

THE HISTORY
OF
ST. ANDREW'S
AEOLIAN-SKINNER
ORGAN

The anticipated arrival of St. Andrew's organ later this year gives the opportunity to explore its history, and therefore let us enjoy the valuable instrument more fully. The name of the organ is derived from its maker: The Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company of Boston, Massachusetts. The time of its construction dates to the summer of 1941 when the contract was signed and work begun on it. This was prior to the onset of World War II (December the 7th 1941) and thus sets the tone of the beginning of its existence, for it was one of the last pipe organs this company was allowed to make. The construction of all musical instruments was banned. Even without this prohibition building a new organ would have been impossible, as tin and other new metals could be used only for the war effort. Aeolian-Skinner's contribution to the war was the manufacture of wooden shipping crates for *coffins*.

This huge organ was a part of the beginning of the Music Department at the University of Texas in Austin. The building it was to be installed in was a state-of-the-art dream of its 31-year-old Dean (E. W. Doty) and the Music Building was just being finished and the faculty assembled.

The summer of 1942 brought this organ to Austin, Texas and the installation was overseen by the President of the Aeolian-Skinner company, G. Donald Harrison. He was trained in England with the prestigious organ builders of that era. The on-site management was by a Texas group of people under the direction of Mr. Roy Perry, the organist of the First Presbyterian Church in Kilgore. This group also installed Aeolian-Skinner organs all over Texas and Louisiana.

When the instrument was completed, fine-tuned, and "finished" by Mr. Harrison, the University then presented it in concert to the public. The music building Recital Hall was filled to capacity on the evening of the 10th of November 1942. Dr. Palmer Christian, organ professor at the University of Michigan and Dean Doty's teacher, gave the formal dedicatory recital.

From that time on, this historic organ was heard regularly in programs given by all the students of Dean Doty plus scores of artists from the United

States and Europe. It was the landmark instrument for the Aeolian-Skinner company. Organists and organ committees from afar came to play, listen and gain insight into organ planning, construction and choices of specifications for their own use.

With the end of the war, the Aeolian-Skinner company became active again, being the choice of hundreds of churches, synagogues, colleges, and homes. The listing goes on at great length. The Mormon Tabernacle chose this company to do the 1949 renovation of its historic organ which dates back to the 1850's and many of us have heard it being played on radio and TV ever since.

For St. Andrew's the above renovation bears a very special meaning, for in 1988 when the Mormon's did the updating again of that organ, the Schoenstain Company of San Francisco was chosen to do the work. And that is the company which was chosen by St. Andrew's to bring the UT organ from Austin and to install it here in Amarillo. That firm has always had an Aeolian-Skinner connection with members of its company working in conjunction with them for years.

Back in Austin: the University became famous for its organ students trained by Dr. Doty: to name but a few – Gerre Hancock : St. Thomas Episcopal Church in New York City, James C. Moeser: Univ. of South Carolina, Kathleen Thomerson: organist and composer, and of course David Lowe of Amarillo!

Organs age, as do humans, and after 23 years of heavy use (and students' multiple hours of practicing), it became obvious that renovation was required. Thus, in 1965 the Aeolian-Skinner company was again contracted to (1) install a new console (2) construct new combination action (3) do mechanical repairs (4) revoice the reed pipes – trumpets, etc. This work took two years.

Following this, the organ was again heard by the public in programs presented by the students and visiting performing artists. These performances were most popular (and free), giving the listening public an opportunity to enjoy classical pipe organ music constantly. This continued until 1975. Dean Doty had retired and the University was enlarging to the extent that it needed a new Music Building and larger Recital Hall, what with the ever-increasing enrollment and need for multiple-use facilities.

For whatever reasons, this 1942 instrument was not used for public presentation of students in recital. They were using the churches near the campus to give their degree recital performances. In 1983 the large Bates Recital Hall was completed and a large tracker-action organ installed there.

The Aeolian-Skinner organ in the old music building Recital Hall was left unused. The hall was used for lecture space by the Architecture Department. The hall itself was renamed "Jessen Auditorium" and music programs of piano, voice, woodwinds, string instruments were given there. But the organ sat silent on the stage, the console locked, the facade pipes visible, and the large instrument behind them silent.

This went on for years – until the St. Andrew's church was destroyed by fire on February 11, 1996. It was at this time that it was brought to Margaret Lacy's attention that perhaps the UT organ could be purchased and become a part of the new sanctuary here in Amarillo.

After many inquiries and contacts with the UT regents and staff, this wonderful instrument was bought in 1997 and removed by the Schoenstein company in 1998. From that time, throughout the building of our new sanctuary, the instrument has been either in storage, or partially transported for reworking its mechanism in San Francisco.

It will be carefully assembled in the Schoenstein factory in 2004, and its planned arrival here in Amarillo will be (hopefully) in July. Then the organ will be completely installed anew here by the staff and workers under the leadership of the President of the firm, Mr. Jack Bethards.

We will have now an historic and most valuable instrument here in our own sanctuary. The long life of this organ will be extended into the liturgical services and concerts at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church and again, it will be heard by an admiring public, 62 years after its first being heard.

Why all this enthusiasm? Well, it is because possessing an organ made by the Aeolian-Skinner firm is like finding a Stradivarius would be to a violinist. Playing such an organ would be like Horowitz or Rubinstein playing a Steinway. There is a thrill to the ear, just as there is a special gleam in the eye of a newly-engaged young woman when she looks at her diamond engagement ring. It IS special. There will be no more Aeolian-Skinner organs – Donald Harrison died in 1956 and the firm died in 1972. We have here a rare find – so enjoy it and let your spirit soar in the beauty of the sounds you will hear.