



AMICA International

Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association

Honor Roll

ELMER H. HUNHOLZ

From the AMICA, VI4, No 10, Dec 1977

Editor's note: A short time ago we asked AMICA's honorary member Elmer Hunholz to supply some material which could be used to prepare a biographical sketch of him. Mr, Hunholz had had a long experience in several areas in the manufacture of automatic musical instruments which we felt would be of interest to AMICAns. He supplied a well-written story of his interesting career which we print herewith without change.

On January 10, 1911, I graduated from grade school and the next day started in the Gram Richsteig Piano Factory in the action finishing department putting capstan screws into keyboards and getting them ready to install into pianos. I stayed in that department some six or eight years until I became a full-fledged action finisher, which was a trade within the piano making trade.



At that time I felt that one could go nowhere in the trade unless one could tune so I took up tuning on the side. I spent my Saturday afternoons and holidays tuning pianos at the factory for free until I could do an acceptable job, and then got a job in the factory as a first tuner or chipper, earning less than as an action finisher but rounding out my experience. I stayed in the tuning department for years doing seconds and thirds and finally fine tuning and voicing four or five years later.

About that time players started to become popular and the superintendent was looking for someone who would want to try his luck in that department. At first only one or two pianos a month were turned out with players, and with my tuning that worked out all right, so I volunteered and finally became the player installer and player man. I held that job a number of years.

A few years previous to this, the company had reached its maximum production of about four or five pianos a day and then tapered off to less and less until we produced that many in a week. During this tapering off period I became a sort of utility man working anywhere in the plant where they needed help. I liked that, and it gave me wide experience in the piano maker's art. My good friend and distant relative was factory superintendent and I later became his assistant. Mr. Gram finally decided to stop the operation and the superintendent and myself formed a company doing major repairs and the rebuilding and servicing of pianos. That was in 1923 and since that time it was our operating company. As a service company our player experience came in handy. We serviced players of any make and also coin operated instruments. (Mills novelty violins, Wurlitzer coin operated, also merry-go-round organs and calliopes, anything that was played with a roll or perforated sheet.)

After a number of years in this operation, we met a man whose father had left him a family name of a rather large operation in the church organ field, and we, with our financial set-up and experience, decided we could take him into our company and expand it to a piano and organ operation. We tried, but it did not work and we released him from any connection with us and paid him out. Shortly after this, and with experience in the organ company, we felt there was a need for a mechanism to play the pipe organ from a music roll for use in funeral parlors and even in large homes. The average organ builder knew nothing about players, therefore we felt that if our company built the player and kept a library of music, we could sustain ourselves and supply a need in the trade,

In our research of what the trade could supply, we found that the Clark.Orchestra Roll Co. of DeKalb, Illinois, had a small library of organ rolls which had been used for funeral homes and also some for the large orchestrions made by Seeburg and Operators Piano Co, of Chicago. These instruments were no longer being built. They had been used in the movie theatres to add sound effects for the silent pictures. We contracted to buy the organ roll department of Clark Orchestra Roll Co. and took on their organ roll editor, Roy Holland, to handle the roll operation there. The rolls were cut in DeKalb and sent to Milwaukee where they were spooled up and boxed and put into stock.

During the time that Mr. Holland was at DeKalb we developed a new roll which could play three manuals on an organ. We had a connection with George Kilgen and Sons of St. Louis, Missouri and put a recording mechanism on their studio organ and they got some recordings from some of the world's best known organists such as Pedro Yahn (Italian) and Charles Corboin (French). Our market for rolls and players was slowly developing for residence organs - we sold to Wicks, Hook and Hastings, Hall-Estey, and Henry Pilcher and Sons, Louisville Kentucky, and a few in Canada such as Casavant Bros. It was then that the government instituted the income tax and large residences were out and that stopped the pipe organs for homes. About this time we had a disastrous fire in our factory and our music roll department with its master records was badly hit. Our music roll stock and masters were almost completely wiped out.

Shortly afterward the Playrite Music Roll Co. was in receivership in Milwaukee and the attorney was looking for a buyer where he could dispose of the machinery and special apparatus used in making music rolls. He gave us a good deal, and we with our organ roll experience took it over and started making music rolls for the home player piano. We made rolls for some five years or more and then business tapered off with the player piano. We junked all the roll and master making machinery as well as tools. Mr. Clark was closing out the factory in DeKalb to retire, and the Miesner Piano Co. closed up in Milwaukee. Mr. Hoskins, who was superintendent of Miesner, came over to work with us and took charge of the music roll department until it closed shop. About this time, Mr. Roesler made up his mind to retire and moved to California for his health. Mr. Hoskins and myself carried on the piano and organ rebuilding operation through the years. Mr. Hoskins retired and moved to California also leaving me alone with the operation and the building which we had purchased during our most prosperous times. The building was now hard to sell. However, I stayed to manage the building and did a little piano work on the side, all the time trying to sell the property. This went on for then years or more until February 1977 when I sold out and am now completely retired at 81 years.