



BEAUTIFUL RUIN: The vacant Super King Buffet had a famous Portland architect and an organ built in 1927 for silent movies.

BRIAN BURK

CHASING GHOSTS

ADDRESS: 5015 SE 82nd Ave.
YEAR BUILT: 1961

SQUARE FOOTAGE: 11,722
MARKET VALUE: \$3,320,730

OWNER: You Fa Inc.
HOW LONG IT'S BEEN EMPTY: About 3 years

WHY IT'S EMPTY: The pandemic struck (and, before that, Chuck E. Cheese muscled in).

Organ Donor

The glass structure once home to the Organ Grinder is poised for another trip to the buffet.

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This is the story of a vacant building on Southeast 82nd Avenue, of which there are many.

It's also a story about a man who fell in love with a silent movie-era theater organ and started a pizza restaurant to support it, with the help of Oregon's original tech entrepreneur.

From 1973 to 1996, the angular building at the corner of Southeast Raymond Street was home to the Organ Grinder, an 1890s-themed pizzeria where the star of the show was a monstrous 1927 Wurlitzer organ. Through a combination of electric circuits and air pressure, the four-level keyboard activated 4,000 pipes (some of which were 32 feet high) and a motley array of drums, cymbals, marimbas, castanets—anything one operator needed to mimic the sounds of an orchestra, a choir, a train whistle, a telephone, and even birds or wind.

More recently, the building was home to the Super King Buffet, an Asian restaurant that closed during the pandemic in 2020, leaving another void on 82nd Avenue.

The building is owned by an entity called You Fa Inc., according to state records, which is controlled by Wen Xu. We couldn't locate Xu, but on Sunday, a man named George Shi was at work on the building. He says he's the leaseholder and plans to reopen his restaurant as the "Super King Buffet II" in the next month or so.

Shi says he closed during the pandemic because he couldn't get enough help to keep his restaurant open. Now he's ready for another go, he says.

"If you know how to eat it, we know how to make it," Shi says in an interview outside the rear door of the restaurant. "If you know how to pay for it, I know how to get it."

But the organ is long gone, and it's not coming back. The story of how it ended up on 82nd Avenue starts with Portlander Dennis Hedberg, now 81.

Hedberg loved organs. During the silent movie era, a pianist would play along with the movie to add sound. Larger theaters had orchestras, which were expensive. The Rudolph Wurlitzer Company and others made an alternative: an organ played by one person that could mimic an orchestra and make all the sounds one might hear in a movie. At the peak of its popularity in 1926, Wurlitzer was shipping one organ a day.

Wurlitzer stopped making theater organs in 1943, according to *Smithsonian* magazine, and by the time Hedberg came along, they were expensive curios. Organ lovers rescued the machines from decrepit movie palaces.

When San Francisco's Paramount Theater closed in 1965, Hedberg went to inspect its organ for another enthusiast, Howard Vollum, founder of Tektronix, the OG of Oregon's Silicon Forest. Tektronix made oscilloscopes—machines that create visual displays of electrical current so it can be measured and analyzed—and oscilloscopes made Vollum a lot of money, much of which he gave away.

Vollum bought the organ. Hedberg packed it up, brought it to Oregon, and spent four years reconstructing it. Vollum put up a separate building at his property on Skyline Boulevard to contain it, Hedberg says. In 1969, Hedberg

became an employee of Rodgers Instruments Corp., a Beaverton-based organ maker founded by two Tektronix engineers.

But Hedberg wanted his own organ. The hulking instruments were going homeless as old movie palaces fell to the wrecking ball. The Oriental Theatre on Southeast Grand Avenue was slated for destruction, and Hedberg bought the organ there in 1970, just before it was torn down.

Buying the organ was the easy part. Now he had to move all the pipes, some of which weighed 600 pounds. Then he had to store the thing. It took two warehouses.

At last, Hedberg had his organ, but it was homeless. Unlike Vollum, he couldn't afford a private building. Hedberg tried to reopen an old theater in North Portland, where the organ could at least pay its way, but the plan fell through, and he let the theater lease go.

Then, he met two brothers, the sons of a successful restaurateur. One of them had an interest in organs. It was the early 1970s, and strange though it may seem, pizza restaurants with huge theater organs were a thing. Ye Olde Pizza Joynt in Hayward, Calif., was among the first, along with a Bay Area chain called The Cap'n's Galley Pizza & Pipes.

Hedberg partnered with the brothers, Paul and Jerry Forchuk, to open their own pizza palace. They needed a building and found one on Northeast 82nd. Built as a Thom McAn shoe store in the 1950s, it had been vacant off and on for years. By 1972, the owner was ready to sign a lease with just about anyone, Hedberg says. "It was a mess, but the price was right."

The partners contracted with architect Will Martin (who would go on to design Pioneer Courthouse Square) and remodeled the building, putting a tower in the front to accommodate the tallest organ pipes. The front was all glass, so people could see the Rube Goldberg mechanics of the organ, which spread along one entire wall. The entrance was a square passageway modeled on the openings atop wooden "diaphone" pipes in a theater organ.

Hedberg moved in his organ, connecting the pipes, drums, castanets, tambourines, telephone bells, and everything else with thousands of feet of wire. An enormous blower, housed in a concrete vault, created the high-pressure wind that drove the whole apparatus.

The Organ Grinder opened in September 1973, and business boomed. "It was unbeliev-

able," Hedberg says. A dough mixer from Franz Bakery and a rolling machine from Switzerland helped ensure the pizza kept up with the music.

Much of the clientele was families. Kids loved the theater organ and another attraction: two capuchin monkeys that hung out in the vestibule with a man playing a smaller street organ. Health codes didn't allow wildlife in the dining room, so Hedberg hooked up a mechanical monkey that would bang cymbals along with the music. "It was a hoot," Hedberg says.

The partners expanded, opening a disco called Earthquake Ethel's in Beaverton in 1977 and another Organ Grinder in Denver in 1979. Business was terrific until the Glenn L. Jackson Memorial Bridge over the Columbia River was completed in 1982, extending Interstate 205 and slashing traffic volume on 82nd.

"The whole area went to hell," Hedberg says.

Another blow came when Chuck E. Cheese opened not far away on Southeast Powell Boulevard. The animatronic shows and arcade games crimped the Organ Grinder's birthday business.

To keep the restaurant open, and his organ housed, Hedberg gave up his shares in Earthquake Ethel's and the Organ Grinder in Denver and bought out his partners in Portland. He got help from his old friend Howard Vollum, who guaranteed a loan from U.S. Bank, he says.

Hedberg hung on for another decade, but by then the building was falling into disrepair. The roof leaked and the parking lot needed repaving. The bank was breathing down his neck, and he didn't have the money to repair a building he didn't own.

So, he closed the Organ Grinder and put his beloved organ up for sale. "That was the worst day of my life," Hedberg says. "I had to admit that this was the end."

He took an offer for \$150,000 from a buyer in Indiana, who came and crated up the organ. Hedberg couldn't bear to take it apart after spending so much of his life putting it together. The man who bought it sold it for parts.

Hedberg says he doesn't miss the restaurant, but he does miss the old Wurlitzer.

"For me, pizza was just a means to an end," he says. **WW**

Every week, WW examines one mysteriously vacant property in the city of Portland, explains why it's empty, and considers what might arrive there next. Send addresses to newstips@wwweek.com.



MIGHTY WURLITZER: Dennis Hedberg's organ was a collection of castanets, marimbas, drums, bells and 4,000 pipes.

DENNIS HEDBERG