Paul Eakins' Gay 90's Organ Collection

Ron Bopp

My entrance into the world of mechanical music, and specifically to the area of outdoor mechanical organs, had its start with Paul Eakins (Fig. 1) and his wonderful museum in St. Louis, the Gay 90's Melody Museum (Fig. 2). My interest in this hobby began in 1970, just about the time when the museum was in its last year of operation. My family lived in St. Louis and a trip downtown to the Arch, Busch Stadium (where the St. Louis Cardinals called home) and the Gay 90's Melody Museum was inevitable. Later in the year, the museum closed its doors to be followed by a flyer in the mail advertising all of the instruments. The saddening by this sudden termination of a new friendship was made only worse when I saw that my favorite instrument of the whole lot, Sadie Mae (the pink fairground organ), was for sale for much more than I could muster, a staggering $8,000.00.

The memories of the museum still linger with me to this date and inspired me to produce an audiovisual program on the life of Paul Eakins (*I Believe If I Got Hold Of One Of Those, I Could Make It Work*) for the 1996 AMICA convention in St. Louis. From this information I would like to elaborate on the organs in Paul Eakins' collection and museum. I refer to these as being owned by Paul Eakins but it was a joint effort with Laura, his long-time partner and wife. Paul passed away in the late 1980s and Laura still resides in their hometown of Sikeston, MO.

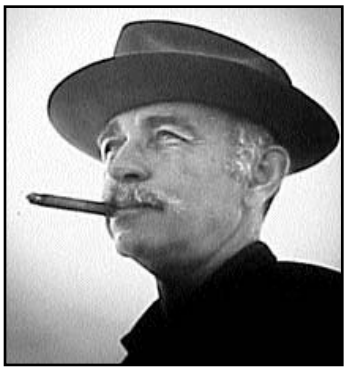

Figure 1. Paul Eakins, circa 1970s.

Paul had worked many years in the heating and cooling business. He was a workaholic and the competitiveness of his business interest led to the medical condition of ulcers which then led to "slowing down" (as dictated by his personal physician) and working more with a hobby—in this case, mechanical musical instruments. Paul was quoted in an August 11th, 1962, article appearing in the St. Louis Globe Democrat as saying "Nothing I learned in the heating, plumbing and air-conditioning business was any good at all in helping me figure out how to go about fixing them [the mechanical musical instruments] but, it's just a matter of common sense." Paul did most of his restoration work, especially the organs (sometimes staying up to 4:00 a.m. to do it) but did have help from Ray Conley, who later worked for G. A. MacKinnon of Charlotte, NC and later, the Floyd Miles "Miles Musical Museum" in Eureka Springs, AR. As a pioneer collector he was one of the first to tackle large fairground organs in the early 1960s — noteworthy especially because there were no restoration references on the topic.

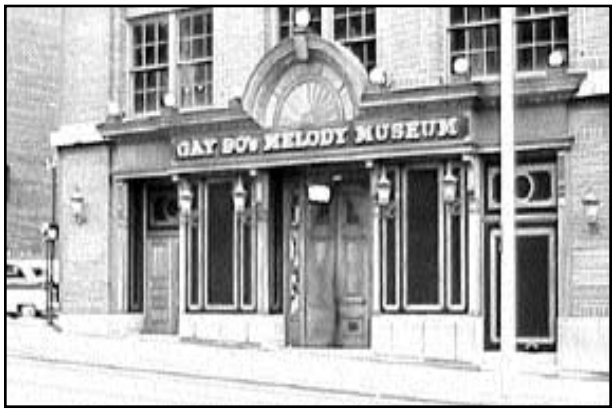

Figure 2. The Gay 90s Melody Museum, across from Busch Stadium in St. Louis, circa 1970.

The Eakins' were involved with two public displays of mechanical musical instruments: the first was the Gay 90's Village in Sikeston, MO, and the second was the Gay 90's Melody Museum in downtown St. Louis. A quote from one of his record albums, Fantastic, Honky Tonk Player Barroom Piano, adequately sets the tone for this collecting advocation:

> The Gay Nineties Village has been characterized as the Disneyland of the Midwest. It is one of America's foremost amusement centers. The Gay Nineties Village came into being when Paul Eakins, a mechanical engineer with a growing plumbing and heating business, had to create a new and less strenuous life for himself on the advice of his doctor. He turned to the hobby of collecting and restoring elderly nickelodeons. As often happens, the avocation became a new career. Paul has gathered at Sikeston, Missouri, one of the largest collections of calliopes, band organs, orchestra pianos and automatic banjos in the world, and has become a leading expert on their care and feeding.

The Museums

The Gay 90's Village museum was open to the public from 1961 to 1966. The Gay 90's Village was part of a large tourist attraction which resembled a Wild West town. Next to the museum was another family-owned business, the Indian Trading Post. At first Paul's interest was American nickelodeons, but as he continued to collect he progressed to European instruments and in particular, fairground organs.

In 1966 Mr. William Dooley, on behalf of the Lewis-Howe Company, a family-owned business that manufactured Tums antacid as well as "Natures Remedy," contacted Paul. Behind the Lewis-Howe business on 4th Street in St. Louis stood their warehouse (Spruce and Broadway). The city of St. Louis at the time was in a large urban renewal project and was tearing all the old buildings down. Mr. Dooley had a Coinola S orchestrion in his living room and with this interest in mechanical music and the neces-

sity to preserve his warehouse, an idea then surfaced for a museum. Paul Eakins was contacted and this was the beginning of the Gay 90's Melody Museum. The machines were not purchased from Eakins, but rather leased for a three-year period.

The physical set-up of the museum was very interesting. Each instrument was showcased in its own booth (28 altogether) and was enclosed in front by a wrought iron fence to keep the customers at arms length. Each was tripped by a remote coin collecting box (25 cents) and there was always a description of that particular machine nearby. Entrance into the museum would find you on the first floor in the midst of several large fairground and band organs. A second floor also housed interesting but lesser important machines.

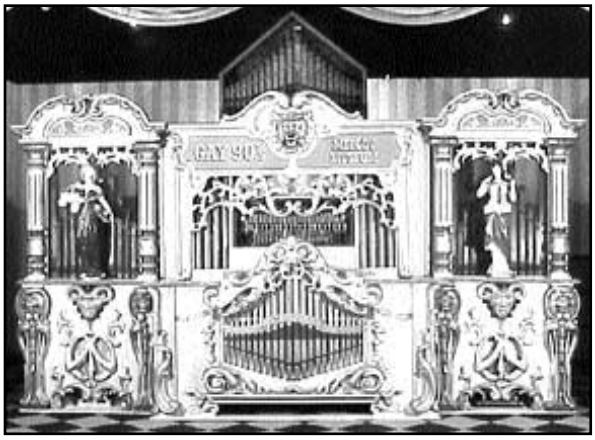

Figure 3. The Emperor, a 80-key Mortier Dance Organ which uses book music.

The Gay 90's Melody Museum opened in July 1967 and remained open for three years until closing in 1970. Fortunately for collectors and historians today the museum was fairly well documented by postcard advertising and photographic slides that were for sale at the time. The music of the machines in this museum as well as Sikeston's Gay 90's village has also been well preserved in over 44 music albums and tapes promoted by Paul and Laura Eakins.

The museum, and its organs in particular, must have made a substantial impression on the locals as the headlines of a July 18th, 1967, St. Louis Globe-Democrat declared "Sounds of Gay 90's to Battle 20th Century Stadium Sonics" (remember, the St. Louis Cardinals baseball stadium was just across the street). The article went on: "The gang in the bleachers at Busch Stadium will have to be pretty riotous to drown out Big Bertha, Madam Laura, Sadie Mae and the Emperor—especially if they're all sounding off at the same time."

As mentioned above, Paul Eakins remained owner of all of the machines in the Gay 90's Melody Museum. This was his limit in the operation of the museum, however. It is speculated that the museum, while having a good traffic flow and business, was not a moneymaking proposition. While all the machines in the museum were the property of the Eakins, not all of his and Laura's machines were in the museum, as many remained in Sikeston.

The Organs

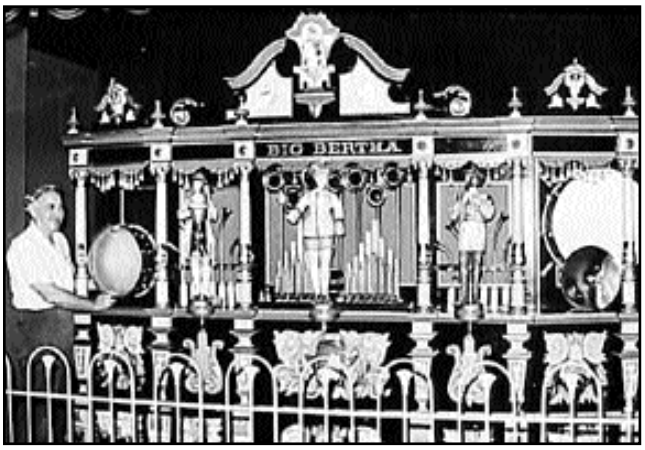

Figure 4. Paul Eakins demonstrates Big Bertha, a 82 fair organ. See text below for discussion of its origins.

In addition to the many coin-operated pianos and orchestrions that graced the collection were several selections of band and fair organs. While only a few pianos were given a title, Paul had named most of the organs (apparently having a fascination with women) and some examples are Big Bertha, Sadie Mae, Madam Laura, Hot Lips Houlihan, Katy Lou and Big Nelly.

One of the largest crowd pleasers at the museum was the ***Emperor***, a Mortier dance organ that was made in Belgium in the late 1880s. Playing from 80-key cardboard books, the Emperor contained 418 pipes plus 44 xylophone bars and the usual organ traps. Paul Eakins purchased this organ from the Vat Hoesbek Beek Beer Garden in Mishawalka, Indiana. As described in a record brochure, the Emperor was noted to be "lavishly decorated with arabesque carvings, hand-carved figures, and lions heads. When this machine plays, it attracts people as did the Pied Piper of Hamelin." The Emperor eventually was sold to Disney World where it was never used, and is now in the Neilson Collection in Pennsylvania.

Paul Eakins had happily rescued three fair organs from rotting conditions where they were stored in Gulf Shores, Alabama. These three had all been featured on one gigantic carousel in Ramona Amusement Park, Grand Rapids, Michigan. The first was ***Big Bertha*** (Fig. 4) supposedly an 82-key Limonaire fair organ that featured a buxom director up front along with two bell ringers. Several organ authorities agree that this was not a Limonaire, however, and historian Tim Trager suggests that it might have been a Frati as it is similar to the large Frati at Knoebel's Grove in Elysburg, PA. The organ was converted by Artizan to play the Style E 87 key roll. The organ is now extensively altered and displayed in an elevated position on a dining room wall of the Grand Floridian Hotel in Disney World, where sadly, it plays with all the stops off because it is too loud for the dining room.

The second of these was an 87-key Gavioli Dance Organ, ***Madam Laura***. Also playing book music, this organ was said to have been painted in colors to suggest a huge valentine. The façade is decorated with three graceful figures, with the central one being the lady director from whom the organ gets its name. While this may have been a Gavioli organ, it is the same organ as illus

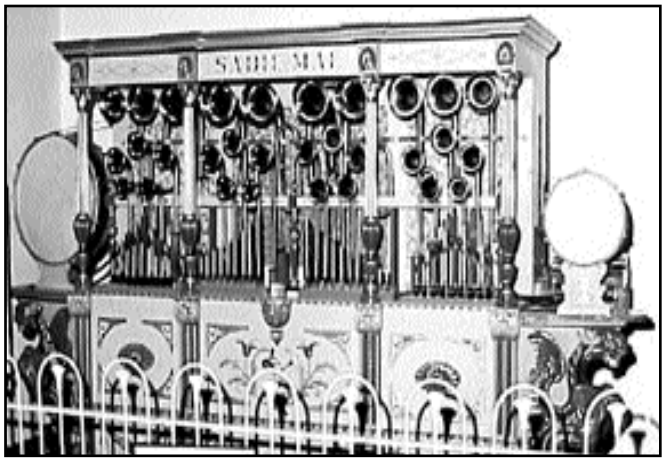

Figure 5 (left). Sadie Mae, as she sat in the Gay 90s museum. Her color was pink and the brass trumpet and trombone pipes made a great contrast. On the right (Figure 6) is the identical organ but pictured earlier as a North Tonawanda Barrel Organ Factory (deKleist) Style 28A.

trated on p 906 of Bower's Encyclopedia -- an 87 key Muzzio organ (Muzzio sold organs made by Frati [primarily] but also some from Gavioli—John Muzzio and Son of New York was an importer of fair organs around 1910.). Madam Laura originally played from a pinned barrel but was converted by Muzzio to play 87-key book music. It is now in a private collection in North Carolina.

The third and most interesting (historically) organ was a 99-key Gavioli (wrong, but we will elude to that in the following paragraphs) brass trumpet organ named ***Sadie Mae*** (Figs. 4 & 5). This organ contained 20 brass trumpets and 10 brass trombones as well as violin, flageolet, piccolo, clarinet, flute, cello, bass and accompaniment pipes. It was originally played from a pinned barrel but later converted to play Gavioli book music. This is the instrument I referred to at the beginning of this article, being offered for a whopping sum of $8,000.00 at the time the museum closed. It subsequently went to Disney World (as did most of the Eakins collection) and in producing their album "America on Parade" the Disney Studio chose Sadie Mae to represent the Eakins collection. Relevant to the following paragraphs was Paul Eakins account of the façade (as described on a record album "Loudmouth Sadie Mae"):

> The ornamentation is magnificent, typical of the style that Europeans love so well. On each side, below the drum sections, are most unusual stylized dragons with gold teeth. The central decorations are sprays of flowers with a lute and two woodwind instruments. Curled around this are two little green snakes. The exotic draped wreaths on the lower façade consist of a great number of intricately carved flowers tied with cross-bound ribbons. The classic laurel leaves are used in outline carvings enclosing oval medallions. Decorative newel posts add to the elegance of the organ. Behind the brass horns may be seen the lovely blue and gold silk brocade setting off their beauty. The same beautiful blue also sets off the bells. The main body of the organ is a flamboyant pink, along with trim of reds, blues, aquas, and gold.

Over 20 years later, and having never being displayed for the public, Sadie Mae surfaced again in the late 1990s and was sold to a St. Louis collector. Close inspection by several collectors at that time revealed that this organ was not a Gavioli organ as originally believed but rather a very early North Tonawanda Barrel Organ Factory (early deKleist) No. 28A. The snare and bass drum and cymbal have been removed from the top of the organ and placed on either side. Was it a deKleist-made organ or was it made by Limonaire? Opinion is divided amongst contemporary historians but never-the-less, it was not originally a Gavioli. Interesting is the fact that this organ is probably the one and same organ featured in deKleist's 1901 catalog. The markings on the oak wood paneling on the facade of the existing Sadie Mae in the Weber collection match exactly those in the 1901 catalog.

Figure 7. Gypsy Queen, a 52-key Gasparini fairground organ.

A fourth organ in the Eakins collection was the ***Gypsy Queen,*** a 52-key Gasparini fairground organ (Fig. 7). The organ was originally a 61-key barrel-organ, which was later converted to book operation. This organ had five figures on the front and was named from the Gypsy lady painted on the top of the façade. Tim Trager believes that this organ has always been a 52-key organ and was later converted from a 52 key book organ. Eakins spent 1300 hours restoring it. It was sold to the Bellm museum in Sarasota, Florida, after the museum closed and now resides in another Florida collection.

The last of the large European organs was ***Pinkey***, originally an 89-key Hooghuys fair organ which was converted to play the 82-key Artizan paper roll system. Three articulated figures highlighted this organ as it played. Even though Eakins touted this as a Hooghuys, historian Fred Dahlinger noted that "the grandson of the Hooghuys organ builders looked at photos I supplied and stated it was not a Hooghuys." Again, contemporary historians agree what the organ is not and that it is probably one of the series of Gavioli organs with the façade that features a large moth

in the middle of the facade. This organ was also sold to Walter Bellm and and it also resides in the same collection as noted with the Gypsy Queen.

The group of American band organs represented in the Eakins'collection was a good sampling of Rudolph Wurlitzer's entry into the band organ business and these included the Styles 103, 104, 148, 153 and 157. The Wurlitzer Style 103, or ***Jenny*** as she was fondly named, was the smallest of the mass-produced Wurlitzer band organs. Jenny was one of the few (if any other) Wurlitzer 103s to be primarily featured on a recording. In addition, ***Hot Lips Houlihan***, a Wurlitzer 104, likewise entertained thousands with its own recording (Fig. 8). After Paul Eakins' empire of mechanical music was sold off during the 70s and 80s, Hot Lips Houlihan was the only organ remaining in his possession when Bill Pohl and I visited Paul in Sikeston in 1987.

Figure 8. Paul Eakins with his last remaining organ in 1987.

A Wurlitzer Style 148 Band Organ, ***Sara Jane***, was a splendid example of a Wurlitzer brass trumpet organ. I can recall that when I visited the museum in 1970 the temptation of "trumpet toss" must have been too great for the younger admirers and a grate had been installed over the brass pipes to prevent someone from "scoring." "Carnival Life with Sara Jane" was one of several records featuring this popular organ.

Katy Lou was a Wurlitzer Style 153 Military Band Organ, again fortunate enough to entertain thousands with its own recordings. Katy Lou, along with Jenny, the Wurlitzer Style 103, were two organs that did not go to Disney but rather ended up in "Russ Nichols Circus Music" caravan. Advertised as the "Largest traveling display of Band Organs in the World" Russ and Connie Nichols of Columbia, MO, purchased these two organs as well as the Tangley Calliope at the closure of the museum and put all three in a semi-trailer where they displayed them at rallies and fairs.

Perhaps the most infamous of the American organs in the Eakins collection was the ***Queen of Kings Island***, a Wurlitzer Style 157 Orchestral Organ. Obtained from a carousel in an amusement park on a pier in Asbury, NJ, this organ was restored to its original condition and then, after the Gay 90's Melody Museum closed, was sold to Kings Island Park in Ohio. Kings Island bought it to replace the another Style 157 that was sold to mechanical music restorers Haning and White (that particular organ ended up in the Bronson collection in Dundee, MI). Harvey Roehl noted in a 1966 "House Organ" that it was used for some of the commercial ads for Campbell's Pork and Beans on the radio.

In addition, the collection included the Artizan Factories Inc. Style C-2 military band organ, known as ***Big Nelly*** which played the 61 note style D roll (Fig. 9). Harvey Roehl in a Vestal Press House Organ review, noted that this organ was one of the best sounding organs. It was sold to Walt Disney World who later moved it to Euro Disney near Paris.

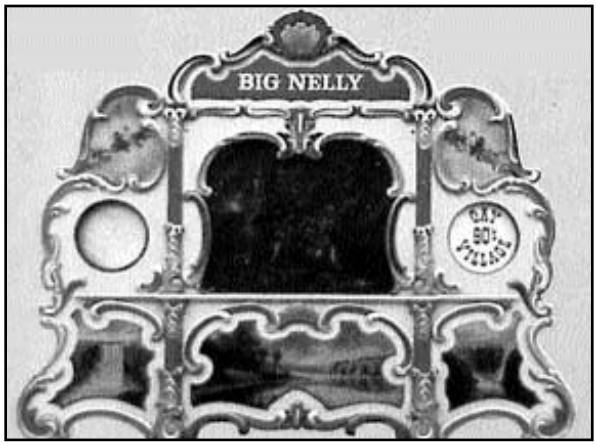

Figure 9. The Artizan Factories, Inc. Style C-2, known as Big Nelly.

Other American organs included a Wurlitzer Style 105 band; a Wurlitzer Caliola and an original Tangley Calliope.

The Gay 90's Melody Museum closed on September 1, 1970 due to a lack of support by the St. Louis population. Although there were 50,000 visitors in the first 8 months the numbers dwindled and the mechanical musical machines left the St. Louis area. As reported in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat in late 1970 "Sour notes on the cash register have sounded taps for the Melody Museum." About six of the instruments were sold directly off the floor but the rest were taken back to Sikeston with some of them going to collectors and Bellm's Music of Yesterday Museum in Sarasota, Florida and the rest to Disney in Florida. Paul Eakins, in his mid-seventys, died from a series of strokes in the late 1980s. Laura Eakins resides in Sikeston and has continued to sell cassette tapes.

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Ron Bopp is a long-time collector and historian of mechanical music with an emphasis on fair and band organs.