

# SYRACUSE KEITH'S FINDS A NEW HOME

Story by Lloyd E. Klos

The Nineteen Sixties can be justly entitled "The Decade of the Transplant." We have transplants of eyes, kidneys and hearts, some of which haven't been the success the medical profession had hoped. In the Renaissance of the Theatre Organ, now in its second decade, transplants of these instruments have been overwhelmingly successful.

Three installations in upstate New York are cases in point—all having been relocated from theatres. The Auditorium Theatre 4/22 Wurlitzer in Rochester, the Roberson Center 3/17 Link in Binghamton, and the New York State Fairgrounds 3/11 Wurlitzer in Syracuse attest to the determination and skill of devoted enthusiasts who have saved three organs for posterity.

On January 26, 1920, Keith's Theatre in Syracuse was opened. Boasting 2,514 seats, it was billed as "The Most Magnificent Theatre in the Universe." From 1920 until 1925, however, Keith's was strictly a vaudeville house. It had an orchestra, but no movies or organ. The theatre's 3/11 Wurlitzer came onto the scene in 1925, as the Wurlitzer list identifies Opus #1143 as having been shipped from the North Tonawanda plant on August 27.

A girl organist, Rubybelle Nason of New York City, played the organ during the first three months after its installation, with Carleton James as relief organist. He became featured organist until 1931, accompanying the silents until 1929 when the talkies took over the screen.

Mr. James recalls three memorable events during his tenure at Keith's. On March 17, 1928 while playing, two gunmen robbed the theatre of over \$4,000. The film rolled on, his music rang forth, and no one realized that the theatre was robbed until he read it in the papers. In 1931, on the death of Thomas A. Edison, the theatre lights were put out for a minute, and Mr. James had to play a memorial number in the dark.

The third incident occurred while he was playing a noontime 45-minute interval. Suddenly, there was a great Bong! Bong! Bong! He was as startled as the audience and exclaimed, "I didn't do it!" As he looked down at the

Photos: Tom Anderson Collection

pedals, a cat was walking across them. Ironically, Doug Fairbanks, a commercial photographer, was in the theatre, and succeeded in getting a picture of the organist and cat.

Paul H. Forster, following his engagement at the Eckel Theatre, took over in the period 1932 to 1936, playing song slides. Luella Edwards Wickham, though not a regular organist at Keith's, did substitute work there during vacation periods. This grand old lady played the Eckel for seven years, and also was featured at the Crescent, Hippodrome, Regent, Savoy, Strand, Temple and Tivoli theatres.

Byron Severance, according to Mr. James, might have played Keith's for a 6-month period, but as to dates, he is uncertain. Severance was featured at the Paramount.

The advent of sound, plus the depression, caused the cessation of organ music in the theatres. With the original cause for the organ's existence gone, and the hard facts of economics present, the Keith's Wurlitzer, like most others, gathered dust in murky silence.

In 1961, a crew composed of Tom Anderson, Harris Cooper, Bill Purdy, Frank Swann and Rochester's Danny Schultz, succeeded in getting the Keith's Wurlitzer into playing condition to be used in a midnight concert on June 27 in conjunction with the regional convention of the AGO. The restorers had

established the first step in the comeback of the organ with several mid-night-to-dawn renovation sessions. Biggest problem was deteriorating leather. The artists for the concert were Carleton James and Allen Mills, and the program lasted until well past 3 A.M. For Mills, it was the first time the Schenectadyan had touched a theatre organ before the public.

Further work involving the finer points of restoration was done when a group of Syracuse enthusiasts, led by Harris Cooper and Al Grant, worked Tuesday night for about a year and a half, releathering the relay.

According to his colleagues, to Paul Fleming must be awarded the accolade for saving the Keith's organ. He was really devoted to it, spending more time than anyone else on restoration work. He worked alone when almost everyone else had lost interest. Bill Hubert and Frank Plante helped him whenever possible.

The author remembers the day in October 1963, when he, in the company of ATOE'r John Roblin and his wife, Fanny, visited Syracuse for the purpose of seeing the remaining organs in the Salt City's theatres. After getting a few bizarre tunes out of the Loew's State 4/20 Wurlitzer, we walked down Salina Street to Keith's.

Through the graciousness of Mr. Dave Levin, the manager, though the movie was in progress, we were given access to the console which was situated to the left of the orchestra pit. Desiring to get a stop list, we sat on the organ bench, and throwing the dusty cover over our head, managed to get the list with the aid of a flashlight. Shades of World War II Army night problems! We were invited to tour the chambers, but access to them could be gained



Original home of 3/11 Wurlitzer, Opus #1143, RKO Keith's Theatre, Syracuse, N. Y.

only via high steel ladders up very narrow shaftways. We could have accomplished the venture, but only at the risk of getting our clothes ready for the dry cleaners. A Stu Green NEVER could have made the ascent!

In November 1964, newspaper headlines announced that Associated Dry Goods Co. had taken over the property on Salina Street which included both the Howard and Keith's theatres. Plans were underway to demolish the block of structures and erect a modern store. Enthusiasts rallied to save the Keith's organ and find a home for it.

In the Spring of 1965, the Syracuse Theatre Organ Society was formed and launched an ambitious program to raise the necessary funds to remove the organ from the theatre and relocate it. Under the leadership of Paul Fleming, who had completely re-leathered the organ a few months previously, the informal, non-chartered, non-officered group handed out pledge sheets at its concerts, asking for donations. Dr. Charles Kaelber, who got the "organ bug" while associating with organist W. Stuart Green in the golden days in Syracuse, also was a prime mover in the project.

The State Exposition Committee of the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce met with the STOC to discuss the possibility of saving the organ for future generations. Through investigation, it was learned that other related instruments and artifacts were slowly being lost to time and that the majority of them were in the hands of private collectors. The idea of a museum was born in this meeting.

In March 1965, it was learned that a west coast organ broker had bought the Loew's State Wurlitzer, which stunned the restoration crew of that instrument. This misfortune served as a spur to those wanting to save Syracuse's last theatre organ, Keith's. On March 23, Luella Wickham thrilled a Sunday morning crowd of 1800 at Keith's and on June 27. Dean Robinson, former theatre organist from Himrod, N.Y., lent his talents in another enjoyable and well attended program.

In June 1966, the New York State Board of Regents approved the charter for the Empire State Theatre and Musical Instruments Museum. It was an historical first, and through the Exposition Director, Harold L. Creal, and other state officials, museum space was obtained.

A "Glimpse of the Past" program was given at Keith's on June 14, 1966. Well-attended and money-producing for the organ fund, the program consisted of music by Karl Cole, Carleton



*Luella Wickham at her March 23, 1965 concert.  
RKO Keith's Theatre, Syracuse, N. Y.*

James, Luella Wickham and Paul Forster. A silent movie and 12 acts of vaudeville, including the Pompeian Players, filled out the bill. It was the last time that the organ sounded for the public in its original home.

In six months, Keith's Theatre was closed, the sad day coming on January 5, 1967. Just as the theatre's counterpart in Rochester, the RKO Palace, had a final fling in the headlines during its demolition (a workman was pinned between girders high above the stage, drawing a huge crowd), so did Keith's, though with more tragic results. On May 26, 1967, the rear wall collapsed into Clinton Street during the noontime traffic rush, killing one and injuring three others.

The removal of the organ from Keith's is a most interesting story by itself. First task, involving five months of evening and weekend labor, was spent marking, tagging and identifying the thousand parts of the organ. Blueprints were drawn of the original installation, and all parts carefully noted and scaled so that they could be evaluated, and locations figured for the organ's new home.

Disassembly began in the fall of 1966 with the packing of over 1,000 pipes. Each had to be individually wrapped for protection by being laid carefully into long cardboard boxes which were filled with shredded paper. Paper was fitted around each pipe to assure its not hitting its neighbor. Then came the removal of the wind lines. A label was affixed to each duct, indicating its position, and the screws put into plastic bags, sealed and taped to the duct.

Removal of bracing and other supports came next, as well as many of the smaller items which could be easily damaged, such as portions of the toy counter and percussion sections. Then, to the blower and relay room where 3,500 electrical connections were unsoldered, identified, and carefully protected from damage in transit.

The heavy electrical cables, which enabled the console to control the pipes, had to be snaked across the high, treacherous steel work at the top of the theatre. These coiled cables, some weighing 1,000 pounds, had to be carefully lashed together to obviate damage to the fine copper wires in them. Large items had to be left in position until the organ was moved, due to lack of storage space.

About this time, the blower and generator were disconnected, and reservoir springs packed, each labeled. Aching muscles were the order of the day, the result of many climbs up and down the ladders in the narrow shaftways to the chambers.

Then came the big problem. Originally, the organ was built into the theatre and then bricked up. To get the organ out, a hole had to be cut through a 21" brick wall at one side of the theatre. This took a couple of weekends with the aid of an electric hammer, similar to those used on street pavements, though smaller.

On the weekend of January 7, 1967 and finishing the following weekend, large truck loads moved the instrument to its new home. Many of the larger items, such as chests, console, cables, relays and blower, weighed well over 1,000 lbs. each. With devoted Syracuse volunteers giving unselfishly of their time during these two weekends, the entire instrument was moved without any damage, except a mark on one small pipe.

Through the co-operation of the organizations mentioned previously, a perfect location was found for the organ in the second floor auditorium of the Harriet May Mills building on the New York State Fairgrounds. Restoration and installation were done by about a dozen volunteers.

On January 22, some of these volunteers went out to survey what they had wrought in the area where the organ parts were stored. It was a sad looking sight, the parts scattered over a 3,500-square-foot area, most of them covered with a 42-year layer of grime. The casual observer would wonder what one was going to do with all this dirty looking "firewood," piles of ductwork, one large blower, an organ console with faded white paint, and many boxes



Console of the Wurlitzer in the Music Museum as it looks today, restored to original mahogany finish. Solo chamber (left) and main chamber (right) show the care in installing the former Keith's organ.

of pipes. The job which must be done looked hopeless.

A total of 3,500 electrical contacts had to be cleaned of their old solder and reconnected. Seventeen hundred magnets had to be cleaned, tested and adjusted. Over 1,000 pipes had to be carefully cleaned, tested and tuned. Over 2,000 pneumatics had to be removed from the chests, old leather sanded, new leather cut and glued, re-installed and adjusted. The large blower, weighing almost a ton, had to be disassembled, cleaned, and the generator completely rebuilt. The console with its many coats of white paint had to be refinished, its combination action completely releathered and many new contacts installed because the years had taken their toll.

The chimes, chrysoglott and harp would require many hours of patient and careful work to restore them to their original polished beauty. Every piece of wood, every rack, every brace, every chest, had to be completely cleaned, then tested for leaks and finally reassembled.

This is what the volunteer saw, and he knew he had less than six months to complete this task. A work schedule was set up; Tuesday and Thursday evenings during the week, and Saturdays all day.

Paul Fleming and Charles Schubert were leaders of the restoration - installation project. The crew included Tom Anderson; Arnold Biggs, who refinished the console; Mary Helen Cavallero, who cut leather; Dick Johnson; Don and Ren Johnson; Frank Plante; Charles Rich; Lloyd Stevens; Bob Vanderhoek, who rebuilt the blower; and Charles Wainwright.

According to genial Charles Schubert, now organ maintenance chief since Paul Fleming moved to Kansas City, the crew literally "sweated blood" to get the organ playing. The mahogany console was originally painted white with black trim. This was removed, and the case beautifully finished in its natural wood to blend with the interior of the auditorium. The console is located to the left of the stage, though not on an elevator.

The new home for the organ is proving ideal. The 400-seat auditorium is equipped with a stage and complete projection equipment—indeed, a small-theatre atmosphere. The two pipe chambers flank the stage, and access is easily gained by a corridor surrounding this area. Relays, blower and motor are housed in a separate soundproof room behind the stage. The sound of the organ amply comes directly from the chambers through grilles and into the auditorium.

In July 1967, the organ first sounded in its new home, and on August 13 it was dedicated, with Carleton James appropriately playing his old organ. Following the opening ceremonies, Mr. James played the accompaniment for three silent comedies: "High and Dizzy" with Harold Lloyd; "The Masquerader" with Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle; and "Casey at the Bat" with Wallace Beery.

In the fall, Luella Wickham again performed on the instrument in a program from Mozart to "Tico Tico," and included World War I songs in a sing-along. Though in her 70's, this lady can still excite an audience.

On March 23, 1968, following complete re-leathering of the entire con-

sole and stop-key pneumatics, a well-attended concert presented Carleton James again. He played a singalong, then accompanied a silent comedy and some early film cartoons. The program was such a success that it was decided to present monthly shows of this type.

During New York State Fair Week in August, the organ was in almost constant use during daytime and nighttime shows, with Carleton James playing for silent movies. So popular was this feature that people were standing along the back and sides of the auditorium, which caused frowns on the part of fire officials.

On November 17, Eddie Baker (Dr. Edward J. Beeko) played before a near-capacity audience, doing a sing-along and accompanying two silents.

The Musical Instrument Society, most of whose members were automatically transferred into it following the disbanding of the Syracuse Theatre Organ Society, is now sponsoring monthly programs involving the organ. Sometimes it is an organ concert; other times, silent movies with accompaniment. A singalong is part of the show. A few programs are of an educational nature such as the one dealing with movie-making at Ithaca, N. Y., which featured such stars as Pearl White and Milton Sills, between 1912 and 1920. In time, the use of the organ will be broadened, featuring various playing styles and different types of music. It is hoped that additions to the organ itself will be made, a piano being an early goal.

Paul Fleming adequately defines the aspirations of this organization. "The total Museum concept goes far beyond theatre organs as such, but will ulti-

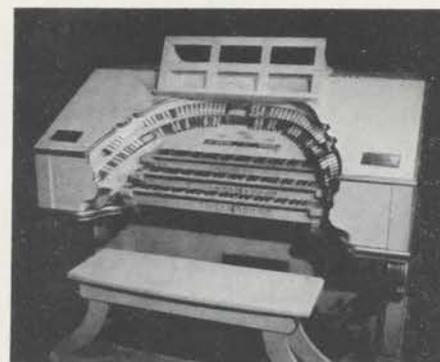
# A REPORT ON THEATRE ORGAN ACTIVITY IN THE UTICA-ROME, NEW YORK AREA

by Donald Robinson

Theatre Organ activity in this Central New York area of the Mohawk Valley has reached a new and challenging level.

The organ in the Stanley Theatre in Utica, New York has been donated to the City by RKO-Stanley-Warner Inc. The organ, a 3/13 Wurlitzer which is being removed, will be rebuilt and installed in an arta high school auditorium with a seating capacity of 1,300.

Area members of ATOS plus other



local organ enthusiasts have formed a group and have undertaken the task of dismantling and removing and to rebuild and install the organ in its new home. The offer of the organ and the final acceptance of the instrument by Utica was the result of much effort. It represents three months of leg work, searching for a suitable home for the instrument, letters, telephone calls, appearances before City subcommittees, full committees and board of directors.

The success in finally getting a unanimous approval of accepting the instrument may be accredited to several factors, principally the salesmanship of the basic principles of ATOS and its effect on the national scene, the rise and success of theatre organ activity in our own neighboring upstate New York cities: Syracuse, Rochester, as well as our own Rome project in the Capitol Theatre and last but not least, the Niagara Frontier Chapter headquartered in Buffalo, which might be looked upon as the "Mother of theatre organ activity in upstate New York." Now in her tenth year of activity, she might smile approvingly at her "offspring" so to speak, that have blossomed over the years outside her Buffalo boundaries, having certainly been an indirect influence at least on their successes.

The acquisition of the Stanley Theatre organ as a restoration project comes after a ten year effort in trying to bring this instrument out of "moth balls".

The final sounds of this instrument came forth on the morning of Saturday, January 25th at the hands of the area's two active theatre organists, Carl Brush and John Seaton who are both organists at the Capitol Theatre in Rome. Dismantling of the instrument began February 1st.

In our next report from this location, we'll briefly summarize the dismantling and removal. This report would be very much incomplete without mentioning our activities in the Capitol Theatre in Rome. The organ is featured regularly on week-ends, Fridays and Saturdays. The instrument is also used during stage shows and community programs. The opening of the United Fund Campaign Program held in the theatre a few months ago featured Carl Brush at the 3/7 Moller.

Finally the Organ Loft Program (which celebrated its seventh anniversary April 20th) continues to serve the FM listening audience with the best sounds in organ music over Utica's FM Stereo Voice, WUFM, 107.3 on the dial, every Sunday evening with the writer as host.

mately encumber the total picture of the American contribution to the field of music from classics to talking pictures. Within this broad scope, we will get into the mechanical aspects, such as projection equipment, the development of sound on film, mechanical musical instruments, records, sheet music, and even the classical side of the family, including early American tracker organs. What we have installed now is the first phase. During the 1968 Fair Week, a second phase was examined as to public acceptance. This was a limited display of historical musical instruments, nickelodeons and antique projection equipment dating back to 1908. With only three nickelodeons, 3,403 nickels went into them in seven days.

"To Mr. Harold L. Creal, president of the Museum, goes much credit for expansion of facilities. This is a permanent public museum. As we grow,



Carlton James at the console, Music Museum.

we will be in a position to offer to both hobbyists and groups doing research, information into the fields which the museum will cover, technical assistance, lending of books and films and other help. The scope is broad, and we are feeling our way to assure that we have a solid foundation upon which the museum will be built.

"As a personal note, I have never worked with such wonderful and enthusiastic individuals, all the way from officers to our loyal and important Museum Society Members."

One thing worries Charles Schubert. That is air pollution which has killed the leathers of many organs in the New York - New Jersey area. A nearby plant spews pollutants into the atmosphere which could be a real organ-killing proposition.

So, another 'organ transplant' is doing exceptionally well. Through perseverance and hard work, Syracuse's last theatre organ has been preserved for posterity; just one more notable contribution to the Renaissance of the Theatre Organ. □

## RANKS OF THE 3/11 WURLITZER OPUS #1143 NEW YORK STATE FAIRGROUNDS SYRACUSE, N. Y.

- 8' Harmonic Tuba
- 8' Diaphonic Diapason
- 8' Tibia Clausa
- 8' Clarinet
- 8' Orchestral Oboe
- 8' Kinura
- 8' Viol d'Orchestre
- 8' Viol Celeste
- 8' Salicional
- 8' Concert Flute
- 8' Vox Humana