



## Restoring an Estey Miniature Organ and Some Comments on Estey Serial Numbers

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NOT long after the company formed in 1877, the Wilcox & White Organ Co. of Meriden, Connecticut, filed a patent for an "Improvement in Blow Pedals for Organs" (US Patent #205,160; 1878): "*The object of this invention is an arrangement of pedals, so that young children can work the bellows themselves ...*" The attachment required modification of the existing treadles by adding a second set higher up (within the reach of a musically interested child). Within six months, Wilcox & White Organ Co. filed a second patent for an "Improvement in Blow Pedals for Organs" (US Patent #213,268; 1879). "*The object of this invention is to construct independent blow-pedals, which may be applied to an organ-case already in use, as well as to new organs, without change in the case, and so that the pedals may be set to different heights above the*

*principal pedals, to accommodate children of different sizes ...*"

This author has never seen such an attachment on any reed organ of the period (nor such advertised in any Wilcox & White catalog), and so it remains a question as to whether any such attachments were constructed or sold. It does indicate an interest in the development of a viable market for *child-accessible* reed organs, although the patent was not followed up by the development or offer of child-sized reed organs.

The 1892 Mason & Hamlin catalog advertised what it called "The Baby Organ"—a four-octave reed organ with a single set of eight-foot reeds. The appellation "Baby" clearly refers not to its intended audience (the term is not inside quotation marks in the catalog) but to the



diminutive overall size of the instrument. The keyboard is still thirty inches above the floor, the standard keyboard height for adult players. The Mason & Hamlin Baby Organ was intended for schoolrooms and Sunday School classes, not for small people. The same can be said for Estey Organ Co.'s Style JJ Folding Organ, a model that remained popular from its introduction in the late 1890s until supplanted by the military contract folding reed organs of 1941. Style JJ was intended for field use by adults; it was not sized for children at home. Indeed, Estey made several one-manual, single-rank organs over the years: the "New Portable Organ" (1890 catalog); "The New School Model C" (Whiting, p.121); the Style CC "Kindergarten Organ" (1897–1900 catalogs); and the Style U "La Petite" (1898 catalog). None of these were child-sized per se; all were meant for Sunday School or classroom use by adults, with keyboards ~30" above the floor.

It was not until after the bankruptcy of November 1933 (following the "Great Crash" of October 1929) that the newly reorganized Estey Organ Corporation began manufacturing a child-sized reed organ, advertised in a 1936 catalog as a "Children's Organ" (Whiting, p. 132), and again by the same name in a 1941 catalog (*ibid.* p. 133). In a later (undated) catalog, the name changed to "Miniature Organ" (*ibid.* p. 134). The primary difference between the "Children's Organ" (Figure 1) and the "Miniature Organ" (Figure 2) is that the former has handholds cut in the case, near the top on both ends. Towards the end of the company's life, the case was simplified further still, eliminating the scalloping of the tops of the end pieces and the routing in the case panels (Figure 3). All three iterations of this miniature reed organ have 37 keys (3 full octaves, C–C), and standard



**Fig. 2: Estey Miniature Organ; ROS Database #7138. (Phil Kell photo.)**



**Fig. 3: Estey Miniature Organ, late design; ROS Database #1242. (Database photo.)**



**Fig. 1: Estey Children's Organ, with handholds. From the Don and Marilyn Swett Collection; ROS Database #3334. (Database photo.)**





**Fig. 4: Embossed metal plaque on an Estey Miniature. (Phil Kell photo.)**

Estey reeds from C to C3, starting one octave below Middle C and extending to two octaves above, plus one note. Cases were made of maple or birch, stained or painted. On painted cases detailed with routed grooves, the routing was filled with gold, silver or some other contrasting color paint. Most of these organs, at least all those I have inspected or of which ROS Database pictures are sufficiently detailed, bear a small metal plaque on the left-hand side of the top, embossed with “Estey Organ Corporation, Brattleboro, Vermont U.S.A.” (Figure 4). Inside, at the rear, on the treble end of the action, is an Estey Organ Company (OR Estey Organ Corporation) paper label bearing the serial number. There is one further style of Estey miniature reed organ: a “miniature



**Fig. 5: Estey “miniature Miniature” 2-octave reed organ; ROS Database 6416. (Database photo.)**



**Fig. 6: Treadle buttons on an Estey Miniature.**

Miniature” with 25 keys (Figure 5). There is an example at the Estey Organ Museum, but little is known otherwise about this line of organs—how many were made, over what span of years, etc. For completeness’s sake, mention must also be made of the Estey Junior Organ, listed in the 1941 price list in Whiting (q.v.), but not in the 1936 price list. The Estey Junior Organ—of which the Estey Organ Museum has both foot-pumped and motor-blown examples—was intended for children somewhat larger than the Miniature’s clientele.

Table 1 summarizes the Estey Children’s/Miniature organs listed in the Reed Organ Society Database having pictures and sufficient information to confidently characterize them. The only organ with hand-hold cutouts is the first one listed, s/n 443728 (ROS #3334); all the rest are “Miniature Organs.” The last four in the list—ROS Numbers 1934, 1242, 3517, and 3872—show the late changes in design. As noted earlier, the end-boards of the case are simply rounded at the top rather than scalloped at each end; there is no routing in the case panels; the treadles are set farther apart than in the earlier “Miniatures” and separated by spacing and end blocks (presumably to secure the treadle axles—refer to Fig. 3). The other distinguishing feature among the “Miniature” organs is a set of raised metal buttons at the heel position on the treadles (Figure 6) on four of them. Table 1 establishes—

| YEAR | Number in Database |
|------|--------------------|
| 1934 | 1                  |
| 1935 | 3                  |
| 1936 | 10                 |
| 1937 | 1                  |
| 1938 | 4                  |
| 1939 | 1                  |
| 1940 | 2                  |
| 1941 | 2                  |
| 1942 | 1                  |
| 1943 | 0                  |
| 1944 | 1                  |
| 1945 | 1                  |
| 1946 | 0                  |
| 1947 | 0                  |
| 1948 | 1                  |
| 1949 | 1                  |
| 1950 | 0                  |
| 1951 | 2                  |

**Table 2: Numbers of Estey Miniature (Reed) Organs in the ROS Database for the period 1934-1951. Miniature reed organs could have been manufactured both before and after this period—they just haven’t been registered with the Database yet.**

| ROS Database # | Serial Number | Putative Year in Database | Year per Serial Number | Case Wood          | Color | Trim       | Estey Organ Corporation Label | Buttons on Treadles |
|----------------|---------------|---------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|-------|------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| 3334           | 443728        | 1934                      | 1934                   | maple [?]          | green | gold       | yes                           |                     |
| 2757           | 444008        | 1924                      | 1935                   | maple              | ?     | ?          | ?                             |                     |
| 2134           | 445311        | 1924                      | 1935                   | maple              | ?     | ?          | ?                             |                     |
| 2749           | 445313        | 1925                      | 1935                   | maple              | ?     | ?          | ?                             |                     |
| 200            | 446636        | 1924                      | 1936                   | Gumwood [maple?]   | clear | routed     | ?                             |                     |
| 2758           | 446744        | 1925                      | 1936                   | maple              | clear | ?          | ?                             |                     |
| 2760           | 447473        | 1925                      | 1936                   | maple              | clear | ?          | ?                             |                     |
| 36             | 447639        | ?                         | 1936                   | maple              | clear | routed     | ?                             | yes                 |
| 4472           | 447691        | 1920-25                   | 1936                   | ?                  | black | gold       | ?                             | yes                 |
| 2448           | 448025        | ?                         | 1936                   | maple              | clear | gold       | yes                           | yes                 |
| 7138           | ?             | ?                         | [1936]                 | maple              | clear | routed     | yes                           | yes                 |
| 2476           | 448251        | 1925                      | 1936                   | maple              | clear | ?          | ?                             |                     |
| 1864           | 449663        | 1930                      | 1936                   | ?                  | green | gold       | yes                           |                     |
| 618            | 449670        | 1936                      | 1937                   | cherry [maple?]    | ?     | ?          | ?                             |                     |
| 3498           | 450332        | 1938                      | 1938                   | maple              | black | gold       | yes                           |                     |
| 6733           | 450578        | 1939                      | 1938                   | maple              | clear |            | yes                           |                     |
| 5220           | 451207        | 1926                      | 1938                   | maple              | green |            | yes                           |                     |
| 6278           | 452851        | 1925                      | 1938                   | maple              | clear |            | yes                           |                     |
| 4307           | 453472        | 1938                      | 1939                   | maple              | green | gold       | ?                             |                     |
| 352            | 455697        | 1939                      | 1940                   | maple              | clear | routed     | yes                           |                     |
| 2333           | 455704        | 1927                      | 1940                   | maple              | clear |            | ?                             |                     |
| 5881           | 458116        | 1941                      | 1941                   | maple              | clear |            | yes                           |                     |
| 6299           | 458250        | 1942                      | 1941                   | white oak [maple?] | clear |            | yes                           |                     |
| 2287           | 461068        | 1929                      | 1942                   | Birch [maple?]     | clear | routed     | yes                           |                     |
| 5222           | 470308        | 1930                      | 1944                   | maple              | clear |            | yes                           |                     |
| 3215           | 476267        | 1941                      | 1945                   | walnut [pby maple] | clear |            | yes                           |                     |
| 1242           | 485821        | 1936                      | 1948                   | maple              | clear | not routed | yes                           |                     |
| 3872           | 489789        | 1948                      | 1949                   |                    |       |            | ?                             |                     |
| 3517           | 494001        |                           | 1951                   | maple              | clear | not routed | not apparent                  |                     |
| 1934           | 494037        | 1950                      | 1951                   | ?                  | ?     |            | ?                             |                     |

Table 1: List of Estey Miniature [Reed] Organs in the ROS Database, with notation of salient characteristics (see text).

within the limits of the available sample—the production span of the Estey Miniature, as well as its case variations.

Assuming that presence in the Database list (very) roughly reflects the numbers of organs sold, Table 2 shows the numbers in the database between the years 1934 and 1951. If the evidence can be trusted, the years 1934 to 1942 were the best production years for this style of instrument. Understandably, the war years were very thin, and, in fact, starting in 1942 the production of most musical instruments was stopped by government regulation as “non-essential” to

the war effort (Leonard, 2013, p. 179). Estey had lucrative contracts with the U.S. government for chaplain’s organs and non-musical items such as ammunition boxes and skis (Gellerman, 1996, p. 192). The sample is too small to draw many conclusions from the numbers, but they generally do point at production concentrated in the period just prior to World War II.

The Estey Organ Company went bankrupt from the widespread economic effects of the stock market crash of 1929. It was reorganized in 1933 and renamed the Estey Organ



Corporation in hopes of getting back on its feet. (See Leonard, 2013, for a comprehensive account of Estey's mid-twentieth century financial woes, the decisions made to counter them, and the personalities and machinations involved). The company's entry into a children's musical instrument market at a time when few families had extra money begs for an explanation, and, unfortunately, none will be forthcoming here. In his excellent and comprehensive cultural and material history of the Estey Organ Company, *Manufacturing the Muse*, Dennis Waring offers an overview of the many factors contributing to the decline of the reed organ market overall in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. In response to my query about why Estey would bring out this new line of miniature reed organs at a financially perilous time, Dennis replied (October 2025):

*From a business point of view, my guess is that, as the country struggled with the Depression, Estey was determined to forge ahead and plum markets that were poorly identified and under-exploited.*

*During this time, the Federal Music Project (FMP) provided jobs for unemployed musicians and music-educators, who in turn offered free music instruction to children and adults in schools and communities across the nation.*

*So Estey's community-minded philosophy may have encouraged testing this new marketing arena, especially in a time when music was on the ascendency in response to hard times. Music is good that way ...*

There is plenty of scope for more research on these cultural factors and their bearing on the Estey Organ Corporation/Company in Brattleboro, Vermont, which survived there until 1960.

## SERIAL NUMBERS, LABELS, AND THE ESTEY ORGAN CORPORATION

In general, Estey consistently followed a linear serial number listing starting no one knows exactly when or with what

number, but fairly reliably from at least 1855 (the founding of Estey & Green). Moreover, Estey reed organ serial numbers seem consistent across the various iterations of the company—Estey & Green, Estey & Co., J. Estey & Co., Estey Organ Company, and Estey Organ Corporation—forming a continuous run of consecutive numbers.

The earliest Estey serial number in the ROS Database, 745, is tentatively assigned the date 1851 (+/-) and is likely spurious, since the instrument is attributed to the “Estey Organ Co.”—an entity which did not exist at that date. There is no picture of it to help make any guesses about its origin. Estey & Green melodeon serial number 5894 is reliably dated to late 1857 (Myers, 2014). The same article derives a production rate of 43 melodeons per month for the previous six or seven months. Projecting that rate arithmetically back to the beginning of the Estey & Green enterprise in 1855 (an admittedly risky undertaking!) would produce a beginning serial number for that firm of 4991. It is unlikely that melodeons #1–#4990 were manufactured in the various shops renting space on the second floor of Jacob Estey's plumbing establishment and elsewhere in Brattleboro over the previous nine years (back to Estey's claim of origin in 1846). This leaves one with the assertion with which this section opened.

George A. Prince of Buffalo, New York—Jacob Estey's primary rival in melodeon manufacture—was producing instruments under his own name in 1846–1847 and had produced more than 16,000 melodeons by 1855 when Estey entered the reed organ world under his own name as the firm Estey & Green. The author owns Prince melodeon s/n 381, which can be reliably dated to 1847 on the basis of its case and wind system designs (described in Myers, 2021). Such a low serial number in the first year of the company's life suggests at least the possibility that Prince began numbering his instruments sequentially from the first. Prince serial numbers—which encompass all the models of reed organ his company produced—are also reliably sequential.

In and after World War II, Estey reed organ serial numbers present a different kind of problem. For one thing, war production regulations forbade the manufacture of “non-essential” products starting in 1942, as noted earlier. Estey delivered 1,200 folding chaplain's organs on a US government contract in March 1941 (Leonard, 2013, p. 179), but from 1942 until 1948, the company produced almost no reed organs. (Of the 32 reed organs listed in the ROS Database between 1942 and 1948, half are military-issue chaplain's organs, and the others cluster around each end of the period.) Secondly, although earlier Estey serial number labels sometimes included hand-written dates, almost none of those pictured in the ROS Database after 1933 do. With the reorganization of the Estey Organ Company in 1933 into the Estey Organ Corporation, at least some serial number labels began to carry that corporate name. The metal plaque on Estey Miniatures always says “Estey Organ Corporation,” but the paper serial number labels inside sometimes use the older designation of “Estey Organ Company.” The subject of restoration in this article is a case in point (Figure 7). ▮

[To be continued in the next *Quarterly*...]



**Fig. 7: Remains of the serial number label on ROS Database #7138: “Company” can just be made out.**