



Back in Action . . .

Devoted Buffs Restore San Diego Fox Morton

When a determined group gets together and sets its collective mind on restoring a long mute, damaged organ, things not only start to happen; they get done.

In this case the instrument is the 4-31 early model Robert Morton organ in the Fox theatre, San Diego, the only instrument left in a theatre in that seaport town. The organ has been the subject of several abortive restoration attempts over the years but each time the restorers gave up; there wasn't much point in restoring an organ whose console seemed permanently doomed to a spot backstage. The console had been moved in order to make room in the pit for a large orchestra during the period the house was used for the presentation of operas.

What kind of people are so determined to repair a sleeping giant? They come largely from the great industries based in San Diego. One is a physics scientist—a Ph.D. Others are electrical and electronics engineers mostly from General Dynamics Convair. Three are employed by Bell Telephone as engineers. Two are from the staff of a well-known San Diego music store—from the organ department, naturally.

By name they are R. G. ("Bob") Wright, A. B. ("Archie") Ellsworth, W. L. ("Perky") Perkins, R. D. ("Bob") Riska, D. P. ("Don") Snowden, I. W. ("Pinky") Pinkerton, W. R. ("Wayne") Guthrie, Paul W. Cawthorne, and C. R. Lewis. We are indebted to Robert Lewis for the background information which makes this story possible. Another member of the crew, Jim Westwick, spent more than three months with the crew during the initial "dirty work" (e.g. cleaning the chambers of years of accumulation of dirt—and the console—well, we'll go into that later. Jim is now a civilian engineer with the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers in Florida. There are very few ATOEers in the group. Note that none of the restorers is pictured in these photos which were shot by Bob Lewis and Archie Ellsworth. We hope to introduce "the guys who fixed the organ" in a second article.

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TOP (l to r): Lefthand "Main" Chamber, showing one mitered Violone at left. "Orchestra" Chamber pipework—Oboe Horn, Doppel Flute, Kinura, Saxophone, Solo String, Muted Trumpet. Chamber is in right wall of auditorium. At right, the console drawers at bottom of each jamb house switches to set combination pistons. LEFT: Lefthand "Solo" chamber has a Fern Flute, Viol Ethoria and Vox. BELOW: Left and Right "Main" chamber pipework.





ANOTHER VIEW of the left-hand "Echo" chamber, showing the medium-scale Vox Humana. All three ranks in this chamber are at 8' pitch; all Echo ranks are played from top manual, but may be coupled down. Both Echo chambers are controlled by one swell-shoe.

How did it all come about? It started when the present manager of the Fox, Bill Mauch, arrived last year to take over his duties after the death of the former manager. Exploring his new charge, Mauch noticed the console backstage and asked one of the janitors if that was all that was left of the organ.

The janitor replied that there were also five rooms full of pipes. With this encouragement, Mauch phoned his friend Bob Riska for advice on how to go about getting the organ going. Riska was aware of a ground swell of enthusiasm for pipes in the San Diego area, one which had periodically resulted in short-lived attempts to repair the Fox organ. Yes, there was a man who had "Phoenixed" pipe organs back to life, including the one from the La Jolla Granada—a Morton which blossomed forth into a four manual beauty in the hands of C. R. (Bob) Lewis. The result was a written agreement clearly stating all foreseeable conditions relative to the organ for the benefit of owners and restorers.

Then Bob Lewis called in "his boys"—all organ owners except for Bob Wright, a man who knows plenty about restoration, considering that he had done so much toward restoration of the ancient sailing vessel *Star of India*, now docked as a museum of the age of sailing ships in San Diego harbor. The town is mighty proud of its new landmark, the "Star." Wright also appears to have some Tarzan in him. He volunteered to work on the tremendous unenclosed 16-foot pedal Diapasons which are elevated some 65 feet in the air backstage. The route to and from them calls for considerable physical agility and some iron nerve.

The newly assembled restoration crew faced the usual "off hours" bugaboo endured by all who attempt to work in an operating theatre. They finally decided to confine their in-theatre hours to Saturday and Sunday mornings—about 8 hours a week. But that didn't include homework.

The most demanding task was the console. Left uncovered in an out-of-the-way corner of the stage, it was gouged, scratched, cracked, split and filthy. While it was still in the pit, years ago, someone had obviously taken a running jump to the stage and had used the console as a step. Result: several keys sheared off, others dislocated.

Uncounted generations of mice had found in the console an ideal storage for peanuts and popcorn pilfered from an enterprise that at one time functioned in rented space backstage to make and box popcorn for many local theatres. Bushels of popcorn and peanuts (once through the mice) were scraped from the woodwork. In fact, the entire console had to be stripped down to the bare shell. Paint, varnish and guano had to go. All keys were removed and repaired, or replaced. Two hundred and fifty-six stop-action pneumatics were removed, re-leathered and replaced. Some 300 feet of neoprene tubing replaced the rotting original rubber tubing used to conduct air to activate the stop keys through the pneumatics when a combination piston button is pressed.

As the console repair loomed ever larger, the crew despaired of ever getting it done at the rate of 8 hours a week. So they trucked the console to the home of Bob Lewis in Rancho Santa Fe, where the restorers could go at it night and day. As we said—"homework." And that also left the console restorers free to work in the Fox chambers on weekends. Between Dr. Don Snowden, who did the console re-leathering, and Lewis, who did the remainder of the console refurbishing, the big keydesk was ready to go back just after Thanksgiving.

Meanwhile, back at the Fox, a new concrete lower floor had been poured. With a minimum of ceremony the console was dollied in through the lobby, down the smooth new concrete aisle to the pit, lifted two feet over the pit rail by willing hands and deposited in its normal position.

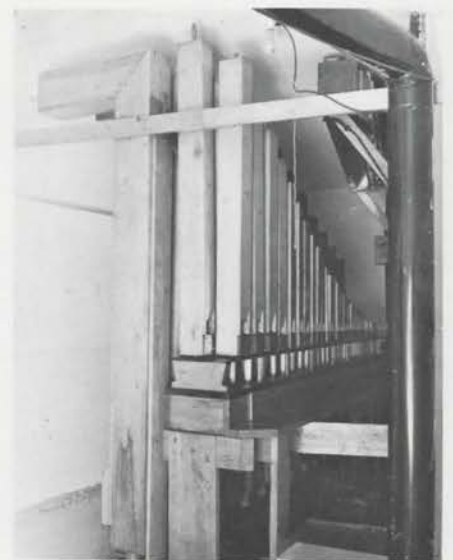
Under a false floor in the pit were the "spreaders," the console cable terminations which had been unsoldered from their normal positions in the console at the time the console had been moved backstage. The console had been disconnected carefully, in contrast with the usual hacksaw job (directly through the cable) encountered by so many re-

storers—as though those who ordered the removal anticipated an eventual restoration of the console to its rightful place in the pit. Even so, the spreaders, once located, were found to be covered with the residue of years of moppings with "green soap" solutions, which had leaked through the improvised pit floor. But, as Bob Lewis says, "It all came out in the wash." The spreaders were reconnected to the console and the first sounds from the awakening giant were heard on the Saturday before Christmas, 1967. The first sounds were admittedly on the rusty side, but they became more mellifluous as time and tuning progressed.

A happy development was the co-operation of the owner of the Fox building and organ, Mr. Philip Gildred of San Diego. Mr. Gildred has been so overwhelmed by the progress made that he volunteered to pay the bill for the missing pipes which must be replaced before the restoration can be completed. That wasn't in the original agreement. Normally, each of the restorers contribute to a "kitty" to provide an operating fund. But the building's owner, shortly after the organ had been winded and played for the first time since the mid-'30s, stated, "...to hear the organ once again has taken twenty years off my life." Organ enthusiasts would be fortunate to encounter more owners of Mr. Gildred's mold.

To date, all chests have been opened to check the leather and for cleaning; then they were revarnished. All pipes have been cleaned and the wooden ones refinished. All damaged pipes have been repaired. The chambers look "like new."

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RIGHTHAND "ECHO" CHAMBER is "flutey." Pipe complement consists of a Lieblich Gedekt and a Klein Gedekt.

VOX POPS, contd.

movie houses—Eastman, Madison, Monroe, Picadilly and Regent—to help cover his music school expenses. He has lived in Olean since 1934, taught piano and theory, been president of the Olean Civic Music Assn., and still teaches. Practically every facet of Olean's musical scene has felt the guiding hand of Chet Klee.

Dick Simonton and E. J. Quinby were seen on a half-hour TV program relative to a voyage of the last remaining Mississippi stern-wheeler, the Delta Queen, in August. A part of the Jack Douglas series of USA travelogues, the program traced a typical voyage of the ship from its home port of Cincinnati to New Orleans, complete with calliope, mint juleps, electric organ, etc.

Oldtime theatre patrons in Chicago and New York may recall organist Raymond Lopatka. He is now enjoying a successful law practice on South La Salle Street in the windy city, and attending theatre organ concerts of the two Chicago area organizations.

George Lufkin from Shelton, Washington, sends the news that Sterling Theatres recently announced that the Granada Organ Loft in Seattle would become a second-run theatre. The theatre will be used most of the time for recent second-run films, but Sterling has promised the non-profit Granada Organ Loft organization several weekends a year to show silent films and present organ recitals. In addition, short organ recitals will be included in programs of recent films. Lou DuMoulin, organist, says that the silents will appear almost monthly, limiting the kinds of silents to be shown to the more popular classics such as "The Gold Rush," "Phantom of the Opera" and "The Thief of Bagdad."

Utterly Useless Information Dept.:

During the summer of 1968, organists Vic Hammett and George Wright had something besides music in common, rather, lack of something—big toenails. While George was hobbling about his studio wearing a left shoe from which the top had been cut away, Vic was practicing for his concert at the LA Wiltern Theatre with a fully shod but tender right foot. Both nails had been lost as the result of injuries. By the time this reaches print, nature should have had plenty of time to make amends.

SAN DIEGO (Continued from P. 6)

Holes in the plaster walls have been filled and all surfaces painted. The refinished chests are complemented by refinished floor frame and walkways. It is beautiful in appearance throughout, in addition to being technically good.

Paul Cawthorne gives the reason for the thoroughness: "Our desire was to refurbish it completely so it would require a minimum of maintenance in the future."

Wayne Guthrie adds: "We wanted to make certain that fine artists will find it worthy of their musicianship."

The Fox organ specification is indeed a strange one for a theatre organ. Most of it was originally installed in the San Diego Balboa Theatre in 1923 where the instrument supplied the scores for numerous silent movies. It was moved to the brand new Fox for that theatre's grand opening in 1929, during which it underwent considerable revision. For a theatre organ it has a dearth of unification, so little, in fact, that all 31 ranks are served by a single row of stopkeys around the horseshoe, with a few located on the backboard above the Echo (top) manual. The arrangement of manuals is unique. The bottom manual is identified as the "Orchestra" and has only six 8' speaking voices, plus couplers. It's more of a solo manual. The next manual up is the "Great" with mainly accompaniment voices and some unification. The third manual, the "Swell," has the most theatrical unification. The top manual controls a two-chamber Echo organ in the back of the house. Then there is one chamber called an "Ancillary" which has no manual at all, although it has a separate swell pedal to control its volume. It's a five-rank string section and it can be switched to three of the four manuals. The Pedal division has six 16' voices, a 32' Diapason "resultant," but only four 8' stops.

Although the layout and unification leave something to be desired, the actual ranks are most theatrical in their nomenclature, as a look at the accompanying stop list will prove. The pipework is installed in five chambers, two on the left side of the theatre, one on the right side, and in two Echo organ chambers.

Most of the group agree that the high point of the restoration work was hearing the organ speak for the first time in many years. Next to that comes the whirlwind visit of Dave Schutt, a pipe aficionado of many years and one with oodles of know-how. As work progressed it became apparent that the pipes would soon have to be tuned. Up in San Jose (near San Francisco), Dave Schutt got wind of the situation, loaded 200 pounds of organ tuning

gear onto a commercial plane and landed at San Diego. The crew was overjoyed to meet Dave but he had no time for amenities.

Dave headed straight for the theatre, set up his equipment and with the help of Pinky Pinkerton, proceeded to tune every undamaged pipe in the organ between Friday night at 12:30 and Sunday noon (with a hiatus during show time Saturday). Then he played a few tunes, packed his gear, said "Thanks—it was fun. When I can, I'll come back and tune 'er up again," and took off for the airport and San Jose several hundred miles to the North.

Archie Ellsworth, one of the Con-vair men, expressed the gratitude of the group with, "One doesn't forget wonderful men like Dave Schutt."

Although plans haven't yet been evolved for the eventual use of the organ in the theatre, already some additions are in the wind. W. L. Perkins of the Finders Music store says: "Mr. Gildred seems enchanted with the idea of a Brass Trumpet, so we are on the lookout for one. This addition, plus some others we have in mind, should result in a versatile theatre instrument worthy of great artists."

The "other" additions planned consist, so far, of a Chrysoglott Harp (the organ has only a wooden harp) and a second Xylophone for the Main Chamber, plus some additional intermanual couplers.

Bob Lewis, who makes his bread as an electronics engineer, gives much credit to the concrete building and the smog-free San Diego atmosphere for the state of preservation of the instrument. He says, "We never found one air leak or even an 'open' or 'shorted' electrical circuit once the console was repaired and reconnected. Despite some missing and damaged pipework, it's encouraging to find so much on an instrument in excellent condition after so many dormant years." This also says much for the original Robert Morton quality and craftsmanship.

As for the missing pipes, they are mostly a few here and there, stolen over the years as souvenirs. One rank of strings looks as though someone, perhaps one of the air conditioner installers, had fallen bodily into the pipes. Some can be salvaged, others must be replaced, and the group has a weather eye out for broken sets containing the missing pipes. The pipework must be complete before big events can be scheduled. But with the lion's share of the project behind them and a friendly, enthusiastic owner egging the group on, there's no doubt that the mighty San Diego Fox organ will once again sing out in all its former glory. —Bert Brouillon