

Biography of Anton Rokos Assistant Installer and First Curator Of the Spreckels Organ

Anton Rokos was born February 25th, 1861 in Milesovic, Bohemia. He became a skilled wood craftsman was employed as an inlay artist for a furniture manufacturer in Bohemia. Some of the pieces he worked on were purchased for the Emperor of Austria, Franz Josef.

He married Maria Burgersdorfer in Vienna in November of 1886.

The thirty-year-old Anton immigrated to the United States in May of 1891. He worked for three months before sending for his wife and their young sons, Josef and Anton Jr. They lived in Salem, Ohio then Detroit for a short time before moving to Los Angeles in 1901.

Anton worked for Murray M. Harris Organ Company in Los Angeles. His assignments included selecting trees from the forests of Oregon for pipe wood.

The Austin Organ Company of Hartford, Connecticut was selected to manufacture the organ for the Spreckels Organ Pavilion to be built for the Panama-California Exposition of 1915 in San Diego's Balboa Park. The Austin Company contracted the Murray Harris Company to install the organ for them in San Diego.

Harris sent two of their most skilled staff for this mammoth undertaking, Edward Crome and Anton Rokos. The Spreckels brothers, Adolph and John, who gifted the organ and its ornate pavilion to the city and citizens of San Diego never did anything halfway, and this was to be the world's largest outdoor organ. For Anton, it was the dream assignment of a lifetime. They began their work at the exposition grounds in 1914 once the pavilion to house the organ and its 3,400 pipes was constructed.

The Pavilion structure included a tiny apartment in the space provided for the longest organ pipes. Here Anton lived for most of the time he was installing the organ and during his continued work as its first Curator. The single room was drafty and had no heat or running water. Anton contracted tuberculosis in 1915. This was complicated by pneumonia during the very damp winter of 1916. Though critically ill, Anton continued his work to keep the organ functioning to its enormous capacity. On February 9th, a worker in the Pavilion found Anton, collapsed from sickness and exhaustion, at the foot of one of the ranks of pipes. He died later the same day.

In 1915 southern California was experiencing tremendous population growth. The San Diego City Council, seeing its water reservoirs at a worrisome level, hired a rainmaker, Mr. Charles Hatfield, to end the drought. There followed rainstorms of biblical proportions during January and February of 1916, so much rain that the train trestle across the San Diego river to Los Angeles was washed out, ending train service for over a month. Anton's remains had to be transported back to Los Angeles by ocean steamer for burial.

He was laid to rest at the Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles.

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