



Pipe organ gets new life at Athens State Univ.

ATHENS, Ala. (AP) - A smile creased Louise Steele's face as she remembered the sound of the pipe organ that once filled Athens State University's McCandless Hall. Her son, Bill Steele, loved playing that pipe organ, made in 1892, but it would soon fall into disrepair along with the building. "He would play that organ as much as he could," said Louise Steele, 92. "He was probably the last one to play it."

Louis Steele is delighted the organ is being restored as part of a \$4 million renovation and expansion of 100-year-old McCandless Hall. The building's reopening will be Thursday, featuring the drama department's play "Importance of Being Ernest." Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Sunday this week and next. According to history supplied by the college, Anna Hobbs Frierson Horton, of the Athens Female College (now Athens State) acquired the pipe organ from a local Methodist church in 1925.

Derek Milnar, co-owner of Milnar Organ Co. of Eagleville, Tenn., is leading the organ's restoration, which he said cost about \$100,000. Milnar said the tracker-style organ - named for the tracker sticks that connect the keys with the sound chest - is typical for churches in the late 1800s. He said roughly 500 to 1,000 remain in use. He replaced the electric blower added in the 1900s, but it still includes a hand pump that operates the feeder bellows to supply sufficient wind for playing the organ. "It plays real well for hymns and other church music where people sing along," Milnar said. "It will fill a room with sound."

Louis Steele said her son, who died three years ago at the age of 65, learned how to play on the McCandless organ from Frank Church. "He thought that (McCandless) organ played and sounded the way it should be," Louis Steele said. Millie Caudle, a retired ASU history professor, said the organ was used for special occasions, including holidays and graduations.

A leaky roof forced the college to move it out of McCandless and have it repaired in the 1960s. Milnar said the dust-covered organ hadn't been used in at least two decades. He said this appeared to be its first complete restoration even though school records show Ellis Dunnivant and Jeanne Norblitt restored it in 1986.

The pipes were painted by Mr. Kevin McGrath (Milnar Organ Co. employee) with help from several skilled painters. The pipes were painted three shades of green, orange, yellow, gold,

black, brown, white and red using a stencil. "It was kind of like a paint by numbers," Milnar said. "And a more artistic person can keep the paint within the lines."

Canna Ricketts, organist for First United Methodist in Athens, was impressed. She said she can't wait to play it when the restoration is complete in a few weeks. "It's beautiful," Ricketts said. "It will be great asset to the community and the college for recitals, weddings and other special occasions." McCandless Hall was built for \$25,000 in 1912-14 and named after late music director Kate McCandless.

Suzanne Sims, ASU human resources director, has fond memories of her piano recitals as a child and teenager in McCandless Hall, but one memory sticks out. "We thought the building was old," Sims, 53, said. "The stage was cramped, and there was only way on to it." The exterior may be old, but the interior was completely overhauled. The project includes an addition with restrooms and an elevator.

The contractor, Building Associates of Decatur, used the same organ colors for the paint scheme. "It's just beautiful," Sims said of the building. Drama professor Hugh Long said the architects kept the 20th century proscenium style in the renovation. The proscenium is an arch which frames the stage for the audience. The balcony, closed when it became unsafe, is a feature that most theaters no long have, Long said. "The balcony is a wonderful space that gives you a different view of the stage," Long said. "Our students like to go up there and watch when we're running scenes on stage."



In this photo taken on April 2, 2014, Guy McClure looks at the beautiful pipe organ, made in 1892, which was part of the renovation of the historic McCandless Hall at Athens State

University in Athens, Ala. The organ is rare with only between 500 and 1,000 remaining in use. The organ restoration cost \$100,000 and was part of a \$4 million restoration of McCandless Hall. (AP Photo/The Decatur Daily, Gary Cosby Jr.)