

THE GREAT ORGAN MOVE – CHAPTER ONE

While most people were enjoying their first “summer” holiday sleep-in on Saturday May 19, more than a dozen fearless St. John’s volunteers set their alarm clocks to go off before sunrise. Eyes widened by shots of pre-dawn caffeine, we car-pooled and trucked our way down a nearly deserted 401, to rendezvous around 8 a.m. at a cavernous old warehouse on the outskirts of Chatham.

Our mission was simple – just pick up a free pipe organ and bring it back to Kitchener. But the “doing” part was something else entirely; an operation of amazing complexity, involving teamwork, imagination, faith, a lot of sweat, and moments of sheer good luck (like perfect weather!).

But let’s start this unusual story at the beginning. Most of us can relate to organs only from the outside: we admire the pipes arranged in graceful symmetry, the console gleaming with ebony and ivory keys, the cabinet-work glowing with richly-grained polished wood. And most pipe organs sound the way they look – majestic, lofty, inspiring, dramatic.

Now, try to imagine a grand pipe organ in its “underwear.” When we climbed out of an old-fashioned industrial elevator cage onto the fourth floor of the Chatham warehouse, almost nothing in the stacks of boxes, crates and trays before our eyes made any sense in its undressed, disassembled state.

But as the plastic sheets were pulled away, all those carefully sorted and labelled objects of wood, wire and metal revealed what had been the Park Street United Church tracker pipe organ, built in 1977 by German-born Gabriel Kney, one of Canada’s finest musical artisans. After serving its congregation for more than a quarter-century, this fine two-manual instrument was suddenly “orphaned” when Park Street closed due to declining membership and amalgamated with another church.

When St. John’s music director Marlin Nagtegaal heard about the Kney organ that had languished under wraps for nearly a year with no takers, he spearheaded a drive to rescue and rebuild it in our sanctuary – one of the very few worship spaces in Waterloo Region that can physically and acoustically accommodate a second organ.

While negotiations (to cover disassembly costs, etc.) proceeded over a few short months, the price kept decreasing as St. John’s found members able to offer more and more resources and skills to make the Great Organ Move an affordable reality. Long-haul trucker Bob Seebeck (more familiar as our head server) donated his work-hours, fuel and truck, while MacKinnon Transport donated a 53-foot highway trailer. The early-rising St. John’s volunteers, along with several more from Chatham, stood in for professional movers to ensure that every piece made the trip undamaged.

In the space of just over three hours, we lifted, rolled, pushed, slid and prodded some 6,000 lbs of pipe organ into secure spots in Bob’s trailer, Marlin’s pickup truck, Angus

Sheach's van and Brian Westwood's car. Down we went to the 401 again, our musical convoy making a smooth return trip to St. John's just in time for a tasty light lunch catered by Angus.

Then came the unloading – and most of the real “fun” we encountered that day. We wondered why the original designers of our church building never thought to make doors and passageways big enough to easily wedge organ parts through! And why don't they build churches with loading docks?!?

But somehow we found human, hands-on ways to do things usually handled by drop-decks, fork-lifts and cranes – like dragging the organ console on wooden runners down Water Street, or sliding the heavy wind-chest onto Josh Nagtegaal's pickup truck for a s-l-o-w ride around the College-King block, and up the sidewalk where there was no room for a tractor-trailer. There were many bewildered looks following us through downtown Kitchener!

By 3:00 p.m., a task that supposedly “couldn't be done” by non-professional movers was finished in less than eight hours. Every piece, from the enormous tracker platform, right down to the smallest pipe (little larger than a ballpoint pen), was stowed safely in the upper fellowship hall.

But the story continues... By late June, the Kney organ will be moving again, piece by piece, into its new home against the right transept wall. And again, St. John's volunteers will be guided by a professional pipe organ technologist, working through the summer to put this fine instrument back together and wake it up again in the fall with the “breath of the spirit.” Stay tuned for the music!

Meanwhile, check out the display boards at coffee hour, showing the step-by-step organ move in photographs.

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Thanks to the intrepid May 19 team from St. John's: Marlin and Josh Nagtegaal, Ray and Anthony Cloutier, Brian and Eric Westwood, Andrew and Patsy Reeves, Pauline and Alfred (Finch) Durichen, Eric Dewdney, Angus Sheach, Bob Seebeck, Paul Smith, Jonathan Malton.

-- *By Pauline Finch*