ABAC Alumni Donate Rare Pump Organ to Museum of Agriculture

TIFTON—Forty years after their romance at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College blossomed into marriage, Laura Groover Whiddon and Darrell Whiddon recently returned to the
Thanks to the two ABAC alumni, a Burdett pump organ which may be approaching 150 years old now resides at the Museum. They donated the organ in honor of Laura’s father, Lawrence H. Groover, who in Laura’s words, “loved Georgia and its wonderful history and ultimately preserved this piece of history.”

Polly Huff, assistant director and curator at the Museum, couldn’t be more pleased.

“The organ is on display in the Museum’s main hall,” Huff said. “Our oldest interpreter, Ferrol Cosper, is one of the very few people in this area who still remembers how to play this instrument, and she happily obliges when museum guests ask her to demonstrate its beautiful sound.”

Huff said the story behind the organ donation actually began when Lawrence Groover spied a rare Burdett solid oak pump organ in disrepair on a family's carport in Smyrna in 1972. He purchased it from them after discovering that the family had rescued the organ from a church in Cobb County just before the church staff was about to dispose of it.

“At that time, Atlanta's downtown Rich's department store had a large piano and organ department,” Laura Whiddon said. “A gentleman who worked in that department did antique pump organ restoration as a hobby. My father took the organ to him, and he faithfully restored both the interior workings and the beautiful oak exterior to an amazingly like-new condition.”

According to http://www.pumporganrestorations.com/, “the Burdett Organ Company was located at 77-83 Sedgwick Street in Chicago, Ill. Riley Burdett, formerly Burditt, had been the
head of J. Estey & Company's Chicago branch, Estey & Burdett. In the 1866 reorganization of the Estey Company, Burdett and Silas M. Waite left and formed the Burdett Organ Co. Ltd., the first of the Chicago reed organ builders.

“They were building organs for Lyon & Healy until 1867 when they formed the Brattleboro Melodeon Co. The Chicago factory burned in the Chicago fire of 1871 but started again at 12th and Walnut Streets in Erie, Penn., in partnership with C.C. Converse from 1872-1888.

“They then moved to Freeport, Ill., in 1894 where they built a three-story building on Manufacturers’ Island where they manufactured pump organs until 1898 when the factory was moved to the Johnson Wheel Co., building in the Northwest part of Freeport, where it had a capacity of 400 organs per month.

“In 1901 the property and name were acquired by the Hobart M. Cable Co., and the piano scales were acquired by the Edna Organ Co. In 1907 Cable sold the Burdett Organ Co., to S.N. Swan & Sons.”

“This particular organ was manufactured by the Burdett Organ Company sometime between 1866 and 1907,” Laura Whiddon said. “Most likely it would have been purchased by a Cobb County or Atlanta area Protestant church from Burdett Organ Company or was purchased from the company after the 1870s by a local family and donated to the church, since the years immediately after the Civil War left Atlanta area citizens in circumstances that forced them to place all their resources on necessities for survival.
“After the end of martial law and the harsh penalties of Reconstruction, north Georgia citizens could finally approach a modicum of prosperity which enabled them to divert some of their resources once again to the luxuries of art and music.”

Laura and Darrell Whiddon had the organ further restored before donating it to the Museum. It is now another piece of Georgia history available for viewing by Georgians and visitors from all over the world for generations to come. And if Mrs. Cosper is around, they’ll even get to hear its beautiful sound.

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