

About the Organ

Zion Lutheran Church – Lansing, MI
by Richard Swanson

The pipe organ at Zion was originally built for St. Matthew's Lutheran Church (ELS) in Detroit, Michigan in 1915. This organ was opus #167 of the Wangerin-Weickhardt Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Wangerin Company started out in 1895 as a woodworking firm specializing in church furniture. In 1903, George J. Weickhardt convinced the Wangerin management to allow him to build pipe organs in their factory at night, after the regular work force had gone home. This arrangement was so lucrative that the two operations became one shortly thereafter.

George Weickhardt was born in Bavaria and learned the art of organbuilding there before immigrating to America in 1893. Upon his arrival in the U.S., he worked for the Phillip Wirsching firm in Salem, Ohio. Several years later, he moved to Milwaukee to work for the Wm. Schuelke Organ Company. That employment didn't last long because George's inventive organbuilding style clashed with the Old World style of Schuelke. It was upon leaving the Schuelke firm that he entered into the arrangement with Wangerin.

Opus #167 served St. Matthew's well until September of 2007 when the church closed. Before the building was sold, Richard Swanson, Dave Kriewall and a group of volunteers from Crown of Life Lutheran Church of Warren, MI and Cross of Glory Lutheran Church of Washington, MI removed the organ and placed it in storage. There it remained until February of 2009 when R.T. Swanson, Inc. of Grand Ledge, Michigan proposed rebuilding the organ and installing it at Zion.

The organ was increased in size from 11 ranks to 16 with the addition of upperwork (higher pitched stops) and a 16' reed stop. These new stops were not in fashion in 1915 but are essential for today's organists. The organ's original exterior casework would not fit in Zion's balcony, so new casework was built by Swanson and stained to match the existing pews. The original speaking facade pipes were modified to fit the new casework and were relacquered. The original windchests were refitted with a new electro-mechanical action which is controlled by a new solid state control system. The new walnut and birch console was built by Swanson and features a 12 memory solid state combination action as well as MIDI record/playback which allows the organ to self-play in the manner of a player piano.

The Deagan Class "A" chimes, which were rescued from another inner city Detroit church, were reconditioned and refitted with a new action.

Richard Swanson voiced or revoiced all of the flue pipes. The new 16' reed was built by Trivo Company, Inc. of Hagerstown, MD as well as the revoicing of the 8' Hautbois. New flue pipes were built by Eastern Organ Pipes, Inc. of Hagerstown, MD. The solid state systems were provided by Syndyne Corporation of Vancouver, WA. Numerous other new parts were provided by Organ Supply Industries of Erie, PA and Klann Organ Supply of Waynesboro, VA.

R.T. Swanson, Inc. employees, Don Black and Steve Black assisted Mr. Swanson. Dave Wigton of Wigton Pipe Organs assisted in the tonal finishing process. Heavy lifting was provided by Zion's volunteers. This organ has been donated to Zion by Mrs. Leona Hall & John and Daune Martis in memory of Franklin Hall.