

The Story of How the Historic Matthias Schwab Organ (1859) made it to the West Gallery of St. Mary's Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption.

Recalled by Gregory J. Schaffer

In the mid-1850's, a German immigrant moved his family and his business to this area. He brought with him an extraordinary talent which enriched the lives of those who were so positively affected by his work. Upon his death, this man would leave a lasting legacy of his dedication and skill for generations to come after him.

Matthias Schwab came here from Westphalia, Germany with a particular set of skills at building and installing Pipe Organs for worship in churches along the Ohio River, between Pittsburgh and New Orleans.

Among these fine instruments was the organ (1859) at Old St. Joseph Catholic Church at 12th and Greenup Streets in Covington, just 2 city blocks from the Cathedral Basilica (the Irish Parish). Not only did this pipe organ function as an effective part of the Liturgy for the parish, it was also a work of musical artistry in construction - to the eye as well as the ear. It would be an eloquent testimony to the gifted and devout immigrants who settled in this area during the second half of the 19th Century.

Since there was no electricity at the time it was installed, the Matthias Schwab Organ's moving parts employed mechanical action from the keyboard and used human energy to power the wind needed for the 1,200 pipes to speak (a manual pump).

For over 110 years this instrument gave praise and accompanied congregations for countless liturgies, weddings, funerals, and concerts. By the time it was 100 years old (1959), instruments of this type we're becoming more rare, either through disrepair or by neglect. The Schwab Organ was maintained very well and sounded much as it would have 100 years earlier. The traditional level of craftsmanship and design had become all but extinct in the region by the mid-20th-century, which made the existence of this organ all the more important.

Meanwhile, two blocks away, Dr. Robert J Schaffer was the principal organist and music director at the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption (Madison Avenue and 12th St.). Occasionally, Mr. Schaffer would substitute as organist for Masses at old St. Joseph Parish. He took great interest in the sound and story of the this fine pipe organ. Since Schaffer has been at the Basilica since 1949, he was well aware of the beautiful sound the Schwab organ possessed.

Late in the year 1969 it was announced that, due to declining membership, old St. Joseph Parish would be closed and the church was to be torn down. By that year, the

church had no full-time musician and only employed organists on a part-time basis. Dr. Schaffer was one of those who helped in the final days of Old Saint Joe's. It became apparent to Schaffer that the future of the Schwab organ was dubious at best.

Robert went to see the pastor of old Saint Joe's to ask him about plans for the organ. The pastor told him that there were no plans to save or move the organ before the old church would be torn down. Dr. Schaffer took it upon himself to save this magnificent organ from destruction. It seemed an impossible task since there was no money to fund the project.

Using his recruiting and persuasive skills to the fullest, and working relentlessly to see the project through, Dr. Schaffer enlisted a modest crew of volunteers for an entire summer. Comprised of Cathedral Bishop's Choir boys and men, and some friends of the family, the organ was dismantled and carried to the cathedral two blocks away. Most of the pipework was carried by hand. The larger pieces were moved by truck and rigging equipment. Almost all of the work and time donated and any incidental expenses were covered by Schaffer, who oversaw and was present for the entire process.

It would be almost two years before Dr. Schaffer received permission and could secure funding to undertake the massive project of rebuilding the great organ. Again much of the work was done by volunteers but now the project required skilled labor. Costs were kept to a manageable level and the project was completed by 1974. It should be noted that all money used in the restoration of this instrument came from outside the church. Robert Schaffer felt the expense should not be a burden to the parish or the diocese and that the funding for this should come from private donations.

The organ was re-dedicated on October 18, 1974 amid much fanfare and publicity. Bishop Richard Ackerman climbed the narrow stairway up to the west gallery to bless the organ at the dedication concert. The Historic Matthias Schwab Organ had found a new home and new life in the Basilica. It became a source of much interest both in the musical community as well as the historical community.

Subsequently, several organ concert were offered to the public on an occasional basis. These recitals generated much interest. Those who attended them urged Mr. Schaffer to start a series of concerts. In 1975, the Cathedral Concert Series officially commenced seasons of organ and sacred music concerts, which continues today with considerable acclaim, attendance, and features many renowned musical artists and groups each year.

Dr. Robert Schaffer died in 2014, one year before the 40th anniversary of the concert series, and 40 years after re-dedicating the Matthias Schwab Organ.

In recent years it has become apparent that the Schwab Organ is in need of major restoration and refurbishment. In the coming year a fundraising campaign will begin to secure funding for complete restoration of the Schwab Organ. Funding will be sought not only for the restoration work, but also for educational outreach, artist stipends, and the assurance of maintenance well into the future.

Many skilled hands and generous hearts built, played and cared for this instrument. It will likewise require many skilled hands and generous hearts to insure the preservation of a priceless legacy.

It is with no doubt that the preservation of this instrument will pay dividends far beyond those of any monetary basis. The legacy left to us by Matthias Schwab, and preserved for us by Robert Schaffer, will serve for generations as an instrument of praise, an instrument of teaching, and a profound example of skilled craftsmanship to flourish in the Ohio Valley region over 150 years ago.