



CHARRED REMAINS of the once-mighty 4-36, former N. Y. Paramount console in the foreground.

## GEORGE WRIGHT QUILTS?

At first hearing it had seemed so, but as the stunned audience at George Wright's March 4th concert on the 2-10 Wurlitzer in South Pasadena's Rialto Theatre began to second-guess and to read between the lines, certain qualifications began to be apparent.

BOMBARDE'S exclusive interview with Mr. Wright, on page six of this issue, clears up any ambiguities and misconceptions resulting from the supposed "retirement" announcement.

# Famed N.Y. Paramount Wurlitzer Damaged

## Arson Suspected in Fire Which Completely Destroyed 'Mother Wurlitzer' Console, Two Pianos, Few Pipes of Crawford Special

February 25, 1968 will be remembered as a sad day for all theatre organ enthusiasts, for on this day the famous New York Paramount Wurlitzer console was totally destroyed in a fire at the Wichita, Kas., Civic Center.

The magnificent 4-36 Crawford Special was recently purchased by the Wichita Theatre Organ Club for installation in the new Wichita Civic Center Auditorium. It was moved from Los Angeles to Wichita and stored in the basement of the auditorium while preparations were made for installation in the 5000-seat edifice.

The fire completely destroyed the console, as well as two pianos, a bass drum, five or six wood pipes, and a few of the off-set chests. The balance of the organ, including the relays, was not damaged. It is reported that there was no serious water damage as the Wichita Fire Department under the direction of District Fire Chief Zene Fankhouser smothered the blaze with foam.

Arson is suspected, according to Fire Marshall Clarke Longenecker, due to the fact that after putting out the fire in the area where the console was stored, another fire was discovered in a storeroom far removed from the original blaze. Therefore it appeared that both fires were set in an attempt to destroy the organ completely.



ANOTHER VIEW of damage, showing partially burned off-set chests, ashes of console again in foreground.



DAMAGED PIPEWORK clearly shows in this dramatic photo of a wanton attempt at purposeless destruction.

Chief Fire Investigator Carl Jones indicated that probably more than one person was involved although he stated there were no fingerprints or other evidence to support this. His investigation is continuing.

Wichita's Mayor Clarence Vollmer, expressed extreme indignation, according to the *Wichita Eagle*, at his press conference. He stated that he couldn't understand how people could be so perverted in their attitudes towards others that they would deliberately go out and burn up something which a group of dedicated people (Wichita Theatre Organ Club) had striven so hard to get. Vollmer also indicated that security at the Civic Center site would be increased.

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GENERAL VIEW of storage room in which Wurlitzer was placed for safekeeping pending installation.

It has been reported to THEATRE ORGAN/BOMBARDE that some alleged ill-feelings were engendered through a misunderstanding. Although the organ was purchased by private subscription, some people of Wichita thought the instrument had been bought with public funds, and they objected violently to this alleged misuse of city money. Whether this minority opinion had any connection with the attempt to destroy the organ will probably never be known.

The instrument is insured, according to Mike Cope of the WTOC and efforts are going forward to have the console replaced. In the meantime, the remainder of the organ will be installed as planned.

The loss of the original console, played at one time or another by practically every "name" theatre organist, is a rough blow to all theatre organ buffs, as this console knew the artistry and techniques of Jesse and Helen Crawford, Don Baker, Ann Leaf, Fred Feibel, Ray Bohr, George Wright, Billy Nalle, Ashley Miller, Reginald Foort, plus a host of others. It has held a special place in the hearts of theatre organ enthusiasts.

The world famous Wurlitzer will be operational again as indicated by John Lindstrom, Secretary of the WTOC, when he stated to Stu Green, "Do not despair, the Dowager Empress will sing again in the City of Wichita's new Civic Center. Her golden voice will be carefully watched and maintained by the Wichita Theatre Organ Club."

#### — LATE REPORTS —

As THEATRE ORGAN BOMBARDE went to press, the following late items were received at the Publications Office:

- William Johnson, president of Concert Recordings, has announced that Aussie organist Vic Hammett will appear in the U. S. this year. Scheduled so far are concerts in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Tulsa and Chicago.
- George Wright, sworn off Southern California appearances for the time being, has presented two major concerts on the East Coast: at Detroit's DTOC Senate Theatre on May 4, and at Rochester's RTOS Auditorium on May 11.

## WRIGHT PLAYS TOP-FLIGHT CONCERT BUT IS IRKED BY CHRONIC CIPHERS

On March 4th, George Wright played a concert on the 2/10 Wurlitzer organ in the Rialto Theatre, South Pasadena, California. The first half of the program consisted mainly of classics, a medley of remembered newsreel themes, and a special arrangement of "Sweetheart of Sigma Chi" (the composer was in the audience, which came close to being a full house). There was some trouble with the organ during the first half, mainly brief ciphers. The second half of the show offered more familiar music—Kern—Berlin—mellow oldies, according to our man on the spot, Lyle Nash. The organ continued to cipher intermittently, and it was obvious that it bothered George more than his audience. Toward the end of the concert George made an announcement that some people interpreted as a "retirement" statement. As always, a bit of fantasy was injected in the story with each retelling after the concert. To clear up all misunderstandings we contacted George and found him willing to talk about his decision. His clarification is offered in the following exclusive interview.

### Decision Not Arbitrary, Declares George

The decision announced by George Wright to make his March 4th concert his last in Southern California, was qualified, as those who listened carefully know, with some reservations. The decision applied only to "theatre pipe organs in theatres—as they now exist." The decision doesn't preclude concerts on electronics, on church organs or if someone should come up with a dependable Wurlitzer.

The BOMBARDE interviewed George Wright shortly after the concert which contained his bombshell pronouncement, which some mistook for a "retirement proclamation." Not so, says George.

**The root of the trouble may be traced to the instruments in the Crown (3-11) and Rialto (2-10), both Wurlitzers, which George prefers. Both have been damaged by vandals, buffs and weather. These had taken their toll long before systematic repair was started by John Curry. Both John and George worked for days before each concert to bring the instruments up to concert "snuff" and the results were usually satisfactory to audiences—but not to George, who is his own roughest critic.**

In the case of the Rialto organ, it had been rained on (through a defect in building design) so many times that the wood has deteriorated to the extent that "strange manifestations appear along with drastic changes in our unpredictable California weather" as George puts it.

"Up to the day before the concert the organ was working well and sounding beautiful—and I was delighted with it," states George, "then, on Monday, the weather took hold—and it seemed the organ was falling to pieces. Tremulants sagged because of the dry, hot

weather and attempts to adjust them to compensate were fruitless. Relay notes were shorting and sticking because the wood contracted and expanded in the interior channeling. I've never run into anything like it. Things popped up faster than John and I together could repair them."

George has special praise for John Curry, who has done his best to maintain the Rialto organ against rough odds. "John has always given of himself above and beyond the call of duty." And he has warm words for Fox West Coast manager Don Boxwell and Loew's Bob Honohand, "I couldn't have gotten nicer treatment from either chain—and that goes right down the roster to sweet gal cashiers, usherettes—and, yes, janitors, too."

Then George spoke of the chain of events which led up to his announcement.

"When I started playing Monday night (March 4th), I had no idea of the announcement I would later decide to make. But the organ just went from bad to worse—and I somehow knew 'that was it'—and finally told the audience so. Believe me, it was a tough decision to make. It was not arbitrary—nor spur of the moment.

"I simply was not able to properly demonstrate my talents to a marvellously receptive audience—people who have supported me so loyally."

The decision will result in a sizeable annual financial loss to Wright, but he stated that he would rather lose the money than the respect of audiences: "I just felt that I had to quit while I was reasonably ahead—because the organ situation wasn't seemingly going to get any better."