

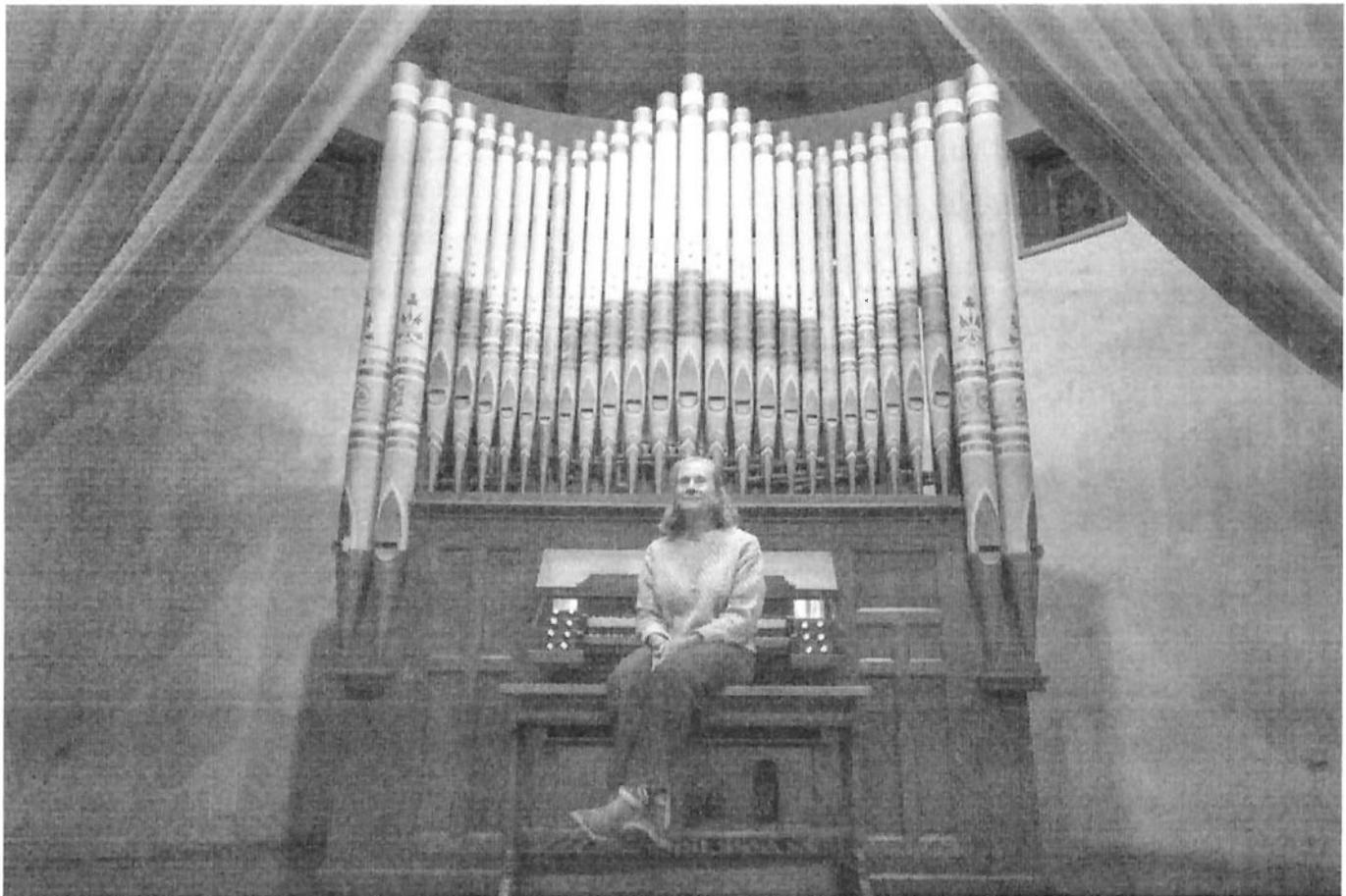
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U.S. & WORLD // CALIFORNIA

A massive pipe organ is dividing a small California town. Can it be saved?

By **Lucy Hodgman**, Staff Writer

Dec 24, 2025



Over the past year, Jacuzzi Family Vineyards' owner Nancy Cline headed up a restoration project of an 1897 Bergstrom pipe organ, which is now housed in the barrel room of the vineyard, where members of the public can be treated to live music. By

contrast, the only other California organ from the same maker is languishing in a locked room in El Dorado County.

Brian L. Frank/For the S.F. Chronicle

Behind a locked door at the El Dorado County fairgrounds, a pipe organ the size of a studio apartment is collecting dust — and causing headaches for local officials.

Once the centerpiece of a local church here in Placerville, the organ is among two surviving instruments in California made by Swedish craftsman John Bergstrom. But since the church was razed in the late 1950s, it's languished in the fairground's musty "organ room," a mostly empty warehouse with ceilings vaulted high enough to hold the 22-foot-tall instrument.

While the other California Bergstrom organ was recently restored and moved to a winery, this one hasn't been so lucky.

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Officials have spent more than a decade trying to find a new home for the historic instrument, which is one of dozens of organs across the country that churches and communities are struggling to give away or restore. The county estimates it would cost around \$200,000 to restore — and an additional \$30,000 to relocate.

“It’s a shame, really,” said fair CEO Kathy Dunkak. “It’s a piece of history, but nobody sees it because it’s locked up in a building. The only time anybody ever cares about it is when we talk about getting rid of it.”

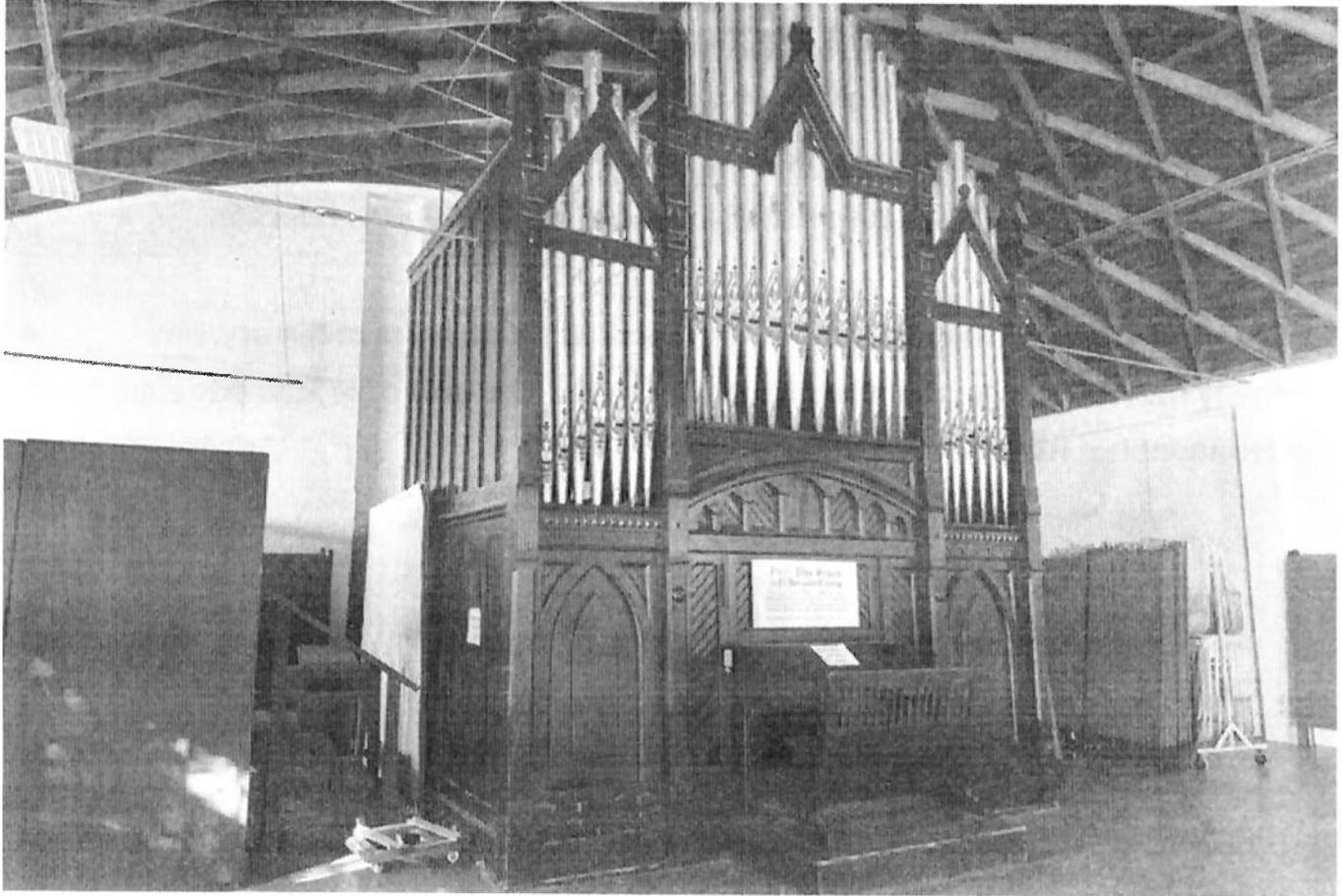


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After years of fruitless outreach to churches and museums, the fair set an October 2025 deadline to move the instrument out, hoping to repurpose the little-used organ room as a year-round event space.



The Bergstrom pipe organ inside the organ room in El Dorado County, where it has been the subject of heated local debate.
Courtesy Amanda Koch

That date came and went amid a standoff with the county's museum commission, which sees the organ as a publicly owned historical asset that should be kept close to home.

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“I sure hope we can find a way to make that wonderful organ accessible to the public,” Commissioner Jacob Rigoli said in a meeting of the commission last month.

Rick Berlin, 64, recalls encountering the organ when he worked at the fairgrounds as a teenager. Berlin was cleaning the room with his partner, who was in a rock band. “He sat down and started playing the organ and the spookiest music I ever heard came out of it,” said Berlin. “I will never forget that day.”

That was 1979. In the years since, the organ has fallen into disrepair. It still plays, but only barely, making a strangled sound that betrays the many bent and missing pieces inside.

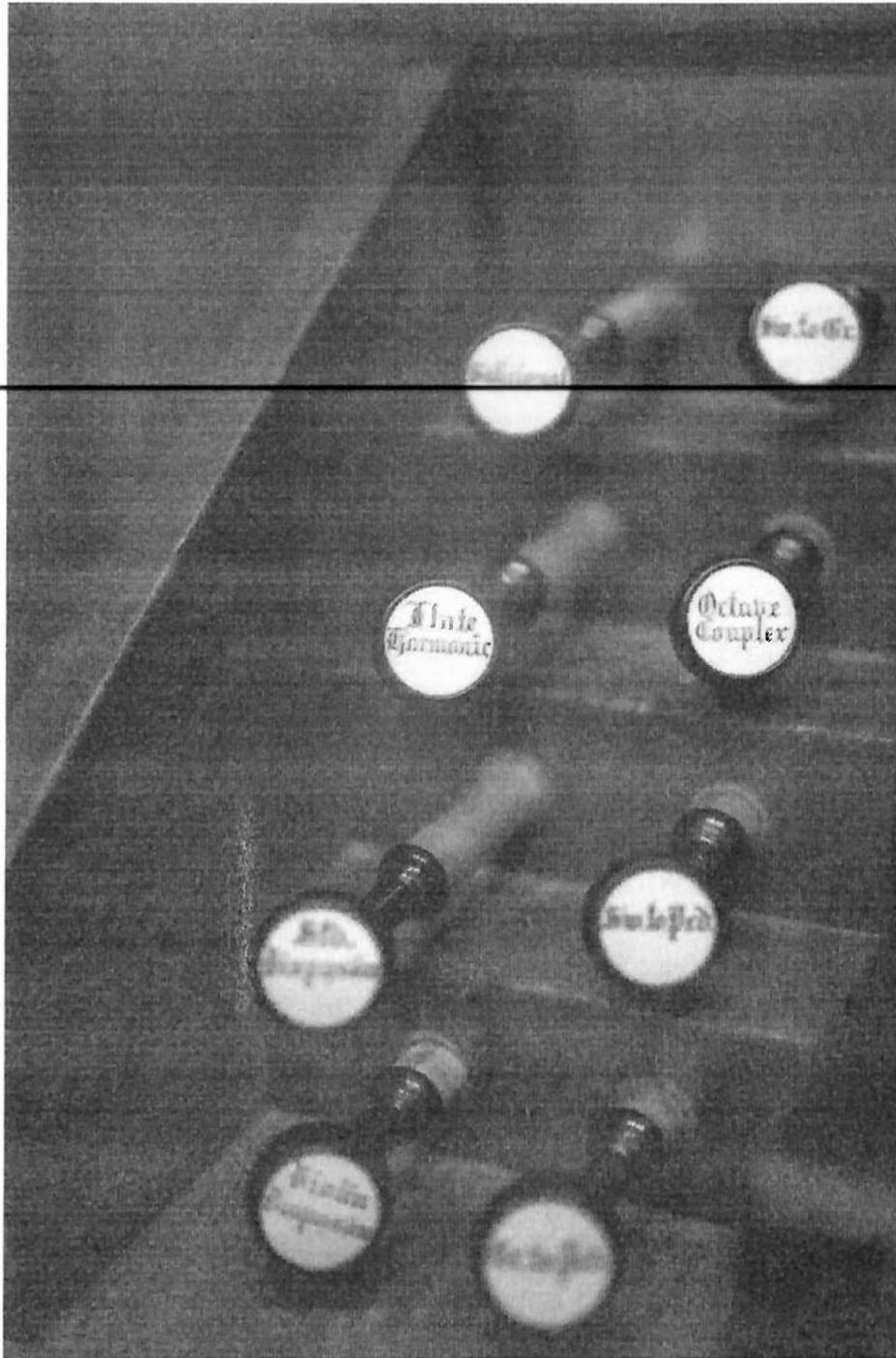
El Dorado County isn't the only place with a pipe organ to spare. More than 50 organs are seeking homes on the website Organ Clearing House, where many of the wall-size instruments are available for free. One 40-ton instrument has sat for years in storage beneath San Francisco's City Hall while a preservation group searches for a space large enough to house it.

The problem, according to pipe organ consultant Jack Bethards, is that there are more historic organs than there are institutions with the resources to house them.



The restored 1897 Bergström pipe organ at Sonoma County's Jacuzzi Family Vineyards. The restored organ serves as a contrast to the El Dorado County organ, which requires tens of thousands of dollars in repairs.

Brian L. Frank/For the S.F. Chronicle



Detail of the restored 1897 Bergstrom pipe organ, now housed in the barrel room of Jacuzzi Family Vineyards.

Brian L. Frank/For the S.F. Chronicle

The United States saw a boom in organs constructed to fill new churches built between the 1880s and 1950s, he said. Since then, some — like the church in El

Dorado County — have closed or been demolished, while others now rely on amplified sound or have shifted away from traditional organ hymnody.

The cost of restoring an old organ can also exceed the price of a new one. The instruments' anatomies are delicate; they contain leather and felt that degrade without regular upkeep. But Bethards believes in preserving the antique instruments, both as historical artifacts and "very, very beautiful" objects.

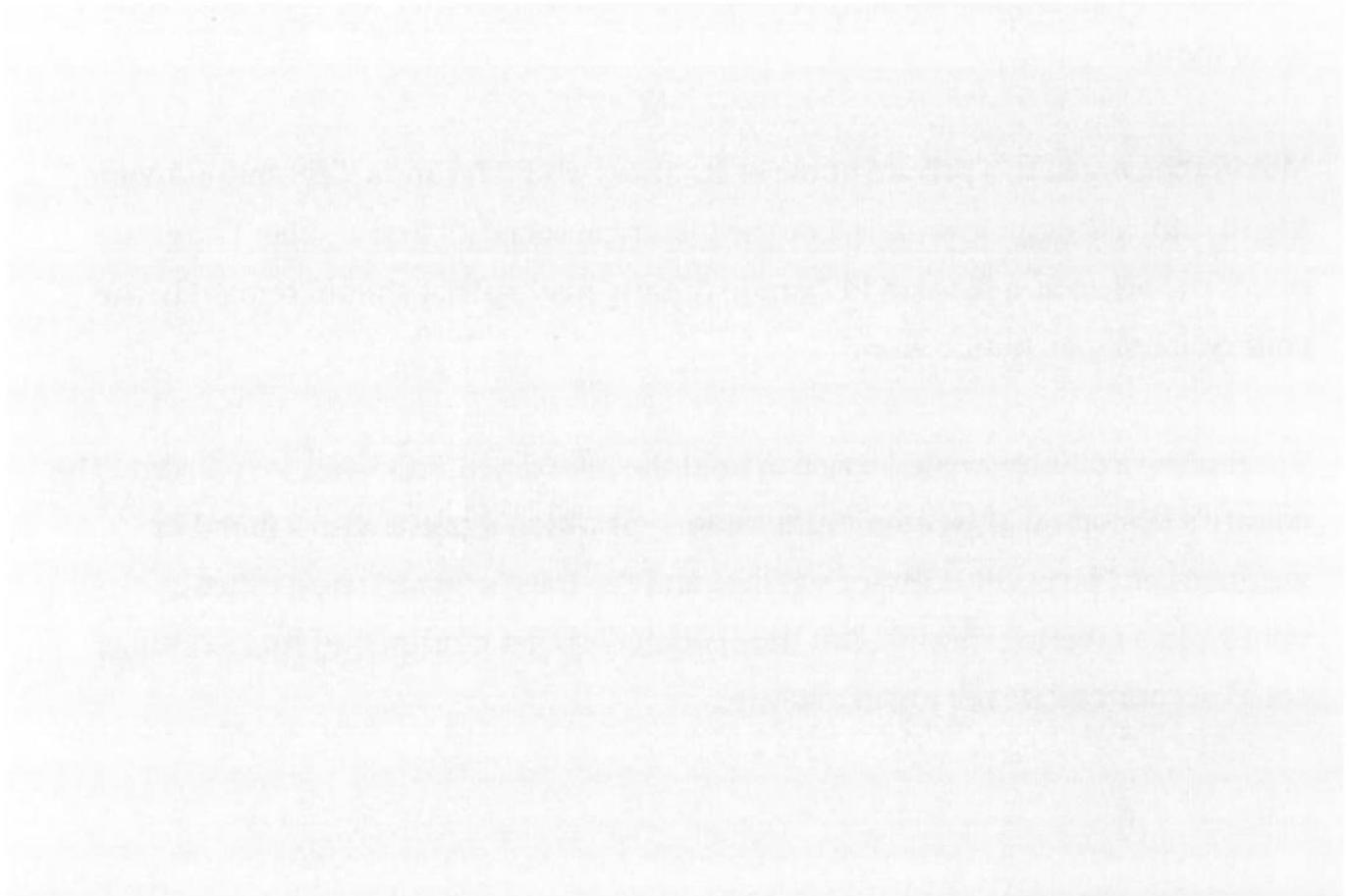
He's especially interested in rescuing El Dorado County's organ because it's a work of Bergstrom's. Many of the organs built in the craftsman's San Francisco studio were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake. "Bergstrom was a small company that didn't build a lot of organs," Bethards said. "And there weren't that many organ builders on the West Coast, so it's a rarity in all ways. I think just on that basis alone, it's worth saving."

Bethards' company was commissioned to restore California's other Bergstrom organ, housed in the First Congregational Church of Sonoma until church leadership decided to clear space for its growing congregation in 2017. They approached Jacuzzi Family Vineyards, a local winery with a cavernous event room.

"Nobody in their right mind would take this organ," vineyard owner Nancy Cline said, laughing. But the offer felt serendipitous — Cline said the space is designed to

look like an Italian chapel, with an empty apse where the altar (and organ) would be. “And just as the world works, the organ fit perfectly.”

The winery spent about \$25,000 to restore the organ, Cline said. Now, organists from around the country come to the winery to play it. Recently, it was used for a holiday concert by candlelight, filling the room with the tooth-vibrating music that once scored Sonoma’s funerals, weddings and church services.



Composer John Partridge of Oakland played a concert at Jacuzzi Family Vineyards on Dec. 12, 2025, demonstrating the sound of the restored Bergstrom organ.

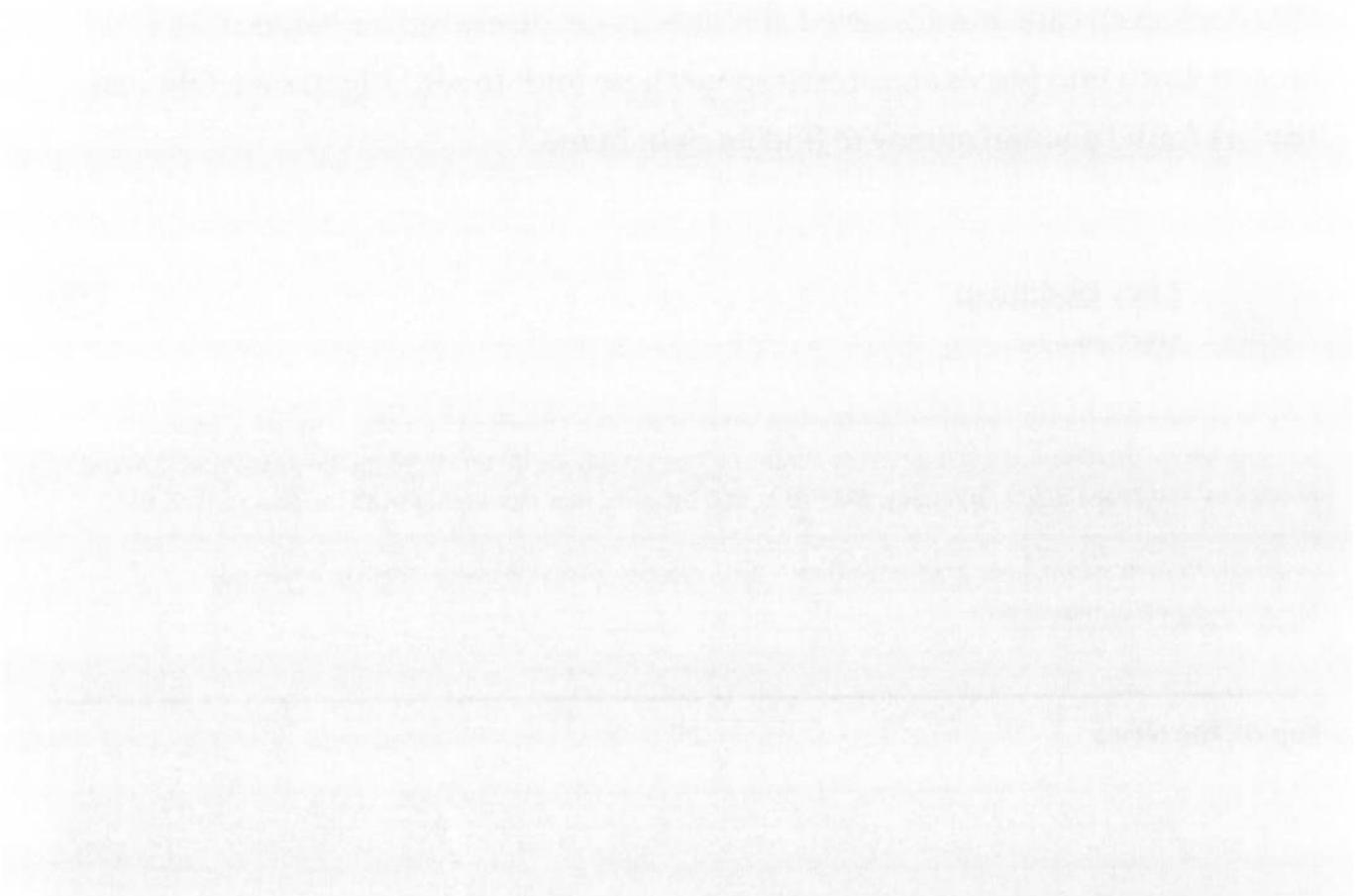
Brian L. Frank/For the S.F. Chronicle

Rigoli, who is also the treasurer of the El Dorado County Historical Society, wondered aloud if the Clines might have room for a second organ — and the funds to rehabilitate the one at the fairgrounds.

“Or maybe they’ve got a wealthy friend,” he mused. “Another winery owner with a lot of room.”

Moving the organ to a private home or business would be an “acceptable outcome,” Rigoli said, although it wouldn’t be the historical society’s first choice. The group prizes the organ as a piece of El Dorado County history that should remain in the county, ideally on public view.

But finding a county-owned space to hold the instrument has been a challenge. The county’s Historical Museum Commission — of which Rigoli is also a member — weighed the Placerville Library’s garage and the town’s historic post office as options in a meeting this fall. But they concluded that neither building’s ceilings could accommodate the organ’s stature.



Jacuzzi Family Vineyards found a place for their Bergstrom organ in their barrel room, which is used for events.

Brian L. Frank/For the S.F. Chronicle

Rigoli hopes to strike a compromise with the nonprofit El Dorado County Fair Association to keep the organ where it is, whether or not the instrument is restored. The historical society has proposed helping the fairgrounds raise funds to renovate the organ room into a better-equipped event space, with the provision that the organ stay there.

Dunkak, the fair CEO, isn't entirely opposed, although she suggested a twist: removing the organ's face and turning it into a functional bar.

≡ San Francisco Chronicle

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“We don’t even care how it’s saved, if it doesn’t get destroyed, or it doesn’t get broken down into pieces and stored somewhere for it to rot,” Rigoli said. “We just haven’t found enough money to find its right home.”

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Lucy Hodgman

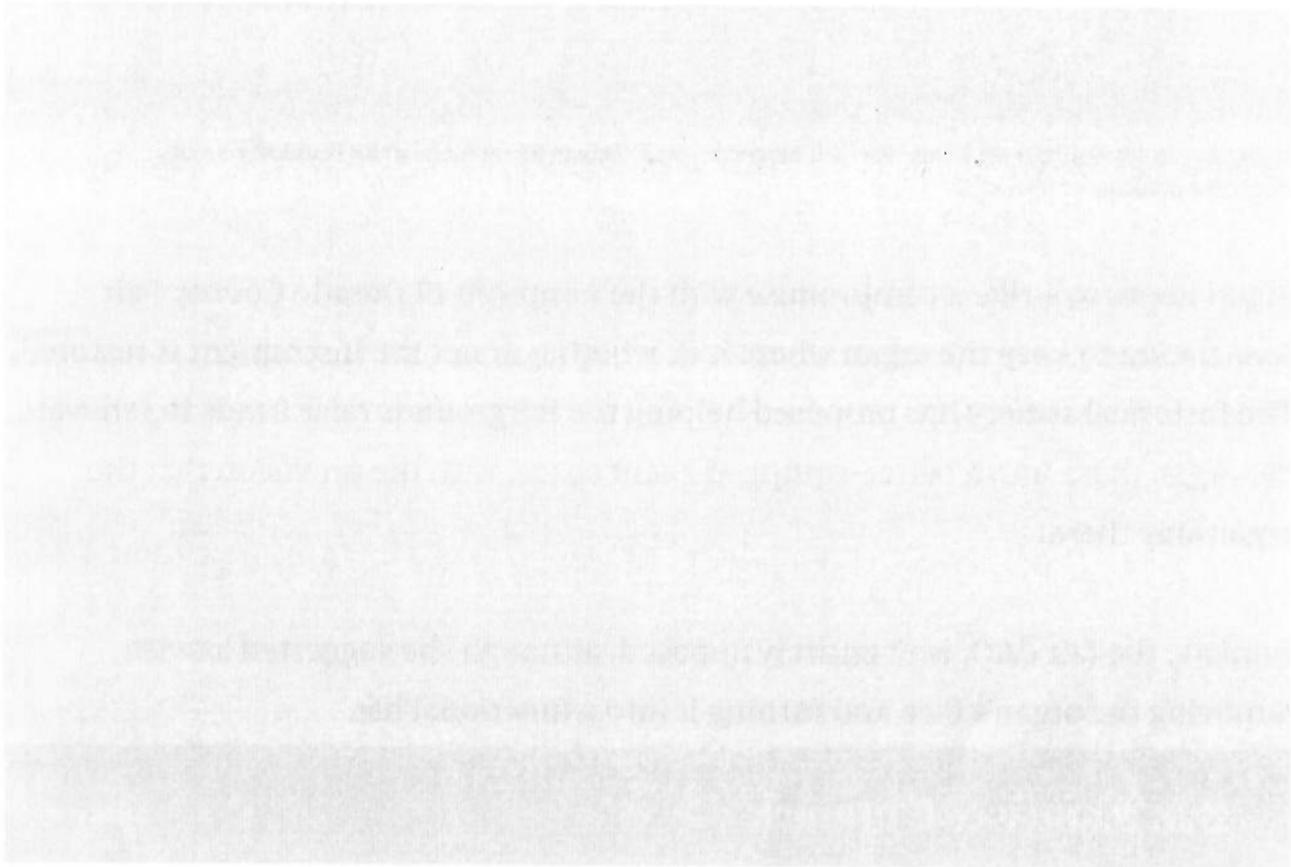
STAFF WRITER



Lucy Hodgman is a Hearst Fellow on the Climate Team at the San Francisco Chronicle, covering seismic building issues, homeowners insurance and breaking energy and environment news. She previously covered politics for the Times Union, in Albany, New York, and breaking news for Politico and the Sacramento Bee.

Originally from Brooklyn, Lucy graduated from Yale University with a degree in English. Reach her at lucy.hodgman@hearst.com.

Top Of The News



CALIFORNIA

Selected Facebook comments as of December 30 2025, regarding San Francisco Chronicle report on the Bergstrom Organ.

Daniel Grove
Make the space into a Pizza and Pipes!!! The one in AZ is very popular. Packs in the crowds.. find some organisms that would like to perform.

2d Like Reply 68

John F. Weber
Daniel Grove Having not seen the stoplist for this organ I am betting that it would not immediately be suited to the Pizza and Pipes concept, which generally requires something of a Theatre style Wurlitzer or comparable mix of pipes, percussion, etc. I have been to the Organ Stop in Mesa, AZ and it is a fabulous instrument with several skilled artists on their performer roster.

2d Like Reply 6

View all 3 replies

Kieran Markham Mccarty
Daniel Grove "some organisms" lol. Otto correct is funny

Nicole Zink
Just to clarify, the organ is not locked away per say. I run a department every year at the El Dorado County fair. Before my department was moved to a different building my great grandmother and my grandmother both had the department in what is called the organ building at the fair. Obviously the room in which that organ is stored. It is a beautiful part of the fair and it's still includes history. Yes, I'm sure after it gets cleaned up. It would be an amazing organ again. But it is a very big attraction at the county fair. Growing up at that fair I saw many people stop and admire such beauty.

1d Like Reply 148

Jonathan Perakis
Nicole Zink we see it yearly at the fair! We need to preserve it!

1d Like Reply 11

Denise Rosa
Nicole Zink I had no idea it was there. I've lived here or 41 years.

5h Like Reply

Charlotte McKimson
Maybe the Music Instrument Museum in Scottsdale Az will take it.
1d Like Reply 4

Dena Stefan
Charlotte McKimson Let's keep it here in the county and find people to maintain it! It's an 'organ' of this county

Kieran Markham Mccarty
I am in touch with some folks in the SF Bay Area & beyond who might be interested and financially capable of restoring her to her rightful place, in a small historically appreciative church where she can fulfill her original vocational. I have messaged them and asked them to spread my own repost of thos article with my embellishments & suggestions. Here's the link:
<https://facebook.com/share/p/1KgDJSpBg1>
Merry Christmas, and pray for a miracle!
2d Like Reply Edited 3

Paul Dessau
A few years ago we appraised this organ and evaluated its condition. We determined it is worth restoring.
1d Like Reply 28

Bob Bondiatt
Paul Dessau Do you know the build date? Curious.
1d Like Reply

Paul Dessau
Bob Bondiatt --1860's , by Bergstrom & Co. of San francisco.
1d Like Reply 4

Bob Bondiatt
Paul Dessau Thanks! Wow she's an old one. ...
1d Like Reply

Paul Dessau
Bob Bondiatt ---That is our estimate--the builder was active from about then to 1900. it has no nameplate date, as I recall, it is an estimate



Cavan O'Neill

They have almost rehomed this Organ multiple times in the last 20 years, however, they make it almost impossible to make it happen. They say they need it gone yet they make it difficult for people to get it, I almost had the Organ installed at St. Mary's in the mountains in Virginia city. However, after getting a team that was able to move it disassemble it and restore it for free mind you, they said the Organ had to stay in El Dorado County. Well, 10 years later, nobody wants it and it's still in danger. Organ could've been saved and making music in Virginia city, Nevada, and one of the most historic churches west of the Mississippi.

1d Like Reply Edited

5



Bob Apalsch

There organs laying dormant all over the world. Every organ needs maintenance, whether playable or not. This all takes money and time. Take the Wanamaker organ in Philadelphia and the organ at the Boardwalk in Atlantic City. These have actual departments for working on the organs. You have to ask yourselves Why was the organ laid up to begin with. Now what would be the plan once the instrument is restored? What would be the plan for continued maintenance? How many performances would people pay to hear? How many of you ,right now , have your checkbooks out ready to help pay for the initial work. A professional would have to consulted. Most of us don't know enough about organs to do the work without guidance. That costs money. Those folks don't do it for free. How many have their work clothes on and a pile of tools in their vehicle ready to go to work? It's one thing to voice your interest in historic preservation. It's entirely different scenario to actually be involved.

11h Like Reply



Katherine Evatt

Domenico Winery, I tried to contact you about this. Would make a great addition to your Amador Winery.

2d Like Reply

1



Chris Colwell
Anna Lapwood



Trisha Carter Uno

Anna Lapwood can you save this beautiful instrument



Roger Scott Larson
I'll move it for free

1d Like Reply 4



Diane Wilkinson

Sybille Beltran the pipe organ was part of the historic federated church in Placerville

When the church was deemed a unsafe and demolished, the organ was removed and donated to the county where it has been since the mid 1950's My father Wesley Wilkinson a native placervillean and builder was contracted to do the church demolition and helped in the re housing of the organ.

Long time locals have always cherished the pipe organ

1d Like Reply

22



David Oakley Ruberg

So many GREAT experts commenting here!

It's not a theater/pizza parlor style organ, rather a relocated church organ. It's not that huge, only 16 stops, 14 ranks of pipes. Originally John E. Bergstrom, Opus 22, 1883. A 1996 plaque on organ reads First Pipe Organ in El Dorado County and therefore may be of historical significance. In that it has mechanical action it may be in better shape than if it had pneumatic or electro-pneumatic action and could be less expensive to restore— "could be."

David Oakley Ruberg commenting here!

David Oakley Ruberg

- Owner-operator at South-Employed and works at Substituted/Interim organist/director at Various Venues
- Studied historic northern European pipe organs at Westminster Choir College

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