

Nearly a century old, Almena pipe organ still in tune

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Originally positioned so that it faced away from the congregation (below), the pipe organ at Almena Sacred Heart Catholic Church was turned halfway around so that the organist (Kathy Rockow) can see the altar in the background. Photo by Bob Zientara

At the age of 96, a handmade pipe organ at Almena's Sacred Heart Catholic Church is still producing beautiful music.

Made in what is now known as Slinger, Wis., in 1924, the Schaefer-brand organ has a local connection, according to Sacred Heart parishioners Sue Wohlk and Kathy Rockow.

Audrey (Schaefer) Held, of Cumberland, is a direct descendant of the organ's builder.

On Saturday, Aug. 29, 2020, in the church choir loft, Held said her great-grandfather, Bernhard (later Bernard), was a clockmaker before immigrating to the United States from Unterdahl, Germany.

He settled in what was then known as Schleisinger, Wis. During World War II, the town's name was changed to Slinger, Held said, because German-sounding names weren't popular at the time, with Americans fighting Germans overseas.

Held said her great-grandfather must have had a creative streak in him, as well as the ability to "figure things out" and determine how mechanical devices work.

Bernard Schaefer's pipe organ company grew and thrived in Slinger, turning out hand crafted pipe organs at the rate of about 100 per generation, Held said. Most of the employees were family members, she added.

"There were 15 children, including two sets of twins," she said.

Three generations after it was founded, Audrey Schaefer worked for the company herself, under the tutelage of her father, whose name was also Bernard. By that time, he had assumed responsibility for running the company for his father, Joseph Schaefer (Audrey's grandfather).

Audrey Schaefer grew up in Slinger, married Robert Held, now retired, and moved first to Rochester, Minn., for 17 years. The Helds then spent 30 years in Cumberland, where Robert worked as a manager for Seneca Foods.

The Schaefer company dissolved in 1982, although Held said her father tuned and serviced organs for years afterward.

Neither Held nor Rockow, an organist at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, know how the congregation chose Schaefer when it bought the company's pipe organ in 1924.

The keyboard is housed in a polished cabinet of solid oak. The pipes, standing nearby, are also surrounded by oak panels. The pipes are of various sizes, the longest 16 feet.

Rockow said she can remember when the organ was played by nuns in Almena. In past years, she said, the keyboard faced away from the altar, so the organists peered into a mirror to make sure they played only when the priests were ready for the music.

"Sister Domenica taught me to play the organ," Rockow said. "It was a secret I kept for 35 years, but I started to play when there was no church music any longer -- except for some guitar music. I didn't like that. I don't play that well, but I can get the job done."

When the organ was rebuilt in 1963, the keyboard and console were moved to the west side of the choir loft and turned around 90 degrees, so that the organists can see the altar by looking to their right.

The pipe organ must be checked and tuned twice a year, because of seasonal changes in temperature and humidity, Held said.

Rockow said there is talk of hosting a centennial concert when the pipe organ turns 100 years old in 2024.