

Frank Roosevelt Op. 494, 1891, located in St. James Church, Chicago, was spared in a fire of 1972 that wrought major damage on other fixtures of the handsome building. The organ will be visited during the 1984 OHS National Convention.

Roosevelt of 'Marvellous Power' and 'Masterly Voicing': A History of the Organs of St. James Church, Chicago

by Michael D. Friesen

In 1891, the Roosevelt Organ Works in New York City, one of the most prestigious organbuilding firms in the country at that time, shipped their Opus 494 to St. James Roman Catholic Church, Chicago. It was one of several Roosevelt organs in the Chicago area, and although far outshadowed by the attention given in music journals to the famous Roosevelt Opus 400, the mammoth 4-manual, 109-stop organ in the Chicago Auditorium (not Auditorium Theatre), only this instrument survives unchanged in its original location. It is a modest-size organ, containing just twenty-six ranks in a specification inspired by (but not a direct copy of) Examples #35 to #39 given in Roosevelt's 1888 catalogue.¹

Built by Frank Roosevelt (1861-1894), younger brother and successor to Hilborne L. Roosevelt (1849-1886) who had founded the firm in 1872, the organ was installed in the recently completed church of St. James' parish in the 2900 block of South Wabash Avenue (on the then-fashionable South Side of Chicago). The new church was built of the tawny-yellow Lemont (or Joliet) Illinois limestone favored by many other prominent churches in the area at the time. It was often called "Athens Marble" by its promoters. The architect of the church was Patrick C. Keely of Brooklyn, New York, who furnished plans and specifications for many prominent churches in the United States. Keely left the Roosevelts with a bad news/good news situation: a wide and very shallow rear gallery with relatively little room for an organ, but a sanctuary with a very high ceiling and over five seconds of reverberation. The acoustics at St. James are still a delight, and they

"promote" the Roosevelt better than any stack of music journals ever could have.

In its 128-year history, St. James is known to have had only two pipe organs: an 1871 Pilcher Bros. instrument built in Chicago, and the Roosevelt. Founded in 1855, the parish was established to serve Irish laborers at the American Car Works (later the Illinois Central Railroad), which were located along the shore of Lake Michigan south of downtown Chicago (which is now known as the "Loop"). Meeting temporarily in the chapel of a school, St. Agatha Academy, the parish built its first church, a modest frame structure, in 1858 on the east side of Prairie Avenue between 26th and 27th Streets. It is not known whether there was a pipe organ in the early years of that building. The structure was enlarged in the 1860's to accommodate a growing congregation.² By 1871, however, funds had been collected to procure an organ, for in February that year Pilcher Bros., then located in Chicago, installed their Opus 125, a one-manual and pedal 9-rank organ. The Pilcher ledger records the stoplist in the following manner:

"No. 125. Built for St. James' Church, Prairie Avenue, Chicago. Duplicate of No. 66 except case which is Norman and compass extended to a. Dimensions 9 ft. wide, 4-6 deep, 12-4 high.

No. 66. Built for Reed's "Temple of Music." Sold to Church of the Holy Family, Chicago, May 1865.

An organ of one manual, CC to G, 56 notes, one & a half [octaves] pedals CCC to E, 17 notes. Stops as follows—

1. Stopt Diap. Treb	F	56 [8']	6. Coupler Pd & Manual	
2. Stopt Diap. Bass			7. Fifteenth	CC 56 [2']
3. Dulciana	F	39 [8']	8. Twelfth	CC 56 [2 2/3']
4. Melodia	F	39 [8']	9. Flute	F 39 [4']
5. Open Diapason			10. Principal	CC 56 [4']
	CC	56 [8']	11. Bourdon Ped.	CCC 17 [16']
			12. Alarm	

Plain Gothic case, grained oak, speaking front from Gamut G. Open Diap. 7 lower pipes of wood. Case 8 ft. x 4-7 on floor, 14 ft. high—2-7 under keys, 4-8 under subbase (?—partially illegible). bellows 3 x 5 on top. windchest 3 x 4-6.⁷³

In the years following the Great Chicago Fire of October 9, 1871, settlement patterns changed, affecting St. James's parish. The business district that had been burned out regrew rapidly, and areas near it that had been residential upper-class neighborhoods before the fire were now being encroached upon by commercial structures. So the wealthy moved south along the lake into what had been the blue-collar area, which caused many Irish families to move farther west. (It was the working-class that constituted the parish, not the well-to-do.)

By 1873 it was obvious that a new church was needed. The present site on Wabash Avenue was thus purchased, three blocks west of St. James's first neighborhood. The cornerstone of the new church was laid on October 10, 1875, and the edifice was finished in 1880. Historians presume the parishioners moved their Pilcher organ from the old church to the new and used it until funds could be raised to buy a new and larger organ. (The Pilcher's fate is unknown.) The interior of the sanctuary was furnished over the next decade as money came in (for example, the marble altars were installed and consecrated in 1886).

It is believed that the noted British organist Frederick Archer was organist at St. James at the time the Roosevelt organ was acquired, or came to serve in that capacity shortly thereafter. A biography of him is not clear on this point.⁷⁴ An article covering organ matters at Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and describing notable aspects of the Chicago organ music "scene" gives some insight into how the organ came to be the way it is. In fact, the unknown writer "Vox Humana" (probably W. G. Pearce, a frequent correspondent) waxes eloquent over the entire musical experience at St. James:

"Probably the most elaborate musical service given in this city is that of St. James R. C. Church, on the south side of the city, of which the celebrated English organist, Frederick Archer, is organist. The organ, by Roosevelt, is of two-manuals, blown by an electric motor. The question now most naturally arises, how is it such a great performer has such a small organ at his disposition? In the first place, lack of room prevented the building of a larger one. But this instrument must be heard to be appreciated. A peculiar occurrence happened at its dedication. The church being packed with hearers, the full power of the instrument proved to be insignificant; no gathering ever had such a marked effect upon an organ. Mr. Davis, Roosevelt's Chicago representative, immediately sent most of the pipes back to the New York factory, with an order for pipes of a much larger scale. This order was carried out, and one is agreeably surprised at the marvellous power and masterly voicing of this truly efficient instrument.

This instrument is in an organ loft over the west door. The church being large, the instrument has twice its height above it. Any one who has studied the position of an organ knows that this goes a long way in its effectiveness.

In stature, Mr. Archer is a giant among men. On the street one cannot but notice that people, not knowing him, invariably turn to admire his stately appearance.

Presently we espy him towering above the masses on the boulevard. 'Good morning, Mr. Archer! what is to be the order of service this morning? Beethoven's Mass in C; Veni Creator, Wagner; Ave Maria, Luzzi; and the organ numbers?'—'Oh, that depends upon how I feel.' The opening voluntary proves to be a general display of the organ, *extempore*. How masterly! How scholarly! What marvellous execution! Goodness! How that organ has surprised us! We feel as if we were in some cathedral in far-storied lands, listening to a mighty organ, the keys of which are swept by master hands.

The choir is quartet and chorus, and all artists of ability. This church spends more on its music than any other Roman Catholic Church in Chicago. Therefore it seems unnecessary to state that the service was masterly rendered.

Being anxious to see as well as hear Mr. Archer play the closing number, we leave the body of the church for the keyboard. Ah! he is feeling in good trim—the Overture to "Athalie," Mendelssohn. We do not get any too close to the keyboard, for members of the choir and others are ahead of us. The rendition of this Overture needs no criticism—it is above us. An overture generally constitutes the closing of the morning service. In going to hear Mr. Archer, one does not go on a long trip expecting to hear something and in turn hear nothing. Mr. Archer goes to the organ to play it, and he does play it. Those who come to hear the organ, go away filled.⁷⁵

The *History* says, "The many families who belonged to this predominantly Irish parish contributed so generously of their money that by 1895, the parish church was entirely free of debt. As a result, St. James Church became the first Catholic edifice in Chicago to be consecrated."⁷⁶ By 1895, a twenty-bell McShane chime ranging in weight from 175 to 5,500 pounds had been acquired, and is still functional; later, Tiffany stained glass windows were bought for the chancel, complementing the Roosevelt and indicating the quality of furnishings the parishioners desired and undoubtedly sacrificed to acquire.

Around the turn of the century Wilhelm Middleschulte, who had been organist at the Cathedral of the Holy Name (R.C.) downtown, became parish organist. He is perhaps best known for his "Perpetuum Mobile" for pedal solo (arranged from the Intermezzo movement of a Concerto for organ) popularized by the late Virgil Fox, which could have been composed at St. James, as it fits within the Roosevelt's pedal compass. Undoubtedly, there were also various other fine musicians who occupied the post and whose names are not now available to us.

In any event, the organ served faithfully through the next phase of years that saw St. James's parish radically transformed. Rather than running from population decline in its territory and the ravages of urban blight that were soon to beset it, the church remained.

The rise of the automobile saw the area of Michigan Avenue (one block east of Wabash Avenue) near St. James become "Automobile Row" where car dealers' showrooms displaced many homes. Other industries located in the neighborhood as the commercial area continued its southward migration. From 1911 to the end of World War I the number of Catholic families living on Wabash between 27th and 35th Streets, the heart of the parish, declined from 165 to five. The wealthy moved north of downtown along the lakefront (to what is now appropriately called the "Gold Coast") to escape commercialism,

manufacturing plants, train noise and dirt, and so forth, leaving their mansions to be converted into apartments. Black families, finding the apartments affordable and better than previous tenements, moved in. Much other housing nearby had, by this time, become substandard and the area became a haven for the poor. St. James's priests, by and large, were determined to serve the people of the neighborhood and opened the parish school to black children regardless of their religious affiliation, and it thrived. In 1950 a new school was erected and from 1961-63 it was expanded, most untypical at the time for an inner-city location.



Frank Roosevelt

In 1949 the church was restored and redecorated, and record exists of the Roosevelt being "overhauled" at the time. The undertaking introduced no essential alteration to the instrument. That same year, the "Blighted Areas Redevelopment Act" was passed, resulting in massive land clearance and construction of high-rise apartment buildings, medical complexes, and expressways in the area during the ensuing two decades. This period of "urban renewal" (so often actually a vague, even regressive phrase) was really a time of loss of many fine buildings, churches, and organs that, if they were still here, might instead be restored.

The rebirth of St. James was dealt a harsh blow when an early-morning blaze, probably caused by faulty electric wiring, struck on December 22, 1972. Damage was largely confined to the chancel and sacristy areas of the church. The Tiffany windows, marble altars, and some of the furnishings were destroyed; damage occurred from smoke and water as well, but the Roosevelt was essentially unharmed. The church was restored to use between 1973 and 1976, with some work done to the organ to keep it playable. The congregation turned a setback into even stronger determination.

Today, the Roosevelt shows signs of its 92 years of age. It requires sympathetic, careful, and high quality repair

which has not always been available as the 20th century progressed and organs such as this have been regarded as outmoded. In any event, the quality of the original workmanship has outlasted all later repair efforts and the organ is still eminently playable, although now in need of a proper and thorough restoration. Recent efforts to promote the instrument and fund-raising projects have been initiated to help pay for such a restoration. The Roosevelt will also be a major feature of the 1984 Chicago National O.H.S. Convention, which should greatly add to that impetus. (*Editor's note: A new recording of the organ is reviewed in this issue.*)

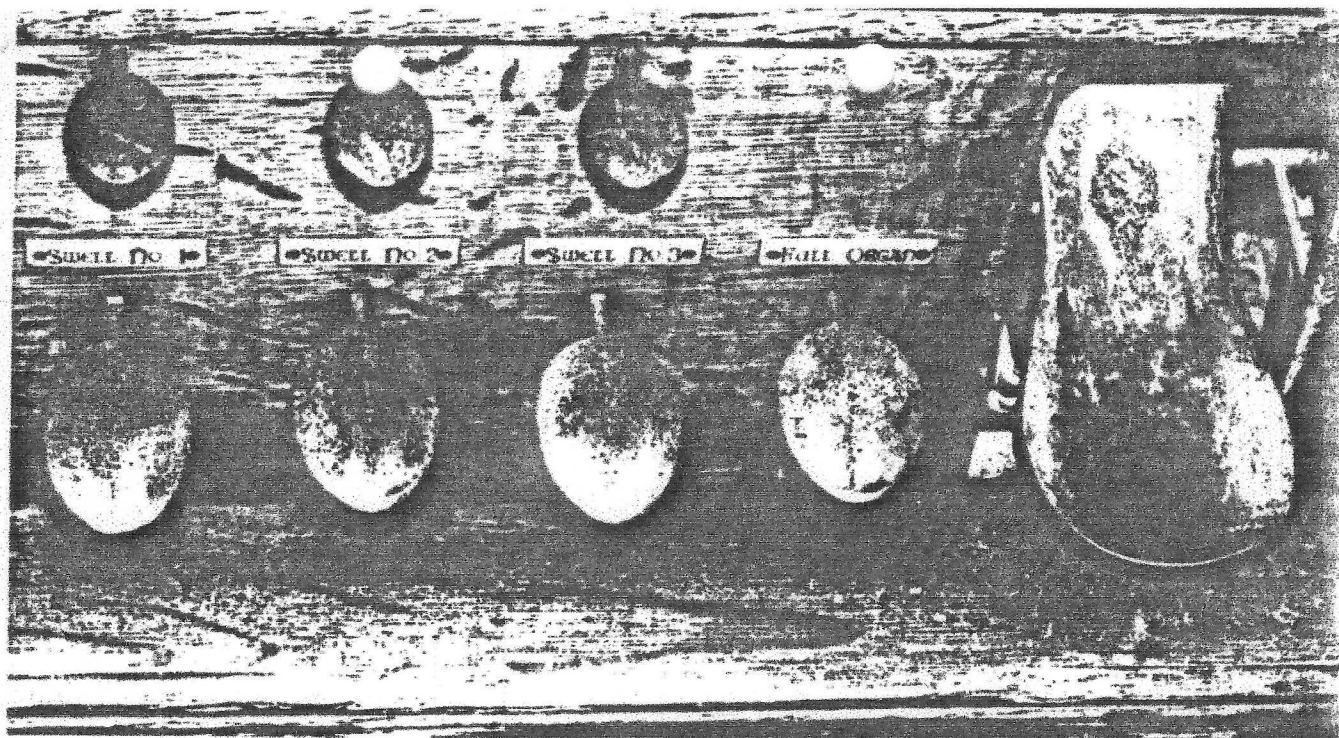
The stoplist shows a typical late 19th-century tonal structure, yet the immensity of sound and wealth of color belie the impression inferred from the relatively small number of stops. The scaling of the pipework is truly generous. Just which stops were indeed replaced with larger-scaled ranks after the dedication is difficult to determine. The story told by "Vox Humana" may be exaggerated or largely myth, as much internal evidence indicates that the pipes are very probably original, except, perhaps, three ranks of reeds.

As the Trumpet, Cornopean, and Oboe ranks all bear the date 1892, they may be replacements of that time. The Trumpet and Cornopean have shallot heads that are beveled longer at the back, and have tapered, thick tongues. Shallots of the Oboe are beveled longer at the front, and have tapered tongues. All three ranks have zinc-resonators with spotted metal bells, slotted. The Vox Humana has long boots, flat-headed shallots, and thick tongues. Low C resonators of the Trumpet and Oboe are dated 1892, the Oboe is marked "#494," and the Trumpet's sky rack is labeled "#494."

The organ is in virtually original condition. "Vox Humana's" 1893 article says that it was blown by an electric motor, and most of the apparatus is extant. A six-foot by nine-foot double-fold reservoir is wound by three feeder bellows connected to a crankshaft that is turned by a large-diameter, iron, flat-belt pulley. A wooden hand-wheel is attached to the large pulley for manual operation. A smaller iron pulley received power from the motor to drive the large pulley. Only a few pieces of this system are missing and it could be reconstituted. A 1920's Spencer blower now supplies the wind. According to a label attached to the c' pipe of the 4' Octave, the original wind pressure was set at 3½" water column. It appears that the present pressure is around 4"; perhaps Roosevelt increased the pressure to strengthen the tone.

The organ's keydesk at the center bottom of the case is connected mechanically, much like a tracker, to the external primary boxes below Roosevelt's patented pneumatic windchests. Thereafter the key action is pneumatic. This arrangement results in very light touch and prompt pipe speech, even with rapid repeats. The stop action is also mechanical to the pneumatic ventill boxes which divide the main chests. Couplers are purely mechanical, as is the ingeniously-engineered adjustable combination action, consisting of seven foot levers (three each for the Great and Swell divisions and a reversible "Full Organ" lever). Small setter levers are located above the combination levers. This mechanism is intact but not presently operable. A reversible foot lever is also provided for the Great-to-Pedal coupler.

The chests employ leather-covered hinged pneumatics (small cuneiform bellows) connected to the side rails of the stop channels, and are wound from key (or note) chan-



Three combination pedals for each manual division are adjustable using the smaller, setter pedals above.

nels. The stop action, when drawn, fills a stop channel running lengthwise (i.e. left to right) in the chest with wind. When a key is depressed, a double-acting valve in the primary box opens, venting the wind in a key channel running from front to back in the chest. Where the two channels thus activated cross, the stop channel wind pressure on the pneumatic causes it to collapse and move a valve (on the same side rail) on the end of an arm connected to the pneumatic. This valve opens and allows stop channel wind to be admitted into an L-shaped boring in the side rail, which is then transmitted through the toeboard to the pipe. This hallmark of Roosevelt work is illustrated and described in detail by Audsley.¹⁷

The case, which is of solid red oak, is of heroic proportions, with 14 basses of the Great 16' Double Open Diapason and 20 basses of the Great 8' Open Diapason in the facade. The 16' basses are divided symmetrically at either end of the case in identical flats with the 8' basses in four identical flats in the center, and are, of course, cut out in back to produce correct tuning pitch. These two stops are the only unenclosed ranks; the remaining Great stops are enclosed in the Swell box, a typical Roosevelt feature. The Pedal ranks are divided along the sides of the case. All ranks are complete to bottom C; none has stopped or common basses.



Frank Roosevelt, Opus 494, 1891
St. James Roman Catholic Church, Chicago, Illinois
V:24 S:25 R:26 P:1,424

GREAT

- 16' Double Open Diapason 58heavy cm
- 8' Open Diapason 58heavy cm
- 8' Viola da Gamba 1-12z 13-58t no mitres
- 8' Dulciana 1-12z 13-58cm
- 8' Doppel Flöte 58sw
- 4' Octave 1-5z 6-58sm sl heavynicks
- 4' Hohl Flöte 1-49ow arched Melodiamouths 50-58om
- 2 2/3' Octave Quint cm archedmouths cylindrical
- 2' Super Octave sm sl heavynicks
- 8' Trumpet 1-54mr 45-54h 55-58om limited

SWELL

- 16' Bourdon Bass 12sw split drawknob
- 16' Bourdon 46sw
- 8' Violin Diapason 1-17z 18-58cm no mitres
- 8' Spitz Flöte 1-17z 18-58cm tapered no mitres
- 8' Stopped Diapason 58sw
- 4' Gemshorn 58sm sl cylindrical
- 4' Flute Harmonique 58cm sl overblows from MC
- 2' Flageolet 58cm tapered archedmouths Cornet toebd
- III Cornet tapered arched 12th, cylindrical o 15th, tapered arched 17th, high t
- 8' Cornopean 1-54mr 38-54h 55-58om
- 8' Oboe 1-54mr 55-58om 1-4mitred
- 8' Vox Humana 1-49mrc 50-58om

Tremulant

PEDAL

- 16' Open Diapason 30ow
- 16' Bourdon 30sw
- 8' Violoncello 30om diapasonic in tone

COUPLERS

- Great to Pedal
- Swell to Pedal
- Swell to Great
- Swell to Great Octaves

Accessories include Wind Gauge, Bellows Signal, three Great Combinations, three Swell Combinations, Full Organ Reversible, Great to Pedal Reversible. The Swell box is spacious and has extensions to both sides at the rear to enclose offset basses of the 16' Bourdon, 8' Violin Diapason, and 8' Spitz Flöte. Details courtesy Alan Laufman and James Wyly.

The distinctive Roosevelt typeface was designed by George Ashdown Audsley.



The leather in the organ was affected by superheated steam generated as a result of the water used to extinguish the 1972 fire. The pneumatics have since become partially stiff and do not always expand enough to keep the valves completely closed. In addition, there is wind leakage out of the note channels from the bottom boards, which no longer fit tightly. It appears that they were allowed to warp slightly during the 1949 work, which seems to have only included partial releathering. The boards were damaged by a futile effort to plane the boards true again and by poor reinstallation, including stripped screws where they are fastened to the chest, missing locating dowels, and gouges at their edges. It is also possible that the valve adjustment during the releathering was inadequate. Since the valves overlap the holes by no more than $3/32$ ", many ciphers can occur where arms are not carefully centered to enable the valves to seat properly and seal off unwanted wind. High humidity and temperatures alleviate these problems, and a second small blower has been added in recent years as a temporary measure which maintains adequate wind pressure to counteract leaks in the key action. When both blowers are used ciphering is minimized, but assorted plainly audible hisses, groans, and rattles make it evident that work is needed.

This Roosevelt is a magnificent example of 19th-century American organbuilding by builders who completely understood the Romantic idiom, and who constructed their instruments with the finest of materials and superior craftsmanship. The design shows no consideration for cost in meeting the primary objective of a perfect organ.

Coupled with St. James's superb acoustics, the sound is rich and full of grandeur. Although the days of the glory of the pipe organ as evinced by the 1893 writer's ecstasy are now largely gone by, we who know that this is undeservedly so can be glad that this priceless treasure still stands at St. James, Chicago, waiting to sound forth its voices that progress will never improve upon."

NOTES

¹The Roosevelt catalogue cited was reprinted in 1978 by the Organ Literature Foundation, Braintree, Massachusetts.

²Harry C. Koenig, ed., *A History of the Parishes of the Archdiocese of Chicago* Chicago: The Archdiocese of Chicago, 1980, pp. 454-61.

³Elizabeth Towne Schmitt, "The Pilcher Opus List," *The Cypher* (Summer 1981) 6:5. (The stoplist itself is from microfilmed ledgers of the Pilcher firm in the possession of Mrs. Schmitt and the O.H.S. archives.)

⁴W. G. Pearce, "Frederick Archer," *The Organ* (December 1893) 2:174-75.

⁵Vox Humana (pseud.), "Organ Music in Chicago and at the World's Fair," *The Organ* (July 1893) 2:67.

⁶Koenig, *History*, p. 457.

⁷George Ashdown Audsley, *The Art of Organ Building* New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1905; reprinted New York: Dover Publications, 1965, Vol. II, pp. 320-27. (Technical verification by Stanton Peters.)

⁸Norman Ryan, "St. James R.C. Church, Chicago, Illinois, Roosevelt, 1891" *The Stopt Diapason* (February 1982) 3:3-5 and (April 1982) 3:8.

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