

PIPE DREAMS CHICAGO, USA

by L. R. Clarke

The last of two installments on
Chicago's Radio Pipe Organs.

(TOB June, 1969)

With the completion of the Civic Opera Building, station WENR moved (from the Straus Building) to new studios on the 42nd floor. The unusually large studio was equipped with a 3/13 Wurlitzer. When NBC purchased both WENR and WMAQ, the theme for "Amos & Andy" (heard over WMAQ) was transferred to the WENR organ.

Of the many organ programs featured at that time, Irma Glen had one of the most popular on the air. She had a tremendous following and is remembered by so many today as if it were only yesterday.

One loyal listener to her program discovered Irma Glen missing from her favorite listening time. After considerable contact with the station officials by letter, phone, and a personal visit, the fan found the only way to correct a personal grievance was to sponsor a program and at a time most suited to her. For almost two years, this anonymous sponsor paid the "card rate without discount," and Irma Glen was heard one night a week for 15 minutes. Irma Glen knew who her benefactor was, but part of the arrangement was that at no time would her name be made public.

Almost immediately after NBC purchased WMAQ, the station was moved to the Merchandise Mart. However, now that NBC had the use of a pipe organ, they transferred some of the music to the organ, especially theme songs.

Studio rent, cross-town switching, plus rehearsal problems behooved NBC to obtain a pipe organ at once for their 19th floor Mart studios. Several offices were vacated, and a new studio was built which eventually housed a 3/13 Wurlitzer. Evidence seems to indicate that Wurlitzer put the organ together on a rush basis using many parts from cancellations, etc. Several chests were rebored and restamped with ranks not originally on the chests. As soon as possible, all programs were moved to

the Mart. Jesse Crawford was one of the last to move. He did not like the new organ. The higher frequencies of certain pipes did not meet with his approval, and it was necessary to install acoustical absorption panels in the areas of the pipes involved. The room was actually too small to do justice to the instrument. The pressure was most evident, and the sound deafening to a studio listener. The final installation, however, was considered to be one of the finest examples of unification by the Wurlitzer Company.

Even before WENR moved from the Civic Opera Bldg., the studios were busy most of the day. All programs were live at that time. When Dean Fossler was required to play "The Perfect Song" for the West Coast, the studio was busy up to midnight. Some who wished to practice at the organ found it necessary to practice after midnight or very early in the morning.

Jane Harvey was one of these. As often as required, she would arrive at the studio in the early morning hours to prepare for the day or to practice. It wasn't too long before she was aware of a white-haired little old man sitting in the control booth. Although a little disturbing, her co-workers convinced her that it was probably a janitor and the best thing was to try and overlook the whole thing. They all knew that soon they would be moving and, since the little old man was behind glass and at a safe distance, it would be best to



The Smith Family, first family on radio, seen here at the WENR 3/13 Wurlitzer in the Civic Opera Building. Irma Glen was Betty, the daughter, and doubled at the organ for music bridges.

The day arrived when it was required to turn in all keys. On entering the elevator, she was surprised to find the little old man behind her. When they reached the first floor, he finally spoke and asked her to join him for a cup of coffee. She mumbled to herself that after all the annoyance it was the least

he could do, and so she accepted. Very few words were exchanged in the coffee shop. He did manage to say finally, "You love that organ very much, don't you?" With this, she actually, for the first time, looked at him very carefully and was surprised to find him exceptionally well groomed and with a very kind face. His next few words, "I would like for you to come to my office; I have something to show you," got a very unfavorable reaction which he sensed. But he assured Miss Harvey that his secretary would be there. When they finally approached his office, she was most embarrassed to see the name "Samuel Insull" on the door. What he wished to show her was a contract all ready for her signature to remain as organist for his new station which would occupy the very studio she was leaving. The terms of the contract were too good to pass by, and her fellow workers advised her to sign the contract.

Irma Glen, Larry Larson, Lew Webb, Helen Westbrook, Dean Fossler, Jane Harvey, and others helped to make the organ studio a busy place, regardless if it were the Civic Opera or Merchandise Mart Studio. The Chicago-originated children's show, "Little Orphan Annie," was broadcast locally by WGN with Len Salvo at the organ; then the cast would move to NBC where Irma Glen took over on the studio Wurlitzer for the network show. The "Amos & Andy" theme followed, with Dean Fossler at the console. Jesse Crawford followed on the same organ after the acoustical changes were made to his satisfaction. Between the opening and closing theme for "Amos & Andy," you usually found Jesse Crawford either changing combination settings or preparing for his program.

At one time, the "Quiz Kids" originated from the Mart studios. The sponsor was willing to pay the extra \$35 fee for the pipe organ on the opening number. The organist, Howard Peterson, found it necessary to run from the organ studio to the "Quiz Kids" studio where he continued on the Hammond.

Howard Peterson was also staff organist for WLS; but, since the station was not full time, it was possible for him to accept other engagements and he took full advantage of the situation. This was almost necessary, as one week you were staff and the next week you were hired for only specific programs.

Back in 1927, the Barton Organ Company installed a new organ in the WLS Washington Blvd. studio. The

original organist again was Al Melgard. However, Ralph Emerson took over and remained until about 1937 when he left for radio station KOY, Phoenix. Howard Peterson took over for what was to be a temporary stay, as Ralph Emerson said he planned to return as soon as his wife's health improved. His wife, Elsie May Look, also served as organist on WLS from time to time. Things did not work out too well at KOY, and considerable friction developed in the studio. Ralph announced his own programs as usual, and one day at the end of the program told his listening audience that he enjoyed playing for them and also how nice they had been. He then added, "but for my associates here in the studio," and produced a tremendous crescendo on the organ, mouthed an equally hearty Bronx cheer and closed the show.



Howard Peterson at the Barton organ in the WLS Studio.

The studio did not take this lightly, and he was given notice. Whether he had actually planned to return to Chicago is not known, but POY and WLS were owned by the same group and he found his old job was no longer available. So, instead of a temporary job, Howard Peterson stayed on for 20 years until the organ was discontinued.

Around 1944, WLS decided to invest considerable money to revamp the studio. They also invested in a new organ console and four additional sets of pipes. During the next four months, programs came from the Eighth Street Theatre using a Hammond. For the next four months, the new console was used without any workable pistons. Once completed, it was no longer a theatre-type but a regulation church-type console. Walter Golnick, formerly with the Barton Organ Company, did the work. (He was also in charge of the

famous Barton organ installation in the Chicago Stadium.) The old theatre-type console was removed but the pedal board was left behind. It was still there in a dark corner many years later when they vacated the studio.

WCFL — Chicago Federation of Labor — was started in 1926. The original studio was at 826 S. Wabash Avenue in the Brunswick-Balk Bldg. Here we find a studio complete with a 2-manual semi-unit Barton, consisting of one 6-rank chest plus 4 unified ranks. This studio was used for only p.m. programs. All day broadcasting came from a Navy Pier studio, the space being leased from the City of Chicago for one dollar per year. In exchange, they extended free mike facilities to City Hall. Al Carney was the organist from the start and continued with WCFL when they moved to the entire 20th floor of the Furniture Mart, 666 Lake Shore Drive.

The Barton Organ Co. moved the organ to the new studio where it continued to be heard until WCFL's recent move to new studios in Marina City. Eddy Hanson took over after the death of Al Carney and is probably better remembered as the WCFL organist because of the many years Eddy was associated with the station.

It seems like WJJD was always around serving the Chicago area. Years ago, the studio was in Mooseheart, Ill. It had a small Geneva organ which was used for broadcasts occasionally. However, most of the radio programs actually came from the Fargo Theatre in Geneva. Here also a Geneva organ was used which by comparison was more desirable since it was a larger organ with a modern electric action.



Fred Beck supplied WJJD with pipe organ music from a rented studio in the Wurlitzer Building.

Eventually WJJD was purchased and moved to 201 N. Wells St., Chicago. The new owners brought a 3-manual Wurlitzer from the Drake Theatre, and by 1935 the installation was completed. One section of the 21st floor was removed, and this area became Studio "A". The final installation was ideal. Two chambers were built at one end of the studio, and the console was placed at the opposite end.

During the interim from Mooseheart to 201 N. Wells, WJJD continued to find a way to offer organ programs. In the beginning, daily broadcasts came from the Arcada Theatre in St. Charles. Some of these were one hour long, both in the morning and in the afternoon. In addition, the Uptown Theatre organ was also heard with Arsene Siegal at the console. After a time, the line charge from St. Charles was excessive, and other facilities were eventually secured in Chicago.

One enterprising organist, Fred Beck, rented a studio, complete with a pipe organ, in the Wurlitzer Bldg. He used it not only for teaching but also supplied the complete package to WJJD whenever required. Actually, Fred Beck rented three different locations from time to time to supply WJJD with programs they desired until their new studios were ready. Fred did not like to wear earphones and so, as often as possible, his close friend, Hannah Jacobs, wore the earphones to receive instructions from the control room across town and gave Fred the signal — a tap on the shoulder — to continue with the next number.

Hannah Jacobs, hired as WIND organist using WJJD's organ, received word on rather short notice that the organ was ready and she was scheduled to broadcast early the next morning. Having never seen the organ before, she turned to Dean Fossler for expert advice and assistance. She was delighted that Dean helped her even though he had finished the closing theme for "Amos & Andy" the previous midnight.

Of the several former theatre organists heard over WJJD, one was the most capable Harry Zimmerman, who is still very busy in the musical field. You still see his name as musical director on some of our bigger TV programs.

WJJD eventually moved from 201 N. Wells to Michigan Avenue. The pipe organ was left behind and acquired by a church. In its place, we find another electronic organ.

Prior to the electronic, only a pipe organ was available and it was even then considered strictly a matter of economics. As one owner put it, "It

was just a matter of good business; for the price of one organist, I got the equivalent of a 10-piece band."

Those of us who love good organ music recall the pleasure it affords. However, one dear lady somewhere had a different opinion. This lady, and no doubt many others, had lived quietly and probably very peacefully in the Granada Hotel on the North Side. Little did she realize that directly below was a pipe organ in working condition just waiting for someone to find and use. Leave it to an organist—this one being Bob Rhodes—to discover the excellent little Wurlitzer. He promptly moved into the hotel with the definite understanding that he could use the organ if he paid for any necessary repairs, etc. The dear lady may have liked organ music, but having it directly below her bedroom was not appreciated. Also, the hours a professional musician found convenient to practice and record were not exactly the same.

Problems arose. To leave the organ in place would mean an empty hotel—except for one guest. The crowning blow may have been the day Bob Rhodes and Hal Pearl moved a Hammond into the hotel. With this topnotch duo—Hal and Bob exchanging places at either the Wurlitzer or Hammond—no one could escape the music. The obvious solution for the hotel manager was to sell the organ and get his long-time residents back.

THE DECLINE

One by one, the pipe organs disappeared from the radio picture. The convenience of the electronic organ was creating considerable soul searching by management. The portability of the electronic and its compact size were distinct answers to the overcrowded studio facilities. Even if a station was fortunate to have a specific organ studio, the new electronic organ solved many problems. Soon there were several per station in place of the one pipe organ. For soap operas, it proved to be actually more suitable.

The original "Amos & Andy" Wurlitzer was located in the WENR studio on the 42nd floor of the Civic Opera Bldg., 20 N. Wacker Drive. The studio was directly below the penthouse of Samuel Insull. The organ was his pride and joy.

For many years after his death, the organ was not for sale. Finally, it was sold to Mr. Liggett of Burlington, Wisconsin. He fully intended to install the

organ in the Royal Palm Room at his Liggett's Holiday Inn, replacing a small Wurlitzer. After he finally acquired the organ, conditions had changed and he deferred installation of the Insull organ and, meanwhile, had it stored in a trailer. Fortunately, it was resold and given a new home in St. Louis where it is presently installed in mint condition.

The second "Amos & Andy" organ—Merchandise Mart studios of NBC—did not fare as well. NBC donated the instrument to the United States Air Force Academy, Colorado, for the chapel. A committee from the Academy inspected the organ before it was accepted. However, they obtained the opinion of an expert, Walter Holtkamp. He inspected the Wurlitzer which by then was in a Denver, Colorado warehouse. Since the organ had been used daily and was always properly maintained it is difficult to understand an estimate of \$42,818 for the rehabilitation of the organ. The word "rehabilitation" may be the clue. The organ was in excellent condition. True, it was not a church organ. Mr. Holtkamp also quoted \$51,000 to "reproduce the organ in kind." To further justify Mr. Holtkamp and his report, the following is a quote from his letter of February 23, 1951, to the Department of Procurement, United States Air Force Academy:

"The musical worth or suitability of the 'movie organ' for use by the USAF depends, in my opinion, upon:

- (1) A USAF entertainment setup like or similar to that unique theatre conditions and era for which this type organ was especially designed.
- (2) A reasonable assurance of present-day USAF audience approval.
- (3) The availability of an organist possessing the special musical aptitude and showmanship necessary to exploit the unusual tonal resources of the instrument.

As an architect and builder of organs, I cannot recommend the installation of the subject organ for the very limited (and questionable) use for which it is suitable."

Thus, the organ was put up for sale.

Various people purchased parts of the organ. The console, English horn, oboe, krumet, glockenspiel, and xylophone were purchased by Robert Castle of Denver. Bob has often remarked

about the excellent condition in which he found the parts he purchased. Eventually, he plans to install the organ in a new home, one built especially for the organ.

Here in Chicago even the electronic organ has practically disappeared from the radio picture, as live shows have almost been abandoned.

Radio station WLS was sold and the studios on West Washington Blvd. were closed. The organ was acquired by a well-to-do farmer in Indiana. As far as is known, it is still stored in an old railroad station along with a few others he has acquired. Although he has a pipe organ in his living room now, he must have some plans for the other organs he has acquired.

In the basement of the Wrigley Building, we no longer find a pipe organ. Originally, a Kilgen was installed there for radio station WHT. WHT replaced this organ with a 4-manual Page which was removed when WHT ceased operations. Then WBBM moved into the same basement studio and had its Barton organ moved in from the Stewart Warner Bldg. In due time, additional stops were added along with a new console.

Later, the publicity arrangement with WBBM was terminated and Barton removed the organ which they promptly sold. WBBM replaced it with the 3/9 Wurlitzer.

Back in the 30's, CBS purchased WBBM and in recent years closed the Wrigley Bldg. studios. The 3/9 Wurlitzer was donated to the Glenview Community Church where it replaced a Hammond. Believe it or not, they liked the Hammond better. The Wurlitzer was finally traded in on a Moller, and many were led to believe that parts of the Wurlitzer pipes were incorporated in the new organ. The Moller people state that they did not use any portion of the old Wurlitzer.

When CBS purchased the Chicago Arena Bldg. for the new TV-radio studios, they acquired the existing 3-10 Wurlitzer. It was auctioned off and went for \$600. When CBS pressed the new owner for quick removal of the organ, he seemed surprised that he had to act immediately and stated that he would get a truck and a friend and be there the next day to remove it. This statement made them ask just what he meant, and they soon realized that he actually thought the complete organ was the 3-manual white console. He was bewildered to see what was involved, having no idea it was so much. This is the organ that the "one and only" Mildred Fitzpatrick played for

years with unmatched precision. Herb Shriner came to the rescue and purchased the organ, whereupon it was promptly moved East and given a new home. (It is now in a church. Ed.)

The Barton Organ Co. had a rather unique arrangement with the radio station installations. They furnished the organ and also had the option to name the organist. However, organists were always paid by the station. Dan Barton called it a "publicity arrangement." For this, "... at the Golden Voiced Barton Organ" was continually heard over the air every time the organ was used.

Most major organ companies were invited to bid on an organ for the Chicago Stadium. One by one, their bids were received and all were asked where they planned to put the pipes. They suggested lofts in various locations, mostly the four corners. They were reminded that this meant they would be a city block apart and out of the question. Super-salesman Dan Barton was one of the last to be questioned. When asked, he immediately said, "I will suspend the entire organ from the ceiling, and it will be like music from Heaven." This clinched the deal, and they gave him a \$90,000 deposit. A crew of 36 men were kept busy installing the organ. When the first carload arrived, they laid all the parts out on the stadium floor, wondering where it was all going. Little did they realize that 16 more carloads were to follow. The Barton Organ Company was paid promptly and in full for the organ, although rumors were that Barton had trouble collecting and eventually settled for \$60,000.

When the talkies arrived, it killed the theatre pipe organ business overnight. The Barton Organ Company was no exception. They had any number of installations which had been purchased on a 10% down, 10% on delivery, and payments over a 30-month period at 6%. Theatre owners just stopped paying for the organs, and one by one they were repossessed. They were taken back to Oshkosh where they were stored, practically all over town. Barton stopped repossessing them after they filled five warehouses. Barton tried to make a few changes on the repossessed organs for use in churches but this was unsuccessful. The remaining installations were just abandoned, and the publicity arrangements with radio stations was ignored in most cases. Technically, the stations did not have title to the organs, but at that point no one wanted them, least of all the Barton Organ Company. The WCFL organ is gone, and they have no record indicat-

ing what happened to it. After all these years, these "gone" organs are of no concern to Dan Barton but he is consoled by the famous Stadium organ, the \$120,000 installation. It is used every day.



The only other pipe organ heard over the air in Chicago was this Kimball organ at Moody Bible Institute (station WBMI). It was used for dinner hour programs and featured religious music.

When the Chicago radio pipe organs seemed to be at an end, we had a reprieve. Headlines read, "WGN to build new studios on the North Side." This news became a reality in 1961 when they occupied the new building at 2501 W. Bradley Place. Space was again designated for the pipe organ.

Once again, after a complete overhaul by the Wichlack Organ Co. — new magnets, new leather, etc. — the organ was installed in a new 40 x 70 ft. studio. The console is now on rollers so it can be moved to any part of the new studio. Off-white now replaces the previous ebony finish. The horseshoe and manual blocks still show the original wood.

The new installation is now in two chambers, whereas previously it was all in one. A new chest was required to separate the ranks into the two chambers as suggested by the Wichlack Organ Company. The clarinet was moved to the new chest, and the old clarinet rack remained vacant.

A casual conversation between Harold Turner and his close friend, John Peters, resulted in the recent addition of the 11th rank. One day Harold Turner received a set of metal open flute pipes as a gift. The gift was the result of a remark that a soft flute would be helpful for the church music he is also required to play. The new stop — nachthorn 8' — is only available on the Solo manual and at present controlled by a previously unused English horn 4' tab. The empty clarinet rack now holds the new nachthorn 8' rank.

If you were to look into the chamber containing the chimes, you might notice the mike directly in the middle of the room. Since the chimes are mounted on the rear wall of the chamber, they do not sound out sufficiently. The control room is always advised in advance when the chimes are to be used. Only ranks in the opposite chamber will then be used, and as Harold Turner signals the control room they will open the mike which permits a distinct clear pickup of the chimes.

Sunday morning, we hear "Pipe Dreams," a half-hour WGN program which, however, is far too short since many commercials are also aired. The new studio is basically a TV studio; a very modern and efficient room with the latest type of equipment for flexibility in moving scenery, etc., for the various types of programs originating from this studio No. 3. When the organ is not in use, it is difficult to locate. Very few would realize a pipe organ is located in the room unless they happened to notice and realize they were looking at pipe organ shutters. The busy schedule of the studio limits the availability of the organ. Even if there was a demand for organ programs, it is doubtful that the full schedule would permit either a radio or TV organ program. At present, a live pipe organ program is out of the question. Only additional taping would permit more, but this would have to be accomplished on a very tight schedule or at a very late hour.

Yes, except for a very few brief moments, it has been a "Pipe Dream." Thanks to WGN and the artistry of Harold Turner, we are still able to hear occasionally the pipe organ and all its beauty. □

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