

# Mercygrove's Hidden Treasure

by Lynne Belluscio

Last Tuesday four hundred people from the world wide Organ Historical Society made their way to LeRoy to have lunch at the LeRoyan at Mercygrove. Maybe you saw the signs "OHS next left - slow." There were 8 busses coming into town, and the entrance isn't marked, but thanks to the LeRoy police department, they all found their way. Most of the visitors did not know about the Aeolian Opus #1559 organ at Mercygrove, so they had a pleasant surprise when it was turned on and folks took turns playing. And these were not ordinary organists. I listened as Nathan Laube, who is a faculty member of the Eastman School of Music, and a co-chair of the conference, played the "William Tell Overture." A young musician from Poland, New York took a turn, as well as several others. Michael Barone, from the PBS "Pipe Dreams" talked about the treasure that they discovered in LeRoy.

If you've ever been to Mercygrove, you probably weren't aware that there is a huge pipe organ hidden from view because all the pipes - and there are hundreds of them - are in the basement and a closet on the third floor, and they are connected to the console. The sound is channeled through sound chambers that run through the walls.

None of this would have been possible last year. Jim Gombrone, who owns Mercygrove, decided last summer that he would have Matt Parsons from the Parsons Pipe Organ Factory in Bristol come take a look at the organ to see if it could be fixed so it could be played. After a couple of days, Matt had the instrument playing, but it still needs a lot more work. Never the less, last Tuesday it was the center of attention.

In 1887, the Aeolian Company began building organs. These were not church or theater organs, but residence or "chamber" organs to provide entertainment in the homes of



Sister Immaculate, Administrator at Mercygrove and "Barney" at the pipe organ that was once used to send music throughout the mansion and grounds.

the rich and famous. Like the organ at Mercygrove, the pipes were often hidden in walls and in the basement. Aeolian organs are usually equipped with mechanisms that are like player pianos, with punched paper rolls. There are at least 64 rolls at Mercygrove, however the mechanism does not work, and the paper rolls are too fragile to be used.

The Mercygrove organ was purchased for \$27,800 in 1926 (\$370,000 today) by Donald Woodward, the youngest son of Orator Woodward. (Jim Gombrone has the original contract.) Don was certainly rich and famous. He was building a huge house on the crest of the hill on the south side of the road, although he never lived there. He and his wife Florence were divorced and she and their three children lived in the house. He built another house across the street, where he and his third wife, Adelaide, lived. Interestingly, he had an Aeolian organ installed in that house too. Florence Woodward had several concerts at her house to raise money for a variety of projects. In 1937, Florence opened her home to over 600 Presbyterian women. "As they enjoyed the gardens and grounds, Marga-

ret Gillette played the organ, which was heard throughout the grounds "by a system of amplifiers."

After Florence moved out of the house, the Woodward house became known as the Edith Hartwell Clinic, named for her sister-in-law. The clinic treated children with neuromuscular disorders. There is no evidence that the organ was used during this time. Soon after, the house became a retreat house for the Sisters of Mercy and it is then that it became known as Mercygrove. The organ was used during that time and again when the house became the property of the Mercedarians. Luckily their attempt to sell the organ never came to fruition and when Jim bought the house, he bought the organ too.

The largest Aeolian organ is at Longwood Gardens, built for Pierre dePont in 1930. It has 10,010 pipes which are divided into 146 ranks. It is in working condition and is often played in fund-raising concerts. Another Aeolian that I have heard is the 1000 pipe organ at Hilldene which was built in the entrance hall of Robert Todd Lincoln's home in 1908. Lincoln was the son of Abraham Lincoln and the president of the Pullman Com-

pany that manufactured passenger cars for the railroad. Hilldene has over 250 player rolls for their Aeolian.

In nearby Rochester, Frank Eastman had two pipe organs in his home. He employed an organist who played for him everyday. In the 1970s, one of the organs was removed but it was replaced in 2012, when Dr. Richard Zipf donated his Opus 1345 organ. If you visit Eastman House, make sure to see the video about the repair and installation of the "new" organ." Today the two organs have been tuned to recreate the surround-sound that George Eastman had originally intended. The dual console now totals 106 ranks and more than 6000 pipes.

Restoring and maintaining a huge musical instrument like Mercygrove's Opus #1559 is intimidating and expensive, but Jim hopes to gradually share the music of this hidden treasure.