

THE MYSTERY OF THE PLAZA ORGAN: BRINGING A TREASURE BACK TO LIFE

The gavel cracked smartly on the podium.

“Sold!” barked the auctioneer.

The next item on his sale list lay on the dust covered stage. Flickering gas lights in the old theater reflected from the object’s crystalline pendants, giving a hint of its former grandeur. It had once hung from the elaborately decorated ceiling of the Opera Populaire.

“Lot 666, then,” the auctioneer intoned, extending his left hand toward it. “A chandelier in pieces.”

He looked up from his list, scanning the sparse crowd gathered in the decrepit opera house. “Some of you may recall the strange affair of the Phantom of the Opera, a mystery never fully explained. We are told, ladies and gentlemen, that this is the very chandelier which figured in the famous . . .”

He hesitated slightly at the next word, studying the faces of the potential bidders.

“. . . disaster,” he finished. “Our workshops have restored it, and fitted up parts of it with wiring for the new electric light, so that we may get a hint of what it would look like when reassembled. Perhaps we may frighten away the ghost of so many years ago with a little illumination.”

His voice rose dramatically.

“Gentlemen!”

A ceramic electrical knob was turned. The fascinated bidders were transfixed as the massive chandelier hummed and flickered on and off several times, blinking as if awakening from a long sleep. Before their very eyes it grew brighter and brighter.

Then, glowing brightly as if possessed, the great chandelier started to move. All eyes were locked upon it as it began to rise into the air, levitating higher and higher above the audience toward its former prominent position suspended from the ceiling of the once-grand opera house. The ascension was driven by music from an unseen theater pipe organ, its powerful bass notes reverberating within the filthy walls of the theater. The mesmerized audience did not notice the transformation

simultaneously taking place on stage.

As the chandelier reached its zenith and halted at the ceiling, the mighty organ throbbed a crescendo and the opera house stage was suddenly bathed in light and color, alive with costumed actors and actresses performing in the opera *Hannibal*. Past became present as the theater audience was transported back to the opera house's grandest era. Above the spectacular scene onstage, the now-glittering chandelier responsible for the transformation watched and awaited its dramatic curtain call. Waited to be hurled crashing to the stage by the phantom.

The Phantom of the Opera.

Wonderful artifacts such as the fictional chandelier in the play *Phantom of the Opera* can connect us to the past. When we touch an artifact and realize that it was held in someone's hand hundreds of years before, we can close our eyes and imagine that we are with them. A historical artifact is a touchstone. It is an outstretched hand from the past that we can grasp.

Like the Phantom's *Opera Populaire*, abandoned theaters still remain in our communities. Now dark and sometimes dangerous, they silently tempt us to remember their glory days, conjuring images of uniformed ushers and glittering productions, of polished brass railings and scarlet carpeting.

The grandest of Brownsville's theaters was the Plaza Theatre. Like the fictional *Opera Populaire*, the Plaza now stands empty, brooding over Brownsville's Snowdon Square. Its roof is collapsed and its stage darkened forever. This grand old lady from a bygone era is in her death throes.

The great chandelier mystically resurrected the *Opera Populaire*. If only there were a magical touchstone that could bring the Plaza back to life, if only for a day.

But what is left from the Plaza? Could a remarkable touchstone from the theatre's heyday still exist?

In early May of this year, Robert Simpson of Vacaville, California emailed me.

"When I was in high school," Robert wrote, "I was told that the Plaza Theater had a theater pipe organ installed, but I could find no further information. A classmate who had worked at the Plaza as an usher had told me that there was an organ console in the orchestra pit, but he had no further information. He told me this around 1950.

"I wonder if any of your readers have ever heard of the existence of this organ or whatever happened to it?" Robert continued. "I am a theater organ fan, and any details would be deeply appreciated."

Robert's request for information appeared in my newspaper column

on Sunday, May 6, 2001. That afternoon, I received a call from J. Harry Johnston of Uniontown.

“I read your piece today,” he said, “about the theater organ that the fellow from California is interested in. I’ve got it for you!”

I was confused by his phrase.

“What do you have?” I asked.

Did he have proof of the organ’s demise fifty years ago? Or evidence that it never existed? I hadn’t expected a quick response to such an obscure inquiry.

“The make of the organ is a Robert Morton,” said Harry. “It’s a little baby organ, not a big one.”

I noticed that Harry was using the present tense.

I asked hopefully, “Are you saying that you can prove there was an organ at the Plaza?”

“Oh, yes. The Plaza’s organ is still being played every week.”

I was momentarily dumbfounded.

“How do you happen to know this?” I finally asked.

“I belong to the Pittsburgh Area Theater Organ Society,” Harry replied. “Your reader should get in touch with Jay E. Smith, founder of the Pittsburgh Area Theater Organ Society. Jay’s father’s name is Louis, and Louis has that organ.”

I said to Harry, “Robert Simpson will be amazed when I tell him about this.”

I thanked him and promptly emailed Robert Simpson with the startling news. I sent him Jay Smith’s mailing address and requested that he let me know if he heard from Jay. A few days ago, Robert emailed me.

“I wrote to Jay Smith in Pittsburgh,” Robert informed me, “and he has replied. Jay’s father Louis owns the theater pipe organ that was formerly installed in the Plaza Theatre. This is wonderful news! I just knew that a theater organ had been installed at one time, even though the theater management voiced denials at the time I asked many years ago. I had a deep sense of loss fearing that the organ was still in the existing building and would now be far beyond salvage.”

Jay Smith wrote to Robert, “What a surprise to get your letter. My dad bought the Plaza organ in 1963 from a local organ repairman named Horstman. It was Horstman’s father, also an organ repairman, who removed it from the Plaza Theatre a few years earlier. The elder Horstman had been in the process of assembling it in his home on Mt. Washington when he died. I don’t think it was ever played in his home, because when we bought it from his son, it was still only partially assembled. I helped Dad disassemble it and move it to his home in

Baldwin. At the time we knew nothing about pipe organs, so it took almost a year to figure it out and get it working.

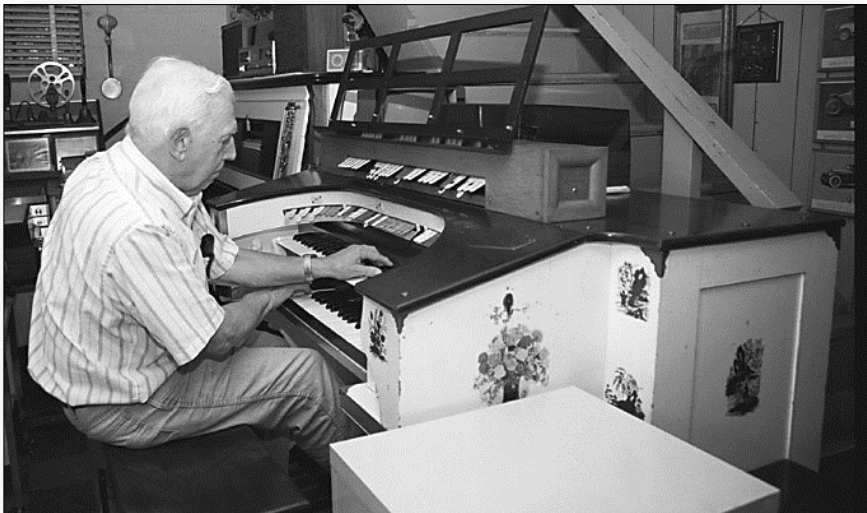
“It is a 2-manual, 4-rank Robert Morton. The ranks are Diapason, Flute, Violin, and Vox Humana. It also has a small scale xylophone and a complete ‘toy counter’ including bass drum, snare drum, birds, tambourines, castanets, and sleigh bells, and also a short set of chimes.

“All of those are original. Since then I have added a piano playable from the organ console at three pitches, and a harp, chrysoglott, orchestra bells, glockenspiel, and a large scale master xylophone. I got those from the former Penn Theatre’s organ.”

The survival of the Plaza Theatre’s organ is remarkable considering the fate of the Pittsburgh area’s great theatre organs.

“The Penn Theatre had a large 4-manual, 22-rank Robert Morton whose console was lost in the 1936 flood and never replaced,” Jay explained. “The pipe chambers were well above the high water line and survived into the early 1960s. The tuned percussion were still available when I bought them before Loews Penn was converted into Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts.

“The Stanley Theatre’s Wurlitzer organ console was also lost in the flood, as was the Nixon’s. The only downtown theatre whose organ survived the flood was the Warner, because it was donated or sold prior to 1936 to a Catholic church south of Pittsburgh.”



Robert Morelli playing the Plaza Theater organ in the basement of the home of Louis Smith in Baldwin, Pennsylvania.

And what was the importance in Jay's life of the Plaza's Robert Morton organ?

"I believe," wrote Jay, "that the Pittsburgh Area Theatre Organ Society would not exist if it were not for the Plaza's little Robert Morton. Putting that organ in Dad's house is what sparked my great love for theatre organ, and in 1969 I founded PATOS, whose purpose is to try to get more theatre organ music back into Pittsburgh."

Did Jay or his father ever visit the organ's former home?

"I visited the Plaza Theatre about four years ago with Dad [1998]," Jay recalled. "I had never seen it before, and it was in a sorry state. I found a loose door and was able to peek inside. I just wished that I could stand on what was left of the stage and imagine what the organ had sounded like in there."

Jay's wish may remain only a dream, but the organ itself is a wonderful reality.

"The organ is in Dad's basement," said Jay. "A friend named Bob Morelli plays it almost weekly. We're sure it doesn't sound as good in our cramped setting as it did in the Plaza Theatre, but we enjoy hearing it."

It is bittersweet to know that although the Plaza Theatre is slowly dying, its marvelous theatre organ lives on. If only the organ possessed the mystical powers of the Phantom's chandelier. One magnificent chord, and who knows what magic would happen?

***DEFYING THE ODDS, TWO AMATEURS
PULL OFF AN AMAZING RESURRECTION***

It looked like an ordinary house, not remarkably different from neighboring homes in the quiet Pittsburgh suburb. But in the basement of this particular house, two zealous men, father and son, had been spending every free hour trying to pull off a seemingly impossible feat.

Their goal was a real-life resurrection, a modern-day version of the Lazarus story. Now on this winter night, after seven months of painstaking preparations, the decisive moment had arrived. It was time to see what they had wrought.

A slightly shaking hand reached tentatively for an electrical switch, and both men had the same thought. Would there be signs of life?

The audible click of the switch signaled that power was now coursing through the patient. As the amps flowed, the men listened

intently for stirrings of life. They both heard it at the same time. It was the sound of moving air, the respirations of a patient that had not breathed for years. For several seconds the whoosh of air grew louder, and the triumphant father and son beamed at each other in childlike delight. Against all odds, they had done it!

But their expressions changed in an instant. As the signs of life grew stronger, the huge patient began to emit the most horrible, unearthly sounds. From the basement of that little house came ear-shattering screeches, hideous wailing, eerie moans. The stunned father and son endured the horrible cacophony until mercifully, the same hand, shaking even more, reached up and threw the electrical switch again. To OFF.

There was silence. The men exchanged concerned looks, then turned their attention to the source of the unearthly commotion. What in the world had gone wrong?

The younger man said later, "They were the most discordant noises imaginable."

And what was the cause of those unworldly sounds?

"We investigated," the son continued. "My father helped me search for their origin. It was while we were searching that we found the skeletons."

Skeletons?

"It took us a week to remove them all," he continued. "They were lodged in the valves. I guess they had shifted there during the moving process."

It was February 1963 when Louis and Jay Smith's grand experiment encountered that first ear-shattering obstacle, one of several hurdles the two men would need to clear in order to succeed. But neither was willing to give up.

Their shared obsession originated in a newspaper advertisement noticed by Louis Smith. Louis had always enjoyed organ music, and over his lifetime he had bought five old reed organs. But this advertisement was not for a reed organ.

When he told his son Jay of his plan to look at a theater pipe organ that was advertised for sale, Jay had his doubts. But he went along to the Mt. Washington home of the Horstman family to examine a Robert Morton organ that had once entertained audiences in Brownsville, Pennsylvania's Plaza Theater.

"Mr. Horstman had been an organ repairman," Jay explained later, "and had purchased the organ from the Plaza Theater a few years earlier. He was in the process of assembling it in his home in Mt. Washington when he died. I don't think it was ever played in his home,

because it was still only partially assembled when we bought it.”

When Louis and Jay first saw the organ, they were dismayed.

“At the Horstman’s home,” Jay recalls, “we found that the pipes of the organ were located in a cold, dark, wet hole beneath a covered porch on which the console sat. The organ was in very poor shape. We could only get seven of the organ keys to make a sound.”

They didn’t buy it. Instead they drove home to talk about it, and after careful deliberation, they reached three conclusions.

One, the old organ was unplayable and neither of them knew anything about repairing pipe organs.

Two, there appeared to be nowhere in their suburban house that a theater organ and its pipes could fit.

And three?

They would buy it anyway!

Louis and Jay spent days dismantling the organ and pipes at the Horstman’s house, trying to memorize where all the pieces went. Jay’s evenings were spent towing an open trailer containing organ pipes from Mt. Washington to their home in Baldwin Borough.

“As the wind was blowing across some of the larger pipes in the trailer,” Jay said, “some very strange sounds were following us!” (Not to mention strange looks from other drivers.)

“The last thing to be moved,” Jay said, “was the console itself. That is when we made the sickening discovery that it would not fit through the door, because the Horstmans had built the porch around it!

“The only solution was to take it out sideways through a large window and slide it on its back down ladders placed at a forty-five-degree angle to the ground, which was twelve feet below! Despite anxious moments we got everything home. Organ parts filled our cellar and the two-car garage. One neighbor took a look and said, ‘Well, at least you have a lot of good drain pipe!’”

For days, Louis and Jay considered each room in their house, trying every conceivable design to devise a place to install the organ.

“Finally,” Jay said, “it was decided that if we relocated several of the parts, cut the legs off the main chest, lay the larger pipes on their sides, and prayed, it might fit in the basement game room. We built an L-shaped room and filled the ceiling and walls with fiberglass for soundproofing.”

Then the real work began for these two men.

“All we knew about pipe organs,” Jay revealed, “was what we had read on the jackets of the many pipe organ record albums in our collection.”

Nevertheless, they were determined to reconstruct the Plaza organ

and get it playing again.

“We spent seven months soldering wires, asking questions, unscrewing and rescrewing wood screws, devising ways to fit things in, and not getting much sleep. Finally all the pipes were in place and the wind ducts were ready, except for many leaks. But when we turned on the blower that first time, we heard the most discordant sounds imaginable. It seemed as though every pipe in the organ was sounding simultaneously.”

And what was causing that racket?

“We discovered that the interior of the organ had been a hideout for a gang of mice. We spent days removing mice skeletons and mice droppings that had become lodged in the valves. When we started the blower again, there were still some pipes speaking out of turn, but after a few other adjustments and a crude tuning of the pipes, the instrument was ready to send forth some beautiful music.”

Decades later, the Smiths’ neighbors still marvel that Louis and Jay never gave up on their dream.



Louis Smith plays the Plaza Theatre organ in his Baldwin basement as his son, Jay, looks on in this 1964 photo.

“I give the credit to my father,” asserted Jay. “I would have given up several times, but he had a compulsive desire to have that organ operating in his home.”

In the years since they restored the Plaza organ, the Smiths have made several changes to it that organ aficionados may appreciate. They removed several coats of paint that had been applied through the years and refinished the console. They gave it the ability to operate all percussion with the feet, installed swell shades (the original swell shades had been left in the Plaza Theater), added a crescendo pedal, and installed a doorbell operated from the console. They also added a piano playable from the organ console at three pitches, a harp, chrysoglott, orchestra bells, glockenspiel, and a large scale master xylophone. These were obtained from the Penn Theater in Pittsburgh before it became Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts.

Their amateur triumph has not come without occasional scary moments.

“The most frightening episode,” revealed Jay, “was when the blower shaft got out of alignment and caused the blower’s metal blades to rub against the wooden housing. It is hard to describe the emotion we felt when the odor of burning wood was detected coming from somewhere inside the organ.

“Another problem occurred when a squirrel insisted on living in the pipe chamber, but a little strategy and the aid of our dachshund solved that one.”

Jay Smith has an interesting view of how fate deals life’s cards.

“You know,” Jay told me, “James Burke’s books, *Connections* and *The Pinball Effect*, both deal with how widely diverse events can be ‘connected’ in causation. I feel that I am in the middle of one such ‘connection’ that is tied to the Plaza Theater in Brownsville.

“The Pittsburgh Area Theatre Organ Society (PATOS), of which I am former president, would not have been formed if it were not for a trip I made in 1969 with three newfound friends. I met those friends because of a shared interest in theater organs, an interest that began when Dad found that ad for the Plaza organ and convinced me to help him move it and install it in his home.

“PATOS grew over the years and purchased its own theater organ, restored it, and installed it in a public place. The organization has given 143 public concerts and entertained more than 55,000 people with some of the most gorgeous, lush organ sounds they have ever heard. Many of these people said they had never heard such beautiful music before. I truly believe the world is just a little bit better, thanks to Brownsville’s Plaza Theater and its little Robert Morton organ.”

And also thanks to two very determined theater organ aficionados. To Louis and Jay Smith, may I express the appreciation of the people of Brownsville for preserving an irreplaceable part of our town's heritage.

A MYSTERY REMAINS ABOUT THE PLAZA THEATRE ORGAN

Recently we wrote about the efforts of Jay Smith, who with his father Louis restored the Robert Morton theatre organ that was salvaged from the Plaza Theater. Jay came to Brownsville in the summer of 2002, driving here from his home in Baldwin to spend a sunny Saturday morning with Norma Ryan, director of the Flatiron Building Heritage Center, and me. Norma, Jay and I took a short walking tour of the north end of Brownsville's Neck.



This photo of the Plaza Theater was taken in October 2003. Not long afterward, the decaying building was razed. The site is now a vacant lot.

Jay was naturally most interested in seeing the Plaza Theater. The decaying building is locked and its interior cannot be viewed. Jay said he is particularly interested in finding out if any area resident can remember where the pipes of the Plaza organ would have been located inside the auditorium of the theater. The reason for his curiosity is that he is trying

to determine whether the organ that is now installed in his father's basement is the same organ that was originally installed in the Plaza Theater when it first opened for business around 1921, or whether it was a replacement for the original organ.

Theater organs had a number of special features and sound effects, all created by ingenious use of the organ's pipes. These special effects were designed for an era when the organ's music and its sound effects were a vital part of viewing a silent movie. But when "talking" movies came along in 1927, the major organ companies stopped building these special theater organs forever. Therefore it is a logical assumption that the theater organ now sitting in the home of Jay's father, an organ which was removed from the Plaza Theater in the 1950s, is the same organ that was in the Plaza the first day it opened in 1921. But there is one problem with that assumption.

On April 6, 1931, an \$85,000 fire severely damaged much of the Plaza Theater. Jay's question is whether the organ was in a part of the theater that was not as badly damaged by fire and water. That would explain how it could have survived to the present day.

"If the original Plaza organ or its pipes had been destroyed in the fire," Jay mused, "it is unlikely that a new organ would have been installed to replace it, since by 1931 theater organs were no longer being produced, and with talking movies, the Plaza would have little need for a theater organ anyway."

That makes it plausible that the organ in the home of Jay's father is in fact the original organ, and that it did somehow survive the fire. But Jay would like to find some corroborating evidence.

A 1931 Brownsville *Telegraph* article described the portions of the theater that were most affected by the fire or damaged by water, while mentioning other parts that were spared.

"Hundreds of gallons of water," reported the *Telegraph*, "were showered upon the building's interior by the theater's automatic sprinkler system, and large quantities of water were also played on the fire by the firefighters."

"If only we knew where the organ's pipes were located within the auditorium," said Jay, "we could speculate on whether they could have survived the fire and water. The pipes were probably located along either the left wall or the right wall. Since the Plaza organ is not a large one, there would not have been organ pipes on both walls."

"Would the organ pipes have been visible to the audience?" I asked Jay.

"There would probably have been some type of screen disguising most of them," he replied. "But if any of your readers can remember



The movie *King of Kings* was the featured attraction in this c. 1964 photograph of the Plaza Theatre. To the left was Quarzo's Barber Shop, and to the right was the entrance to Casper's pool hall (downstairs).

where those pipes were located prior to their removal from the Plaza around the late 1950s, it would be a clue in our mystery of whether the organ could have survived the fire, thereby increasing the likelihood that my dad's organ is the theater's original organ."

We may be looking for a needle in a haystack, but we are hoping that one or more of our readers may remember the location of the organ's console (keyboard) or of the organ's pipes within the Plaza auditorium.

AN INCREDIBLE ACT OF GENEROSITY RETURNS THE PLAZA ORGAN TO BROWNSVILLE

It is a homecoming that was decades in the making.

After nearly half a century in exile from Brownsville, a magnificent circa-1927 Robert Morton theater organ, the pipe organ that entertained thousands of Brownsville residents who attended shows in the Plaza Theater, is returning to Brownsville. A Pittsburgh-area family that has owned the pipe organ for the past forty years has agreed to donate the organ, still in excellent working condition, to the town where its rich

tones and delightful sound effects were first heard three-quarters of a century ago.

What spurred this act of generosity by a Baldwin man who until six years ago had never even visited Brownsville? The donor, Jay Smith, has ascribed his decision to something he calls the “pinball effect,” which he defines as “an unusual sequence of events involving previously unconnected persons that leads to a desirable result.”

If we accept Jay’s pinball theory as the explanation for the return of the Plaza organ to Brownsville, then Bob Simpson is the man who pulled back the spring-loaded handle and started the pinball on its fateful path. Bob, a member of the Brownsville High School Class of 1953 who now lives in Vacaville, California, sent the pinball on its way two years ago when he asked me an innocent question. I printed his question in my column, hoping the Reader Roundtable could come up with the answer.

“When I was in high school,” Bob wrote, “I was told that the Plaza Theater had a theater pipe organ. A classmate who worked at the Plaza as an usher told me that there was an organ console in the orchestra pit and that it was never played. I wonder if any of your readers have ever heard of the existence of this organ or whatever happened to it?”

That item appeared in my newspaper column on Sunday, May 6, 2001. That afternoon, I received a telephone call from J. Harry Johnston of Uniontown, who told me that there was indeed an organ in the Plaza Theater and who put me in touch with Jay Smith. Jay told me the story of how he and his father had discovered and restored the Plaza organ.

“Putting that organ in Dad’s house sparked my great love for theater organ,” Jay said. “In 1969 I founded the Pittsburgh Area Theater Organ Society, and I owe that interest to the Plaza’s Robert Morton organ.”

In 1998, Jay and his father visited Brownsville to see the Plaza Theater in which their organ had entertained patrons for so many years. They were dismayed to see the theater’s condition at that time. The sidewalk in front of the building was





blocked off to protect pedestrians from falling pieces of stucco. In the rear of the building, only a faded star in the window of the stage entrance door hinted of the theatre's glorious past.

In June 2002, Louis Smith passed away. It fell to Jay and his brother to deal with his estate, and part of that process was to place Louis Smith's house on the market. Still installed in the residence's finished basement was the Robert Morton organ that Jay and his father had so

lovingly restored. The time had come to make a decision about the organ's fate. There were three other possibilities for the organ's future, but in Jay's mind, there was only one "right" place for that 1927 Robert Morton theater organ – back in Brownsville, Pennsylvania.

Two years ago, Jay returned to Brownsville, alone this time, for another visit. He was joined for a walking tour of the area near the Plaza Theater by BARC's Norma Ryan and myself. Jay's elderly father's health had been deteriorating over the past few years, and Jay had come to town to explore the feasibility of a plan that was forming in his mind.

As we stood on the street in front of the Plaza Theater on that sunny Saturday morning, Jay, Norma and I had a long conversation about the twin fates of the Plaza Theater and the organ that had formerly been housed there. As we talked, Jay broached the possibility that the Plaza organ might someday return to its "home" in Brownsville. It was an idea he was still mulling over and something that he continued to think about during the following year.

In December 2002, the pinball ricocheted once more. Jay contacted Lou Orslene, Executive Director of BARC, at the Flatiron Building Heritage Center in Brownsville.

"Jay sent me an email indicating that he would like to donate the Plaza organ to BARC," Lou told me. "At first I tried to discourage him

from doing it at that time, because BARC was not in the best situation to accept the Plaza organ, which would need to be properly stored or re-assembled. I was concerned that since the organ was in good working order, the storage accommodations that I could provide for it would not be good enough, and I didn't want anything to happen to the organ.

"Jay told me that he'd had other inquiries about the organ, but he really wasn't happy with the options that he had, and he further encouraged me that we could work it out. He said that he felt that it was important that the Plaza organ be returned to Brownsville and installed somewhere here in town. After further discussions an agreement was reached, and in late December, Jay and I met and signed the papers that officially deeded the organ to BARC."

"So the Plaza Theater's Robert Morton organ is now officially the property of BARC?"

"That's right. After we signed the papers, we then began working out a timeline as to how and when the movement of the organ could take place. In early April, Jay and I met again to finalize arrangements, and then he began to take the organ apart. That took a long time."

In late April, Jay Smith emailed Lou Orslene.

"The disassembly of the Plaza's organ is progressing well," Jay wrote. "All pipes shorter than eight feet have been placed in a number of sturdy pipe trays built for their transport and temporary storage. They will be well protected that way. Most of the wind lines have been disconnected and electrical unwiring is about to begin."

"We set May as the time for the transfer," said Lou, "and we almost met that target. I should mention that Jay has also volunteered to be heavily involved in the reassembly of the organ in Brownsville, if an appropriate place can be found to install it. He estimates that it would take about eight weeks to reassemble."

"That's great," I said to Lou. "What a generous act on Jay's part, not only to donate the organ to BARC, but also to volunteer to help install it here in Brownsville."

By the second week of May, disassembly of the organ was nearing completion. On May 12, Jay emailed Lou Orslene, "All wind lines have been disconnected, all of the unwiring has been completed, and all pipes have been unracked."

The organ would soon be ready to move. The next task was to find a suitable vehicle and the manpower with which to accomplish the task.

PLAZA ORGAN RETURNS TO THE TOWN WHERE IT ENTERTAINED MANY GENERATIONS

The return of the Plaza Theater's circa-1927 Robert Morton theater organ to Brownsville was the result of an act of generosity by Jay Smith, a retired nuclear engineer from Baldwin who has owned the venerable organ for the past forty years.

Jay and his father, Louis, reassembled the organ in Louis Smith's Baldwin home in 1963 after purchasing it from the estate of a Mt. Washington organ repairman. They enjoyed playing it for many years and kept it in good repair. When Louis died last summer, Jay made up his mind that this organ belonged in the place where it had entertained so many generations of youngsters and adults – Brownsville.

Jay set his plan in motion by contacting the Executive Director of the Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation (BARC), Lou Orslene. After several discussions, BARC agreed to accept the organ on Brownsville's behalf, and in late 2002, ownership of the organ was officially transferred to BARC.

A timetable for the moving of the organ to Brownsville was established. In April of 2003, Jay began the painstaking process of disassembling the organ. He constructed long, shallow wooden boxes in which the more fragile organ pipes could be laid and safely moved without dents or damage. By mid-May, the disassembly and packing process was complete, and it was time for the next step – making arrangements to move the organ to Brownsville.

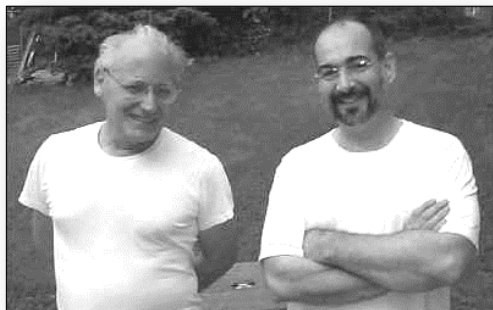
One item that was needed was a large panel truck capable of carrying the organ's console, its heavy blower assembly, specially constructed boxes containing the delicate pipes, and other parts of the complicated musical instrument.

I suggested to Lou Orslene, who was coordinating the effort to bring the organ to Brownsville, that this project might be one with which the Brownsville Fire Company No. 1 (North Side) might be glad to help. The fire company has a large closed panel truck that it uses to transport firefighting equipment – just the ticket for moving a 75-year-old pipe organ.

North Side Fire Chief Clark Sealy enthusiastically agreed to assist with the project, adding that the company's firemen would provide whatever manpower was needed to accomplish the move. Emails flew between Jay Smith and Lou Orslene as they estimated how many trips would be needed in order to move all of the parts of the organ from Baldwin to Brownsville. In the end, their projection of two trips was one short.

Moving day was Sunday, June 8, 2003. At seven o'clock that morn-

ing, I met Lou Orslene, Clark Sealy, and Clark's son, junior firefighter Jordan Sealy, at the North Side fire hall. I rode with Lou, who had Jay Smith's written driving directions, and Clark and Jordan followed in North Side's big red panel truck. A forty-minute drive on foggy Routes 43 and 51 brought us to Louis Smith's house.



Jay Smith and Lou Orslene

The modest suburban house has an integral double garage in the rear. A sloping concrete driveway leads downward along the left side of the house to a concrete pad next to the garage. That is where we found a smiling Jay Smith, who had just removed a large ground floor window through which the organ's console would have to be

taken out of the house.

Clark expertly backed the big truck down the narrow driveway between the house and the neighbor's fence. After introductions were made, we sized up the task ahead of us. As might be expected of an engineer, Jay had preplanned the entire enterprise and fabricated some equipment to ease the move.

Forty years earlier, when he and his late father had moved the organ from its previous location in Mt. Washington, it had been necessary to remove the console through a window and maneuver it down a twelve-foot-high ladder to the ground. Fortunately, the window Jay had just removed from the ground-floor recreation room was only about three feet above the lawn.

Our primary concern was to avoid damaging the antique console as it came through the window frame. Jay had measured the size of the opening.

"We should have a little room to spare, but not much," he declared.

As it turned out, we had about an inch clearance on the sides and a few inches on top. In order for the console to be



Jay and Clark Sealy discuss the next move

level as it traveled through the window opening, it would be necessary to raise the console three feet above the basement floor.

Jay had built a portable wooden ramp, two feet wide and eight feet long, fashioned of two by six lumber. We placed one end of the ramp on the window sill and the other on the basement floor, then everyone lifted the heavy console onto the inclined ramp. To level the console, several men lifted the lower end of the ramp until it was level with the window sill, then supports were quickly placed under the end of the ramp.

Now the ramp was level and ready to be slid through the window with the console on it. Two men went outside and stood on the lawn to receive the ramp and console. We slid the ramp and console through the window frame, not stopping until only a few inches of the ramp still rested on the sill. The organ on its ramp was in the air over back yard with two men holding the outer end of the ramp.



The organ rests temporarily outside the basement window as Lou Orslene and Jordan Sealy take a break. Next task: gently carrying it to the panel truck.

The most nerve-wracking job was out of the way. The next task required brute strength – moving the heavy blower assembly, which forces air through the organ’s pipes and weighs 800 pounds, from the double garage into the truck.

We placed one-inch diameter metal pipes under the front and rear of the blower assembly, then slowly rolled the unit out of the garage on the concrete surface until we were near the rear opening of the truck. We placed one end of Jay’s useful ramp on the truck’s bumper, the other end on the concrete pad, and with a lot of pushing and grunting wrangled the blower up the ramp and into the truck.

Next we loaded the four shallow two-by-eight foot wooden boxes that Jay had built to protect the most delicate organ pipes. After they were safely in the truck, we carefully placed the long wooden pipes that provide the organ’s deepest bass notes into the vehicle.

Supports were then placed on the grass under the outer end of the ramp. After a breather, four men took deep breaths, picked up the console off the horizontal platform, and carried it over to the panel truck, where they carefully positioned it in the center of the truck’s cargo compartment..

The big truck was nearly full. We did not want to position any part of the organ in such a way that the cargo could shift. Determined to avoid damaging any part of the organ during the move, we decided not to load any more for this first trip. We arranged to return later that evening and headed for Brownsville.

We arrived back in Brownsville around noon, where firemen Jack Lawver, Wally Bakewell, and Tom Wardman helped us unload the cargo into a street-level storage area (a garage space) in the Flatiron Building. Before dispersing to join our families for Sunday afternoon activities, Lou, Clark and I agreed to meet again at the fire hall at 6 p.m. for a return trip to Baldwin.

That evening we journeyed back to Baldwin, accompanied this time by fireman Chuck Smith. We loaded the big truck with more wooden and metal organ pipes, a bass drum, a long wooden xylophone, several mysterious wooden boxes bristling with wires and electrical connections, and other paraphernalia. The truck filled quickly again with some large pieces yet to be loaded. With space at a premium, we decided that a third trip later in the week would be necessary, and we prepared to leave for Brownsville.

Rain pelted down during the trip to Brownsville, but by the time we reached the Flatiron Building at 8:45 p.m., the rain had let up. With the help of volunteers Dave Ferguson and John Patruss, we transferred the cargo into the storage area. As darkness fell, three-fourths of the organ was now in its new temporary home at the Flatiron Building. A third journey to Baldwin would complete the job.

So far we have had good fortune in our effort to return the Plaza organ to Brownsville. Two years ago, we did not even know that the Plaza organ still existed. Now Jay Smith has not only donated the organ to Brownsville, he has also volunteered to lend a big hand in re-installing it here. Just one question remains to be answered: Where can this organ be installed in Brownsville?

Many years ago Louis Smith visited Brownsville and took photos of the Plaza Theater. Perhaps he was considering returning the organ someday to the scene of its greatest glory. But on his final trip here with his son Jay six years ago, Louis must have realized that the decaying theater could no longer provide a safe home to its former pipe organ.

So where can the Plaza Theater's Robert Morton pipe organ be installed so that it can be played in Brownsville once more? Ideally the organ should be installed in a large room that could showcase its great sound. However, for many years it was played in a suburban home's recreation room with a ceiling height of less than eight feet, so a large hall is not absolutely essential.

Brownsville has no shortage of buildings with large rooms, but most of these rooms are in unheated empty buildings inhabited only by rodents or birds. What is needed is an occupied building whose owners or

tenants are willing to provide a home for this great musical treasure from Brownsville's past. That is the type of place that Lou Orslene and Jay Smith are hoping to find in Brownsville. There are several organizations in town whose buildings could offer such a home.

This project has come so far, with so many people trying to make it happen, that we certainly don't want it to fall short of its goal now. It is our hope that members of one of our hometown organizations will read this story and urge their group to extend open arms to this wonderful Brownsville historical gem and say, "Welcome home."

PLAZA ORGAN HAS FOUND A PERMANENT HOME

At long last, the Plaza Theater organ has found a permanent home.

The 1927-era Robert Morton theater organ was played for decades in Brownsville's once-grand, now-demolished Plaza Theater. Now, after a search that went on for more than a year since the organ's return to Brownsville, a building has been found where this community treasure can be reassembled and played in public for the first time in half a century.

The Plaza organ is more than a keyboard console with foot pedals. This classic theater organ also includes 328 wooden and metal pipes, the longest of which is 10 feet long, and a bewildering array of heavy wooden pieces, some too heavy for two men to carry. The console, the blower unit, the pipes and dozens of other parts would completely fill a good-sized room.

This organ has been moved four times in nearly eighty years. Each move was a major chore, involving weeks of preparation and plenty of heavy lifting. The latest move happened in August 2004, delivering the antique treasure to its new home.

The saga of this Robert Morton organ began in the 1920s when it was installed in its first home, the Plaza Theater. From the twenties through the fifties, Plaza patrons were captivated by the music produced by this intricate instrument. Through ingenious application of air pressure, the organ created realistic sound effects that brought the silent movies of the 1920s to life. Some of those sound effects were produced by the organ's "toy counter," which included a 37-bar xylophone, bass drum, snare drum, cymbal, tom-tom, bird whistle, tambourine, castanets, sleigh bells, and a set of five chimes. But after "talking pictures" were invented in the late 1920s, the need for the Plaza's versatile theater organ was diminished. As decades passed, the old organ gradually fell silent.

In the late 1950s or early 1960s, the organ was sold to a Pittsburgh-

area organ repairman named Horstman, who carefully disassembled it and removed it from the Plaza Theater. Unfortunately, during the painstaking process of reassembling it in his own home, he passed away. His son decided to sell the organ, and in 1963 he advertised it in the newspaper.

The ad caught the eye of Baldwin's Louis Smith and his son Jay, both theater organ enthusiasts. The Smiths visited the late organ repairman's home and examined the partially assembled organ. Despite trepidation on their part, due to the fact that the Smiths had never assembled a pipe organ, they purchased the Plaza organ.

The Smiths spent the following year reassembling the organ in their Baldwin home, and for nearly forty years they and fellow theater organ enthusiasts enjoyed playing it. Then in the year 2000, an incident set off a chain of events that brought the Plaza organ back to Brownsville.

The incident was the posing of a question by Brownsville native Robert Simpson of Vacaville, California. In my newspaper column of May 6, 2001, Robert asked if there had ever been a theater organ in the Plaza Theater. That led to the discovery that there had been such an organ, and that it still existed and was in playing condition in the Baldwin home of Louis Smith.

The organ's co-owner, Jay Smith, was soon emailing me with the details of how he and his father had acquired and assembled the organ. Then, in the summer of 2001, Jay Smith visited Brownsville. He, Norma Ryan of BARC (Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation) and I took an early-morning walking tour that included a stroll past the Plaza Theater, then in a heartbreaking state of disrepair. As we surveyed the condition of the theater, Jay revealed to Norma and me that he was giving a lot of thought to what might happen to the Plaza's former organ in the coming years.

A year later in June 2002, Jay's father Louis, whose love of theater organs had led to the Smith's 1963 acquisition of the Plaza organ, passed away. Louis's death meant that his Baldwin home would soon be placed on the market; however, the Plaza organ was still in the house, playable at the flip of a switch.

In December 2002, six months after Louis's death, his son Jay offered to donate the organ to BARC so it could be returned to Brownsville. Jay also volunteered his services in the monumental task of re-assembling the organ here.

But there was a problem. There was no available building in Brownsville in which the organ with its many pipes, its blower, and all of its workings, could be properly installed. Determined not to allow this opportunity to slip away, BARC agreed to accept the donated organ and

store it in the Flatiron Building's ground floor garage until an appropriate building could be found for its installation.

On June 8, 2003, with the help of a large panel truck and several volunteers from Brownsville Fire Company No. 1 (North Side), the Robert Morton organ was moved from Baldwin to the Flatiron Building. The organ and its apparatus completely filled the Flatiron's garage.

Then a search began for a venue in Brownsville where the organ could be reassembled, the pipes installed, and the organ played once more in Brownsville. Several options were explored, but each building considered was unsatisfactory for one reason or another. It began to look as if all of Jay Smith's efforts and the work of many volunteers to bring the organ to Brownsville would be for naught.

Then a ray of hope was provided, oddly enough, by the disbanding of a venerable Brownsville fraternal organization, Lodge No. 51 of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. The organization's lodge hall in downtown Brownsville dates back to the Civil War or earlier, making it the second oldest building in the Neck.

"There were only six or seven remaining active members in the lodge," explained Lodge No. 51 Secretary Bob Bradmon, "and over the past three years or so, we talked about dissolving the lodge."

Late last year, Bradmon informed BARC that the I.O.O.F. building was to be sold, and he asked if BARC would be interested in purchasing it. The building's crown jewel is its third floor meeting room, a recently repainted, high-ceiling room that is 30 feet wide and 48 feet long. Its plush red wall-to-wall carpeting stands out beneath a white 14-foot high, intricately patterned tin ceiling. The room is trimmed in dark hardwood, and the perimeter of the room is lined with tradition-rich leather upholstered



benches. What a beautiful room!

And what a great setting for a theater organ concert!

In May of 2004, BARC purchased the Odd Fellows building, and Jay Smith drove to Brownsville to evaluate the third-floor meeting room as a potential site for installation of the Plaza's Robert Morton organ. Jay agreed that the room was magnificent, but noted several obstacles that might impede the organ's ascent to the third floor.

The building has no elevator, and the third floor is reached via two long, narrow flights of stairs. How could the organ's wide, fragile console be gotten to the third floor? And what about the organ's 800-pound blower unit? Four hardy men had struggled to roll that metal monster along a level surface when moving it to the Flatiron Building in 2003. How could it possibly be taken up those narrow stairs to the third floor?

And more importantly, how much damage had been done to the organ by an unexpected calamity that befell it while stored in the Flatiron Building – yet another hurdle to be cleared in the determined attempt to have this community treasure restored to its former grandeur.

DRAMATIC PLAN LIFTS PLAZA ORGAN TO NEW HEIGHTS

In June 2003, the antique Plaza Theatre organ was transported in pieces to Brownsville and temporarily stored in the ground-floor garage of the BARC-owned Flatiron Building. A search began to find a permanent venue where the organ could be installed, but for months that search was fruitless.

Eight months later in February 2004, a near-disaster occurred. During frigid weather, a water pipe burst in the ceiling of the Flatiron Building garage. The organ components, stored on the garage's concrete floor, had been covered with plastic, but pools of water formed on the plastic, which sagged under the water's weight until it finally perforated, drenching the metal and wooden organ parts beneath it.

"The water did some damage," acknowledged Jay Smith as he surveyed the mess days later. "The water got to the boxes that contained the pipes and other parts of the organ too. It is impossible to determine the extent of the damage without close examination of the insides of the organ parts when we reassemble it. Hopefully, the damaged parts can be repaired and the organ made playable again."

That close examination is now underway, because a permanent home for the Plaza organ has finally been found. BARC has purchased the Odd Fellows building, a three-story structure in Brownsville's Neck.

The organ is to be installed on its third floor, which boasts an ornate, high-ceilinged 30' by 48' meeting room large enough to host an audience for a theater organ concert. Two anterooms can accommodate the 328 pipes in their "pipe chamber" as well as the organ's blower and other components of the complex instrument.

BARC's major challenge was to get the organ's fragile console and its 800-pound blower up the two long narrow flights of stairs to the third floor. To accomplish this feat, the Rev. David Clark, president of BARC's board of directors, did what small town folks often do when they need help. He asked a neighbor.

"Thomas Liston lives near me in Hiller," the Rev. Clark explained. "I knew he worked for Maxim Crane Works of West Mifflin, the company that bought out Anthony Crane. I asked Tom if Maxim could provide equipment and personnel to lift the console and blower to a third floor window of the Odd Fellows building. Tom put me in touch with Maxim's Ron Shearer."

On July 30, Ron Shearer met the Rev. Clark at the Odd Fellows building to determine the best way to handle the job, which Maxim offered to do free of charge as a community service.

"Ron thinks a large forklift with an extendable boom will work fine," the Rev. Clark emailed the others involved in the project, after meeting with Ron. "The forklift would be stationed on Market Street, using its telescoping arm to hoist the organ up and over the utility wires to the third-floor window.

"Before the forklift arrives, we will need to secure the console and the blower to wooden pallets placed on the sidewalk by the Flatiron garage. The forklift operator will lift the pallet containing the organ console from that spot, drive the forklift down Market Street to the Odd Fellows building, and lift the console to the front of the third-floor window. From there, we will have to slide it in through the window. He will then make a second trip for the other piece [the blower].

"We must arrange to have Allegheny Power do what needs to be done with the wires in front of the building, have a window removed, have a platform ready inside the Odd Fellows building onto which we can slide the console and the blower, and provide traffic control while the street is blocked."

It was decided that the move would take place on an early Saturday morning, when traffic would be minimal. According to the plan, volunteer firemen would muscle the console and blower out of the Flatiron garage earlier that morning and place it on the sidewalk by the garage door. There was also a safety matter to be addressed – the organ would have to be lifted over live electrical wires.



A bright neon sign inside the Odd Fellows building’s third floor meeting room welcomes the Plaza organ. Seen through the window is a vacant lot where the organ’s former home, the Plaza Theatre, once stood.

BARC board member John Evans contacted Allegheny Power and explained the plan. He was told that in order to carry it out, the wires would have to be wrapped (in case of contact by the crane’s arm with the wires) or temporarily moved during the job.

Meanwhile, Jay Smith was uneasy about something else.

“I have a slight concern,” Jay Smith emailed the others after learning of the proposed plan, “about having a load so high up in the air supported only from beneath.”

Jay knew that the organ and pallet together would not both fit through the window together, making it necessary for the men in the third-floor room to unbelt the heavy console from the forklift while it was still suspended in the air, then drag it off the pallet and into the window without a slip.

In mid-July, permission was granted by Allegheny Power to lift the console and blower over the wires. The utility company agreed to wrap the wires with insulation the day before the move, which was scheduled for 7:00 a.m. on Saturday, August 21, 2004.

On Friday night, August 20, rain began to fall in Brownsville. Before dawn on Saturday, Jay Smith picked up his telephone in Baldwin and placed a phone call to Brownsville.

“Do you know if the move is still on?” he asked.

“It rained here all night,” he was told, “but the rain has just stopped, so the move is probably still on.”

Shortly after Jay hung up, the downpour in Brownsville resumed. Wind-driven rain pelted the plastic-draped organ console and blower on the sidewalk beside the Flatiron garage where the firemen had placed them. Around 7 a.m., as Jay Smith and other volunteers who had arrived struggled to securely tie the wind-loosened plastic around the console, the roar of an engine alerted everyone that the Maxim Crane Works

forklift was coming down Market Street hill. At about that same time, the rain slowed. Then it stopped.

Forklift operator Tim Smith, who is also mayor of Perryopolis, wasted no time. He smoothly maneuvered the big machine into position, placed its forks under the console and pallet, and lifted them three feet into the air. The forklift slowly turned toward Market Street, balancing the console on its outstretched arm as it began the 100-yard journey down Market Street to the Odd Fellows building.



As it began moving, fire policeman Bob Sunny hopped into his automobile, set its red light flashing and moved his car to the intersection of Market Street and Brownsville Avenue, where he blocked the Neck and detoured westbound vehicles through Snowdon Square. At the

intersection of Bank and High Street, Brownsville police did the same for eastbound traffic. As the forklift crawled toward the Odd Fellows building, several onlookers scurried ahead of it, backpedaling down the middle of wet, empty Market Street as they snapped pictures or videotaped the unusual scene.

Arriving in front of the Odd Fellows building, Tim Smith gently lifted the telescoping arm and its cargo toward the third-floor, then spent several minutes inching the organ to the open window. He was guided by Ron Shearer, who was leaning out a different third-floor window and issuing directions to Smith via cell phone.

When the moment seemed right, the waiting crew of John Evans, Jay Smith, Darrell Smith, Paul Mammarella and the Rev. David Clark, reached out the window and grasped the console. They released the belts, eased it through the window onto the improvised wooden platform, paused a few moments to catch their breath, then lowered it onto the red-carpeted floor. They stepped back to gaze in satisfaction at the nearly 80-year-old Plaza organ console, safely delivered to its lofty new home. Success!



Then they remembered that the even heavier blower was already on its way up to the window from the street below. The big metal unit arrived outside the window. There it rested on the forklift for some time while inside the room, the men tried

to figure out how to move the 800-pound monster off the pallet and through the window.

Ron Shearer took matters into his own hands. Putting away his cell phone, he put one foot out the window and onto the wooden pallet, and as the people in the room watched with their hearts in their throats, began tugging on the massive blower from his precarious perch three stories above the street. The other men quickly sprang into action and with surprising ease, jerked the blower a few inches at a time through the window and onto the improvised platform inside. It sagged under the blower's weight, but held.

The two heaviest pieces of the Plaza organ were now on the third floor of the Odd Fellows building. But when the organ was moved the previous year from Baldwin to Brownsville, three trips were needed with a large panel truck to move all of the parts. The console and blower were now in the Odd Fellows building, but the rest of the organ's many components still lay in the darkness of the Flatiron garage.

In the final article in this series, volunteers will gather once more to "bring the Plaza organ home." Then with fingers crossed, Jay Smith will take on the mind-boggling challenge of reassembling the hundreds of mysterious-looking and somewhat water-damaged parts.



The Plaza organ in its new Brownsville home

His lofty goal?

The second resurrection of the Plaza Theater organ.

***NUCLEAR SCIENTIST AND VOLUNTEER CREW
REBUILDING ANTIQUE PLAZA ORGAN***

The rebuilding of the Plaza Theater pipe organ has begun.

On Saturday, August 21, 2004, with the help of Maxim Crane Works, the organ's console and blower were lifted to the third floor of Brownsville's Odd Fellows building. Nine days later at 8 a.m., a group

of volunteers gathered at the Flatiron building, where the remaining organ components had been stored for over a year. Using three pickup trucks in rotation for three hours, those parts, including four wooden chests containing several hundred easily-damaged tin organ pipes, were moved to the Odd Fellows building.

The volunteer work crew included Candy Bastian, Furman Frazee, Cecil Kifer, Jeff Kifer, Paul Mammarella, Allen Nichols, Norma Ryan, Darrell Smith, Jay Smith, Kelly Tunney, Kristen Tunney, Melissa Tunney, and me. As curious motorists rubbernecked, the small army unloaded the unusual array of organ parts from the pickup trucks and carried them up two flights of stairs to the room where the organ will be installed.

By 11 a.m. the entire red-carpeted floor of the 30' x 48' meeting room, blanketed first by thick plastic sheeting, was covered with wooden and metal pipes and mysterious-looking organ parts. Experiencing both exhaustion and satisfaction that the move was completed, the perspiring volunteers said goodbye and departed the building, leaving Jay Smith to survey the amazing scene and contemplate the job that lay ahead of him. Jay, who donated the organ to BARC, has volunteered to reassemble it.

Jay is the founder of the Pittsburgh Area Theatre Organ Society. It was only after weeks of associating with him that I inadvertently discovered that he has several academic degrees, including a Ph. D. in Nuclear Science. For 39 years prior to his 2003 retirement from Westinghouse, he designed nuclear reactor propulsion systems for U.S. Navy submarines and aircraft carriers while serving as a troubleshooter to solve operational problems within the U. S. fleet.

Now this same man is driving to Brownsville each week to rebuild the Plaza Theater organ. When I commented on his impressive academic credentials, Jay (who insists upon being called “Jay” rather than “Dr. Smith”) joked self-deprecatingly, “That and a nickle might get you a cup of coffee!”

He is a lover of theater organs, but his interest lies less with the music they create than with their intricate internal workings. It is a fascination that was born when he and his father purchased the Plaza organ forty years ago. Now, four decades later, the disassembled Plaza organ is back in Brownsville, and the work of reassembling hundreds of parts into a working 1927-era theater pipe organ has begun.

A few of those parts have been damaged. Most of the damage occurred in February 2004 when a water pipe burst in the Flatiron garage, showering the stored organ components with water. Other bumps and bruises resulted from the two moves the organ has been put through over the past two years. These mishaps have added an element

of suspense to Jay's efforts to make the organ playable again. He seems confident it can be done.

"What damage have you discovered so far?" I asked Jay last week. He listed moisture and water-related damage first.

"Several of the wooden pipes have considerable splitting at the glue joints due to water damage," Jay told me. "Repairs will not be difficult, but they will be very time-consuming. The snare drum needs a new skin head due to water damage. The keydesk got wet, causing some of the ivory coverings to no longer be as flat as they should be, and the ebony-colored sharps have lost their color and should probably be painted. It appears that the entire xylophone needs to be completely rebuilt, due to water damage to the leather power pneumatics. The exposed electrical contacts in the console, literally thousands of them, are in need of cleaning to remove residue from the months in storage."

"And what damage resulted from the two moves or the fifteen months in storage?" I asked.

"The mechanisms of a couple of stop tabs were broken on the console," Jay noted, "which is minor damage. One large metal pipe has had the top broken off somehow and must be repaired, and one very small metal pipe has somehow gotten smashed. That's what I have discovered so far."

"Do you have any guess when your restoration and reassembly of the organ will be complete?"

"There is significant preparation work to do first. Part of the ceiling in the anteroom that will become the pipe chamber must be opened up, and a small rest room must be moved before the pipe chamber can be installed. All things considered, I do not anticipate completion before early next year, even if we do not encounter any unexpected obstacles or delays."

"Where on the third floor do you plan to install the several hundred organ pipes and the keyboard console?"

"The pipe chamber would work equally well in either of the anterooms at the top of the stairs," Jay explained, "although one has a lower ceiling that would have to be opened to accommodate the taller pipes. I envision the console on a rolling platform that can be positioned as desired for concerts, but whose 'home' position would be in one of the two rear corners of the big room.

"Another thought is to have a spotlight on the console and the 'toy counter' [xylophone, drums, jingle bells, castanets, etc.], which would be exposed in the big room itself. The door into the pipe chamber could be made of glass so that people could see the innards of the organ chamber."

"Most folks have never seen a silent movie accompanied by live

music,” I said. “Is there any chance of that happening here?”

“Silent films can be rented,” Jay nodded. “A screen can be erected in the big room on which we can show the silent movies, while the Plaza organ provides the accompaniment and sound effects just as it did in the 1920s.”

I asked Jay to identify some of the hurdles that lie ahead in the restoration effort.

“Among them are figuring out a way to silence or reduce the noise from the blower,” he began, “funding repairs necessary due to water damage [Jay is donating his own time for the reassembly], rebuilding the damaged xylophone, and finding someone to be a long-term caretaker for the organ, as my dad and I were for the past forty years.”

“There was a lot of preparation, effort, and unexpected tribulation during the past two years in order to bring this organ back to Brownsville,” I said. “Do you still feel that donating the Plaza organ to BARC was the right move?”

“Yes,” Jay replied. “Even if the organ never speaks again to an audience, it is back in Brownsville, and an irreplaceable piece of American history has been saved.”

Last week, with the help of my wife Melissa and my children, Kristen and Kelly, Jay Smith began the meticulous task of cleaning the organ parts (many of the pipes were affected by mold in the aftermath of the pipe-burst flood in the Flatiron garage) and testing some of the pipes for damage. By the end of the day, Jay was encouraged at what his tests revealed.

“We racked most of the diapason pipes on the manual pipe chest,” he reported, “put the chest under temporary wind pressure [using a shop vac], and energized the magnets one at a time. Only one of those pipes did not speak, but we did not disassemble things to find out why. This is good news, because at least this particular chest appears not to have suffered major water damage.”

This week Jay and his helpers have continued cleaning organ parts, and Jay is moving on to the next major task, the disassembly of the 800-pound blower unit so that it can be moved in pieces to the windowless fourth floor, where it will be reassembled and permanently installed.

Readers, I will keep you informed on the progress Jay and his helpers make in their efforts to bring the Plaza organ back to life. In a few months, I hope to be bringing you news of a rededication performance spotlighting this remarkable treasure from the glory days of Brownsville’s grandest theater.

Epilogue:

In the years that followed the move to the Odd Fellows building, hundreds of hours of labor spread over several years were donated by a crew including Jay, his wife Carol, Joyce Spark, Kelly Tunney, Kristen Tunney, Melissa Tunney, and Dave Knight.

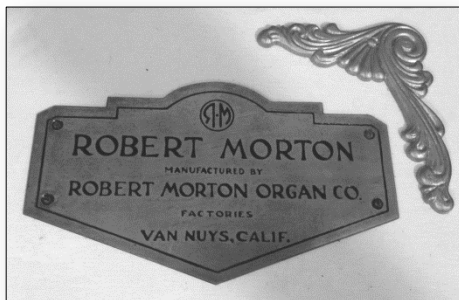
Among the many chores were scouring the mold from the water-drenched pipes; restoring the console's leather connections, electrical contacts, and damaged keys; installing the blower assembly one level above the organ and connecting it to the organ; creating a pipe chamber and installing the hundreds of wooden and metal pipes in it; and many other tasks aimed at restoring this venerable and complicated musical gem to playing condition.



The restored console of the Plaza Theatre organ in its 2014 home at the Odd Fellows building in Brownsville.

The painstaking reassembly of the organ was temporarily delayed due to an injury to Jay Smith, who took a fall while doing volunteer maintenance work inside the pipe chamber of a theater organ owned by the Pittsburgh Area Theater Organ Society (PATOS).

At long last, after years of delicate work, the Plaza Theatre's classic Robert Morton pipe organ was finally played for an audience of Brownsville residents. It was the first time its pipes had "spoken" in public in Brownsville in more than half a century.



Manufacturer's badge on Plaza organ

Now it is played on special occasions during community events. Each glorious note that fills the room is a musical tribute to the determination, skill, generosity, and love of the theater organ of two special men: Louis and Jay Smith.

Brownsville owes these two men a debt that can only be repaid by continuing to lovingly care for this irreplaceable antique theater pipe organ as much as Louis and Jay have. The treasure now residing in the red-carpeted upstairs room of the Odd Fellows building represents our last surviving connection with the glory days of Brownsville's greatest showplace – the Plaza Theatre.