



A Short History of the 1897 Pfeiffer Pipe Organ at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish

Johann Georg Pfeiffer immigrated to the United States in 1854 from Sigmaringen – what is presently considered southwest Germany – where he had learned the pipe organ building trade. Having settled in St. Louis, Missouri in 1859, Mr. Pfeiffer rather quickly established himself as a prominent organ builder. In 1897, a pipe organ was constructed for St. Thomas the Apostle Parish by the J.G. Pfeiffer Company. The steam-powered paddleboat “Frederick” carried the pipe organ up the Osage River to its new home in St. Thomas, where it was proudly installed in the loft of the sturdy brick parish church constructed in 1883. Even with the destruction of the bell tower during the tornado of 1948, the pipe organ survived relatively unscathed.

Having served the faithful for many decades, the venerable Pfeiffer tracker was gradually retired in the early 1970’s, as the technology of the day manufactured by the Baldwin Company proposed an electric alternative to accompany the Sacred Rites. In 1985, shortly after the centennial celebration of the church’s construction, the electric organ was removed and three ranks of winded pipes were placed in and behind the Pfeiffer case. Controlled by a 1940’s Wicks console situated near the sanctuary where the electric organ once sat, with plastic clothes-dryer hoses providing wind to the Kilgen wind chests, this electro-pneumatic arrangement served the musical needs of the parish for almost three decades. In more recent years however, a number of physical and electrical components had begun to fail, making it unsafe and fiscally imprudent to repair.

With the intercession of some holy helpers – most especially St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose death in 1897 coincides with this instrument’s construction and whose intercession has always been indicated by some sign of roses – certain prayers were answered for this forgotten Pfeiffer. As it came to pass, in mid-2015, a bequest from the estate of Rose Schmidt was made specifically for the restoration of the pipe organ. That initial bequest, along with a number of other donations, provided the means for the Quimby Pipe Organ Company from Warrensburg, Missouri to begin a careful and historically-sensitive restoration of the instrument according the Organ Historical Society conservation guidelines.

While a comprehensive list of all J.G. Pfeiffer instruments is not currently known to exist, but it is estimated that his company may have constructed nearly 600 instruments around the country. At this point in history, fewer than 50 are known to exist anywhere, and even fewer in a totally unaltered condition. The J.G. Pfeiffer at St. Thomas is, however, one of those rare examples of 19th century American organ building here in the Midwest.

Unenclosed manual (58 notes on slider windchest)

8' Open Diapason
 8' Stopped Diapason
 8' Gamba
 8' Dulciana
 4' Rohrflute
 4' Octave
 2 2/3' Twelfth
 2' Fifteenth

Pedal (25 notes, on ventil windchest)

16' Subbass - 25 pipes on a parallel, flat pedal board

 Pedal coupler
 Bellows signal - now controlling an eight bell zymbelstern
 Tremulant
 Two single-acting fixed mechanical combinations – “Piano” & “Forte”

Although an electric blower drawing air from the bell tower had been added at some point in the early 20th century, the cleaned and restored pipes speak most comfortably at 3” of wind, with a tuning slightly less than A-440. The original double-rise feeder bellows are extant and have been restored to full operation by hand-pump, or alternatively by means of a new ½ horsepower electric blower located in the organ loft. An air conditioning system was installed in the organ loft in 2016 in order to better control temperature and humidity for the sake of the organist and instrument.

The Victorian-style stenciling on the façade pipes is completely original, as is the finish on the wooden case. The restoration work and reinstallation of this historic instrument occurred during the summer of 2016. It is hoped that the restoration of this instrument will be the impetus for a renewal of the music program at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish and in the local area. Your contributions for the music program and the continued maintenance of this historic instrument are invited and greatly appreciated!