

# The Man Who Made José Albino Baca's Piano

by David L. Geary, Ph.D.



*Jose Albino Baca*

A team of historians from El Rancho de las Golondrinas, New Mexico's living history museum, in Santa Fe, recently visited Las Vegas' historic Plaza Hotel to learn more about its famed piano.

The piano, one of the finest made in the 1800s, was ordered from New York by José Albino Baca, a local prosperous rancher who had 95,000 sheep, and transported by freight wagon to Las Vegas over the Santa Fe Trail.

Among the Las Golondrinas historians was Roberto Baca, the great-grandson of José Albino Baca.

Pianos were expensive items in the United States in the early 19th century, and were economically beyond the reach of most households. As the 19th century evolved, competition began to produce pianos that were more affordable and desirable.

By the late 19th century, pianos were purchased by more households and their major competition, the parlor or pump organ, was falling out of favor. More people began to take piano lessons, and sheet music for piano players became very popular -- a way of taking into the home the melodies people heard played on pianos in vaudeville performances.

For those who couldn't play, the player piano with rolls of perforated paper to press the keys down and release them was an option, but those pianos also soon fell from favor. The popularity of radio essentially ended the popularity of pianos in homes.

Up until 1866, most all of the pianos made in the United States were shaped into thick, flat rectangles, but they were called "squares." They were not the upright or kidney-shaped grand pianos common today.

Henry Steinway's square pianos became known as the premier brand through clever and aggressive marketing. That company established its own company town in Queens, New York City, and in the 1860s began to produce up to 1,800 square pianos a year, including very high-end "art case" pianos designed by famed artisans.

Steinway developed more capacity as the many innovations in piano acoustics rapidly occurred. The company also built a fancy showroom with 100 pianos, and on the backend of the showroom built a 2,000-seat auditorium that housed the New York Philharmonic Orchestra for more than 25 years. Ticket holders had to walk through the showroom to and from the concerts.

Against this Steinway production and marketing juggernaut were numerous piano manufacturers, most located in and around New York City. George Charles Manner (birth name Georg Karl Jacob Manner) was one of those manufacturers.

He was born in Germany in 1828, the son of drummer in the military band of the King of Wirttemberg (now part of Germany). The young Manner migrated to the United States in the 1840s, and became a citizen in 1854. He had studied music in Germany, and was a lover of German classical and popular music and opera.

Manner briefly served during the Civil War in a New York Volunteer regiment, enlisting in 1861 at age 33 but deserting in 1862. He began to make pianos in New York City in 1854, at 361 Broadway, but operated in various New York City locations for more than 25 years. In 1858 Manner partnered with piano maker Ernest Gabler, but the two separated to make their own pianos.

In 1866 George Manner launched Manner & Company, and began to make square Arion Forte pianos, which he patented on November 13, 1866.

In 1869 Manner exhibited his Arion Forte before the American Institute, then a top juried competition of world inventions held in New York City. Competing pianos were wrapped in cloth to hide their makers, then played by concert pianists. Manner's piano won top honors, even against a Steinway piano, and a national advertising campaign followed.

The piano was ordered by many, including leading music schools -- and Las Vegas' José Albino Baca.

As to the name of the piano, Arion was a minor figure in Greek mythology who invented the dithyramb, an ancient Greek chorus danced by up to 50 men or boys in a circle. Pianoforte is the original Italian name for piano, but the "forte" was eventually dropped in popular usage.

In 1870 George Manner changed the name of his company from Manner & Company to the Arion Piano Forte Company, which appears on the front of José Albino Baca's piano at the Plaza Hotel. The national advertising campaign was successful, and the New York City manufacturing plant grew to take up an entire city block.

Later in 1870 George Manner sold his company and rights to the Arion name to Covell and Company, but Manner stayed on as the company's superintendent, but became a mere journeyman when the company was purchased by J. Simpson and Company around 1874. Two years later, Manner left the J. Simpson Company and joined with his sons Charles and George, Jr., to make upright pianos in a firm called Manner & Sons.

Charles died in 1879, and George, Jr., died in 1880. Adding to the loss of two sons, a partner allegedly had stolen money from George, Sr. Most of the family soon left New York City, and moved to Dallas, Texas. They lived in a large Victorian two-story home in an upscale neighborhood.

In Dallas, George Manner began the first commercial piano manufacturing company in Texas, but it did not match his previous success with the Arion. He became a well-known musician in Dallas, associated with a German singing society and a Jewish synagogue.

He wrote and published hymns and other music, as well as a special German polka for the 1889 Ft. Worth, Texas, Exhibition. George Manner died in Dallas in 1916, at age 86. He had fathered eleven children through two marriages.

His musical scores are in the museum at Dallas' Old City Park. Manner's second wife, Katarina (Catherine) Elizabeth Sensenstein, was 25 years younger than her husband. She was born and raised in eastern Pennsylvania. She operated a boarding house after her husband's death. She died in 1934.

*(Author's Note: I wrote this for the Las Vegas Optic, based on the recent trip of a team of historians from El Rancho de las Golondrinas, New Mexico's living history museum, to the Plaza Hotel to learn more about its famed piano. I was one of the historians. I hope that you and the readers of the Las Vegas Optic will find this article, and the photos that accompany it, informative and useful. The photo is of George Manner, the maker of José Albino Baca's piano in the historic Plaza Hotel, Las Vegas, N.M., with his granddaughter Kathryn, in Dallas, Texas, around 1905. Photo courtesy of Carter Jefferson.)*