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PLAYING PIPES

Veteran organist Bill Watts, 59, of San Jose, California, is nearing his 50th year as a professional organist.

Watts was born in Los Angeles and as a child would go to the downtown theatres to listen to the best organists there, he relates.

At the age of nine, he got a job in a theatre passing out handbills.

"The organist (at the theatre) let me play a little and I just kept on going," he says.

As a teen-ager, Watts was a regular organist at the theatre, playing during newsreels and silent flicks.

Watts played in "big theatres, little theatres, and everything else," he says, until the advent of the talkies and the Depression knocked him out of a job. He played the last silent film in Los Angeles at the old California Theatre, then "went around playing for nothing and everything you could think of" to make a living, he says.

In 1935, the first Hammond organs came on the market, and Watts found there was a demand for organ salesmen and teachers. The organ became a household item for many.

Watts and his wife, Dee, moved to San Jose, California, in 1956 and he began playing at clubs in the area. He also spent considerable time teaching, demonstrating, and playing for organ clubs.

Upon installation of the organ at the Cap'n's Galley, Santa Clara, Calif., Watts was engaged to put a half-century's accumulation of music to work, although he admits, "A lot of it I've forgotten because I haven't used it for so long."

He's more than a little critical of the way movie theatres are operated these



Silver Springs, Md.

T.O. Enthusiast Hosts 200 At Theatre Organ Bash.

On June 30th, George Merriken's Wurlitzer Music Hall, Silver Springs, Md., held its ninth annual June concert, with Dick Smith of Baltimore doing the honors as guest organist. (This installation was featured in the Winter, 1961, issue of THEATRE ORGAN.)

It was one of those hot summer afternoons, but in spite of the uncomfortable weather, over 200 friends and guests of George and Mickey Merriken were on hand to hear Dick play the 3-18 Wurlitzer Special.

As an added attraction Ben Hall gave his own inimitable talk with colored slides and movies, based on his book, "The Last Remaining Seats." The Merriken installation is an ideal setting for Ben's lecture, since it is equipped and furnished with items removed from

days. "Theatres have gone backwards in presentation and quality," says Watts.

"They don't put on shows like we did — there's no mystery in theatres now. You go in and look at a blank screen before the show starts, but we tried to put on a real presentation in the old days," the gray-haired organist says.

"To me, show business isn't the same any more. You walk out of theatres without music, while we played a chaser until everyone was out.

"Theatres have done themselves a big injustice," Watts says, "by not going on with the presentation policy. Now, if you don't like the movie, the show is over. There's nothing else. It just ends there," he explains.

Bill plays organ in the nostalgic style so dear to the avid theatre organ enthusiast. His manner of using the theatre organ brings immediate memories of how it was in the golden era of silent films. Mr. Watts recently acquired a 2-manual Geneva-Smith organ which he is preparing for installation so we can be assured that his happiness with pipes will continue for a long time to come.

doomed movie palaces such as theatre drapes, candelabra, gold murals, foyer furniture, jeweled dream cloth in front of the swell shades, and multi-colored spotlights playing on the gold "Public Modern" style console and drapes.

The Wurlitzer Music Hall is a former stable on the Merriken farm. The floor of the hayloft was removed to accommodate the 16' pedal pipes. A grand piano in front of the swell shutters is connected to the organ console and a 5' Chinese gong imported from Hong Kong is in view beside the console. The gong is operated with a toe stud.

The June concert was Dick Smith's second appearance at the Music Hall and as on his previous concert, he was given a standing ovation for his bright, unique style of playing.

DICK SMITH playing the George T. Merriken 3-18 Wurlitzer Special during Host Merriken's spectacular summer bash.

