

HISTORY of ORGANS at FIRST METHODIST CHURCH in BILLINGS, MONTANA

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The 100th anniversary of the church published as, On This Corner lists several allusions about the need/desire for a pipe organ. Two different pictures seem to show the existence of two different pipe organs.

The first edifice was erected at the corner of 4th Avenue N. and N. 28th. It was made of brick and the auditorium measured 28' x 54' with a basement of the same size beneath. The first mention about an organ is made on page 13 of the church history, and is an excerpt from The Montana Christian Advocate, July 19, 1892. It simply states, ". . . A new organ organ or a new interior department is needed." A photograph of the church interior during Easter, 1893 clearly shows a piano in use.

In 1901, the church trustees voted to enlarge the edifice, and the cornerstone for the addition was laid at 7:00 p.m. on July 6, 1901. The new section was to measure 28' x 30' and included the addition of a bell tower. According to the Billings Gazette, December 1, 1901, the church reopened at 11:00 a.m. After being closed for three months. The article states, "The new organ has been placed on the south side of the old portion and to the front of this is the choir platform with room for about 15 persons." A photograph on age 39 of the church history shows the choir in 1914 in front of what looks like a fair sized pipe organ. There are three flats of pipes separated by two towers arranged: 7 – 5 – 15 – 5 – 7 for a total of 39 pipes which are clearly stenciled in colors. Two manuals are partially visible. This organ was hand-pumped, and an article in the Montana Methodist Messenger for March 1906 states, "An electric motor was recently installed in the church to pump the organ. It is found to be more convenient than to depend upon the uncertainty of a boy as the motive power." The church bulletin for December 29, 1929 lists some of the goals for the coming year. One phrase states, "To replace the 'imitation' pipe organ with a pipe organ; . . ." Phone interviews with parishioners and former pastor Dr. Vern I. Klingman have revealed that the organ was a large, pressure Vocalion reed organ with a false pipe façade.



The Vocalion served until 1936, and while the actual instrument was replaced, the façade was retained. An article in the Billings Gazette for March 15, 1936 reads:

Billings' first organ with electrical control will be dedicated at the First Methodist Episcopal Church at 8:15 o'clock Wednesday night, according to an announcement by the Rev. Forrest W. Werts. ...The concert model Hammond organ which has been installed during the last week is 48 inches long, 24 inches wide, 37-1/2 inches high and weighs 275 pounds without the pedal clavier. The mechanism consists of small rotating tone wheels geared together and driven by a synchronous motor. Being that the tone wheels which originate the pitches can run at only one speed, the organ can never be out of tune. Main feature of the organ is the wide dynamic range of the swell pedal, approximately three times that on any pipe organ. It is not a pipe organ in that it contains no pipes nor does it contain any air pressure system or vibrating parts. It is an organ, however, since it is capable of producing organ tone.

The Hammond organ cost \$1,715.00 completely installed.

The Billings flood of 1937 claimed an organ, but not the Hammond, because the Board minutes for March 8, 1937 state, *"We cannot tell, yet, what damage was done to the the church. Two pianos, **one organ**, two radios—are gone forever."*

On page 93 of the published church history is a photograph of the sanctuary interior, ca. 1960. Visible along the right border of the picture is the end of an organ case and 5 large pipes in a tower formation. This configuration does not match the configuration of the Vocalion. Interviews revealed that the original Vocalion façade was altered over the years. The five pipes visible in the ca. 1960 photo are probably the five tower pipes that once separated the center and side flats of pipes.

The old church was demolished in May 1963, and in September of that year, the new church was begin on the same site. While the new church was under construction, the congregation worshiped at the Fox Theatre. The new [present] church was completed in 1964 and was first used for worship on September 6. The Hammond from the old church continued to be used until its replacement by the congregation's first pipe organ in 1975. The Hammond was then given to Rocky Mountain College.

In 1972, the 102-1/2 year old Mr. Clarence E. Wood established a fund to provide the new 1964 church with a pipe organ after his death. He continued to contribute to the fund until his death. Casavant was a strong contender for a new instrument, but their heavy attention to tracker-action instruments and heavy tariffs on materials imported from Canada greatly diminished their chances for being awarded the contract. On December 12, 1974 the Administrative Board voted to contract with the Schantz Organ Co. of Orrville, Ohio for a new pipe organ. Mr. Woods' fund provided for the entire expense! At the time the contract was signed, the Wood fund had around \$110,000.00, and the new Schantz was to cost just under \$100,000.00. The new organ arrived on July 14, 1975 and was installed by early August.

In the mid 1990's, Balcom and Vaughan of Seattle, Washington was contracted to overhaul the console and replace its original mechanism with new, solid state components from Peterson Electro Musical Products, Inc. in Illinois.