

An Alpine History Mystery – Solved!

The Oldest Musical Instrument in Alpine

September 2015

If you figured out that the oldest musical instrument in Alpine is a *harmonium* then you solved our history mystery. Oh, but if the highbrow name of harmonium is new to you, then maybe you know this instrument as a “reed organ” or “pump organ”. Whatever you want to call it, we have a wonderful example of this versatile musical instrument on display in the Beaty House at the Alpine Historical Society’s John DeWitt Museum. And if you have been to one of our Alpine History Day celebrations, you may have heard Joan Waterworth play this beautiful instrument.

The harmonium makes beautiful music, but in a different way than a pipe organ. To play this instrument the organist presses on foot pedals to create compressed air which is then forced through a brass reed causing it to vibrate at a specific musical note. The sound of the organ can also be changed by pulling out or pushing in stops to enhance sounds like base and treble, or to simulate the sound of a viola, echo horn, or even the human voice.

The organ in our story has found many homes through the years and could probably tell us some interesting stories from its travels. It was purchased in 1890 by teenage girls in Alpine who put on a fundraising “variety” show, and by Benjamin and Harriet Arnold who provided matching funds. There was no Town Hall at that time, so the harmonium was kept in the one room school house built in 1890 by the Arnold’s. Pearl Foss, daughter of pioneers Edward & Caroline Foss, played this reed organ for church services which were also held at the school. Then in 1899 the Alpine Town Hall was built and in 1901 the organ was moved from the Alpine Center School to the Alpine Town Hall where it became a prominent feature in this landmark building, providing music for town gatherings and Sunday church services. Sometime in the 1920’s a new piano was purchased for worship services and the Story & Clark harmonium traveled to the home of Pearl and Percy Foss. After Pearl’s death in 1956 this lovely instrument found a home with Cathy Cost, who was the church organist. For its next journey, this much travelled instrument was given to the Alpine Community Church by the Cost family.

For over 125 years and through its many travels this pump organ or “harmonium” has been treated with loving care and deep reverence for the melodious contribution it has made to our little community. And so it seemed fitting that its last journey should be to the Alpine Historical Society where it joins the collection of very special objects that each in their own way tell the story of Alpine, our lovely and musically blessed mountain settlement.

