commented "gave Ripon more notoriety than any one business in our midst." This was to be the first in a series of fires which would shape the early history of the company. The

placed at \$12,000, was a severe blow to the Marshalls who momentarily considered rebuilding in Ripon, but who elected to relocate in Milwaukee in June, 1870 because of service work there that would provide an added source of revenue. Of the four Marshall Brothers, only George and Octavius, who moved to Milwaukee, appear now to be identified with the business.

Business boomed in Milwaukee. In addition to numerous two manual instruments for churches in Milwaukee and neighboring Wisconsin towns, the firm built a 31-rank three manual for St. John's Episcopal Church in Quincy, Illinois in 1872, and two years later an ornate 40-stop manual for the First Presbyterian Church in St. Louis. The former instrument was built twice. The first one was standing on the erecting room floor ready for delivery when it was destroyed in another fire which swept the factory in October, 1871. By the following April a large facility in a new location on Clyburn Street had been built and the second edition of the organ was ready for delivery. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* commended the firm for its "great energy and enterprise" in recovering so rapidly from the disastrous fire. A. F. Clarke, a prominent local businessman, was taken in as a partner for a short time, perhaps to aid them financially in getting back on their feet.

The enterprise appeared to be well established in Milwaukee, having survived the fire and having competed successfully for contracts, when an incident occurred which resulted in the spinoff of a new nameplate and ultimately the end of operations in that city. In the spring of 1872, Lancashire and Turner filed lawsuit against George L. Marshall. The nature of the litigation is unknown but the court awarded the pair a sum totaling over \$1300. With their new-found cash as the "shoe-suing" and having recently obtained three contracts in the three cities complex on the Mississippi River of Rock Island and Moline, Illinois, and Davenport, Iowa, they decided to pull up stakes and move to Moline. Thus the triangular Lancashire and Turner nameplate made its debut about 1873.

The fledgling enterprise prospered, building organs in Iowa and Illinois. The works was destroyed by fire in August, 1876 but again as in Milwaukee they recovered rapidly, building a new three-story building with a separate pipe shop and lumber shed. But as was also to be so typical of this enterprise and indeed of the whole pipe organ industry, Messrs. Lancashire and Turner found that they needed more capital. They interested a local businessman, Albert A. Crampton, whose investments from time to time included land, banking, an iron foundry, and a farm machinery concern into adding \$3,000 to \$2,000 of their own funds to incorporate the enterprise as the Moline Pipe Organ Company in 1879. Thus the Moline Company was born and a new triangular nameplate appeared. Crampton sold his interest in 1882, possibly to Marcellus R. Metzger, the secretary-treasurer of the company during this period who signed the contracts and who was a stockholder.

During the Moline era, which lasted for 12 years, the company prospered and built many organs including some three manual instruments all through the upper Mississippi Valley region. Their high reputation stemmed from the versatile skills of Lancashire, a consummate builder, his able assistant, Turner, Barlow the key-



OCTAVIUS MARSHALL 1841-1918



ROBERT J. BENNETT 1864-1938

maker, and Ted Harris, an extraordinarily talented pipemaker. When he came to America, Harris carried in his trunk a set of beautiful lancewood mandrels. He fashioned his soldering iron from a wagon axle and fired it in a charcoal heater. The organs these artisans built were of high tonal and mechanical quality, and were probably representative of the finer tracker work of the 19th Century.

The triangular Moline nameplate ended in 1891 when the former associate Octavius Marshall again acquired a financial interest in the firm and moved to Moline to take an active part in the business. Marshall had, no doubt, deeply regretted the split in Milwaukee and apparently had remained on friendly terms with Lancashire. He had represented the company in Milwaukee after the close of the Marshall Brothers enterprise and welcomed an opportunity to invest \$25,000 in the company in 1891, doubling its capitalization which had been increased from \$5,000 to \$25,000 in 1888. With his long white beard and dignified bearing, Marshall was an impressive figure before a church committee, as his sales success indicates. Both he and Lancashire played the organ well enough to demonstrate their product to a prospective buyer.

The Lancashire-Marshall Company rode the crest of the booming 1890's, an era of unprecedented firm prosperity in America. They built a large number of instruments over a surprisingly wide geographical territory. A pneumatic pedal action was introduced during this period, the first step in the eventual abandonment of mechanical action.

About 1902, Octavius Marshall began looking for an experienced builder as shop superintendent to succeed Lancashire who had died suddenly of pneumonia a few years earlier. He approached Robert J. Bennett, foreman of the pipe organ department of the Lyon and Healy Company in Chicago, and persuaded him to come to Moline.

Robert J. Bennett was born in Calais, France, on January 28, 1864, the only son and seventh child of a stonemason who migrated to Nova Scotia and then to Boston. After attending a vocational high school in Boston, Robert Bennett apprenticed himself to the organbuilder George S. Hutchings, and over a period of about ten years he acquired a general knowledge of organbuilding and some skills as an action mechanic. Another aspiring young apprentice at Hutchings at the time who would also have his own nameplate later was Ernest M. Skinner. Bennett often recalled his association with the Boston patriarch, although the two did not maintain their friendship.

Like other young apprentices, Bennett dreamed of one day having his own firm. His first giant step toward reaching this goal came when he moved west to affiliate with the Lyon and Healy Music Company in Chicago. This firm, a large progressive music retailer also operated a facility to manufacture numerous musical instruments including tracker pipe organs. In 1895 Bennett was listed as superintendent of the pipe organ department at Lyon and Healy after about only one year with the firm. It was in this role that the complex, contradictory, personality of Robert J. Bennett began to emerge and the dissension which plagued his career at Lyon and Healy was but a portent of his future troubles in Moline.

The arrival of Bennett to take over the operation of the Lancashire-Marshall Company in 1902, which was reincorporated as the Marshall-Bennett Organ Company, came at a time when the pipe organ industry was undergoing a major technological revolution. Although Hilborne Roosevelt's successful experiments with non-mechanical action in 1884 had created much interest, it was several years after John T. Austin had perfected his universal windchest in 1893 and others had made similar strides, before a sense of urgency pervaded the entire industry. By the turn of the century, however, it was patently clear that unless a company could come up with a satisfactory non-mechanical system, it could not survive.

Bennett perceived this trend and its crucial importance to the company and when he came to Moline his first step was to promote a new action on which he would stake the future of the firm, the so-called "Bennett System." Opinions differ on the origin of the system he was to champion. One former employee cites key contributions by two Marshall associates—Arthur Sperbeck, a veteran of the Moline era, and Frank Harris, son of the pipemaker Ted Harris. Other sources attribute it to Bennett's experience with the newer chest actions at Hutchings. Hearsay has it that an unknown Lyon and Healy employee shares credit for the invention. The end product was most likely a combination of the ideas of several men. It was a relatively complex device consisting of a two-pouch pneumatic action. When the key at the console was depressed the lower pouch inflated admitting air to the channel which exhausted the second pouch. This pulled the spring-loaded wire valve stem away from the toeboard admitting air to the pipe. With more moving parts than a conventional pitman action it was costly to build and because it required two men to remove the bottom board it was difficult to service; but it was a durable, reliable, and a reasonably fast action. Bennett was so impressed with it that the words "Bennett System" were inscribed on every nameplate. In advertising the "System" in *The Diapason* he used testimonials by Clarence Eddy and Harold Gleason. The conversion of the Marshall-Bennett Company to tubular pneumatic action (electro-pneumatic by 1916) was a stroke of managerial genius by Bennett, but ironically it was to be one of the few correct decisions he ever made.

When "R. J.", as he was known among the employees, came to Moline he saw his dream of owning his own organ firm fulfilled. He acquired stock in the company from Lancashire's widow at a favorable price and set about immediately to revamp the organization and recast it in his own image. Whereas the tonal philosophy of Lancashire-Marshall and its predecessors was a continuation of the great Willis tradition, Bennett's concepts were gleaned from his training at Hutchings. He determined to supplant the Willis scales for the 8' Open Diapason on the Great manual with the large scales being used by Hutchings—even on small organs—much to the chagrin of certain employees. He contributed his part to the tragic tonal degeneration which swept the organ industry at the turn of the century and his instruments were representative of the building during that lamentable era. It is noteworthy, for example, that in the elaborate Bennett Catalogue of 1910, not a single mixture is to be found among the numerous two and three manual standard specifications listed.

In 1908 Octavius Marshall left the firm and Bennett assumed full control. He rewrote the corporate charter as the Bennett Organ Company which was now located in Rock Island because of a change in municipal boundaries with adjacent Moline. It was a propitious time to acquire a pipe organ business. The industry was in a period of marked expansion as indicated in the table below. More important, the Census of 1900 had noted the rise of western builders who had overtaken the New England firms in output.

PIPE ORGAN OUTPUT AND VALUE, 1899-1919

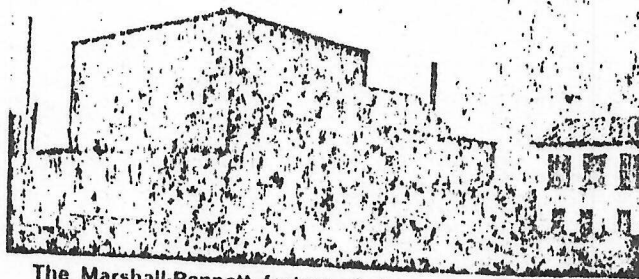
Year	Number of Instruments	Value
1899	564	\$1,177,021
1904	901	1,989,979
1909	1,224	2,713,587
1914	2,273	4,660,301
1919	1,151	4,185,535

Source: United States Census, 1900, 1910, 1920

The future of the firm now rested upon the business acumen of Bennett who personally solicited most of the contracts. Friendly and humorous, this slender dark-haired man was beyond question a capable and clever salesman. He had all the answers when talking to a church committee about an organ and they in turn appeared to swallow everything he said. On one occasion, for example, a Lutheran Church in Swedeberg, Iowa complained that the primary action on the newly installed Bennett organ was too noisy and called Bennett. He drove over to the church, listened to the action, and then explained that the fault was not in the instrument but was caused by the church being acoustically too alive. If the church were not so alive, he told the committee, the problem wouldn't exist. They bought the story.

As was true of other midwestern builders up through the early 1920's, the Bennett Company did not employ full time sales representatives in territories across the nation. The majority of the installations were in the immediate neighborhood—within driving distance of the home office. Several men did solicit contracts informally for the company: Fred Cesander of Strandberg, South Dakota; John Byington, a piano dealer in Rockford who had stock in the company; and John Howard, influential in Methodist circles in Chicago. Cesander, a lanky Swede who had just graduated from Augustana College in Rock Island, did not confine his efforts to selling Bennett pipe organs in Nebraska and South Dakota; he also peddled Royal typewriters, Essex automobiles, silk hosiery, pianos, and reed organs.

The task of directing the enterprise proved difficult for Robert J. Bennett. He purposely or inadvertently alienated stockholders and employees. It was generally known among the employees that he forced Octavius Marshall out of the business in 1908. Marshall moved to Kansas City where he represented the Austin Organ Company quite successfully until his death in 1918. Bennett reportedly took notes in lieu of cash for the big four manual instrument in Oklahoma City against the instructions of the shareholders—the church is said to have eventually paid 20 cents on the dollar—and they accused him of having a personal financial interest in contracts for theater organs the company was building for Lyon and Healy. He was forever trying to persuade the em-



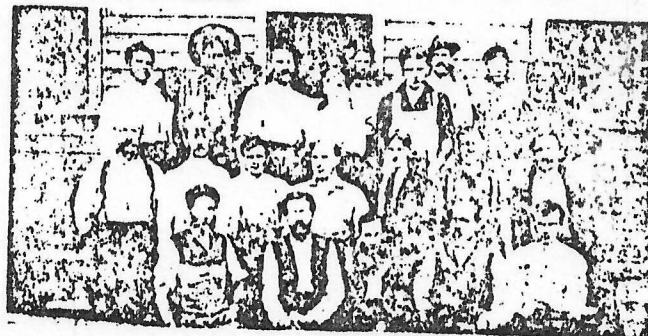
The Marshall-Bennett factory photographed about 1903.

ployees to trade a portion of their wages for stock in the company. This drove several valuable men away including Frank Harris who joined Wangerin-Weickhardt in Milwaukee where he introduced a variation of the Bennett windchest. Needless to say those who bought stock in the Bennett Company never received a nickel on their investment.

Bennett found an escape from his personality clashes and his lack of business ability in his fascination for console mechanisms. He experimented endlessly with various forms of combination and key action, but he changed his ideas so often that he never succeeded in producing a satisfactory mechanism. He eagerly pursued the work of other builders seeking to learn their methods, but then he changed the designs so much they wouldn't work. His mistakes were costly, tied up shop labor, and incurred the bitterness of churches. On one occasion the combination action didn't last long enough for the dedicatory recital. The company survived largely because of the dedication of a handful of able craftsmen: men like Ed and Charles Wright the Canadian born pipemakers, Albert Stannke the voicer who came from Aeolian in 1924, Carl Nyquist the console maker, and Theodore Sandburg the shop superintendent.

The company was winning contracts and from all appearances it was prospering. But under the surface trouble was brewing. The organ industry had become highly competitive in the 1920's and to get contracts Bennett had to underbid neighboring builders like Hinnert, Wangerin-Weickhardt, Kilgen, Reuter, and Wicks, plus such eastern houses as Moller. Even though Moller had Ford and Reynolds as sales representatives in Chicago, their aggressive sales manager in Hagerstown, E. O. Schulenberg, often journeyed west to bid on a contract. In bidding so low to get the contracts, Bennett couldn't generate the revenue necessary to cover his costs. By

Company employees in 1907. Left to right on the first row are Arthur Sperbeck and Ted Harris. Frank Harris is third from right in the second row. Theodore Sandberg is on the right end in row three.



1923 the financial condition of the company had deteriorated so drastically that it was technically insolvent. Hovering on the brink of bankruptcy, Bennett was forced to resort to issuing promissory notes to suppliers and installation crews. Wages were the only cash disbursements. The critical cash flow problems of organ-building vexed most builders, they simply overwhelmed Bennett. It is noteworthy that during this period no equity capital is known to have entered church organ-building in the middle west and the commercial banks had largely soured on the industry. The only proprietary funds coming into the industry were in theater organ manufacture, as for example, the Barton, Geneva, Louisville, Page, and Smith companies.

In 1927 Bennett changed the corporate charter to the Rock Island Organ Company, a legal subterfuge employed surreptitiously to avoid the lawsuits threatening the company brought by irate churches disillusioned with the malfunctioning Bennett organs. By then he could no longer ignore the precarious financial condition of his enterprise and so he went looking for a buyer. Perhaps he could sell the company and stay on to manage it. His first overtures were reportedly in Dallas, Texas where the company had installed an organ at Radio Station KRLD in the Adolphus Hotel, but these did not materialize. Shortly thereafter a business promotor from Rockford near Rock Island named Robert Stack learned that the company needed funds and could be bought. He approached the wealthy Sundstrand Brothers in Rockford who had recently sold their adding machine business to the Elliott Fisher Company for a reported \$3 million and who were interested in acquiring other investments. Stack somehow convinced them that the pipe organ business was promising and they agreed to buy the Bennett Company. They were reportedly prepared

to sink a half million dollars into it. Bennett was elated. He talked all the creditors into cancelling their claims against the company, a condition necessary under Illinois law before the firm could be sold; all but one; a former road man, who demanded his money. When Bennett heard about this holdout he flew into a rage but the employee collected the full amount of his claim.

The Sundstrand Brothers and their associate, a man named Brolin, had high hopes for their new enterprise. They purchased a tract of land in Rockford where the factory was to be moved and hired an architect to draw up the plans for the buildings. But they knew virtually nothing about the organ business, least of all the problems of the Bennett Company. They began by making the incredibly unfortunate mistake of hiring Bennett as the general manager at the munificent salary of \$10,000 per year. As shrewd businessmen accustomed to successful enterprises, however, they were determined to make a go of their new venture. When they became aware very shortly that matters were not going well they began to ask questions. Bennett, who had buried himself in his experiments, seemingly oblivious to the critical stage of things or subconsciously bent upon destroying the firm, found a scapegoat in Theodore Sandberg the shop superintendent. One day Bennett left unannounced and journeyed to North Tonawanda, New York where he called at the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company and persuaded a young draftsman named Hollingsworth to come back to Rock Island as shop superintendent.

When they returned Bennett fired Sandberg and announced triumphantly to the stockholders that the problems were solved, now everything would be in order. In 47 years experience beginning with the Moline era, Sandberg—who was popular with the employees—had acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of organbuilding. The survival of the firm during the 1920's rested in large measure upon his capabilities and his loyalty. As events soon proved, his dismissal, the most irrational act conceivable, sealed the fate of the Bennett Organ Company. But for a short time it appeared that Bennett was right. Hollingsworth restored discipline in the factory—which had broken down completely because Bennett overruled Sandberg when the latter tried to fire poor help—and work began moving through the shop again. Then it came time to layout new organs and Hollingsworth, who was supposedly a draftsman, was found wanting.

By this time the Sundstrands, who were commuting to Rock Island before the anticipated move to Rockford, were thoroughly disillusioned. "If you're smart" an employee told Adolph Sundstrand bluntly "you'll fire Bennett, move the works to Rockford, and start building organs." Instead, they concluded the situation was hopeless and so liquidations proceedings began. At a sale in the spring of 1930, employees bought the tools, console shells, and other miscellaneous materials. The last instrument built in Rock Island was a three manual for a Christian Church in Decatur, Illinois. The unfinished contracts were completed by the Hinners Company in Pekin under Bennett's supervision.

His company in ruins and his career at an end, Robert J. Bennett found solace in romance. Some years earlier he met an attractive young woman in Dallas, Texas, Mrs. Mignon Stromberg, the widow of the radio station owner where a Bennett organ had been installed. After the

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JON SPONG

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death of his wife in June, 1929 he began counting her. Following their marriage in Chicago in September, 1930, they moved to Arlington, Texas where she conducted a piano studio called the Bennett School of Fine Arts and he did organ service work. He died in Arlington on April 23, 1938 at the age of 74.

The history of the Bennett Organ Company and its predecessors is illustrative of a number of major characteristics of the pipe organ industry in mid-America during the period 1870-1930. Expanding from local to regional installations when the mid-continental builders were just appearing, they returned to what were—with certain exceptions—essentially local markets. This resulted from new nameplates and intensified competition in the industry after the return of the century as well as from a preference for home office sales by officials of these firms. Representative records of the Bennett firm, listing one-third of the approximately 1100 pipe organs built during its 66 years of operation, show 144 instruments in Illinois, 65 in Iowa, and 39 in Wisconsin. Like other church organbuilders in this region, Bennett nibbled at the edges of the lush theater organ market but he never went into it in a big way. He built fewer than 20 theater organs, not counting the ones sold under the Lyon and Healy nameplate. Likewise, only a handful of instruments were built by this firm for residences, funeral homes, and lodge halls.

Failure to develop nationwide sales territories serviced by full time representatives until the late 1920's was also typical of these firms. And while this alone cannot explain the demise of some nameplates and survival of others during the Great Depression, it was beyond question a serious error in business judgment. Selling was customarily done from the home office by officials of the firm aided by an elaborate catalogue featuring standard specifications and testimonials from satisfied customers. After 1926 the Bennett Company did make some attempt to expand installations geographically through the use of agents, among whom were: J. Riley Chase in Spokane, Washington; William E. Beazley in Chicago; G. M. Howell in Dallas, Texas; and the Grunthal Music Company in Jacksonville, Florida.

As was true of numerous other builders in the mid-western industry, the Bennett Company built fewer than half a dozen four manual organs. These firms failed to penetrate the prestigious four manual large church market in the metropolitan centers, which with the exception of Kimball was largely monopolized by the eastern builders.

Finally, the history of the Bennett Company reveals most dramatically in the career of Robert J. Bennett that the nameplate is but the lengthened shadow of the key figure in the enterprise. A man tortured inside, Bennett's life was a series of contradictions. He dreamed of his own nameplate, and when he got it he had great difficulty managing it. He recognized the importance of non-mechanical action in windchest design, yet he couldn't or wouldn't build a workable console. He knew he needed money but when he got it he couldn't make it work for him. But for all his weaknesses, R. J. Bennett was a likeable man, one of those figures in the rich history of American organbuilding who wanted to build pipe organs more than anything else. Were it not for them our legacy would be less as would our challenge.

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