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Beth Mullins Scales, the daughter of Steve Mullins who founded the American Toby Jug Museum, walks through the museum in Evanston.

What to do with 8,500 Toby jugs?

The American Toby Jug Museum in Evanston — ‘a roadside attraction, of sorts’ — is closing

By Christopher Borrelli | Chicago Tribune

Stephen Mullins collected Toby jugs. That’s true, though kind of like saying Michael Jordan played basketball. Some people are the greatest at one thing. Mullins was a champion swimmer, and for most of his life on Chicago’s North Shore, he was a successful Evanston real estate developer. But he was exceedingly good at acquiring Toby jugs. He was so skilled at this that his collection outpaced the size of his sizable home, then his office, so Mullins reworked a former bank into a six-story building on Chicago Avenue in Evanston to keep his collection. It’s still there, at the corner of Chicago and Main; there’s condos in it now and a Subway franchise, so it’s not *just* storage space for Toby jugs. But really, says his widow, Carol Mullins, her husband wanted it as a dedicated space (with custom shelving) for Toby jugs.

Indeed, at Carol’s home, in the living room, there is one prominent jug on a shelf. It has the likeness of her late husband, wearing a sweater the exact green of his beloved Dartmouth College. Inside the head, where you sip your drink, Mullins’ ashes are kept.

What, you are asking yourself by now, is a Toby jug?

A Toby jug is one of those old-timey ceramic mugs shaped to look like a person — traditionally, a caricature of a British drunkard, ruddy complexion, tricorne hat, long coat, on a stool, cradling a mug of lager. Across the 250 year or so history of the Toby jug, there

have been jugs with the likenesses of Winston Churchill and Barack Obama, Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, Gandhi, Hitler and Spuds MacKenzie. A Toby, to be specific, shows a full figure likeness, and a “character mug” shows only the bust of a figure. But Mullins bought both, and anything else (pitchers, thimbles) remotely related.

So, about 19 years ago, in the building he made for his collection, he established the American Toby Jug Museum as a nonprofit foundation, with free admission for all. It’s still open, just five hours a week, at the

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Above: 1990s Applause Star Wars character Toby jugs on display at the American Toby Jug Museum in Evanston. Left: Scales the daughter of Steve Mullins who founded the American Toby Jug Museum, puts on Toby jug thimbles. STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS



Organist Phillip Kloeckner sits in front of the organ at the First United Methodist Church’s Chicago Temple Building. The organ was installed the same year the Temple opened in 1924 and less than 50% of the instrument is fully functional due to age, deterioration, electrical malfunction and water damage from leaks in the floors above the church.

ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The Chicago Temple finds unique way to mark century

Its 100th birthday gift to itself? Fixing its historic organ

By Hannah Edgar
For the Chicago Tribune

If someone can’t sing you “Happy Birthday,” did your birthday happen at all?

That’s no riddle. It’s more or less the dilemma currently facing the Chicago Temple. Home to the First United Methodist Church of Chicago, the historic downtown building opened its doors 100

years ago Saturday.

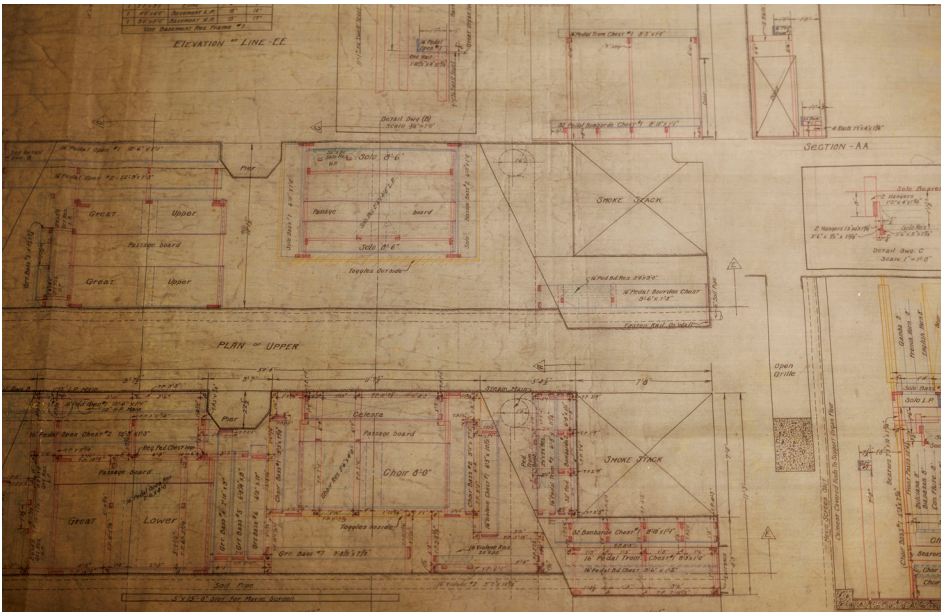
The Temple’s centennial is dampened somewhat by the condition of its renowned E.M. Skinner organ, also turning 100. The instrument boasts 5,589 pipes across seven divisions, four manuals, 73 stops, 93 registers and 92 ranks. At present, only about half of that functions as it should.

“We’ve had a lot of problems with our blower and our bellows,” says First United Methodist organist Phillip Kloeckner. “What you’ll hopefully hear (after

the renovation) is a lot more balance and clarity.”

Since 2019, the Temple has embarked on a fundraising campaign to restore the organ, dubbed the Opus 414 because it was the 414th instrument Skinner designed. Proceeds from an Oct. 1 benefit concert featuring Kloeckner and the Chicago Brass Quintet will support the organ’s \$3.25 million restoration campaign. If all goes according to plan, the pipes will be gradually

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Blueprints for the organ sit in the First United Methodist Church's Chicago Temple Building. The organ was installed the same year the Temple's opened in 1924.



A stained glass window with an organ sits in the First United Methodist Church's Chicago Temple Building. ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS



An organ console sits in the First United Methodist Church's Chicago Temple Building.

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moved out and shipped to Ohio-based organ maker Schantz in late 2025, then reinstalled in the sanctuary in early 2027.

In the Skinner organ's absence, Erik Nussbaum, First United Methodist's director of music ministries, says the church will make do with a small donated pipe organ. Long-term, however, he says he "can't fathom" a Chicago Temple without the Skinner.

"We live in a disposable world. It's so easy to use something and just throw it away," he says. "But artists use recycled material to create art all the time.

"That's why restoring it appealed so much to us. We can continue that history, in a way, and relive it."

Towering 568 feet above street level, the Chicago Temple was the tallest building in Chicago when it was commissioned by First United Methodist, a historic congregation whose founding predates the city's by two years. The church enlisted the venerable firm now known as Holabird & Root — the same architects behind Soldier Field and Palmer House — to design a "city temple... Gothic in structure, with a churchly tower (and) a radiant cross at its pinnacle."

Though now dwarfed by other skyscrapers, the Chicago Temple still claims the Guinness-approved record for the tallest church building in the world. Even the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona tops out two feet short of the Chicago Temple spire.

Unlike Gaudi's behemoth in Spain, the Chicago Temple was intended to be mixed-use from its inception. Leopold and Loeb lawyer Clarence Darrow opened an office there in 1925, the year after the Temple opened its doors — and the same year he took on the Scopes "Monkey Trial." Pugnacious Hyde Park alderman Leon Despres also practiced in



Metal and wooden pipes sit in the organ chamber several stories above the chancel at the Chicago Temple Building. The organ was installed the same year the Temple opened in 1924 and less than 50% of the instrument is fully functional due to age, deterioration, electrical malfunction and water damage from leaks in the floors above the church.

the building, first on the 14th floor and then the seventh, where his law firm remains. Lawyers are still overrepresented among building tenants today, plus some eclectic outliers: a pointe shoe manufacturer, a natural-hair wig company. Save a brief absence from 1992 to 2002, the Chicago Temple has also hosted the offices of the United Methodist Church's regional bishop.

But Opus 414 is by far the building's longest tenant. The organ was a gift from Arthur Harris, son of Norman W. Harris, a devout Methodist and founder of the bank that would become BMO Harris. Then the country's leading organ maker, Skinner custom-designed the organ to fit the Temple sanctuary. He actually completed it in 1923, a year before the building was ready to install it.

Skinner manufactured Opus 414 during a feverishly prolific period. For example, the University of Chicago's Rockefeller Chapel — where Kloeckner worked prior to joining First United Methodist in 2016 — holds a Skinner built just a few years after the Chicago Temple's, in

1928. Its opus number? 634.

"Skinner built an insane number of organs in 1923 alone — somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 organs," Kloeckner says.

During a recent visit to the Chicago Temple, Kloeckner fished out a copy of Skinner's original blueprint. It remains remarkably close to the organ's final installation, give or take a few inches here and there. Unlike many organs with visible pipes, the vast majority of Opus 414 is tucked out of sight behind a neo-Gothic concrete grille three stories above the altar. Exploring the chamber means climbing up and down creaky wooden ladders and sidling on gangways about a foot or two long, with sheer drops down into the sanctuary on either side. With some contortions, the flexible can make their way to the area that once housed the organ's old pneumatic machinery.

Kloeckner traverses those obstacles with the unbothered adroitness of a gymnast. Others over the years haven't been quite so deft. In 1974, an electrician doing routine work on the Skinner's wiring

plummeted one story into the three-foot-wide organ tuning chamber. Fifteen firemen and a dislocated kneecap later, the man was admitted to the hospital more rattled than maimed. For some time, a newspaper clipping documenting the rescue was taped to the door to the organ chamber, perhaps as a cautionary tale.

It's quite likely some of the hardware that hapless electrician was tasked to fix is still around. Kloeckner pointed out some needed fixes along our trapeze-artist tour of the chamber. Old wiring from the 1980s. A cracked shutter. Pipes that fell silent years ago.

When we return to the ground floor, Kloeckner tosses off a virtuosic demonstration of the organ's capabilities, improvising his way through snatches of "Simple Gifts" and "God Save the Queen." The organ's lower register was churning and fearsome, like a snarling underdog beast. The instrument's might and evenly dispersed sound nicely make up for what the Chicago Temple chapel lacks in natural acoustic.

"You wouldn't know the organ is in bad shape. Phil makes it sound so wonderful," murmurs David Foster, a volunteer on the Temple's centennial committee, as the organ caroled around us.

But listen closely and you'll hear the Skinner's quirks. Next to the organ's bass, its middle register lacks plushness and warmth. Some stops, in their upper register, sound bleating or, occasionally, out of tune.

Other stops don't work at all. After his improvised fantasia, Kloeckner played a descending major scale on the organ's ceremonial trumpet stop, added about a decade ago. Over just two octaves, the pitch gradually became warped, and four notes didn't sound at all, save the thunk of Kloeckner's fingers depressing the keys.

"Unless I have a piece that misses all of those dead notes, I can't use that," he says. Even one bunk note is enough to render a stop unusable.

By those standards, Kloeckner estimates about 50% of Opus 414 is, indeed, inoperable. That's the statistic First United Methodist is putting in

front of congregants and patrons to convince them the organ needs saving.

So far, they've heeded the call: The campaign has raised \$1.6 million to date. The church needs \$800,000 more by the end of 2025 to meet Schantz's renovation quote.

The remaining money will go towards an organ-specific endowment, which will cover ongoing maintenance and, hopefully, a future recital series. Kloeckner also envisions future collaborations with cultural organizations like the Chicago Jazz Festival. The goal is to have an organ the Temple would be proud to offer out-of-town artists.

In the meantime, Kloeckner will keep bringing his Midas touch to the Opus 414 every Sunday.

"We still seek to make great music," Nussbaum says. "But when it's all back in place again, it's going to be like Christmas every week."

"Centennial Brass and Organ Concert" with First United Methodist Church organist Phillip Kloeckner and the Chicago Brass Quintet will be 2:30 p.m. Sept. 29 at the Chicago Temple; \$25 suggested minimum donation, more at www.chicagotemple.org

Midday organ recital with First United Methodist Church organist Phillip Kloeckner at 12:15 p.m. Oct. 1 at the Chicago Temple; free, more at www.chicagotemple.org

"A Look Back at 1924," an informal afternoon of Chicago history and music from the 1920s, will be 2:30 p.m. Oct. 6 at the Chicago Temple; free with complimentary refreshments, more at www.chicagotemple.org

Hannah Edgar is a freelance critic.

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