

Nostalgia

ROCHESTER'S FIRST WURLITZER AND THE BUILDING WHICH HOUSED IT

by Lloyd E. Klos

Rochester, N. Y.—The first Wurlitzer organ to be installed in Rochester was doomed to a short existence; its cost brought bankruptcy to the owners of the building in which it was located.

The history of the building is interesting if not amusing. It was located at 21 South Fitzhugh Street and parallel to the old Erie Canal. It was built in 1890, first known as Fitzhugh Rink, and comprised an auditorium where "athletic exhibits" were held.

In 1896, the building became known as Fitzhugh Hall, with a reported seating of 2,000, using portable chairs. For nine years, it was used for plays, 6-day bicycle races, boxing, lectures and other sundried events. For bike races, a high-banked wooden track was constructed. Eighteen laps on it was equal to a mile. Ralph DePalma, who later gained fame as an auto racer, rode a bike on this track. Local cyclist George Clune held the mile record for the track which was set in 1903 at 2:11.

Eugene Sandow, famous strong man appeared at Fitzhugh Hall. Later, he was to tour with Lillian Russell's stage troupe. Mike Sweeney, in an indoor track show, set a record for the high jump in 1895 at 6' 5-5/8". Such was the diversity of entertainment offered at Fitzhugh Hall.

In 1905, the name was changed again to the Fitzhugh Bowling Hall, with the magnificent number of 3 alleys installed. In 1909 and 1910, the building was vacant, but in 1911 it came under the ownership of the Fitzhugh Clean Amusement Company which ran the structure as a theater and bowling center.



This building once housed Rochester's first Wurlitzer organ. Photo was taken around 1920 when its name was City Hall Garage. Bridge over abandoned Erie Canal bed is at left. Building was drastically cut back when subway and Broad Street were constructed in canal bed. Property is now a parking lot. As far as is known, no picture was ever taken of the organ. —Lloyd E. Klos Collection.

In 1913, the building became known the Fitzhugh Hall Theater and in May installation of a Style 3 Wurlitzer, the city's first theater organ, was begun. The organ was ready in 2 weeks. Times-Union artist Wallace Bradley, who admits to having been in practically every theater in the city, recalls that the pipes were placed on both sides of the movie screen, with the console in front of center stage.

Newspaper advertising in those days was not extensive, especially with theaters during the week. However, three ads appeared in the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle during June 1913 which are of interest.

In the June 1 ad, it states: "I am on my way and know where I am going — Fitzhugh Hall opposite City Hall. Fifteen minutes listening to the recital of Dr. Gustave Ronfort will help you in your day's task. Fifteen minutes of film plays will make the whole day pleasant. Rest with recreation. Recitals on the \$10,000 pipe organ orchestra (sic) at 12:30, 2:30, 3:30, 4:30, 9:00 and 10:00 PM every week day. Afternoons — 5c; evenings 10c."

The June 8 ad proclaims: "All regular photoplays at Fitzhugh Hall are special. Highly amusing, instructive, morally clean, and suggestive of good thoughts. Dr. Gustave Ronfort will give 15-minute recitals on the Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra."

On June 29, the ad listed "A Fight to the Finish," "Roughing the Cub," "Bob Bunyan Auto" and "When Men Forget." Sidney A. Baldwin of the Century theater in New York City gives organ recitals every week day and evening on the Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra."

The late Amy Croughton, veteran mus-

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The late Amy Croughton, veteran music and drama critic of the Times-Union in a compilation of theater history remarked: "The film 'Quo Vadis' was shown at Fitzhugh Hall at the northwest corner of South Fitzhugh Street and the Erie Canal where many were attracted by the novelty of a pipe organ to accompany the films instead of the usual piano. It was the expense of this organ, however, that took the Fitzhugh Clean Amusement Co. into bankruptcy in 1914." Whatever happened to the organ is unknown, but quite conceivably, it was repossessed by the Wurlitzer Company. Their organs were not bolted to the floor for this very reason — quick repossession in case of default in payment.

From 1915 to 1916 the building became known as the Winter Garden Theater, but strangely is not mentioned in old city directories. In 1917, it became the City Hall Garage for the repair and washing of "flivvers."

In 1923, the name changed again to the Rochester Garage. A restaurant known as Peter Doyle's did business on the ground floor, North side. In 1926, the garage became the "U-Drive-It System Garage," with the restaurant's being run by Clarence L. Ray. When the abandoned Erie Canal bed was developed by the city as a subway with Broad Street above it in the 1920's, the building was cut back drastically on the South and East sides. The remaining structure was known as the Fitzhugh-Broad Building. On the ground floor was housed the Cornucopia Restaurant (later, the Colony) with lawyer's offices on the second floor.

When the restaurant went into bankruptcy in 1954, the building was razed and the property became the Broad & Fitzhugh Parking Lot. Thus the site, where once Rochester's first Wurlitzer organ entertained the public has succumbed to the modern age.

make sure it sunk in. It did. The audience noise abated some during the second stanza, to be followed by a lively one minute ovation.

As mentioned, the attendance came to 3000. A check at the box office revealed that more than 500 tickets had been sold there just before the performance—er—recital. Many more had been sold to the public preceding the concert. It was estimated that about half present were AGOers.

Following the concert, Mr. Nalle was seen hugging a lady in the lobby. In fact he lifted her right off the rich carpet, like a long lost friend. She was — the retired principal of the grammar school Billy attended in his hometown, Fort Myers, Florida.

The New York Times picked up the curious story of supposedly staid AGOers going soft on what has sometimes been referred to as the "courtesan of the organ world" in a flattering article in its July 10 edition. A close friend said it started Billy's phone ringing continuously. It also awakened some advertising agency account execs that they had a genius on tap, right there at CBS. Result: Billy landed a job scoring twenty Post Cereal radio commercials. The exec wanted someone to "spoofer around with the music" but didn't care for soap opera organists. Then recalling that Billy scored a soaper called "Young Dr. Malone," he added, "but that was a jazz score — no schmaltz."

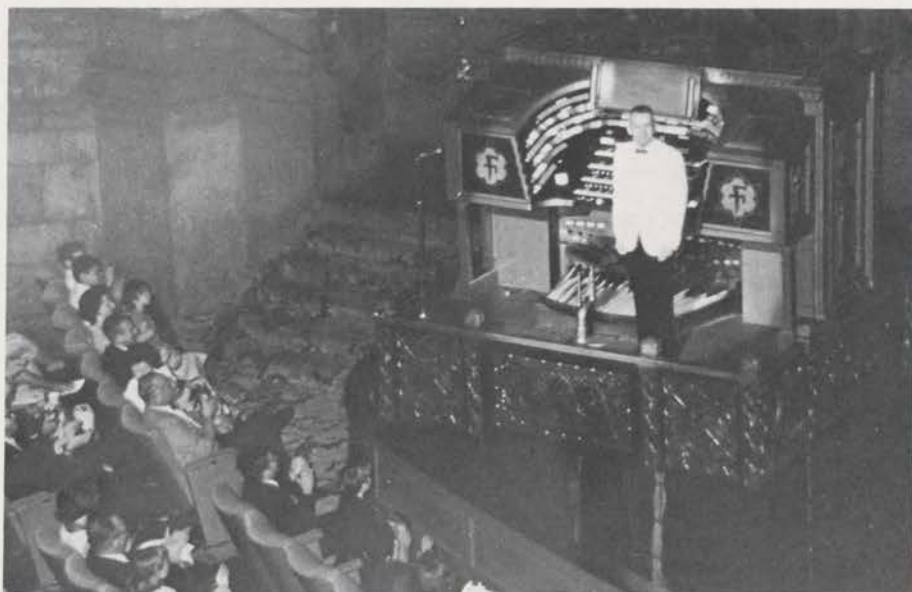
Interviewed briefly in a CBS passageway, Billy recalled his Atlanta adventure with delight — and a deep sense of gratitude to those who's made the recital technically tops. For example, the opener; the theatre darkened gradually to blackout, the organ started up in the dark with re-iterating Cymbals gradually swelling to a crescendo then — Bam! — the clean white spot hit the console as Billy hit the first notes of "Georgia on My Mind," which took him to the top of the lift (celebrated by a brief fanfare based on "Dixie."). Organ serviceman Joe Patten managed the production, which included a stage lighting crew and two men in the projection booth. Production entailed use of the three elevators in the pit. The grand piano came up on its elevator at the right side of the pit for solos played from the organ console. For a clincher the middle elevator rose to fill in the space between the two plateaus to enable Billy to walk across to solo on the piano's 88 directly, a well-embellished "Lover." The audience loved the novelty as well as Billy's musicianship.

Nalle had only praise for his helpers, saying "The Fox crew was completely pro — planned every movement and lighting effect to perfection — the most effective backup I've had in any theatre.

— Bert Brouillon

Afterthoughts :

THE AGO'S FIRST THEATRE ORGAN ADVENTURE



Happy Moment for Billy. The star stands to greet his applauding audience at the conclusion of his console riser.

One thing was certain about the theatre organ concert held during the AGO convention early in July; the conventioners liked it. A number interviewed afterwards wondered what all the fuss had been about previously when it had been considered low camp for a "serious" organist or musician not to wince when the words "theatre organ" were spoken aloud among the cultured.

Of course, those exposed to the theatre instrument in years past probably didn't have the luck to hear the genius of a Billy Nalle — nor to hear an instrument as great as the Atlanta Fox Moeller. Whatever the reasons for capitulation the

young man with the very short hair caused the "Miss Susies" as well as many others to melt on the spot when he met them in terms they understood — counterpoint in the best Bach style — a fugue based on "Alles Was Du Bist" better known to other shorthairs as "All the Things You Are" (it's done on Nalle's Mirrosonic record, "Billy!").

Up to that point the 3000 friends of serious music in the house had been quietly appreciative but hearing the Bach-Kern bit caused considerable audience reaction — so much so that the organist decided to milk a good thing and repeat the entire arrangement to