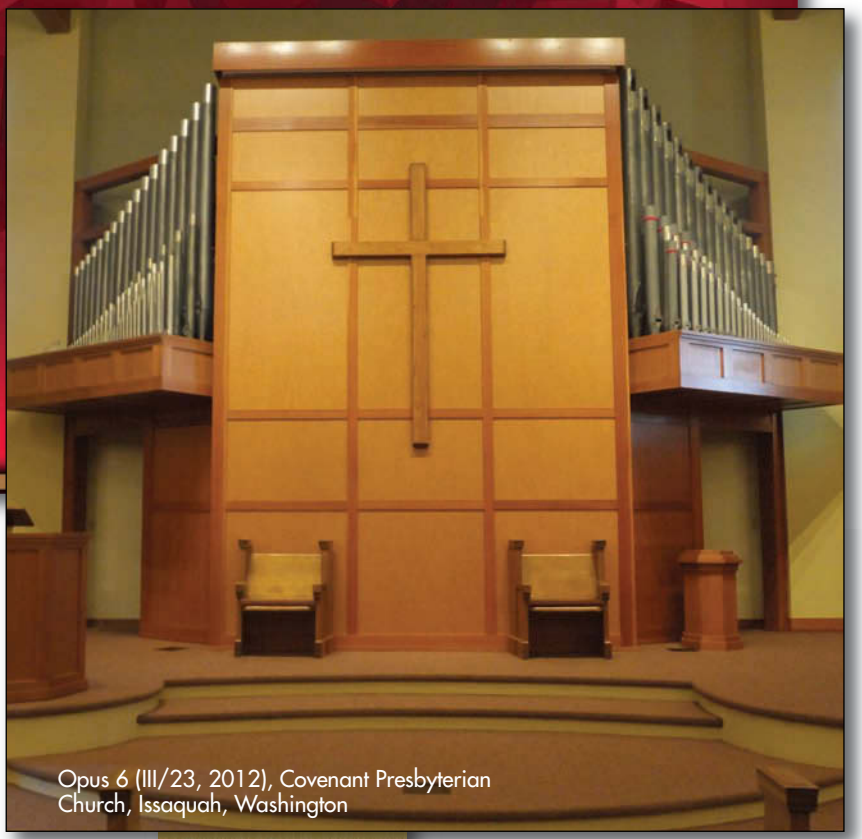


Opus 6 (III/23, 2012), Covenant Presbyterian Church, Issaquah, Washington

The Pipe Organ Foundation

A Model for Preservation

By Carl and Halie Dodrill

As organists, we rightly focus on performance; yet we have much to gain from learning to maintain and restore the instruments we play, especially when they are in danger of being discarded. For over two decades, a group of volunteers in the Pacific Northwest devoted countless hours to preserving and rebuilding a number of organs, and to placing them in public venues at reasonable costs. By telling their story, this article seeks to inspire others to undertake similar efforts.

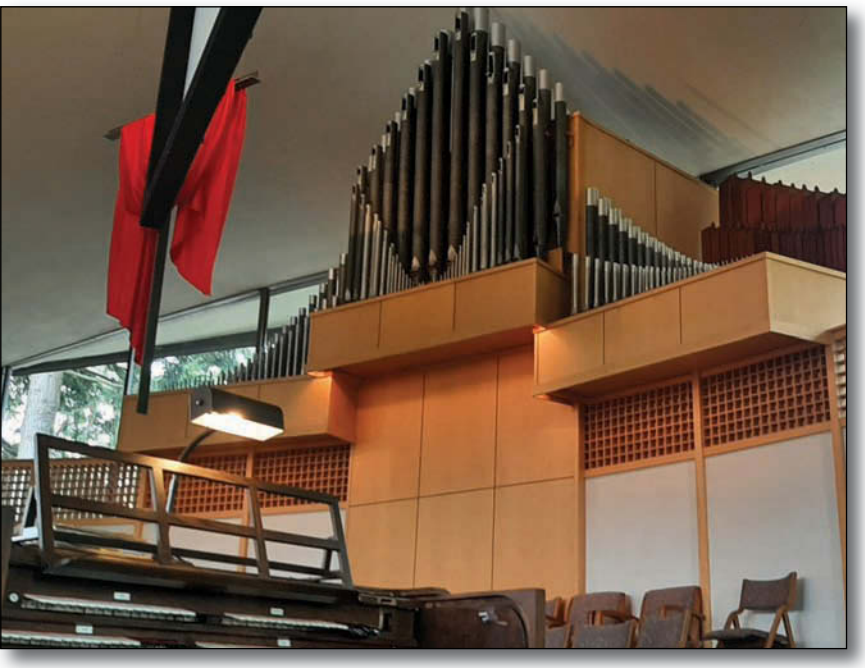
The Pipe Organ Foundation

The authors of this report had a long-standing interest in pipe organs. Carl had done intensive work with organbuilders, and Halie had taken years of organ lessons to augment her considerable experience as a pianist. Both were actively involved in the Seattle AGO Chapter. When their children left for college in the early 1990s, they moved into a much larger house and installed an Aeolian organ.

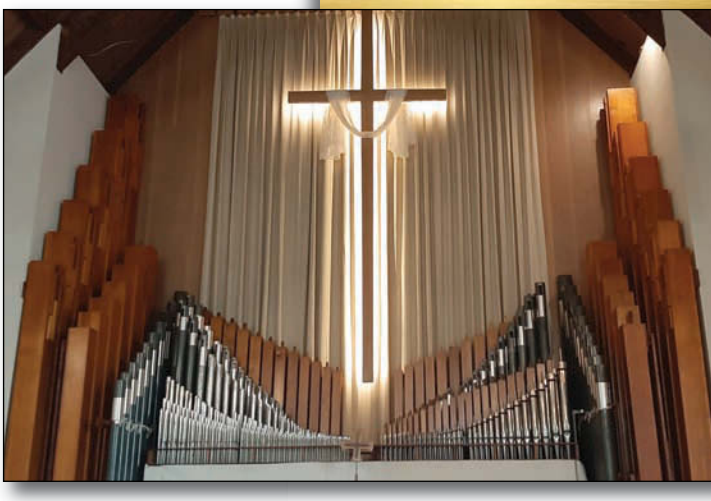
At the same time, downtown Seattle was undergoing major development. Many people had moved to the suburbs, and many churches had closed. A few of the organs in these churches had been preserved, but many were demolished with the buildings that housed them, as high-rise structures sprouted up in their place.

In view of this harsh reality, the authors determined to do something about the situation, and in November 2000 they formed the Pipe Organ Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation devoted to the preservation and placement of pipe organs in public settings at minimal cost. All legal steps needed to form the foundation were taken, and a board of directors was set up, with the AGO well represented. The Dodrills provided a shop area in their triple-car garage and equipped it with basic materials and tools. Volunteers (from the AGO and elsewhere) constituted the backbone of the labor force; work began in early 2001 and continued through the end of 2023.

In its 23 years of active operation, the foundation acquired complete pipe organs or parts therefrom—consoles, blowers, windchests, regulators, switch stacks, and approximately 270 ranks of pipes—on more than 30 occasions, providing the components from which custom instruments could be assembled and installed. It was never possible simply to move an instrument from one setting into another without significant alteration.

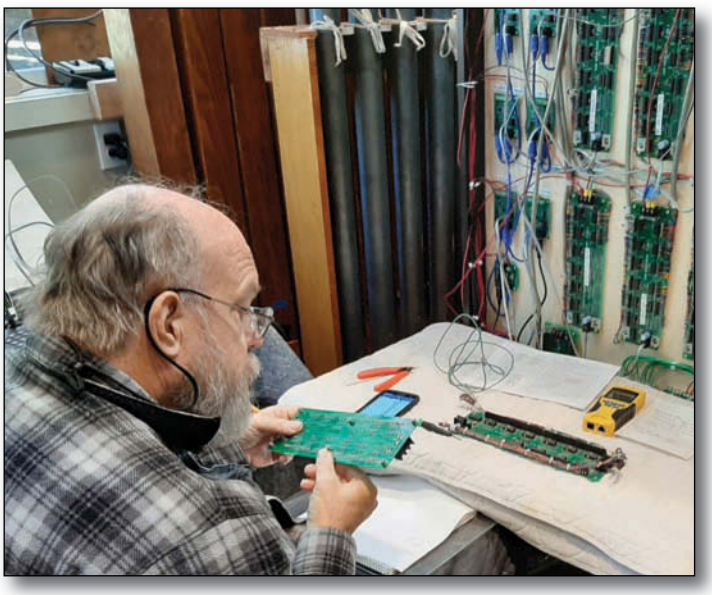


Opus 2 (III/28, 2005), Mercer Island Presbyterian Church, Mercer Island, Washington



Opus 11 (III/21, 2022), Faith Lutheran Church, Seattle

Volunteers wiring and soldering junction boards



Laying out the electronic driving-board system for the organ

The foundation custom-built a total of eleven pipe organs for permanent installation in public settings; the largest of these are shown in the first photographs. Ten were placed in churches or chapels, and one was installed in a public high school. Only institutions that were clearly unable to afford an organ were considered for the services of the foundation; all others were referred to qualified regional builders. Of the eleven instruments rebuilt and installed, eight were two-manual and three were three-manual. They ranged in size from 8 to 28 ranks and from 525 to 1,747 pipes. All of them are listed on the Organ Historical Society's Pipe Organ Database, with Pipe Organ Foundation as builder. The full history of the organization and its work can be found at PipeOrganFoundation.org.

The Work of Volunteers

Volunteers made this entire program possible. Their primary work can be divided into five categories:

Electrical wiring. Most pipe organs in the United States have electric rather than mechanical (tracker) action, and that was true for all the instruments we rebuilt. There are hundreds of wires in these instruments, and getting all of them in place with soldering was the activity that required the most volunteer time—although the volunteers learned what to do rather easily. In addition, new modern control systems were installed on every organ, and all old control mechanisms were discarded.

Pipe repair—cleaning debris off a reed pipe block

Careful packing of pipes for travel

Washing metal pipes in an EDTA solution

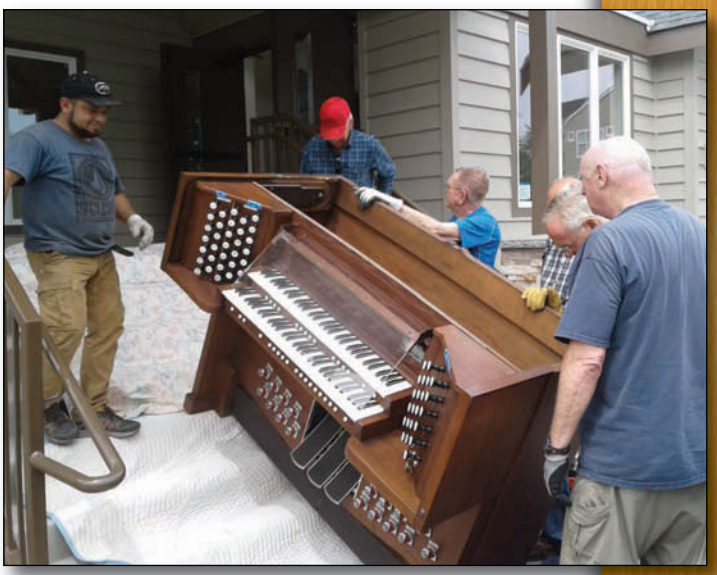
Pipe restoration. Volunteers did many tasks with pipework. Pipes had to be removed from churches, packed in wooden trays, and taken to storage areas. When it was time for the pipes to be used, they had to be removed from storage and taken to the shop. Wooden pipes were cleaned one by one with Murphy Oil Soap; metal pipes were cleaned with an EDTA solution. A number of them required repair, and all required tuning. Once an organ was fully playing in the shop and ready to be installed, the pipes had to be packed very carefully to ensure that they would not be damaged in transit.

Windchest work. Organ pipes sit on windchests, which contain the valve mechanisms that control the air coming into the pipes. It was essential that old windchests be dismantled and repaired, and electropneumatic chests often had to be releathered. Rackboards (which hold up the pipes on a windchest) had to be redrilled when they had been damaged. And when none were available to meet a critical need, new windchests had to be built from scratch.

Releathering an electropneumatic windchest

Building an entirely new windchest

Refinishing the wood of a console



Moving a console into a church

Lifting hundreds of pipes into a Swell chamber

Time for lunch!

Wood refinishing. The consoles and benches of many organs required attention, and volunteers with an interest in wood refinishing were able to make huge differences in how our instruments looked—almost like new.

Installation. Consoles, windchests, blowers, and all other organ parts had to be transported. Once on-site, all parts had to be put in place and hooked up. In cases where the pipe chambers were upstairs, a "fire brigade" was often organized, with pipes removed from trays on a lower level and then handed upstairs one by one, utilizing a dozen or more volunteers, some of whom were from the institution acquiring the organ. There was usually great joy and enthusiasm as an instrument was being installed—especially when it began to play.

Lunch. Workdays for volunteers were often about six hours in length. At about noon, Halie would provide volunteers with a sit-down lunch, usually in her own kitchen, as the Dodrill house was next to the shop. Volunteers greatly enjoyed these lunches, as they provided a great opportunity for connection.

An average of 29 volunteers worked on each of the 11 instruments, with a minimum of 10 volunteers and a maximum of 51. An average of 3,030 hours of volunteer time was required for each organ, or just over 200 hours per rank. Volunteers were also heavily involved in maintaining organs under the care of the foundation, which at one point was responsible for 18 instruments, most in settings with limited financial resources.


The Times-Picayune
TUESDAY, JUNE 17, 2008

The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* welcomed the arrival of the organ at Blessed Francis Seelos Catholic Church.

Financial Matters

After an initial contribution of $10,000 to start the foundation, income came primarily from two sources. First, many of the rebuilt and installed instruments generated some funds, even as the foundation always requested a sum that the receiving site could afford. For the eleven instruments, this ranged from nothing to $58,500, with an average of $22,527 per organ. The second source of income was the fixed, affordable monthly fee for maintenance, which ranged from nothing to $200. The foundation also received funds from other sources on occasion.

In terms of expenses, the foundation covered all costs during rebuilding, installation, and maintenance operations; it also maintained property and liability insurance as well as medical and injury insurance for the volunteers. In addition, the foundation compensated the Dodrills for shop utilities and for the lunches they provided. When the foundation came to an end, $12,868.80 remained, and this entire amount was contributed to the scholarship fund of the Seattle AGO Chapter.

Special Events

As a result of the foundation's work, a number of special events and projects took place over the years, including the following:

Virtual meeting, Seattle AGO Chapter. In September 2021, Howard Wolvington, dean-elect of the Seattle AGO Chapter, created an excellent 50-minute video overview of the foundation's work for the first fall chapter meeting (tinyurl.com/pipe-organ-foundation). This video shows the shop where the volunteers worked, the organ being rebuilt at the time, and two instruments already in place.

Hurricane Katrina outreach. The completely ruined organ at Blessed Francis Seelos Catholic Church, in the Bywater neighborhood of New Orleans, was brought to the attention of the foundation after Hurricane Katrina. The church had no money for organ replacement. In addition, the archdiocese had identified the congregation as the church in the district for hearing-impaired persons, with about 40 percent of the congregation being hard of hearing or deaf. In 2007 and 2008, the foundation took on this project, and over the course of 16 months, 37 volunteers spent 4,000-plus hours designing, rebuilding, and assembling a two-manual, 13-rank organ for the church. A group of volunteers packed it and loaded it on a truck, two volunteers drove it from Washington to Louisiana, and 15 volunteers flew to New Orleans and spent a week assembling it on-site. Two workers spent an additional week doing final installation, tonal work, and tuning. The entire event made the front page of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* on June 17, 2008. The picture on the front page showed the eldest of our volunteers, an 85-year-old woman who had played the organ in church for more than 50 years. Given to the church with no charge whatsoever, the organ had a huge, positive impact upon the parish.

Practice organs for POE alumni. In 2008, Carl Dodrill led a POE for the Seattle chapter. A number of the students wished to continue their studies in organ at the end of that program, but they did not have practice instruments in their homes. The foundation helped these young musicians to find, at low or no cost, two-manual electronic organs that met AGO standards. Further, these instruments were brought to the homes of the students at no cost, using foundation equipment and volunteers. This occurred on seven occasions, and it was a real source of satisfaction to everyone involved.

Roosevelt High School, Seattle. In 2008 and 2009, the 1940 Möller organ at this public high school was rebuilt, more than doubled in size using another Möller, and installed in a new auditorium. A detailed book about the project can be found at tinyurl.com/roosevelt-project-book.

Sending organs abroad. While pipe organs abound in the United States, they are both desired and in short supply in many other parts of the world. Recognizing this, the foundation sent one organ to China and a series of organs and organ parts to the Philippines. In 2012 a larger Kimball organ was sent to the Archdiocese of Manila and installed in the country's most southerly cathedral. In 2021 two organs that were being discarded were removed from churches in the Seattle area, loaded into an oceangoing container, and installed in two Catholic seminaries in Palo. Finally, in 2023, when it was clear that the foundation would be coming to an end, 21 volunteers spent more than 500 hours packing all the residual inventory that Diego Cera Organbuilders in Manila said they could use. This included more than 100 pipe trays filled with 5,000-plus pipes, along with consoles, windchests, blowers, regulators, and more. The assembled material filled an extra-high 40-foot container. All of this was given to the organbuilding firm, and all shipping costs were covered. The shop employees were elated to acquire these thousands of usable organ parts.

Unloading organ parts in Manila, the Philippines

A joyful celebration with foundation volunteers and board members

Joyful celebration. Carl and Halie had wanted to keep the foundation going indefinitely, but when the time came for them to move into a retirement setting, no one could be found to assume the responsibilities involved. With the entire inventory of the foundation disposed of by May 2023, it was time to bring all of the volunteers together for a final celebration, on June 10, 2023. Pictures of all organ rebuilds were on display, and gifts were prepared for everyone, including custom keychains and decorative wooden organ pipes that were hand-painted by Carl and Halie's daughter, Susan. The celebration was an absolutely huge and joyful occasion.

Conclusion

The key to the Pipe Organ Foundation's success was a group of willing volunteers. Without these individuals, the program would never have been viable. With their knowledge of music and the organ, AGO members were important volunteers, and they themselves profited from an increased understanding of their instrument. They also had the gratifying experience of hearing the organs they had worked on make beautiful music. It is hoped that this article will encourage organists and organ students everywhere to do similar work, both to increase their knowledge of pipe organs and to assist in the preservation of the instruments we love so much.

Carl Dodrill was a neuropsychologist professionally and served as president of the Pipe Organ Foundation throughout its existence. **Halie Dodrill** was both secretary and treasurer of the Pipe Organ Foundation throughout its existence, and as a lifelong musician she was often of major assistance at the console during tuning and tonal finishing.