

# **Pumps, Pedals, Pipes, Pianos and Some Clanging Bells... but No Pizza!**

## **A Look At Some of the Keyboard Instruments in the History of First Congregational Church of Walla Walla**

Compiled by Steve Wilen  
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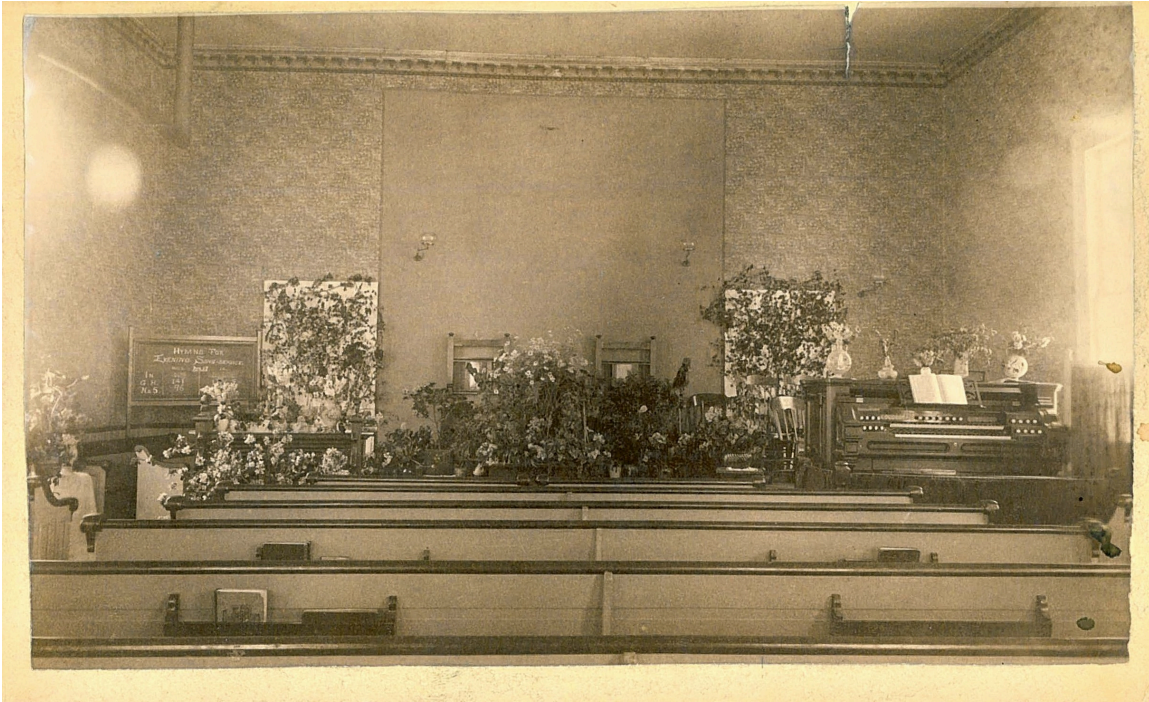
This overview of some of the instruments that have played a role in First Congregational Church of Walla Walla evolved from a request for a short feature on the organ and carillon for the *Highlights* newsletter during the sesquicentennial year of 2014. It goes without saying that this is a part of the church's history that has been scantily documented, but in that some interesting particulars have been uncovered it seemed a good idea to gather this information to a single source.

### **The Second Church Building, Southeast Corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> and Rose Streets**

Earlier this year, in researching the third church building, dedicated in 1900 and lost to fire in 1922, little was discovered concerning keyboard instruments for that building, or the second building that preceded it. A harmonium was removed from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and Rose church during a fire in 1868. As this was a mere four years after incorporation of the church, and the congregation was still small, it would be logical to conclude that this instrument was probably a small pump or reed organ of one manual (keyboard). Trustees minutes from November 28, 1898, a full 30 years later, mention that a "Mr. Kline [had] recommended that the Church Organ be fixed by a man now in the city who is pronounced as fully competent." Further, that as late as Christmas morning 1899 – a mere week before the dedication of the new church at Palouse and Alder – the Trustees were still discussing whether or not to move the organ from 2<sup>nd</sup> and Rose to the new building (the decision to move ultimately was made). Inasmuch as it would be impossible in 2014 to move a pipe organ from one location to another in a mere week and have it in place and playable, and even less probable in 1900, that alone would indicate that the instrument in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and Rose building was some type of harmonium.

Since completing the report on the third church building in April 2014, further research at the Whitman Archives disclosed a previously-unseen hazy photo of the sanctuary of the second church building; on the right is a distinctive two-manual organ console that could have been either a self-contained harmonium or, except for the absence of any visible pipe case, a pipe organ. Further investigation has revealed this instrument to be a Mason & Hamlin harmonium from the T-303 series of 1884. This model was available with or without a pedal board, and as it is unlikely that any other photos exist of First Congregational's Mason & Hamlin, whether or not it was equipped with a pedal board will most likely remain a mystery. This instrument did serve the third church for a time after its dedication in

1900, but there does not appear to exist a single photo of the sanctuary of that beautiful but short-lived edifice.



The Mason & Hamlin harmonium in the sanctuary of the second church at 2<sup>nd</sup> and Rose, Easter Sunday 1892.



Two contemporary photos of Mason & Hamlin Model T-303 harmoniums. Note the full pedal board (straight rather than radiating concave) in the lower photo.

Harmoniums, also known as reed, parlor or pump organs, were commonplace during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in both homes and churches. Parlor organs designed for home use were pumped by the organist – the lack of a

pedal board not requiring the use of the organist's feet to play a pedal part – thereby filling bellows with air that flowed over a brass reed when a key was depressed. If the harmonium had a full set of pedals, a second person would be required to pump by hand (note the pumping lever protruding from the rear of the organ in the lower photo above). Although various stops could be engaged for “different” sounds, e.g., Flute, Melodia, Diapason Dolce, because the sound was always produced by a metal reed with limited ability to regulate the tone it produced, all stops tended to sound somewhat like a cross between an accordion and a harmonica. But no less a composer than Antonín Dvorák composed a set of Bagatelles for String Trio and Harmonium, and César Franck, among others, also wrote for the harmonium.

### **The Third Church Building at Palouse and Alder Streets**

The Mason & Hamlin harmonium served the congregation of the new church building for approximately two years. In an article that appeared in the *Walla Walla Statesman* on April 22, 1899, it was noted that, “A large organ loft will be constructed, in which it is hoped to place a pipe organ.” This hope was fulfilled by the gift of a pipe organ to the church in 1902 from Louisa Baker Lewis. What this organ was – manufacturer, number of manuals, number of ranks of pipes, etc. – is not mentioned in any information in the Archives, nor is there an extant photograph of the organ. However, a letter was found, dated November 29, 1920, from H. M. Hansen, Organ Expert, Spokane and addressed to The Board of Trustees of First Congregational Church proposing to install a 354-h.p.\* three-phase electric motor and Orgoblo blower to provide ample wind for the organ. The church was to pay for wiring the motor, the galvanized iron wind pipe, and if the floor was found to be “too shackey (sic.) owing to continual leaking of water motor” a concrete pad would be required to support the new blower. The letter may have been delivered in person, as the Trustees accepted Mr. Hansen's bid that same day.

The pipe organ was heavily damaged in the fire that largely destroyed the building on January 28, 1922. In 1923, a contract was let for just over \$300 to salvage everything that remained of the church building, excluding the foundation, but presumably including anything that may have remained of the pipe organ.

On January 13, 1922, a Daniel Otis Blair wrote a letter to the Trustees expressing his heartfelt sympathy over the recent destruction of the church and its contents. In his letter, Mr. Blair specifically addressed the church's loss of its piano and pipe organ, and noted that he was in touch with several major manufacturers of moderately priced pianos. He offered to act as an intermediary in procuring a replacement piano in the range of \$1,200 to \$1,500, as well as obtaining a pipe organ wholesale for around \$2,000. He ended his letter thus: “I am as you know an old Congregational minister who has seen 32 years service for the master.”

Also found in the First Congregational archived material was a business card from Baird Music Co., 27 W. Main Street, Walla Walla. On the back of the card was this penciled note, dated June 12, 1923: “We will put the Kimball #28724 in as good

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\*Presumably this is a typo; 354 h.p. would have generated enough air to launch all the organ pipes into orbit.

shape as before the fire and deliver on grown (sic.) floor for One Hundrew (sic.) Eighty-dollars, s/A. P. Mapel." Obviously, even at 1923 prices, no pipe organ heavily damaged in a fire could be rebuilt for \$180, so Mr. Mapel presumably referred to a Kimball piano that had been in the church.

Mr. Blair's offer evidently did not come to fruition; the outcome of Mr. Mapel's offer is unknown.

### **The Fourth and Current Church Building at Palouse and Alder Streets**

As plans were being drawn up in 1929 for the current church building, D. F. (Frank) Baker, Treasurer of the church, wrote to The Rudolph Wurlitzer Company – yes, *that* Wurlitzer – of North Tonawanda, New York soliciting information regarding the installation of a Wurlitzer pipe organ in the new edifice in 1930. In an undated letter, the Manager of the Organ Department responded that no doubt the church had made inquiries of numerous other organ builders, but he was certain that The Wurlitzer Company could assure “that none of the specifications submitted could come within near reach of our offer.” He went on to write that a two- or three-manual organ of 13 ranks of pipes, plus chimes and harp, could be had for the same price as a six- or seven-rank instrument from any other builder. On June 25, 1929, this same gentleman, whose name was not typed on either letter, and whose signature bore no resemblance to the one on his earlier letter, but is equally illegible, wrote Mr. Baker, and attached a suggested stop list for a three-manual organ of mostly eight-foot foundation stops, but also including several four- and 16-foot stops on the manuals (probably borrowed or extended from 8-foot ranks), and one three-rank Mixture on the Great (primary) manual.

No further correspondence with The Wurlitzer Company could be located, nor could any correspondence with any other organ manufacturers, including The W. W. Kimball Company, who ultimately installed the pipe organ still in use in the sanctuary. Wurlitzer was not known for its church organs; this writer has never encountered one in over 50 years as an organist. The pipe organs they produced for movie palaces to accompany the silent films of the times and for other entertainment venues made up the vast majority of their organ oeuvre. They were brash instruments that operated on a very high wind pressure, and came with oogah horns, cymbals, snare and bass drums, cow bells, boat whistles, bird whistles, xylophones, marimbas and a varied assortment of other hootenanny effects.

The W. W. Kimball Company ultimately was chosen to build the pipe organ for First Congregational Church. It was not gifted, as had been the pipe organ in the preceding church building, and was figured into the overall cost of the building. How the selection was made is yet one more mystery, but Kimball was installing a wide variety of church organs at that time, particularly in the nearby larger cities of Spokane and Seattle. University Temple United Methodist in Seattle still has a large four-manual Kimball from the late 1920s, although the former Balcom & Vaughan Organ Company of Seattle has substantially altered it. A Kimball organ, reportedly from a large unidentified Walla Walla church, is now located in a home in Port Ludlow, Washington.

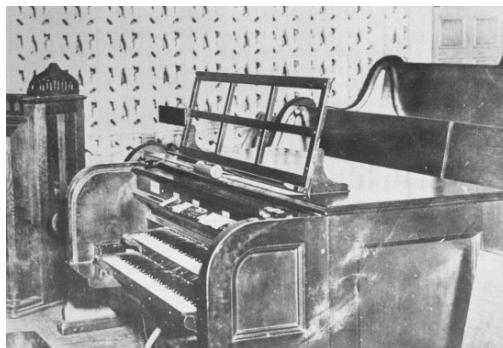
The W. W. Kimball Company began as a piano dealership in Chicago in 1857, representing piano manufacturers such as Chickering, Fischer and Emerson. In 1877, Kimball began building reed or parlor organs, and within a few years they were producing 15,000 reed organs per year.\* They ceased the manufacture of reed organs entirely in 1922, having produced 403,390 instruments.

In 1887, the Kimball Company began producing pianos. Their first instruments were not considered to be of high quality, but after enticing workers from the high-end piano manufacturers Steinway and Bechstein the quality of Kimball pianos improved greatly. At the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Kimball was awarded the World's Columbian Exposition Award.

The Kimball Company began production of pipe organs in 1891, after hiring the Englishman Frederic Hedgeland of the W. M. Hedgeland Organworks in London, England. Over a course of close to half a century, until ceasing production in the late 1930s, Kimball built and installed 7,326 pipe organs.

Not only does it appear that there is no preserved written documentation of First Congregational Church's negotiations with W. W. Kimball Company, but the organ itself provides little information. The builder's plate on the organ console is undated and contains no opus number for the instrument. Newspaper articles that appeared at the time the church building was dedicated on February 1, 1931 mention the Kimball organ, so undoubtedly it dates from 1930. It has two manuals and nine ranks (sets) of pipes. Each of these ranks produces a specific sound, and speaks to the imitative orchestral style of the period, e.g., Oboe, Viola, Tuba, etc. Eight of the ranks of pipes are basic eight-foot; there is only one four-foot rank, a Flute, on the Swell (upper) manual. There is no separate pedal division; the only two 16-foot ranks for the pedals are borrowed from the Great and Swell. The Swell manual can be coupled to the Great manual for more volume, and both manuals can be coupled to the Pedal.

Three separate payments to the Kimball Organ Company from First Congregational Church were made during 1931 for a total of \$5,200; in that this is a small organ, it is reasonable to assume that this might represent the total cost of the organ – or perhaps a settled-upon amount due to the Depression.



A Kimball pipe organ console of 1921, very similar to that of First Congregational, formerly in St. John's Church, Seattle, and later in the 45<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre in Seattle.

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\*The writer's first antique acquisition was a Kimball parlor organ, dripping with Eastlake-inspired gewgaws, purchased in 1956 for \$85 in squirreled-away paper route money. (The writer was a weird kid.)

Noted organ builder and author Bynum Petty was contacted at the Organ Historical Society Archives in Boston, Massachusetts regarding the possible existence of archived material from the W. W. Kimball Company, and he responded that sadly no such records exist, as far as he knows.

A copy of a letter written by then-pastor Emrys Thomas on August 15, 1973 to Century Electric Company in St. Louis, Missouri was found in the Archives. Rev. Thomas's letter enquired about the availability of parts for the Kimball's motor and blower, and he went into great detail as to what was needed, stating at one point, "As you might guess, the writer of this letter is NOT a mechanic, but I think I have down all I was told to ask about." (Unfortunately, the blower motor is still prone to occasionally seize up, rendering the organ temporarily useless.)

### **The Sanctuary Steinway Piano**

The sanctuary grand piano is a 5'4" Steinway "M" model that dates to 1923. All of its parts are original, which David Tarnowski, Whitman piano technician, has reported is rather amazing considering its age, and the fact that a grand of this type has between 1,200 and 1,500 moving parts in its action. Even the ivory of the keys – ivory is no longer allowed for piano keyboards – is in basically good condition. The action is considered fine, not too heavy, not too light. It appears that even the felts on the hammers are original; their even and impressively shallow grooving that results from striking the strings continues to produce mellow, pleasant tones. The old growth spruce of the soundboard likewise contributes to the fine tone. The steel plate is marked "Steinway Foundry Casting – Tubular Metallic Action Frame", which David Tarnowski explained dates it to a period when Steinway manufactured their own steel plates. So this piano has a harder plate than many pianos, whose manufacturers used other alloys, resulting in a softer plate. Most piano manufacturers were located in large cities where steel production may have been part of the local industrial complex. For example, Kimball was located in Chicago, and may well have had the plates for their pianos fabricated at one of the mills in the nearby steel town of Gary, Indiana.

The Steinway was bequeathed by Alice Zaring (1904 – 1993) to First Congregational Church. Mrs. Zaring was the widow of Ed Zaring of McDonald Zaring Insurance Agency. Both were active long-term members of First Congregational. She was described as a soft-spoken lady in the old-fashioned sense, with immaculate taste. She had been a serious student of the piano, although the extent of her formal study of the piano is not known. At social functions, it is said she would always decline to play if asked, but if *not* asked she would sometimes sit and play. Her Steinway was in immaculate condition when bequeathed to the church; David Tarnowski went so far as to surmise that she perhaps had not played it much, in that its condition was – and remains to date – so perfect.

## The Schulmerich Carillonic Bells

Silent since long-time member Bob Watson (the only man who knew how to coax along the automated portion of this vacuum tube dinosaur of the pre-digital era, using the roll player attachment to broadcast hymn tunes on Sunday mornings) moved to Oregon five or so years ago, the Schulmerich carillonic bells, amplified from the church steeple, have again been heard on Sunday mornings during the church's sesquicentennial year (when this writer doesn't forget to play them or is not substituting for an organist in another church). The pealing of the bells, improvised on the 25-note keyboard attached to the organ console, has garnered an abundance of positive responses in the community.

The "Coronation" Model 180 series of carillonic bells was manufactured by Schulmerich Electronics, Inc., Carillon Hill, Sellersville, Pennsylvania, and was gifted to First Congregational Church in 1955 by Mrs. Evelyn Clark Stuart of Los Angeles, California in memory of her parents, William Spencer Clark and Ella Seelye Clark, and her late husband, Dr. William Kent Ruble. Mrs. Stuart's father was the son of Walla Walla pioneer Ransom Clark.\* Members of the extended family had been active in First Congregational Church from 1887 until 1932. Total cost of the carillon was \$5,339.52. The bells were dedicated at the Sunday morning service on April 17, 1955, followed by an afternoon carillon concert at three o'clock.

The "Coronation" model consists of the above-mentioned keyboard, and, in the choir room, a roll player that is placed alongside the large metal enclosure that contains the program clock, bells and amplification equipment. The program clock can be set to play the bells on specific days for a specified length of time; the choice can be either a bell peal selected from five factory-programmed peals, or by engaging the roll player that functions much like the rolls of a player piano. The bells also can be played manually from the 25-note keyboard. Regrettably, all but one pin used to set the timing for the program clock are missing, and there may be other parts missing. The Schulmerich Company was contacted about this, but reported that they no longer make or stock any parts for a carillon of First Congregational Church's vintage, and photocopies of period brochures they sent do not correspond to our model – even though they reported that they still have a file on our carillon. Thus, at present, the carillonic bells can only be played manually from the keyboard.

The electronic reproduction of bronze bells was developed mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Formerly, bell pealing was accomplished either by a person pulling on a rope that was attached to a wheel that in turn was attached to a bell located in the church tower, causing the bell to swing in an arc of about 220°, producing two rings or "claps" with each pull; or with a larger number of bells – 25 or more – by striking large wooden keys with a closed fist, causing the clapper to strike the bell, resulting in a single ring of each bell with each strike.

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\*Ransom Clark (1809 – 1859) was a member of the 1843 Fremont survey expedition that had passed through the Walla Walla valley en route to The Dalles. After spending time in Oregon Territory, Clark returned to Walla Walla in 1855. He staked off a square mile on Yellowhawk Creek about two miles south of the present city of Walla Walla, on which he built a log cabin. The cabin was donated to the Fort Walla Walla Museum in 1969, where it still can be seen.

The Schulmerich carillon consists of 25 miniature bell tone generators of bronze bell metal in the housing in the choir room that are struck by metal hammers, producing barely audible vibration tones. These tones are picked up electronically and amplified over 100,000 times by means of a 200-watt amplifier, and transmitted to four large stentors (speakers) housed behind the four louvered openings at the base of the steeple. The sound is thus projected 360° into the community for up to a range of about one mile. Until recent years there was also some type of amplification in the sanctuary so that the bells could also be heard inside the church, although this writer has been told it had a scratchy sound that tended to set one's teeth on edge. A thorough exploration of all areas where a fifth interior stentor might have been located, including the attic, the tower itself, the pipe chamber above and behind the choir and the empty space above and behind the organ console, found no evidence of such, so it appears that the interior speaker was apparently of a jury-rigged after-thought variety, and is no longer in place.

An article from the *Union-Bulletin* dated June 30, 1972 noted that the summer organist for the church was planning to present Wednesday evening concerts of change ringing at seven o'clock during the summer months. A simple explanation for the fairly complex system of change ringing is that it consists of a mathematically organized pattern of engaging the bells that does not include any recognizable tune. It is similar to what has been heard on Sunday mornings during the sesquicentennial year, although what this writer has played is totally improvised and not based on any mathematical sequence of tones.

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Appreciation is gratefully extended to any reader who has managed to reach the end of this collection of largely obscure and arcane facts, most of which were extracted from the 41 boxes of archived material on First Congregational Church in the Whitman Archives. If it has seemed to the reader Wagnerian in its length, you can praise God that the writer's windy, perambulating style of word processing thankfully was not attached to a 354-h.p. Orgoblo blower!

**References:**

Whitman Archives: 41 boxes of material from First Congregational Church; and Whitman photo collection  
Various ledgers of Trustees meeting minutes, etc. archived at First Congregational Church  
Bynum Petty, Organ Historical Society Archives, Boston, MA  
Schulmerich Electronics, Inc., Sellersville, PA  
Jackie Wood, organist/pianist, First Congregational Church  
David Tarnowski, Piano Technician, Whitman College  
Parke Thomas, son of former First Congregational minister Emrys Thomas  
Spencer Turbine Co., Hartford, CT, manufacturer of Orgoblo organ blowers, 1904 - 1982