

## History

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# A Brooklyn organ comes to Tech

### Part Seven

The Windham Regional Vocational-Technical School formed a partnership with the Connecticut Valley Theatre Organ Society in 1969. The latter organization had recently acquired a Wurlitzer organ from the RKO Madison Theatre in Brooklyn, N.Y. The organ, which imitates a 26-piece orchestra, had been installed in the Brooklyn theater in 1927 to provide solos and the musical accompaniment for silent movies. The Society donated the organ to Windham Tech providing that the school go down to New York, take the organ to pieces and arrange for it to be shipped back to Willimantic. In April and May, 1970, WRVTS director Alfred Dorosz and organ specialist Mike Foley supervised 30 students and five weekend trips were made to Brooklyn to strip the organ down.

The Eli Parizeau Theater Organ was painstakingly reassembled and renovated at WRVTS. A dedication concert took place in June 1971, but work on the complex organ continued throughout the



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1970s. On March 19, 1983, two top class organ concert players, Frank Cimino from New Jersey and Ralph Ringstad from Ithaca College, held a concert in the school's auditorium. Cimino and Ringstad performed a variety of music from different eras to demonstrate the organ's versatility, and to raise funds for future renovation. The Victorian Lady restaurant announced that anyone buying tickets for the concert would receive a 20 percent discount on a meal. In 1983, the organ, which has 1,350 pipes, was conservatively valued at \$100,000. The Parizeau organ is located in the school gymnasium, and is one of only two Wurlitzers of its kind in the United States.

The students at WRVTS also became actively involved in the lead-up to the nation's Bicen-

ennial celebrations in 1976. On June 23, 1974, in conjunction with the Windham Bicentennial Commission, the students and faculty members celebrated Windham's famous contribution to Boston's dispute with the British, and reenacted the driving of a flock of sheep to Boston to help their citizens who were suffering because of the closure of their port facilities by the British. A town meeting was held in the Windham Congregational Church, and the 1774 resolutions were repeated — but the students and faculty didn't drive the sheep 90 miles. They boarded buses and were driven to Boston to meet with the Boston 200 Committee, where they met the sheep. Nevertheless, the WRVTS sheep drive to beleaguered Boston received much coverage in the nation's media.

WRVTS director Felix Grzych had begun plans for the expansion of the school in 1977. They eventually came to fruition in the late 1980s. A \$13.1 million expansion program added 200,000 square feet of floor space to the school, almost doubling its size.



Organists Frank Cimino, right, from New Jersey and Ralph Ringstad from Ithaca College stand in front of Windham Tech's refurbished Wurlitzer organ before their March 1983 concert.

Ground for the expansion was broken in January, 1988, and on Oct. 18, 1990, almost 500 people attended the dedication ceremony. WRVTS students now had access to a new culinary arts kitchens, electronic testing labs, science rooms, a heating, ventilation and air conditioning section, and a second gym. Also added were a girls locker room, cafeteria and

a faculty lounge. The Willimantic Trade School has come a long way since its humble origins in an abandoned silk mill, 70 years ago.

Thanks to WRVTS director Charles Wilt, assistant director Bill Zenko and the staff for their assistance in the compilation of this brief history of Windham Tech, and for opening the WRVTS archives.