

Museum Musings: The Museum's Organs

Recently, I was involved in a discussion with respect to the relocation of one of the largest artifacts in the Historical Museum. In order to proceed with the de-colonisation of the Museum, we will need to move the 1912 St. Alban's organ console out of the room in which it is currently located. It is therefore necessary to identify a suitable location for the console, and a survey was undertaken regarding just how many organs we have, where they are located, and how they fit into the story we are trying to tell in our Museum.

The nave of the current St. Alban's Cathedral was built in 1905, with a chancel added in 1911. As music is an integral part of Anglican worship, the congregation banded together to raise the money to buy and install a pipe organ. The organ and console were built and installed by a well-known Quebec firm called Casavant Freres. Through the years, talented organists such as Jack Hicks and his wife Marjorie, as well as George Dobson, sat at the console, playing the two manual organ with foot pedals.

By the mid-1980s, it had become apparent that it was time to replace portions of the organ. Additional pipes were added and the blower was updated. As part of the renovation, the console was replaced, and the Prince Albert Historical Society became the recipient of the original console.

Four other organs are currently on display in the Museum. Two of these organs have a connection to the St. Alban's console, inasmuch as they were used to provide music for church services.

The first of these is a portable organ which was brought to Prince Albert in 1879 by Miss Lucy Baker. At the time, it was the first musical instrument of its kind in Prince Albert and it was used in both Anglican and Presbyterian Church services. Some of the local girls wished to learn to play the instrument and Miss Baker used it to teach them, as well as allowing them to practise on it. This organ was also used at all the local balls and dances in Prince Albert's early social life.

A similar portable organ is displayed as part of our World War I display. Such organs were used to provide the musical accompaniment at church services on the front lines of combat. It is noted that such organs were also transported by canoe and dog team by the early missionaries as they visited remote villages and First Nations communities in northern Saskatchewan in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Two other organs, from our display depicting settlers' parlours, would have played a major role in the early social life of the community. Families would gather around the pump organs in the evening. Hymns and songs would be played, and members of the family and their visitors would sing along to the music.

One of these organs is a beautiful piece of furniture, a "Black Walnut" Beckwith Imperial Grand Organ which had been purchased from the Sears Roebuck Company of Chicago, Illinois, in 1906. It is an oak Grand Orchestral Action C model, with five octaves and seventeen stops, and would have cost \$54.80. Rolleyg (Roy) Ronning brought it to Prince Albert with his settler's effects when he moved here in 1913 from South Dakota.



An eight stop organ manufactured by D.W. Karn & Company of Woodstock, Ontario has the distinction of being the first organ to be sold in Prince Albert. Established in 1867 by Dennis Karn and John Miller, their company was originally known as Miller & Karn, as well as by the name The Woodstock Organ Company. Karn bought out Miller in 1870 and after several years changed the name to the D.W. Karn



and Company. The organ was shipped to Prince Albert via river boat and sold to the Plaxton family by Walters & Baker General & Indian Traders on River Street (at approximately 2nd Avenue West, where the Diefenbaker Bridge is now situated).

These artifacts can be viewed in the Museum in the off-season by dropping in on week days between 9:00 and 4:00, or during the summer season during our regular hours of operation. If you wish to ensure that a tour guide is available, you can always call the Museum at 306-764-2992.

The Museum will be closed on February 27 for staff training.

Don't forget to visit our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/PrinceAlbertHistoricalSociety/> and our website at historypa.com

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