

JIM WHELAN BOARDWALK HALL

ESSAY II BY NATHAN BRYSON

History of the Convention Hall Midmer-Losh

IN NOVEMBER 1923, MAYOR EDWARD L. BADER INITIATED A public referendum at which time residents approved the construction of a monumental convention hall. Construction began in August 1926, and the building was officially opened in June 1929. At the time of its construction, the building was the world's largest auditorium and covered seven acres. The arena, where the Midmer-Losh organ is located, measures 487 feet long, 288 feet wide, and 137 feet high. The barrel-shaped ceiling is supported by the building's walls rather than pillars, granting an unobstructed view from one end of the room to the other. In its original configuration, the building was a multi-purpose room that could serve as a convention hall, sports arena, and concert venue. Fixed seating in balconies ran along three of the walls, but the bulk of the seating was in bleachers or moveable chairs on the main floor. At maximum capacity, the arena could hold more than 40,000 people. Following a \$90 million renovation in 1999, the capacity of the arena was reduced to just over 14,000 but with greatly improved sight lines, better access, and amenities.

One of the key players responsible for the creation of the mammoth organ was a New Jersey state senator by the name of Emerson Lewis Richards. A lawyer and politician by profession, Richards was enthralled by pipe organs from an early age. He was well-traveled, spending a great deal of time in Europe studying historical instruments, and was well acquainted with many of the finest organbuilders and organists of the time. His family's wealth enabled him to install numerous pipe organs in his palatial home, located only ten blocks from Convention Hall. His house instruments were a laboratory for testing new pipework, and he was notorious for swapping ranks of pipes with some frequency. One of the largest of his residence instruments, Aeolian-Skinner Organ No. 1047 (four manuals, 146 ranks), was built for the Senator in 1944 and moved a few years later in 1948 to First Baptist Church of Denver, Colorado, where it is still extant, slightly altered. His vision of the "perfect" pipe organ morphed considerably throughout his life, and his contributions to organbuilding cannot be overstated.

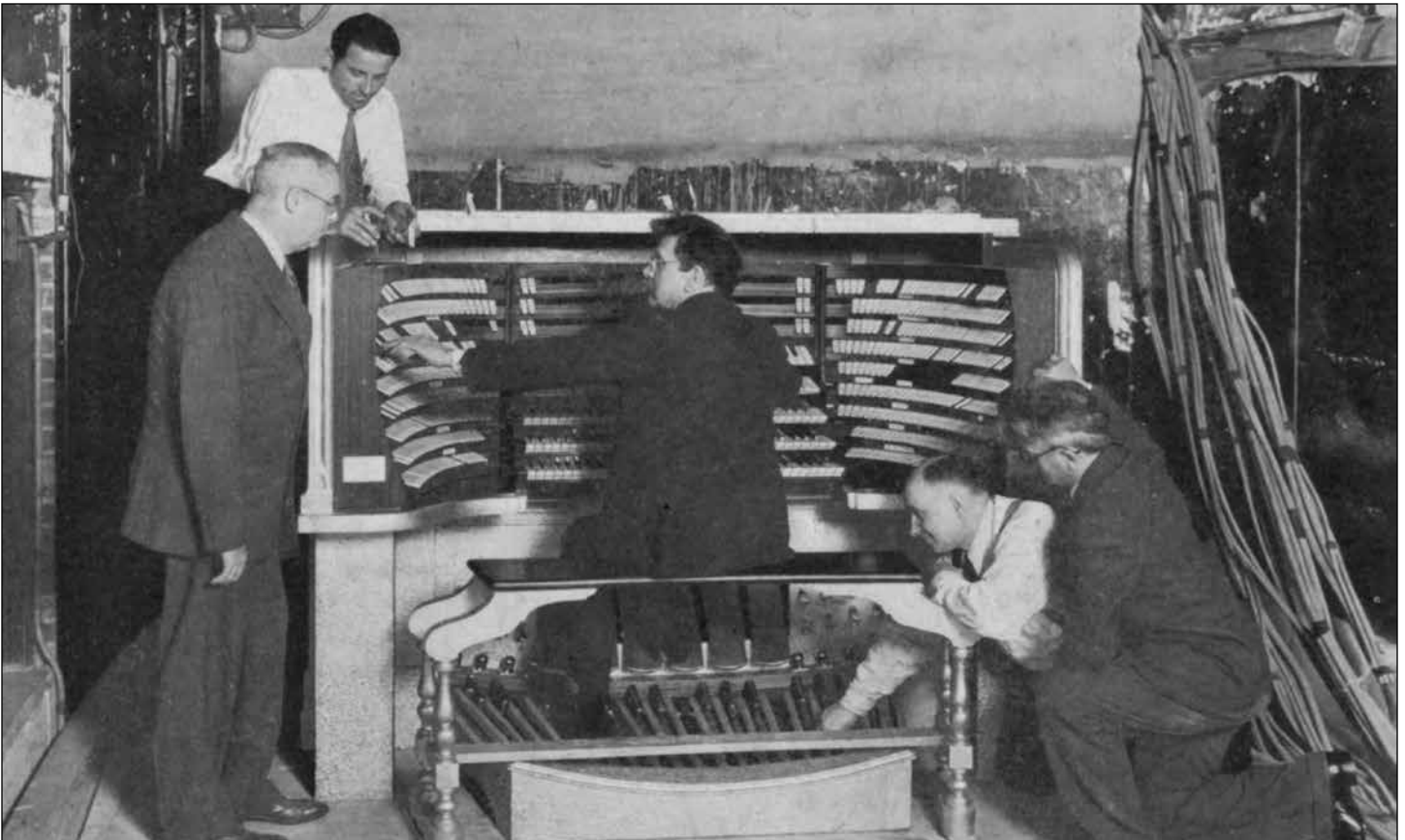
It was Richards who was the champion and mastermind behind the installation of a pipe organ in the Convention Hall. While a pipe organ would not have been uncommon in a civic building of the time, the Senator used his influence to convince city officials that it would be more cost effective to spend a large sum of money up front to build an organ and then only require one musician to play it, rather than to hire a large orchestra or band every time there was a need for live music. The size of the instrument would have to be monumental to fill the space and lead 40,000 people in song.

Richards' initial design called for an astonishing 592 ranks and 43,641 pipes. Space and budget constraints mercifully intervened, and the revised scheme was reduced to 403 ranks and 29,646 pipes. By the time construction was complete, the instrument grew to its present 449 ranks and 33,112 pipes. The twenty divisions of the organ are located in eight chambers at the front and sides of the room. W.W. Kimball, M.P. Möller, and Midmer-Losh were asked to submit proposals based on the Senator's specifications. Kimball's price was the highest at \$467,617. Möller came in lower at \$418,850, and the lowest bid of \$347,200 came from Midmer-Losh. All of the bids were still over the \$300,000 budget established by the city, but Richards pointed out that if the instrument was to fit the budget exactly, it would have to be smaller than what was, at the time, the world's largest organ—the Wanamaker organ in nearby Philadelphia. The fact that the city provided the extra money suggests that perhaps having "an organ of record-breaking size" was indeed part of their civic pride. Ultimately, Richards was able to insert a clause into the contract, surprisingly accepted by the builder, which gave him the power as the Organ Architect, to make any change to the contract at any time with the builder bearing the cost. Richards invoked the clause on numerous occasions with devastating financial results for the Midmer-Losh company.

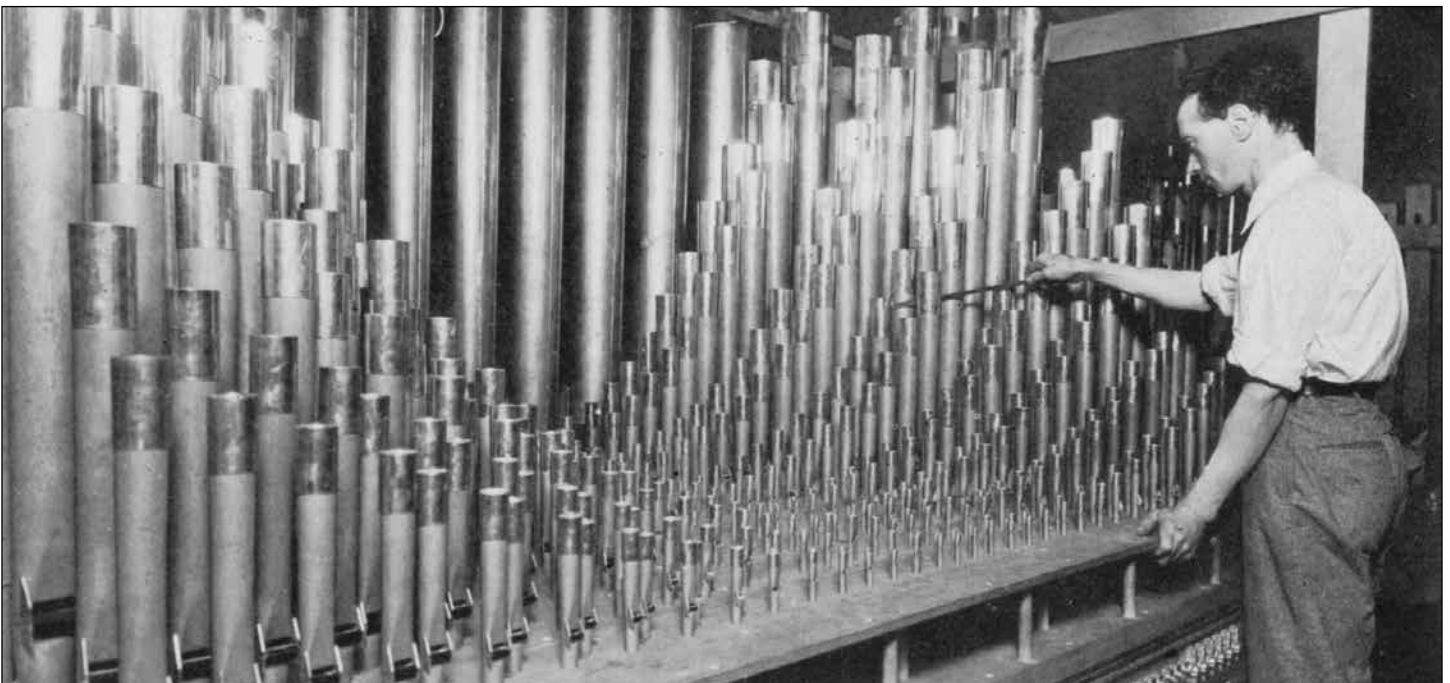
Construction of the organ, Midmer-Losh Opus 5550, began in May 1929 and was completed in December 1932. The first two divisions made playable were the Brass Chorus and String II on July 28, 1929. They were played from a repurposed three-manual Möller theatre organ console. As construction progressed, the instrument was played from the five-manual "portable" console until the seven-manual console was completed. James Winter, an electrician for Midmer-Losh, gave the first public recital on May 11, 1932, during the Atlantic City Fair.

The contract for the organ was signed only a few months before the Great Depression began, but the money for the organ was not affected and construction continued. In fact, in some ways, the Great Depression may have contributed to the success of the instrument. While other organbuilding firms were downsizing or ceasing operations altogether, there was plentiful work in Atlantic City and many of the best and brightest minds in organbuilding were associated with the project. Former employees of Estey, Steere, Odell, Marr & Colton, Dennison, Gottfried, and Wurlitzer who found themselves suddenly looking for work, all found their way to Atlantic City. Their contributions can be seen and heard throughout the instrument. In the end, however, the project was not exempt from the financial struggles of the Depression, which led to increasingly bitter conflicts between the Midmer-Losh company and Atlantic City as the instrument edged toward completion.

The instrument's contentious completion was an ominous foreshadowing of its future. Following the official completion of the organ, formally accepted on December 5, 1932, the Midmer-Losh



The portable console with 500 registers controls the instrument as a straight organ. The city organist, Arthur Scott Brook seated at the console with Emerson Richards far left and organbuilder Seibert Losh kneeling far right. CREDIT: *Under the Sassafras Tree*, Midmer-Losh, 1930



H. Vincent Willis tuning the 7-rank double-languid Stentor Mixture on 35" pressure made with double languids and flared 4 notes wider at the top than at the mouth and by far the most powerful and brilliant Mixture ever made. CREDIT: *Under the Sassafras Tree*, Midmer-Losh, 1930

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The Right Stage chamber key relay room.
This relay is still in use today.
PHOTO: Fred Hess and Son

company was required to keep two men at the job for one year, to carry out maintenance and, in effect, continue the tonal regulation that would have otherwise been completed during the contractual construction period. One of the men tasked with this assignment was Roscoe Evans, who would remain in Atlantic City as the organ's first curator. His greatest challenge was the combination action for the seven-manual console. The complex machinery to control 1,235 stop tabs and 240 pistons was located in two rooms in the basement below the stage. The combination of delicate metal traces and machinery contained in wooden boxes proved a disastrous pairing, especially with a steam line running through one of the rooms! The combination action was so troublesome that it was decommissioned after only two years. The great Atlantic hurricane that struck the island in 1944 inundated the basement levels of the hall with 15 million gallons of seawater, permanently damaging the combination action and requiring extensive repair to the blowers and their motors.

Evans retired in the early 1950s, and his successor was William Rosser. Rosser continued the daunting effort of single-handedly trying to keep the largest pipe organ in the world playing on shoe-string budget. The organ was used for the 1964 Democratic National Convention which nominated Lyndon Johnson, but by that time the instrument was already exhibiting major problems. By 1962, the Gallery I reeds were out of commission, and portions of the instrument were becoming unreliable or failing altogether. While there is considerable documentation from Evans's tenure, there are no records from Rosser's time. A stipulation for holding the 1964 convention in Atlantic City was the installation of air conditioning. While no doubt enjoyed by convention attendees and many others in the following years, leaks from condensate pans caused significant on-going problems and the instrument's decline accelerated as a result.

Dennis McGurk joined Rosser as his assistant in 1959. While he had no background in organbuilding, he was a quick learner and in 1984 succeeded Rosser as the third Curator of Organs. McGurk recalled, "Pretty much all of the organ was working when I arrived in 1959. Since that time, however, it has slowly but surely gone downhill. Roof leaks in the '70s caused most of the damage in the two upper chambers, and the simple fact of the matter is that the authorities had little interest in spending money on repairs at a time when the City as a whole was in decline." McGurk had the unenviable and discouraging task of keeping as much of the organ playable as possible, with a limited budget and materials. Perhaps his greatest contribution was keeping at bay those who wanted to simply discard the instrument, thus preserving it for future restoration. McGurk retired at the end of 1998. Prior to his retirement, the *Atlantic City Convention Hall Organ Society* was formed to raise awareness of the instrument and begin the process of fundraising for its restoration. This group was instrumental in protecting the instrument during the 1998 building renovation and furthering McGurk's advocacy that the instrument be saved and not relegated to the scrap pile.



Senator Emerson Richards showing the ergonomic design of the console where the player could easily reach the extremes of key and tab placement.

PHOTO: Fred Hess and Son