

Passion for pipes

Family organ business going strong after 4 decades

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COVINGTON — It's a profession that requires artistry, skill, passion and dedication, and only about six people in Rockdale and Newton counties share that experience.

Covington resident Arthur Schlueter III and five other workers from those counties owe their livelihood to a wide-eyed boy's fascination that began more than six decades ago.

When Art Schlueter Jr. was 5 years old, he visited an organ shop in his hometown of Lakeland, Fla. The boy was so taken by the sight that he asked for a job.

That led to his childhood preoccupation with the instrument that led to a high school job at the shop, and ultimately, a thriving business today building, rebuilding, maintaining and tuning pipe organs that has become a rewarding career for both Arthur Jr. and his son, Arthur III.

Arthur Jr. is founder and president and Arthur III is artistic and tonal director of the A.E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Company in Lithonia. The firm consists of 25 employees from Newton and Rockdale counties and outlying areas.

The five employees at the factory, besides Arthur III, who are from Newton and Rockdale are Robert Black, Marc Conley, Barbara Sedlacek, Al Schroer and Dallas Wood.

The company has built, installed, tuned or maintained organs throughout metro Atlanta and as far away as the Philippines. It currently is building or-



Arthur E. Schlueter Jr., left, and his son Arthur E. Schlueter III, of Covington, operate the family business of building, re-building, refurbishing and maintaining pipe organs throughout the U.S. (Staff Photo: Wade Marbaugh)

gans for churches in St. Louis; Galveston, Texas; and Silver Springs, Md.

Building a pipe organ requires 13 dif-

ferent occupations, such as metallurgy, carpentry, cabinet making, electronics and aerodynamics. It requires a fondness

for lifelong education.

“The skills to build an instrument are largely self-taught,” said Arthur III, who started helping in the business at age 5 and held a high school job at his father’s factory.

“Organ building is a constant ongoing education. You learn from every organ you build, rebuild and service.”

Most people enter a church, see the pipe organ and don’t realize the nuances behind the intensive planning, artistry, craftsmanship, skilled labor and heavy labor involved in placing it there.

Some churches raise funds for years to purchase a pipe organ — Arthur III cited one 23-year project.

He referred to the Episcopal Church of the Advent in Madison as an example of the artistic, architecture-like skills necessary to satisfy a need.

When General William T. Sherman’s army slashed and burned through Georgia during the Civic War, he was persuaded by state Sen. Joshus Hill not to destroy the Madison church. The church, built in the 1840s, was refurbished in the 1960s to look like Brewton Parish in Williamsburg, Va., which is a much older style than that of the 1840s.

“We adapted to a design style that bridged both periods,” Arthur III said.

Pipe organ building involves high technology. Included in an 18,000 square-foot factory on South Stone Mountain-Lithonia Road is a CNC machine — a computer numeric controlled router.

“It allows us to design parts on the computer and then produce them to a tolerance of three-thousandths of an inch,” Arthur III said.

Encasements are constructed in the factory’s wood shop. In the voicing room, pipes are fine-tuned to fit the church space. A 1,000-seat sanctuary requires different tuning and volume than a 250-seat chapel.

Installation involves a crew of six or more, with much heavy lifting, and crewmembers may be at the church for months, almost like becoming members.

The firm recently installed a pipe organ for a 7,000 seat church in Quezon City, The Philippines. Arthur III trained



The pipe organ at Atlanta First United Methodist Church is one of many built by A. E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Company in Lithonia. (Special Photos)

local people to maintain the organ.

Once back in the states, he helped those locals address over the phone a problem that arose. At 1 a.m. he was awakened by a call from them, reporting that his instructions fixed the problem and thanking him.

After installation, there can be mixed emotions because the crew has been with that pipe organ from conception to tonal finishing for months or even years.

“It’s bittersweet,” Art Jr. said. “It’s almost like leaving one of your family.”

Obviously, pipe organ building involves passion.

“We’re into it for the glory of God,” Art Jr. said. “The big picture is what the instrument does. That’s the bottom line. I’m not putting my theology on my shoulder, but we do pray about our work.”

“The job is long hours and time away from family and friends,” Arthur III said. “You have to go to where the churches are. This can be for months at a time.”

Art Jr. said that in 1973 at age 39 he decided to leave his high-powered job at the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and start up a pipe organ business in the basement and garage of



The A. E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Company constructed this organ at First Presbyterian Church of Savannah.

his Stone Mountain home. His father imparted some advice.

“If you’re going to leave the education field and go into this business, you’re going to work all week, weekends and not take vacations,” Art Jr. remembered his father said, and he knows how true that was.

“We’re on call seven days a week for over 300 churches,” he said. “Whatever happens, on Sunday the organ has to work.”

Indeed, being married to one of the Schlueters requires the patience and understanding of the wife of a coach who works long hours and travels often.

Arthur III provided a good example. He and his wife, Stephanie, once planned a rare date two weeks in advance to eat for the first time at The Mystic Grill in Covington, arranging a babysitter and all. Driving to the restaurant, Schlueter heard his cell phone ring.

An organ in an Atlanta church had broken down 55 minutes before a paid concert was to begin.

“Well, I guess our plans have changed,” Stephanie said.

They raced to the church, and Schlueter barked orders to anxious church members like a surgeon — “I need this; I need that.”

Meanwhile, the audience filled the pews. Schlueter eventually got a broken cable replaced and as he and Stephanie left the sanctuary, the concert began.

They dined at a downtown Atlanta restaurant. The Mystic Grill would have to come later on another rare date.