



Wendell Shoberg

GETTING

CLOSE AND PERSONAL

WITH John D. Spreckels

Edward S. Barr, Archivist-Historian

Part I

November 1971: "If it was anyone other than John D. Spreckels, I would not lift a finger for such a project!" These sobering words from my mother, Dennie Barr O'Bryan. "What you are attempting is beyond reason for two struggling working-class fathers supporting their wives and four young children. Can't this wait?"

October 12, 1971: The big, exciting night had arrived. *HEAVY ORGAN*, featuring organ master Virgil Fox and his touring "Visual Musicians," *Pablo Lights* from New York City, were ready to give this city the show of a lifetime from the stage of San Diego's big downtown theater, the Fox. The all-Bach concert was taking place on a Tuesday night. My partner, Wendell Shoberg, and I prayed for good weather. We got it! The show was a success. We did *not* lose money! Indeed, we set a box-office record for a single event. The financial risks were huge but we came out whole, against dire predictions and warnings from everyone we knew. Renting the Fox was *not* cheap. Hiring Virgil Fox and crew from New York was expensive. I was 38, Wendell 29. Both of our wives thought that we had taken leave of our senses.

In that month our partnership was born - *Organ Power Productions* - whose purpose it was to restore pipe organs, relocate them in places where people could "get" their musical message of inspiration and uplift. These concepts later evolved into the well-known eatery, *Organ Power Pizza*, with three locations, 100 employees, four pipe organs and a combined dinner seating for 1000.

But - I am now digressing from the Barr-Spreckels connection...

1970: My friend and colleague, Wendell Shoberg, builds and services pipe organs in San Diego. He called to my attention an evaluation report regarding the John D. Spreckels residential pipe organ still located in the basement of his Coronado mansion - called, in 1970, the Glorietta Bay Motor Hotel.

The report claimed that the organ was so large that there was no way to remove it without destroying the mansion. The report concluded that the organ would ultimately be broken up in place and sold off in pieces or hauled to the dump.

Wendell and I decided that we must see this for ourselves.

We frequently attended Civic Organist Douglas Duncan's Summer evening concerts performed on the large Spreckels Organ Pavilion's 1915 Austin pipe organ. For us the idea was appealing, to see, to play, and maybe even to *buy* the organ that so inspired John D. Spreckels that in 1912 he built it into his 1908 mansion. Barney Padway, former mayor of Coronado and current owner of the Spreckels mansion, had a need for the basement space then occupied by the pipes and mechanisms of the organ. The instrument, built by the Aeolian Company of Boston, was comprised of over 2,000 pipes, with a three-manual console and a weight of nearly 20,000 pounds. Built into its mechanism was an automatic reproducing capability, similar to a player piano, with a library of over 150 rolls. John Spreckels, who was *not* an accomplished performer, would select the desired rolls from his library and entertain his after-dinner guests with the music of the Masters. Many of his favorites were from the world of Opera.

Wendell and I began to dream: Wouldn't it be wonderful to place this instrument in a building near the Balboa Park Organ Pavilion so that *both* of the instruments which had inspired John D. Spreckels would serve "all the peoples of the world," as he had

said in his dedication, cast in bronze in the plaque on the stage of the pavilion.

On November 8, 1971, for a total sum of \$400, *Organ Power Productions* purchased the Spreckels mansion organ from Mr Padway with one major condition. Every component of the instrument was to be off his property on or before January 1, 1972. He would take anything remaining to the dump. We had less than 60 days to complete the removal; this, in the dead of Winter!

What, in theory, seemed to be a wonderful and logical little project soon turned into two fully grown gorillas firmly attached to our shoulders. Wendell studied the organ in minute detail. He soon conceived a way to code and label every part of this large machine.

As a senior stock broker for Roberts-Scott & Co. in downtown San Diego, I had difficulty explaining to my family *why* I was no longer reporting to my 24th-floor suite, but, rather, was in Coronado on my hands and knees packing and crating thousands of organ parts, day after day. I was becoming desperate. I had twisted the arm of every friend I knew into helping us in our crusade. Occasionally a morning or afternoon would be donated to the cause by a neighbor or yachting friend. The size of this project required an *army*! With my back against the wall I went to my "Court of Last Resort.": I made an appointment to see my mother. To my amazement, she continued the comment with which I began this article: "You know, I was, on several occasions, the dinner guest of John D. Spreckels in that mansion and I have heard that organ. It was Heaven; I shall never forget the setting! My mother, Jeannette Denison Cary, lived with her family in Coronado in the 1920's and became friends with the F.J. Belcher family. He was President of John Spreckels' First Trust and Savings Bank. John Spreckels' granddaughter, Harriett Holbrook, and I became good friends. In fact, we were married in San Diego on the same day, September 20, 1930 - she to Frank G. Belcher and I to your father, Lawrence A. Barr. My mother would be invited to the Spreckels' for dinner. I would go along with her so that I could visit my friend, Harriett. We had to behave when in 'Uncle' John's house. There was not too much 'fooling around'! From age 12 to 15 I have fond memories of the Spreckels way of life. And that organ - it was impressive! I'll see if I can help save the instrument. I can sense that you are losing ground. Maybe I can rally some of my troops."

Out of the woodwork and my Mother's socialite "black book" came some of the most amazing and unlikely organ workers one could imagine - all dedicated to seeing the project succeed. First to arrive on the scene was Bea Evenson, founder of the Committee of 100, and her husband, Frank. Then her daughter and son-in-law, Anne and Jerry Ryan, joined the effort, along with Lucia and Gould Eddy (prominent in the San Diego Yacht Club), their son, Richard Eddy, and neighbor, Leslie Fox (years later a frequent S.O.S. concert sponsor). The expanded organ crew spent days cleaning and packing pipes in custom made long boxes - some pipes extended 16 feet. It was a labor of love for these art devotees.

At times our project assumed an almost party-like atmosphere. There was a magical, enthusiastic chemistry uniting our "army" of the Dirty Dozen. Ultimately, John's monster music machine was carefully loaded, section by section, into a PHD rental truck for its return to Mainland San Diego - this time by way of the Bay Bridge, in contrast to its arrival in 1912 aboard the Coronado Ferry, also owned by John D. Spreckels. For our many truck crossings, the only vehicle that was available was a refrigerated meat truck containing the familiar curved steel overhead track with rollers holding long, dangling, polished meat hooks normally used to hang huge slabs of beef at temperatures in the 30's. Oh, if only John D. could see his organ now! I'm sure he would have a hearty laugh, seeing it trundling along Orange Avenue in a refrigerated meat truck! But - by golly - it was *not* going to the dump! Wendell and I saw a new life rising over the horizon for this musical treasure.

I had arranged with my Stanford classmate, George Gildred, to store the organ temporarily under the very stage on which Virgil Fox had performed his "Show of a Lifetime" two months before. The Fox Theater stage dressing rooms had been unused for years.

-- to be continued --

THE VOICE OF SAN DIEGO CONTINUES.



GETTING

CLOSE up AND PERSONAL

WITH John D. Spreckels

Part II

Wendell Shoberg

Edward S. Barr, Archivist-Historian

THE BARR, SHOBERG, ZIPF INTRIGUE WITH JESSICA!

Introduction & Review:

Part One: 1997 Summer "StopTab" recalls the events leading to the discovery, inspection, purchase and removal of John Spreckels' Aeolian Pipe Organ (40 ranks) from his Coronado mansion in 1971. The story continues as this 20,000 pound instrument arrives at San Diego's downtown Fox Theatre.

With understanding support from Stanford classmate George Gildred, the Spreckels residence organ, in pieces, was gradually loaded onto the back stage elevator, lowered to a sub-basement level, and carefully packed into a series of old, unused actor dressing rooms in the cavernous Fox Theatre. With a sigh of relief we then turned all our energies toward a detailed proposal asking that the Museum of Man accept the organ as a gift from us, on the condition that it be played at least once each day that the museum was open to the public. With over 150 player rolls to choose from - there would be no pressing need to engage a featured artist. The organ would play itself.

Scarcely had our written proposal been completed than we received a call from George Gildred who said that his dad (Phillip) was making a routine tour of the theatre and discovered those rooms full of pipes. His father demanded an explanation, after which he declared "tell young Barr to get all that stuff out of my theatre...it does not belong here!" He was sorry but said we would have to remove it immediately. His father was "so exercised he just flew around that theatre like a big old bat!"

Wendell and I were thunderstruck. What to do? Since we had no purpose toward monetary gain and only wanted the public to share in the inspiration this instrument brought to John Spreckels, I concluded that a mass public appeal would be our only viable next step. I called Harold Keen, a well known news reporter for TV Channel 8, explained our dilemma and declared "if the people of San Diego lack interest in the instrument that inspired John Spreckels to build modern San Diego, then I will give the entire damn machine to the pigeons at the Horton Plaza Fountain downtown on Broadway!" Harold sensed the desperate energy in my voice and said "I'll meet you with my camera crew inside the theatre one hour from now!" My passionate plea received top billing on the late afternoon news. My phone rang at 5:45 PM. A calm, deep voice said "Mr. Barr, this is Kenneth Golden of Golden Construction Company. I saw you on this evening's news and thought that you were going to have a heart attack. Possibly some free space in my warehouse next to the Carpenter's Union Building at the foot of Washington Street would be a better choice than those downtown pigeons." These were words from a "god" I thought "we are saved!" But now we must gather together another moving crew and truck. With renewed vitality, Wendell and I were successful in moving the entire pipe organ to its new location about 3 miles from the Fox Theatre.

During a late afternoon "Happy Hour" together, Wendell mused and waxed philosophical "you know-that organ now needs a name after all that we have endured. During the Spreckels years she would have been "Angelica" providing soul music inside that Coronado mansion. But, on the other hand, when John Spreckels was traveling on his yacht, I bet the household staff gave that organ a real street music work-out with their parties in that music room.

She then would have been a real "jezebel!" Combining these opposites, we should name his custom organ "Jessica." I responded "absolutely perfect."

From now on we are saving "Jessica." KNX 1070 L.A. news radio sent to my San Diego office an interviewer when they learned that an all day Rock and Roll Concert in the Ford (Starlight) Bowl was being planned. The unique rallying cry went out to "Save Jessica!" "Rock and Roll will save Jessica!" Our arts project seemed to be gradually losing control and focus. The Starlight Bowl seats over 4,000 people. "Green Power" trucks, on concert day, were to arrive from Los Angeles to provide free meals (out of date food from grocery stores) for the pot smoking, spaced out revelers. Huge super-graphic pictures of Jessica were framed and erected on stage. Soon the large wild audience was going crazy for Jessica - not that many had ever seen a real pipe organ before. But hey, 1972 was a year of great social upheavals and strange alliances. An old pipe organ and a series of Rock & Roll performing groups such as Hocus-Pocus, Dry Creek Road, Sequoia, Horsefeathers, and Greenstone, before 4,000 wild screaming crazies seemed to strangely fit the impossible mission before us. However, all the money raised was ultimately squandered by the concert management. The event ended as a financially failed experiment - but, Jessica was gaining fame as an icon in exotica! A second rock concert for Jessica was held in Pacific Beach at the "New Earth", a converted 14,000 square foot bowling alley at 1165 Garnet Street in Pacific Beach. Three years later it became Organ Power Pizza location #2, featuring the famous 5-manual Moller Theatre Pipe Organ with 300 stops, built for Reginald Foote in England! This event, like the Starlight Bowl Concert, created a merry, wild, spaced-out party, and no financial help for Jessica's purpose.

While the Museum of Man's board of directors continued to nit-pick our proposal, Jack White, reporter for San Diego TV 10, conducted an interview standing among those thousands of pipes leaning against the walls of Kenneth Golden's warehouse. I was becoming weary from rejections; from the Ballet Auditorium, Copley Auditorium, and the University of San Diego's Church of the Immaculata. I knew that the kindness of Mr. Golden could not continue forever.

The official rejection by the Museum of Man was then received and later a letter from Golden requesting that the pipe organ be removed (for the 3rd time in 6 months). I asked Wendell if he would please buy my interest in Jessica. I wanted out! Wendell was a professional organ builder, and was better positioned to own Jessica. He agreed. I did assist Wendell in moving the instrument to several garages owned by his father. There she rested for ten years until the early 80's when Richard Zipf, an ophthalmologist from Carmichael, CA (near Sacramento) purchased the organ. He started the long, slow process of restoring the instrument to like-new condition and gradually built the organ into his home. A recent letter from Dr. Zipf indicates that his project is over 90% complete. In 1997, Jessica plays again!

An epilogue for this two part series is suggested. With Jessica in the sole possession of Wendell Shoberg, our business evolution into the beginning of Organ Power Pizza took place August 15, 1972, when Sandy Fleet, myself, and Wendell, together flew to Redwood City (near San Francisco) to view the Captain's Galley Organ Pizza Emporium. On that evening the birth of our Organ Power Pizza concept took root and the first of 3 pizzerias opened its doors at 5375 Kearny Villa Road in 1974. That is a story for another time.

Let it be concluded that Jessica did not end up with the pigeons, nor dumped into a junk yard. As stewards and caretakers of her future, Wendell and I sadly failed to find a fitting San Diego home for John Spreckels' musical inspiration. The torch of caregiver had passed to Dr. Zipf.

We congratulate him for his progress and admire his steadfast commitment to Jessica's continued life into the 21st Century. Meanwhile, the voice of San Diego - the Spreckels Organ and Pavilion - CONTINUES.....