

Celebrating 100 Years

THE 1908 PILCHER PIPE ORGAN

History of Pilcher Organ Number 629, First United Methodist Church,
Belton, Texas

(Source: The First United Methodist Church, Belton, Texas website)



The firm of Henry Pilcher's Sons in Louisville, Kentucky built the pipe organ at First United Methodist Church. Henry Pilcher, Sr. was born in Canterbury, England and apprenticed as an organ builder in London. In 1832 he arrived in New York and established his business in Newark, New Jersey. His son, Henry Pilcher, Jr. would open his business in St. Louis, Missouri in 1852. During the Civil War era, the firm relocated to Chicago, Illinois. This factory survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and, in 1874, the Pilcher firm once again moved and opened their business in Louisville, Kentucky. The firm built over 1,800 organs for churches, concert halls, and universities across the country. In 1944 the factory closed and the assets were sold to the M. P. Möller Organ Company of Hagerstown, Maryland.

Initially, the contract for the organ was signed in 1907 and installation commenced later in 1908. The Pilcher firm assigned the number 629 to the Belton instrument of which the purchase price was \$4,000. Today the

replacement value is over \$250,000. From 1908 until the rebuilding in 1954, the instrument had an attached console in the middle of the case, containing the keyboards, pedal board, and stops. During these years, the instrument employed mechanical action, commonly known as tracker action. In 1954 a detached console was installed and the action of the organ was electrified. Otto Hofmann of Austin, Texas, performed this work. The organ currently contains 1,093 pipes of metal or wood, which range in size from smaller than a pencil to over eight feet tall.

A most unique feature of the instrument at the time of installation was the use of a water-powered hydraulic engine. The water, which came from the city of Belton, caused a piston-like device to operate the bellows. In fact, there are a few people in Belton that remember seeing water trickling down the curb on Third Avenue, while the instrument was in use. To turn the instrument on, the organist would turn a small brass valve located to the lower right front of the case.

Later, a large electric blower placed in the basement that, to this day, creates the needed wind for the organ replaced the water engine. The manufacturer of the electric blower and in all likelihood the water engine was the Spencer Turbine Company of Hartford, Connecticut. In 1892, Mr. Ira Hobart Spencer decided that he would create a mechanism that would not require him to manually operate the bellows of the organ at his church in Hartford. Thus, the company bearing his name was born and remains in business to this day manufacturing not only electric blowers but also other mechanisms that involve compressed air.

Today, the congregation of the First United Methodist Church is blessed to have this instrument provide music in corporate worship and concerts. From the initial installation in 1908 until today, the church has

always maintained this grand instrument. With proper maintenance and oversight, this instrument should continue in service to the glory of God for years to come and help proclaim through music the good news of Jesus Christ.

Robert C. Green

“100 years of harmony”

Church pipe organ celebrates Centennial

By Ryan Renfrow, Temple Daily Telegram Staff Writer

BELTON “It’s all really unique.” That simple statement by organist Robert Green summed up a lot more about the First United Methodist Church’s pipe organ than he probably thought it would. First, it’s been around for 100 years. “It was built by the Henry Pilcher’s Sons. Organ Company out of Kentucky in 1908,” Green said. He’s played organ since the ninth grade and went on to get two degrees in music. He’s also worked for two organ companies.

Second, it doesn’t look like the usual pipe organ from that era. “I think that the façade is bigger than normal, much wider,” Green said. “The oak paneling is even unusual. A lot of pipe organs are shoved back in a chamber and this one is freestanding. This is more like they did them in Europe.”

Third, it hasn't had much rehabilitative work for its age. "Pipe organs are generally built to last at least 50 years. It's really pushing it to last 100. It's even amazing that the 1954 rebuild is still going," Green said. "A lot of organs rebuilt then are in need of a great overhaul."

The only major changes made to the organ are the placement of the playing console and the addition of an electric fan to the bellows that create wind to sound the pipes. A piston controlled by a water pump originally ran the bellows. Green has heard stories of overflow water from the pump running down Third Street during services. "And everyone knew that meant the organ was on," Green said.

The organ is the centerpiece of the church's sanctuary and plays an important role in the worship services. "At some churches people may think the organ is too loud, but here they are just first class," Green said. "Piano and organ are very important here. We use them together and separate. It's what I call the Belton experience. It's grounded in tradition while moving forward."

The church's pastor, Darren Walker, said he is proud to share in the historical moment. "I think it's all really neat," Walker said. "It's amazing to be a part of a church with this kind of history and length of service."

Walker mentioned the organ is part of the

reason why some old-timers called the church the “Cathedral of the Southwest.” Green has been the organist at the church for three and a half years and finds it “interesting” to be the organist during the anniversary.

“It’s a testimony to this church to see to it that it has lasted all this time,” Green said, “Part of it is good building, but also good love and care too.”

At Sunday’s celebration, there will be hymn singing and solo works by Green. The event will be followed by a reception.

Just like his simple words used for describing the organ, Green’s comment about performing was another exercise in understatement. “It’s just an honor,” he said.

MECHANICAL. MUSICAL MIRACLE

Robert Green’s love for organs is more than a musical one. “Organs are both mechanical and musical,” Green said. “It’s a rather complicated piece of machinery besides being a musical instrument.”

Green isn’t sure about the original cost, but after a little research he learned most organs that size and age were purchased for \$2,500.

“Most of it is original. The facade is original, the wind chest, the bellows and the wooden framing,” Green said. “You can’t put a price on its historical significance.” Today, an organ of equal size would cost \$300,000, Green said. “And that’s on the low end.”

Like most pipe organs, it can imitate other instruments with its 1,081 pipes. “This one has flute-like sounds and string-like sounds. I won’t say they are exact copies though,” Green said. The organ is number 629 out of about 1,800 made by the Henry Pilcher’s Sons Company from Kentucky. The organ’s pipes are handmade.

“Even to this day they are handmade,” Green said. “No machine makes them.” Today, the wait for an organ of equal size would be a year and the installation would take about three weeks. Green wouldn’t even guess how long it took to install the organ 100 years ago.

“I’ve always wanted to know how this organ got here,” Green said. “I’m guessing train. I just don’t think they brought it down on a truck from Louisville, not with the old road system. It probably came on a train.”







Although frequently taken for granted and often overshadowed by newer and grander symbols in the worship and other services of the church, I am certain that there is no item in the inventory of The First United Methodist Church in Belton, whose role has been greater or whose history is more remarkable than the Pilcher/Hoffmann pipe organ.

For many years, its majestic principals and melodic flutes have been proud heralds to the Glory of God. Installed in 1908, by the firm of Henry Pilcher's Sons of Louisville, Kentucky, and rebuilt in 1952, by Otto Hoffmann, the organ's impressive facade and mighty works stand today as a testament to the endurance and fortitude which live in the heart of the church.

To fully appreciate the organ's heritage, it is important to know that the founder of the Pilcher firm, Henry Pilcher (1798-1880), and his five sons, came to New York from England, in about 1832. In Dover, England he received instructions in organ and piano building. The first record of an organ built in the United States was 1839, for St. Stephens Church in East Haddan, Conn. At one time, Pilcher was organist of Seamen's Institute, and he worked for Henry Erben, the most eminent organ builder in America. Pilcher and his family moved often while in the United States. The sons went into business with their father and carried it on after his death. The company moved to Louisville, Kentucky after the Chicago fire destroyed the factory there. Expositions after the Civil War were a chance for organ builders to display their work: the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia, the 1884 Cotton Centennial in New Orleans, and the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The most famous exposition organ is the one built by Los Angeles Art Organ Company, for 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition.

Naturally a company with Henry Pilcher's Sons' abilities should be chosen to build the organ for the First Methodist Church of Belton, Texas in 1907. The organ was completed in 1908. Except for having to change the wind source to an electric motor from a water motor, the organ remained the same until Otto Hoffmann, of Austin and San Antonio, electrified the action of the organ in 1952. Most of what is heard is the original Pilcher organ; as solid as when Mrs. Lon Curtis, the first organist, played "How Firm a Foundation."

The Pilcher firm was sold in 1944 to M. P. Moller, Inc. of Hagerstown, Maryland. In 1963, Duane Whitlow, wrote to the Moller firm asking if the company had the Pilcher records. As it happened, William E. Pilcher, Jr. was the Moller representative in North Carolina and he still had the Pilcher records. He furnished Duane with the original stop list, which may be found below.

STOP LIST

Rebuild of Pilcher Opus No. 629 in 1952, by Otto Hoffmann of Austin and San Antonio, Texas.

GREAT ORGAN		SWELL ORGAN		PEDAL ORGAN	
16	Gedeckt	8	Flute	1 6	Sub Bass
8	Bourdon	8	Prestant	1 6	Lieblich Cedeckt
8	Principal	4	Principal	8	Bass
8	Dulciana	4	Harmonic Flute	8	Principal
4	Octave	2-2/3	Nazat	8	Still Gedeckt
4	Spitz Flute	2	Gemshorn	4	Principal

IV	Mixture	1-3/5	Terz	4	Gedeckt
				2	Principal
				1	Rausch Quinte
				1	

**Original Stop List of the
Pilcher Organ
inatalled in the
First Methodist Church
in Belton, Texas in 1908.**

GREAT ORGAN		
1. 8' Open Diapason	Metal	61 pipes
2. 8' Dolcian	Metal	61pipes
3. 8' Melodia	Wood	61 pipes
4. 4' Octave	Metal	61 pipes
5. 2' Super Octave	Metal	61 pipes
SWELL ORGAN		
6. 16' Bourdon Bass	Wood	12 pipes
7. 16' Bourdon Treble	Wood	49 pipes
8. 8' Open Diapason	Metal	61 pipes
9. 8' Salicional	Metal	61 pipes
10. Stopped Diapason	Wood	61pipes
11. 4' Violina	Metal	61 pipes
12. 8' Oboe (not reeds)	Metal	61 pipes
13. 4' Flute Harmonic	Metal	61 pipes
PEDAL ORGAN		
14. 16' Bourdon	Wood	30 pipes

COUPLERS
15. Swell to Great Unison
16. Swell to Great Super Octavea
17. Swell to Pedal
18. Great to Pedal
ACCESSORIES
19. Tremolo to Swell
20. Bellows Signal
21. Wind Indicator for Organist

22. Wind Indicator for Bellows Blower
23. Organist's Seat
24. Organist's Foot Rest
25. Water Motor
PEDAL MOVEMENTS
26. Great Organ Forte Combination
27. Great Organ Piano Combination
28. Swell Organ Forte Combination
29. Swell Organ Piano Combination
30. Great to Pedal Reversible
31. Balanced Swell Pedal
Water Motor

On September 14, 2008 a concert was held in the sanctuary to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the pipe organ. The organist at the time was Robert Green.

**Organ Concert and Hymn Festival Robert C. Green, Organist
September 14, 2008, 4:00 p.m.**

† **The National Anthem**

O say, can you see, by the dawn's early light, what so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming, whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight, o'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming? And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof though the night that our flag was still there. O say, does that star - spangled banner yet wave o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

† Hymn 139 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty LOBE DEN HERREN

Toccata in C Johann Pachelbel

Andante Religioso from *Fourth Sonata* Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

Allegro moderato maestoso in C Major

God of Grace Paul Manz

† Hymn 577 God of Grace and God of Glory CWM RHIONDDA

Elegy George Thalben-Ball

Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring	Johann Sebastian Bach
Christ is Made the Sure Foundation	Anna Laura Page
† Hymn 529 How Firm a Foundation	FOUNDATION
Marche Romaine	Charles Gounod
March from The Musical Clocks	Franz Josef Haydn
Sketch No. 2 from Sketches for the pedal piano, OPUS 58	Robert Schumann
Amazing Grace	Dale Wood
Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee	Michael Costello
† Hymn 89 Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee	HYMN TO JOY
Prelude in G, BWV 541	Bach
† Please stand as you are able.	