# The Restoration of the 1882 Louis Mitchell organ

## Tignish, P-E-I, Canada

Prince Edward Island (PEI) holds a very special place in the hearts of Canadians. The warmth of the people, the colorful local expressions, the salty air, the unforgettable coastal vistas, and the undeniable quality of local seafood and potatoes are all aspects that make a stay on the island a memorable experience. And for organists and organ enthusiasts, such a visit isn't complete without a stop at Tignish to experience the vibrancy found under the vaulted ceiling at St-Simon and St-Jude Church, one of the pillars of our cultural heritage.

There is a lot of talk lately about the preservation of cultural and religious heritage. Inevitably, several questions come to mind: To restore? To renovate? To preserve and copy? Most often, the parish will appoint a group of volunteers to form a committee and take charge of this infinitely difficult process. Whether it relates to work on the bell tower, interior decoration, or the organ, one thing is clear: the financing and completion of the task will require an extraordinary involvement on the part of parishioners, and perhaps the community at large. In the case of the restoration of the Tignish organ, we have to applaud the support and efforts of the parishioners, as well as the commitment of devoted musicians, who have always put the instrument to good service. Village organist and historian Henri Gaudet (1932-2001) put together a pamphlet documenting the organ. For many years, summer organ concerts organized by Dr. Allan Reesor have charmed locals and tourists alike. More recently, current organist Antoinette Perry, Father Jim Willick, and the restoration committee inherited the task of giving the project direction and seeing it to completion. By 2007, the organ was on its last legs; a decision had to be made. But this is where the situation becomes even more complicated! What are the priorities? To retain the façade and pipework and reconstruct a new instrument? Or rather, to conduct a strict museum conservation? It goes without saying that in the world of historic organs nothing is so simple, and that the answer lies somewhere between the two. In the end, the committee decided in favor of a restoration that would respect the original form of the organ, without forgetting the 130 years that had passed since its installation.

*Brief History*

Built in 1882, the Tignish organ was the 129th organ to leave the workshop of Montréal organ builder Louis Mitchell. It is comprised of 19 voices over 2 manuals (56 notes) and pedal (30 notes.) During disassembly of the organ, we noted that the name of the parish priest of the time was written in 3 places on the organ structure, and also inside the swellbox. Furthermore, the signing of the contract

was announced in the periodical *The Boucher and Pratte Musical Journal*, Volume 3 no. XI, December 1881:

«Mr. Louis Mitchell, of Montreal, has recently signed the contract for an organ of 26 stops, two keyboards with complete pedalboard for the parish of Tignish, Prince Edward Island. The cost of the superb instrument, the highest in that province, is but $3000. It is to be delivered in June. »

These facts disprove, once and for all, the legend that the organ was built for a parish in Charlottetown, PEI. However, the reality of the situation is that the organ cost $2400 and has 19 speaking stops. Despite the lesser number of stops, the sound of the ensemble is full, doubtless due to the luminous acoustic of the high, Gothic Revival nave. The organ served for 70 years without any significant changes. Around 1959, an electric blower was installed. At the same time, the repairmen replaced the large reservoir and manual feeders with a curtain valve and a smaller reservoir. The swell hook-down was replaced with a balanced swell pedal. Again in 1970, it was decided to carry out modifications. The *Horn Diapason 8'* was shifted to create a *Doublette 2'*. The *2 Ranks Mixtures* (sic) was shifted and a rank of pipes added, to transform it into a *Sesquialtera*. The *3 Ranks Cymbals* (sic) was shifted, and its breaks reformulated. A Swell reservoir was added, and the tremolo was replaced. Offset tubing was repaired and the façade was painted. It is most likely during the 1970 renovation that the organ was tuned to 440Hz. Later, in the 1990's, nearly the entire pedal action was replaced, probably due to wear. Thus, the wooden pedal rollers were replaced with aluminum ones, and the vertical wooden trackers were replaced with aluminum wire.

*An Authentic Restoration*

All throughout the project, the committee based its interventions on 3 guiding principles. The first was to respect all original materials. This means that after analysis, every pipe and organ piece found was to be put back into its original place, and this was followed almost without exception. The second principle was that every action taken upon original material be reversible, as much as possible. This is to say that future restorations will not be compromised by the use of materials and glues that are not compatible with the ones originally used in the organ. The third principle was that missing elements should be copied from historic models of the same school of construction. The main challenge here is to find the model! Even though Louis Mitchell installed many instruments in Quebec, few of the organs remain in their original condition. As luck would have it, not far from Montreal, the 1881 Mitchell at Saint-Norbert-d'Autray (II-16) sits quietly in disuse, and in nearly original condition. It shares many family traits with its younger brother at Tignish, and served as a model to recreate the large

double-rise reservoir, the hand operated feeders and pumping system, and the tremolo.

The windchests were completely opened: the channels made airtight, the tables repaired and repapered, the sliders and toeboard bearers made mechanically sound. All action parts were inspected, cleaned and repaired. A new pedal action was built as it would have been originally. The 3 combination pedals on the Great were adjusted and reset in the traditional manner of *p – mf – ff*. Salvaged antique ivories were used to replace worn, original key covers on the manuals, and new cherry and walnut replaced the ones on the pedalboard. The walnut console area was completely refinished.

We paid particular attention to the restoration of pipework. It is interesting to mention that several ranks of pipes were inscribed by pipemakers Léon Houle and W.H. Smith, Montréal 1881-82. Metal pipework was cleaned and straightened. To our surprise, a large amount of pipework that had been removed from the organ 40 years ago was found by the organ restoration committee. They found not only 8 pipes from the bottom octave of the *Horn Diapason 8'*, but all of the missing pipes from the plein-jeu...save 4! While some of the pipes were deformed or completely flattened, some remained practically intact. It is the intact pipework that contained invaluable information about the original strength and voicing of the plein-jeu and the original pitch of the organ. To put this in context, starting in 1859, the regular pitch in Great Britain and her Dominions was 452Hz at 70F. Pianos, melodeons, reed organs, pipe organs and band instruments built in Canada are, for the most part, tuned to, or near to that pitch, which is approximately a quarter tone higher than 440Hz. Our analysis of the pipework produced an average pitch of 450.5Hz at 70F (449.7Hz at 20C) at a pressure of 3 inches (76mm).

The committee realized that the impact on tone quality of bringing the organ back to its original pitch was of no small importance, and so it was carried out. New pipework was made of the same alloy as the original pipework, using the same techniques. The story of the Great *Trumpet 8'*, however, remains a mystery. Although the original racking material was present, the pipework itself was composed of mismatched twentieth-century elements, and was removed from the organ. The new stop was based on the trumpet in the 1872 Mitchell organ (II-21) at St-Fabien-de-Panet, QC. For budgetary reasons, the façade pipes were not gilded in leaf, but painted. In the end, the organ required only a conscientious matching-in to assure the cohesion of the ensemble.

Exploring the different sonorities of the organ, the curious musician will be seduced by the diversity of the timbres: the clarity of the flutes, the warmth of the principals, the tender, yet striking quality of the string tones; the contrast

between the delicate oboe-bassoon and the vibrancy of the trumpet. Clearly, this was the work of a voicer who understood fully his art. Given that the most thorough article cannot replace the cultural and musical experience of visiting PEI, we invite you to go to Tignish on your next vacation!

Robin Côté, Juget-Sinclair Organbuilders

Translation: Dean Eckmann, Juget-Sinclair Organbuilders

*Great C1-g56*

8' Open Diapason
8' Floete Traverso (wood)
8' Stopt' Diapason (wood)
8' Dulciana

4 'Principal
4' Harmonic Flute
2' Fifteenth
2 Ranks Mixtures (sic) (without 1 3/5')
3 Ranks Cymbals (sic) (without 1 3/5')
8' Trumpet (partially new)

*Pedals* C1-f30
16' Double Open Diapason
8' Cello

*Swell C1-g56*

8' Horn Diapason
8' Clarabella (wood)
8' Viol di Gamba (bell gamba)
8' Unisson Bass (wood 1-12 for Clarabella & V di G)
4' Violina
4' Waldfloete
8' Oboe & Bassoon
Tremolo

Swell to Great
Pedal to Great
Pedal to Swell
Octave Coupler 16'(II/I 16')
Pedal Check

Combination pedals (*Great* only)
I
8' Stopt' Diapason, 8' Dulciana

II
8' & 4' foudations

III
Full organ