

The Last Vestiges of M. P. Möller?

Recent visits to Hagerstown spur 20-year-old recollections

Randall S. Dyer

Even as Bynum Petty's anticipated book on the life of Mathias Peter Möller and the early years of the company he founded nears completion, what may have been the last chapter of organbuilding at 403 N. Prospect Street in Hagerstown, Maryland, was playing out during a cold week in March 2011. On January 5 of that year, as our crew was working in northern Virginia, removing an organ for rebuilding, I made a quick trip to Hagerstown to take pipes for repair at Eastern Organ Pipes. Their business has always been located in a part of the old Möller plant. Having visited it in bygone days, the church's organist, who had played Möller organs for years, wanted to go along to visit what remained of the once-proud factory again.

Fire

Back on the job site loading our truck the next day, I received a late-afternoon phone call from long-time friend David Bottom of Lexington, Kentucky. He didn't even say hello. "Are you in Hagerstown, watching the fire?" His words sent cold chills down my spine because I knew immediately that he was referring to our mutual interest, the old Möller factory, the nooks and crannies of which we both had plied for years. Beyond the immediate concern for the safety of our friends there, my mind eventually turned to replacing the pipes I had left, which must surely have been consumed; after all, the last I saw them, they were in the room next to where the fire was reported to have started.

During the course of the next several days, it became apparent that the media, as is typical these days, had greatly overplayed the seriousness of the situation. An eventual phone call to Hagerstown revealed that my pipes were fine. Most of the damage had been confined to the spray booth area and the floor immediately above it, all located in a cheaply constructed wooden addition to the back of the main building. Though hampered by an inoperative sprinkler system, apparently disabled without warning at some past date, the fire department had done a heroic job. Only smoke permeated the workspace, and most of the water damage was confined to a few inches of depth in the sub-basement casting and cut-out areas.

Möller closing

For those who may not remember, the M. P. Möller Company abruptly ceased operation on a Wednesday in April 1992. With the business no longer in family hands, the new owners had become weary of the constant injections of cash required to keep it afloat. Employees were called into the erecting room at the afternoon break, and told there was no money in the bank to meet the following day's payroll; they were free to go home.

There had long been tension with the union. A bitter twelve-week strike in 1984 ended with the resignation of the president, Kevin Möller, grandson of the founder. Peter Möller Daniels, another grandson, followed in the president's office. But sparring with the union continued, and on 25 July 1986, Daniels asked them to take a 75 cent per hour pay cut, and eliminate three paid holidays, this a reflection of Möller's 69% loss of market share over the previous year. The union refused; the company cut the workweek to 32.5 hours.

On 13 August 1986, the board abruptly placed Peter Daniels on administrative leave, and appointed the first non-family member, Ronald Ellis, as president. While Ellis made conciliatory offers to the union, and was rebuffed, Daniels made his displeasure with everything known in the local newspaper, stating that he didn't believe Ellis and Henry



Hanging on the corner of the former office building at 403 N. Prospect, the sign for Eastern Organ Pipes is the last reminder of organ work in the building. Just beyond the office is the Möller Company's famous erecting room.



View of the burned area from the south, looking back toward the spray booth. Rick Morrison is taking notes and talking on the phone at the far end of the room.



View from the loading dock area facing south toward the spray booth: in the center of the picture, the source of the January 2011 fire. Daylight at the top of the picture is from an open hole burned in the ceiling of the room.

Hanson, chairman of the board, were qualified to guide Möller and set quality standards.

Years of decline

But the union was only one of the problems at Möller. As the decade of the 1990s dawned, organ industry statistician Robert Ebert would continue to track a decline in overall organ industry sales; there was no question that a serious recession was at hand.

Internal documents would later reveal a company frantically struggling to maintain the place it perceived for itself in the industry while trying to figure out a way to make a profit, something that had been elusive for a long time. In the most recent six-year period, losses had ranged from a low of \$475,000 to as much as \$1.7 million. Healthcare was running nearly 10% of sales.

The new owners, a consortium of businessmen with backgrounds in managing other companies, launched into an effort to bring Möller around. Meetings were held with mid-level management and shop foremen. As late as December 1991, a "Strategic Action Plan" outlined 26 areas of potential improvement, and explored ways and timelines for dealing with them in the new year. The vision, entitled "Möller Number One," was for Möller to be "the undisputed Number One builder of pipe organs" in the world.

Obstacles to success

The list of obstacles to success included "trying to be all things" to a very broad customer base (which included tracker organs); "poor product documentation" within the factory (resulting in rework costs when details were changed after an organ was under construction); general "resistance to change" at all levels; and conflicts between "customization and standardization" (the big organs versus the little ones).

Committees were appointed to deal with things as mundane as open pipe seams, resulting from use of green (uncured) metal; difficulty attaching reed barrels to blocks because of dirty solder; and old worn-out machinery that needed to have cutting parts adjusted and sharpened. Apparently one very serious problem was inadequate fitting in the erecting room, which was resulting in difficulties at the installation site. A suggested solution was to appoint factory installation teams that would follow the organs through final assembly right on to site completion. Major remodeling to the Prospect Street plant, or even a completely new factory, was also suggested to improve manufacturing flow.

In the sales department, new advertising initiatives were studied. Executive summaries cheered major advancements in quality, but recognized the need to cover the extra cost involved while remaining competitive. At the same time, fiascos on several high-profile projects, including St. James Church in New York City, were readily admitted to have resulted in a loss of client base. And a two-manual, 25-rank tracker organ in Texas ran \$175,000 over budget!

To help bring fallow territories back into the fold, a strategy was detailed for wooing a lengthy list of formerly friendly, well-known organists and consultants. Proposed methods included luncheon invitations, visits to "show organs," and trips to see the factory. Field representatives were encouraged to join as many AGO chapters in their territories as possible, in order to hear of new prospects. It didn't help that Wicks was offering a special 10% discount on outstanding proposals signed before the end of 1991, and Zimmer was known to be nearly 50% under the Möller pricing—both firms were regarded as serious competition, particularly in the small organ market.



Joe Frushour's work bench in the second floor metal pipe area. With only a dusting of smoke, this space was not otherwise damaged. A picture of the same area, remarkably similar in appearance, is found in Junchen, *Encyclopedia of the Theatre Organ*, Vol. 1, p. 396.



Patterns on the wall hang over the shallot-making area



An empty Möller pipe box on the floor of the erecting room. Church pews at the back of the photo are stored by another renter.

Attempts to revive the company

Following the April dismissal in the erecting room, several attempts were made to revive the company. A letter from Paul Coughlin, chairman of the board, to contracted clients dated 12 August 1992, thanked them for their patience, and talked of progress on an employee-sponsored buyout. But employees were apparently not pleased with the idea of mortgaging their personal property to secure the necessary bank loans. Ultimately, no solutions were found; as Bruton Parish Church threatened legal action for return of a contract down payment, it appeared there would be no more work at 403 N. Prospect Street.

Public auction

A four-day public auction, attended by an estimated 2,100 people from around the country, commenced in the world's largest pipe organ erecting room at 9 am on Wednesday, 13 January 1993. Like the documents in the office suite, personal items—tools, calendars, apparel—left by the employees were still in place the day of the sale as if to bear evidence of their owners' quick departure.

The event resembled a feeding frenzy in a shark tank. Those whose agenda was to make sure organbuilding equipment would not be used again in a competitive way bid against those equally deter-

mined that it would. Tempers flared. Under-the-breath remarks were exchanged. And in spite of the terms outlined in the sales brochure, the auction company did a poor job managing dispersion of sold materials. Even bulky items, including lumber and brass, disappeared before the true buyers were able to present their paid receipts and get their trucks backed up to the door.

Items we bought are still in use in our shop, including one of the swing-arm drills from the chest department, an adjustable-height table, which works well with that drill, and several four-wheel factory-style carts. The 900 wooden drawknobs were all used after being turned down by Jan Rowland to a style that belied their ancestry.

Another revival attempt

Much of the equipment and stock was purchased by Paul Stuck, a Chicago businessman with a vision of continuing to build organs in Hagerstown, using the available pool of talent there. Great hype was made of the fact that he bought the Möller name, files and "trade secrets," whatever those might have been, for \$50,000.

Operating under the corporate name King of Instruments, his umbrella company was to handle sales, assembly, installation, and service. The actual work



Without power in the building, the elevator was unusable. By removing the railing on the second floor balcony, a fork truck was able to lift down heavy materials from the pipe shop area behind the camera. Brad Jones is loading a small Pexto shear. The author is operating the fork truck.

of building the parts would be farmed out on a piece basis to a group of small companies remaining in the building. These firms were also free to sell directly to the trade under their own names.

Eastern Organ Pipes, formed by Frederick (Rick) Morrison, Alvin (Jack) Rogers, Delphin (Joe) Frushour, and Dave Keedy, was the pipe-making arm of the operation. All of the principals had

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One of the ABF pup trailers is parked at the back loading dock, adjacent to the area of the January fire. Remnants of the spray booth exhaust fan hang out of the building. The back side of the original southwest building, dating from 1896, complete with Möller sign, clearly shows the extent of deterioration.

worked in the Möller factory, either as pipemakers or as voicers, and they were joined by several other former Möller employees as helpers. The firm occupied three floors in the metal pipe shop area north of the erecting room and directly behind the offices and engineering department. Casting and cut-out remained in the basement of the same building. Large pipe rolling, pipe-metal planing, and the spray booth were on the former loading dock along the Pennsylvania Railroad spur that had brought in rough lumber and carried off completed organs in years past.

Within 18 months, trouble was brewing again. When Stuck failed to pay back rent totaling \$20,000, building owner Vincent Groh sued. By April

1995, Stuck's operation had crashed, and a second, though much smaller, auction was held to liquidate his bank's holdings. This time we bought the knee-panel bending jig, but once again churches lost down payments, and organs in process were left to be finished by others.

Post Möller

Eastern and the chest/console group, Hagerstown Organ Company, flourished in their own right. Former Möller representatives and service personnel seeking "in-style" equipment to enlarge or rebuild existing Möller organs, were frequent clients of both firms, but a following of others, including ourselves, also developed.



Items brought down from the second floor pipe shop are arranged for placement on one of the ABF trailers, in the world's largest pipe organ erecting room. The large window is visible in the picture of the front of the building. Junchen, vol. 1, has several pictures of the erecting room; in the photo on page 397, the photographer of this picture was standing near the balcony door in the center left of the picture.



The largest piece moved, a 10-foot Pexto power shear, is pulled up a ramp from the basement, chained to the fork truck. Mounted on machinery movers (visible in the photo on the far end of the machine) it was moved past the fire area to the trailer, by shoving with the fork truck. Once staged facing into the trailer, the fork truck had to get into a narrow corner behind it, and side shift it onto the trailer in 18-inch movements.

At the time, we were looking for an alternate domestic pipe supplier, and welcomed a new source. Beginning almost immediately, many ranks of reed and flue pipes were purchased from Eastern and installed in our organs. They also did excellent repair of existing pipes. We developed a close working friendship with everyone there, and got quality products in return. Since our vehicles make trips up and down I-81 multiple times a year, stopping in Hagerstown for a pick up or drop off was routine.

During our January visit, Ed had rounded out a couple of large pipes while Lana looked up something in our file. We watched Gary beat Oboe resonators around a mandrel, and Cindy was washing a new set of beautifully made Rohrflöte pipes she had just finished.

After the fire

In the aftermath of the following day's fire, however, enthusiasm began to wane, and the owners, all nearing or past retirement age, eventually decided to accept the insurance company's buy-out offer. The equipment and materials of Eastern Organ Pipes were sold to the highest bidder by a Georgia salvage broker on Friday, 18 March 2011, at 12 noon.

The winning bid was proffered by Oyster Pipe Works, of Louisville, Ohio. Fred Oyster, a former reed voicer at another firm, is well known in the industry, and in recent years has been successful in establishing his own shop. A friend and colleague for many years, we had encouraged his bid, and we gladly jumped in to help expedite removal of the con-

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BACH AT PALMER

NEW! Kevin Clark plays the organ at Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas. It was designed and built by C. B. Fisk, Inc., of Gloucester, Massachusetts. Opus 99 of the Fisk firm - a three-manual instrument - has 46 stops totaling 2,976 pipes, housed in a polychrome case. The late Charles Fisk, in consultation with Rice University's Professor of Organ Clyde Holloway, designed the preliminary specification in 1981. The stoplist reflects the many roles a modern American church organ must play: leading hymn singing, accompanying choral music and playing 400 years of organ repertoire with authority. The contract for the organ was signed in 1984 shortly after Charles's death, affirming the church's faith in his successors. **\$17.98**

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Ignominious end: Replaced by Möller in the late 1980s, stripped out parts of the 1960 Reuter console from Belmont United Methodist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, litter the floor in the far southeast second floor room of the console department. The locker contains a shirt and two jackets left over from the 1992 sale. This room is pictured in Junchen, Vol. 1, p. 400, bottom right.

tents, happy to think the tooling would still be used to make pipes.

Beginning at 7:30 am on Tuesday, 22 March, our crew from Tennessee swept the broken glass from the parking lot, made arrangements for a portable toilet, and backed our truck up to the dock door to unload packing materials and supplies. In the darkness of the building, condemned and without heat or power, we began a clean-up of fire damage, wearing dust masks and hard hats, and using generator-powered string lights in order to see.

By the time Fred and helpers from Ohio arrived after lunch, we had also arranged for a forklift truck to bring heavy items down from the second floor pipe-making room. What followed for the next three days was fast and intensive work in a building that was leaking rainwater and cold wind through multiple openings in walls and roof. On the third morning it was 32 degrees inside and out.

Two pup trailers were staged by ABF Motor Freight, one in the space of the former center bay on the south side of the erecting room. This section—the first erecting room, but more recently the rough wood mill and zinc pipe area—was torn down about two years ago because of serious structural problems, but the concrete floor pad remained. Though the fork truck barely fit through the door to the outside, a milling machine, several large old drill presses, a gigantic old bandsaw, three Pexto shears of varying size, and myriad patterns, sticks, tables, miscellaneous small tools, mandrels, and voicing machines all made a quick trip down to the first floor and eventually out to the trailer. And nothing was dropped or damaged in the process.

Upon completion of work in the erecting room, the fork truck was moved to the back of the building and brought in through another tight-fitting door. It spent the next two days lifting pipe-metal plane, 10-foot Pexto power shear (more than 5,000 pounds), casting table, and two rolling machines onto the second pup trailer, which was parked immediately adjacent to the source of the fire. Several of the items had to be pulled up a makeshift ramp on machinery movers to get to the working floor level.

A week after commencement of removal, everything was in Ohio, undergoing setup in Fred's building where mandrels were put to immediate use; in less than a month's time, pipe metal was being planed there. We lament the passing of Eastern Organ Pipes, while congratulating Oyster Pipe Works on their acquisition; a greatly enhanced and more efficient production capability there will be the result.

Möller—then and now

Returning home to Tennessee, I looked through the pictures of the Möller factory in David L. Junchen's

book, *The Encyclopedia of the American Theatre Organ*. One is immediately taken by the organization and flow of materials through the place in its heyday. An insurance drawing of the building shows the vastness of the space, at one time totaling more than 125,000 square feet. The quantity of completed work that moved through the plant, at one time as many as 30 organs a month, is almost incomprehensible.

Before leaving Hagerstown, I took one last trip around a decaying old building through which I will probably never walk again. That it still stands seems a minor miracle, given the broken windows, roof leaks, sagging floors and crumbling brick. Though technically "locked," graffiti in remote areas testifies that in fact, it is quite open, and one suspects that shady people roam it at will.

Floor after floor reveals organ parts of various descriptions, all old, many left from the first sale in 1992. Chests, pipes, and disassembled consoles are strewn throughout the space in a helter-skelter manner. In a dirt basement of the west building, tucked up under the floor joists, is a long-forgotten and very strange looking green Kinetic blower, actually two blowers on one frame, connected in the middle to the motor by a belt drive. At one time it provided wind for voicing rooms on the south side of the erecting room. Never again.



In a room lit with one drop light, Fred Oyster explains his theory of loading a 14-foot-long slab of marble onto the four-wheel truck to its right. Fred's son Nate stands at the back with a miner's light on his helmet. An earlier view of this room is found in Junchen, Vol. 1, p. 400, bottom left.

Driving away in a truck laden with nearly 10,000 pounds of pipe mandrels, I was struck by the idea that the last chapter of active organ building at 403 N. Prospect Street had probably just closed. But until such time as the building might be completely demolished and hauled away, vestiges of M. P. Möller will remain. Somewhere in that vast space there will always be some reminder that organbuilding once took place within its walls, even if only a random screw, stuck between two planks in the floor.

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tute of Organbuilders. Now in its 38th year, the Institute meets regularly in conventions and seminars throughout the United States and Canada, during which attendees have an opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with colleagues and suppliers, as well as to hear technical lectures, visit organ shops and see local instruments of interest. Information is available at <www.pipeorgan.org>.

With his wife Lou Anna, Randall Dyer owns and operates Randall Dyer & Associates, Inc., of Jefferson City, Tennessee, <www.rdyerorgans.com>. The firm specializes in the high quality construction of electric-actuated pipe organs, using slider-and-pallet chests, and in selective rebuilding of existing instruments of good manufacture. Dyer was Convention Coordinator of AIO for 17 years.

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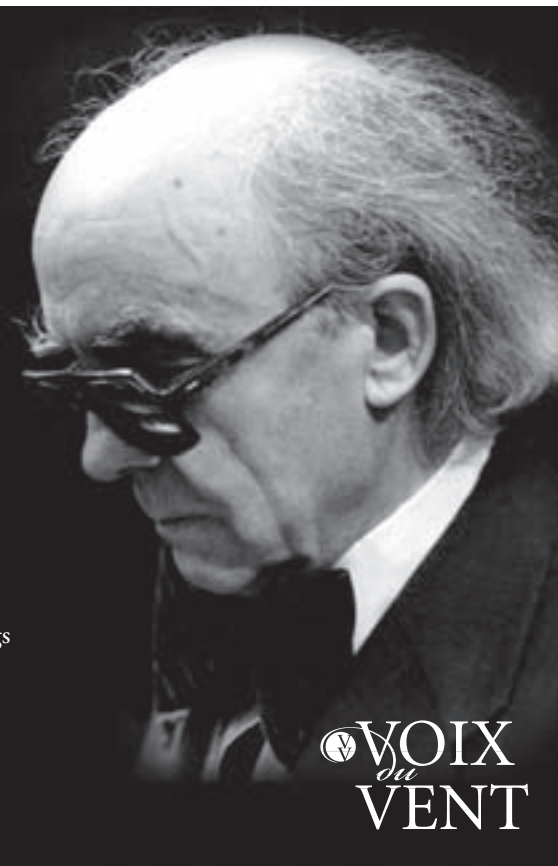
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