

OUR PIPE ORGAN

By Kathy Simmons

From its humble beginnings in 1919, in another church, our pipe organ has gone from a modest seven sets of pipes to the 15 sets we enjoy today. Considering there are roughly 60 pipes per set, our organ has 900 pipes, plus the 36 pipes for the pedals. That's a lot of lung power!

Pipe organs are an old technology; they've been around for 500-600 years. However, in the '60s there was a trend to take the old pipe organs and give up on them in favor of electric organs.

I spoke to Gary Brandenburg one morning in June, 1995. He told me about the history and workings of our pipe organ.

In 1955-56 an electronic organ was donated as a memorial. In 1959 Gary's Mom, Reba Brandenburg, became our church organist and Gary sang in the choir. They both dreamed of a pipe organ for the sanctuary. Gary said, "The poor little electronic organ didn't have much variety of sound, but it did well. It got us to 1963, when we got wind of a pipe organ in a Redwood City church."

Eventually the Redwood City church said, "We'll let you have our old pipe organ, if you'll just take it out!" Gary remembers that the CCB congregation felt they should pay church something. "We picked a dollar amount out of the air. We offered \$300 and they accepted. It was a ridiculously low price, even back then."

The Rebuilding

There was no place at the Congregational Church of Belmont to put the organ for the tune-up work that needed to be done. Gary's parents had a garage and that's where the organ was re-built. It took Gary a year to go over every part and re-build it. Once it was ready, Gary tested it out in the garage. "I started to play, and it just came alive."

The organ's motor has 1 1/2 horsepower, and, after he finished playing, Gary went outside and saw that the power of the motor had blown all the leaves off the tree that stood above it! This is why the motor now sits downstairs at the church, cradled in insulation. As Gary said, "We had to get the motor as far away from the organ as possible or else it would drown out the music."

A thermostat and heater were installed to take the chill off the air in the winter. "The cold temperature causes the pipes to change pitch. The reeds, especially, are a real problem," Gary noted.

The reeds are fragile due to their delicate construction. A note goes dead if a reed has specks of dirt on it. The other pipes need no maintenance. Gary speculated, "Maybe the air blowing through them keeps them clean. They hold their tune pretty well."

A pipe organ can't ever be perfectly tuned because, as soon as it is tuned, it starts to

drift. Therefore, the pipes will always have a slightly different pitch. People think that's the beauty of the organ," Gary said, "to have it slightly out of tune."

The Pipes

The big, gold pipes we see that frame the back of the altar are the foundation of the organ. Played alone they have a big, lush, romantic quality. "Then you add other sounds around the foundation to give it other qualities. The organ can play down to a whisper and up to the full sound of a symphony," Gary explained.

In 1964, the organ was set up in the church, and almost immediately another set of pipes was added. In the classified section of an organ magazine, Gary saw an ad for a set of trumpet pipes for \$65. Gary said, "I bought them, but the trick was to add them on."

A retired contractor and church member named Ed Dougherty built a room off the back of the church just for the pipes.

Over the years the pipe family has grown to include an oboe, clarinet, figato, clarim, mixture, celeste, and a pedal trumpet, because, as Gary explained, "When you add a lot of stops, you need to beef up the pedal or else it's not balanced; it sounds tinny."

Another set of trumpet pipes came along that was too good of a deal to pass up. Gary described this second set as a "loud, brassy sound with strong bite and attack. The first set of trumpet pipes is mellow and gentle. Together the two have a lot of muscle."

To amplify the low notes, and help give them some depth, there are 15 foot woofers in the floor behind the altar

Designing, re-building, enlarging, and maintaining this wonderful instrument has been a labor of love for Gary for many years. Each Sunday we who sit in the pews are able to benefit from his experience and care.

One thing is for certain, our pipe organ is unique, and nothing can match its sound!