

TULSA'S THEATRE ORGANS

by Ron Willfong

Tulsa has had an unusual number of theatre organs for a city of its size. None of these instruments were what would be considered large, the largest being 17 ranks. Most of them were Robert Mortons, with only two Wurlitzers ever having been installed in the city.

The most well known was the four manual Robert Morton, which was installed in the Ritz Theatre in downtown Tulsa. This was a 1500 seat "Atmospheric" theatre and was literally designed with the organ to be the focal point. The console was huge and was on a lift in the exact center of the orchestra pit. The organ itself was designed by the Hamilton Brothers, Wade, the organist, and Howard, who was the technician. It represented some new ideas in that unification and inter-manual couplers were utilized to their fullest, to obtain the largest sound possible from a 17 rank organ.

The organ was presided over by Wade Hamilton for several years after its installation, for organ interludes and radio programs. It was known all over the country in the early thirties by a

mid-night broadcast on radio station KVOO. Mr. Hamilton moved to California in the mid-thirties and at that time Mr. Milton Slosser took over the organ duties at the Ritz, where he and the organ became well known. He played off and on until 1953 and the last time the Ritz was used was in the latter part of 1955, when it was presided over by Mr. Bob Mack for a three month engagement.

Supplementing the Ritz organ was a three manual, eleven rank Wurlitzer which was installed in the Coliseum. This was an arena type building, used for ice skating, hockey games, etc. This organ could very well have the reputation of being played more than any in existence from the time of its installation in 1929 until it burned with the building in 1952. In 1945 it was necessary to completely replace the manual ivories and pedals, because they were literally worn out. The sharps on the pedals were worn off even with the naturals, which were themselves worn out. Some of the ivories on the manuals were worn through to the wood—not broken off, but worn through!

The complete list of Theatre Organs which have at one time or another been installed in Tulsa, are as follows, with their dispositions as far as we know.

Majestic Theatre:

3/16 Robert Morton, installed in 1926, sold to John Clair, Denver, Colorado, 1956.

Ritz Theatre:

4/17 Robert Morton, installed in 1926, sold to Mark Kenning, Dallas, Texas, 1961. (Theatre torn down for parking lot)

Rialto Theatre:

4/12 Robert Morton, installed in 1926, sold to Central Assembly of God Church, Tulsa, 1957.

Orpheum Theatre:

2/9 Wurlitzer, installed in Rialto, formerly named Orpheum, and moved to present Orpheum Theatre in 1927, after a Morton was installed in the Rialto. Sold to Gordon Wright, Dallas, Texas, 1969.

Circle Theatre:

2/4 Robert Morton, installed in 1926, sold to and re-installed in Masonic Temple, Tulsa, 1931.

Coliseum:

3/11 Wurlitzer, installed in 1929, burned when building was destroyed by fire in 1952.

Wade Hamilton Studios:

3/11 Robert Morton, installed in 1928, sold to radio station in Kansas City, Missouri in early thirties.

Central High School:

4/45 Kilgen. This is a concert organ containing many theatre organ stops and is voiced in the Theatre Organ Style. The organ is the largest of this type in the area. It is used regularly for school activities.

Research Project Nears Completion

Readers may recall that copies of an IBM listing of the Wurlitzer shipping list have been available during the past six years. Shortly after the list became available, the project was undertaken to update the list. Over 30 people throughout the United States, England, Australia and Canada have assisted in this project.

Each of the cooperators received an IBM deck of cards, one for each of the organs shown on the list as shipped to their area. Over the years, the information gathered has been coded onto cards. They have then been returned to Judd Walton, who has undertaken this project as a matter of interest to the entire hobby group.

Walton reports that the information received to date has now been key-punched and the first of the revised lists is soon to be run. Before this is

undertaken, however, he has requested that each owner of a Wurlitzer or part of a Wurlitzer contact him, identifying where possible the original installation site and opus number, if known, of the organ or component parts. He points out, for instance, that if someone can identify his Wurlitzer Tibia, installed in another make organ, as having come from a certain instrument, it can pretty well be determined that that instrument was broken up for parts. Such is then coded on the card.

Hundreds of phone calls and letters have been made in an effort to determine as accurately as possible the whereabouts of each of the instruments. At this point, Walton reports, it is not known what percentage of the 2231 Wurlitzers have been coded as removed—whereabouts unknown, still in the theatre, sold intact, broken up for parts, etc.

An appeal is made on behalf of this project to contact Judd by writing to him at the California Farm Bureau Federation, 2855 Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley, California 94705, with information regarding any Wurlitzer organ or component parts of which you have knowledge.

When the project is near completion, revised lists will be made available to any enthusiast at cost, as has been the original shipping list. □

The Worth/Crow Duo — Classical organist, Ted Alan Worth and theatre organist, Andrew Crow, will tour the country with two Rodgers organs — 3 manual classic and theatre style. It will be the first time that two organists have toured together. The duo will include both classical and popular music in their concerts.

