

Calgary church has province's oldest pipe organ, now 150 years old

[Hannah Kost](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jan 04, 2021 5:02 PM PST | Last Updated: January 4, 2021

The instrument was brought to Highwood Lutheran Church over half a century ago



The church will celebrate the organ's 150-year milestone this summer. (Vincent Bonnay/CBC)

Alberta's oldest pipe organ, located in a northwest Calgary church, reached a milestone last year.

Built in 1870 by the Odell Organ Company of New York, the Opus 81— which is also the third-oldest pipe organ in Canada — turned 150.

Comprised of 1,300 pipes, 25 pedals and two keyboards, the instrument has found a home in the Highwood Lutheran Church in northwest Calgary for the past 52 years.

It was purchased second-hand from a church in Ossining, N.Y., and moved to Calgary, to be installed when the church was built.

"All the pipe work and all the original parts are still all there," said Rick Vander Woude, an organist at the church.

"The only thing that has changed from the organ is the front of it — it is designed to fit with this building, so you can see it has a 1960s kind of style to it."

When the Highwood Lutheran Church decided to purchase the pipe organ, it was no easy feat.

It was being sold by a baptist church that wanted to replace it with a Hammond drawbar organ, which Vander Woude said was popular in the 1960s.

"[The Hammond] was a great, great jazz instrument ... they wanted to use that instead of the pipe organ," he said.

In order to retrieve it, three people travelled from Calgary to New York to disassemble it piece by piece, and pack it into boxes, Vander Woude said.

Those boxes were then brought to Canada by train, and then by truck.

When the church was ready to install the complex instrument, they had to work in reverse to put it all back together — and the organ still needed a bit of further rehabilitation.

"They had to do some pretty major repairs to bring it back up to shape [about 50 years ago], and since then, it's been working wonderfully," Vander Woude said.

Organ integral to church

It seems like a lot of work, but the organ was integral to the church, which had been constructed to suit the instrument.

"They had the church and the organ in mind when they designed it," Vander Woude said.

"The organ chamber, nicely, is big, there's lots of space in there, and so all the sound blends and then speaks to the length of the building. So it works really, really well in this church, and they had both designs in place."

He adds that the instrument is unique in North America due to its original and extensive pipework.

"It's a complete mechanical organ, there's no electrical parts in it. You feel everything that's happening at your fingertips, to the bottom of the pipes, and that is always a lot of fun to play," Vander Woude said.

"It's also interesting to think about who has all played on this instrument as well ... and all the opportunities it had to help with congregational singing and bringing music to different congregations."

A celebration of the milestone is being planned for this summer.

With files from Vincent Bonnay and Terri Trembath.