

# Johann Traugott Wandke

## 1863 Workshop and Home

*Although he worked for more than a year on the Bethlehem Lutheran Church pipe organ he never accepted any pay for his services.*

In 1855, at age 47 Johann Traugott Wandke (1808-1870) sailed for two months with his wife Christiane (1808-1900) and his two daughters, Karoline (1837-1910) and Christine, from Bremen, Prussia (Germany) arriving in Galveston, Texas. Upon arriving on the ship Weser on May 4, 1855 Wandke and his family went inland settling in La Grange, Texas. In 1860, Wandke and his wife moved to Round Top to live with Karoline and her husband, Zöllestin Pochmann (1835-1862). A skilled craftsman and organ-maker, Wandke built seven organs in various Lutheran churches in Texas.

Wandke's Round Top stone building was erected in 1863 as a workshop and living quarters for Wandke until his passing on December 21, 1870. The building is still located at Bauer-Rummel and South White Street in Round Top. The ground floor was his workshop where he built seven pipe organs and other furniture the second floor was his home.



Then, in his mid-50s, Wandke in 1866 began work on the largest of the pipe organs he built in the Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Round Top. The master pipe organ builder, was erecting the celestial organ in the loft of Round Top's Bethlehem Lutheran Church, he was confronted with the problem of tuning the pipes.

Tradition says Traugott took the pitch from a small German reed organ. Some accounts say the organ was in his home; some say it was in his shop two blocks from the church. Anyway, Traugott would take the pitch for each pipe of the new church organ from the corresponding reed of the small organ and would carry the tone by voice and ear to the church.

Wandke had some modest ability as a musician. He brought with him an obscure book of German chorales. He could play most of them but not much else. He sang in his church choir. Old-timers from Round Top said he would walk through town singing a single sustained high note. They said it was a high G.

*“Guten Tag, Herr Wandke,” Round Toppers would say when the organ builder came walking along, humming like a bumblebee. But Traugott wouldn’t reply. After a while nobody expected him to return a greeting when he was carrying a note in his head. “Ach, here comes Traugott,” they would say, “bringing D to the church organ”.*

There's no hard evidence that he'd ever built an organ before. He might have. But it was common for the people who shaped life in our wilderness to do it without the expertise you'd expect. And, in 1865, Round Top lay on the very edge of the American frontier.

Before his death in 1870, Wandke built seven pipe organs from scratch. It's amazing how well he did at it. Three are around and the Bethlehem Church organ is the largest of the pipe organs he built and is still in use.

The organs were beautifully made. They're self-contained units in fine wood cabinets. Wandke put them together with hand-turned wooden screws (the Wandke hand turned lathe was brought with him from Germany and is on display at the Round Top Area Historical Society museum). He made the pipes from hand-planed wood. His organs are typically about ten feet high and six feet wide. Most of the wood in them is local cedar. They still perfume rooms with a delicate cedar smell.

The level of craftsmanship is remarkable. These are no historical curiosities. They're nice, playable instruments. They have a gentle, mellow sound. The voicing is uniform and musical. The action is good.

So that's how the first organs were built in Texas. This was a hard and barren land. The first order of business was to bring some beauty into it -- to make it bearable. That's what Wandke did. That's what fired his technological genius. But then, beauty has always been the first business of any technology, in any age.

