

# First Presbyterian Church

## Our Organ

In 1923, a generous gift by the Higginson family made it possible for First Presbyterian Church to acquire an organ from the Pilcher Organ Company of Louisville, Ky. The organ had about 20 stops and three main divisions: great, swell, and pedal which were placed in the organ chamber which is still in use, plus a small antiphonal division, which was placed in the balcony.

The large group of pipes in the organ chamber was screened by a set of gold—lacquered pipes, most of which were non—speaking, simply providing a decorative facade for the instrument.

The new organ was dedicated in December, 1923. It was typical of American church organs built in this country between 1900 and 1935, an era that has been described as the low point in organ building. Former organists described the sound as "loud, but muddy."

During the 1960s and 1970s, two modest projects were undertaken to improve the organ's sound. In 1961 three ranks of pipes were replaced, and the whole instrument was cleaned. A new three-manual console replaced the original console, which was falling apart. The console was purchased from the Reuter Organ Company, and the new pipes were installed by Robert Geisler.

In 1973 three new ranks of pipes, a mixture and a Zimbelstern were added by Mr. Geisler. The number of stops now totaled 23, but some tonal deficiencies remained.

The year 1986 marked the 63rd year the instrument had faithfully served us. In addition to the variety of voices, it was becoming apparent that the mechanical work, including the wind chests, was in a need of major repair.

In the spring of 1987 the Session's Worship Committee appointed an organ committee to develop suitable proposals for adding to and rebuilding the instrument. Committee members were Ed Walker, moderator, Gordon McQuere, Jim Lilly, Jim Richards, Jan Bodine, and Becky Ward (ex—officio).

The committee consulted with Mac Range, of Range Organ Company, Mesquite, Texas, who had been hired in 1986 to maintain the organ. An initial proposal to rebuild the instrument was received from Mr. Range in 1987. Several other organ builders expressed no interest in bidding on the project.

The Range proposal was divided into four possible choices and presented to Session on March 16, 1988. Because plans were being formulated for capital improvements needed to carry the church into the 21st century, the Session deferred any decision on the organ until those plans were completed.

Meanwhile, Waco experienced a historic cold spell in late December 1989. The extended period of below freezing temperatures resulted in such severe damage to the wind chests that the organ became largely unplayable. On Christmas Eve 1989, one day shy of the 66th anniversary of the dedication of the Higginson

Organ, the congregation observed the annual Christmas Eve service using a piano instead of the organ.

In early 1990, the Session committed the church to the proposal of rebuilding the organ and adding new voices. This proposal included the removal of the existing facade pipes and the building of a new facade which would house a full complement of speaking pipes. Because the major fundraising effort for the Capital Improvements Program was a year away, a special contract was proposed by Mr. Range. Under this plan Range would rebuild a part of the organ in such a way that the balance of the original proposal could be completed. This limited initial project was financed with funds available in the Organ Fund, the Golden Memory Memorial Fund and the church's Plant Replacement Fund.

The initial project was completed in December, 1990.

After the First Into the 21st Fund Campaign in the fall of 1990, the Session authorized a contract in mid—1991 for the balance of the proposal. The work was completed in May, 1992, and the rebuilt organ was dedicated in morning worship on Sunday, Sept. 20, 1992.

Former organists of the church, Valinda Ashworth and Frank Carney, joined Becky Ward, present organist, in playing during the worship service. On the afternoon of the same day, Mark Scott of St. Stephen Presbyterian Church in Forth Worth played a special dedicatory recital.

In early 1999, a newly rebuilt console was purchased from and installed by Range Organ Company using funds provided by the Organ Fund and the Golden Memory Memorial Fund.

Installation required expansion of the Chancel area, which was accomplished by Barrett Building Company and the C. M. Trautschold Company, both of Waco, using wood left from earlier renovations to the chancel. Later in that same year, gifts were made by two families in the church to purchase an enhanced, variable speed Zimbelstern and a set of replacement chimes.

In the fall of 2009, a capital campaign to restore the stained glass windows in the sanctuary and make other necessary repairs was undertaken. Session approved the campaign to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the sanctuary in April 2012. The campaign also included funds to complete the organ program started in the 1990s with finishing out the balcony portion to provide even more tonal range in the instrument, especially with the softer sounds.

-- December 2009