

BERT BUHRMAN and the School of the Ozark's Wurlitzer

by Lloyd E. Klos

When one thinks of the Ozark region of Missouri, he envisions hillbillies, rattlesnakes, hilly terrain, rocks etc. Little does he realize that culture has taken a strong foothold in the area — culture in the form of a magnificent Wurlitzer theatre organ in the School of the Ozarks at Pt. Lookout, Mo. The installation is fast gaining in popularity and will serve as a stopping place on the concert circuit as time passes.

To completely tell the story of this magnificent undertaking, we must first review the background of the man who helped make it possible, organist Bert Buhrman.

Bert was ten when he began playing the pipe organ at St. John's Episcopal Church in Springfield, Mo. He was a student of Glen Stambach, who

served as organist at St. John's and at the Electric Theatre. Bert says that Stambach was an excellent teacher and a fine musician. Recitals were held in the Martin Building where there were several studios and a recital hall.

While attending Kansas City Junior College in 1932-33, Buhrman played

over WOQ, owned by the Unity School of Christianity, using 2/5 and 3/10 Wurlitzers. Bert wonders what happened to these instruments which played by remote control from the Wurlitzer Building on Grand Avenue.

In 1933, he had a program using organ and piano on WHB in Kansas City. The organ was a 3/5 Wicks from the Jenkins Music Company.

While at the University of Kansas at Lawrence in 1934-36, he played organ and piano programs on WREN, owned by Jenny Wren Mills, now in Topeka. Organ programs were broadcast from the Reuter Factory on a small studio organ, and on each new organ in the erection room as it was set up for final adjustments before

Bert Buhrman and the restored console. The wreck caved in the left side, stop rails were sprung, board behind the pedals buckled, and several pedals were broken. The suitable bass button for the accompaniment manual was never found.

(Bert Buhrman collection)



shipping. "The title was changed to 'construction room' for the benefit of the radio audiences," Bert says.

Bert was graduated from the University of Kansas with an A. B. degree and a major in music, which didn't exactly please his pharmacist father who wanted our budding musician to be a doctor.

But, music won out. After graduation, Buhrman returned to Kansas City and joined newly-opened KCMO as musical director. A featured program was an all-girl orchestra which he directed. He also played the organs in the Newman and Main Street theatres, both since renamed. He accompanied slides for sing-alongs, played for vaudeville acts, and gave special presentations. His pay for doing eight shows a day was \$37.50 a week.

From 1936 to 1940, he was working seven days a week, including eight shows on radio and five daily shows in the theatre.

In 1940, New York City beckoned and he hied to the big town as CBS staff organist, a position he held until the end of 1962. He also did equal time with NBC, ABC and the Mutual Radio Network. CBS didn't give any vacation time or sick leave, but offset this by arranging schedules so the artists could accept other assignments. "It was very good," Bert says, "but a good way to wear one's self out!"

From 1943 to 1945, he served in the army. His miseries with asthma prevented his going overseas, and he was stationed at Astoria, Long Island. With a dozen others from Tin Pan Alley, he helped issue the Army Hit Kit. The group also recorded background music for training films and performed other tasks for Special Services.

Following the war, and for the remaining years spent in New York, Bert Buhrman worked 12 to 18 hours a day. In addition to his duties as organist, he did orchestra work which included directing a 20-piece ensemble for "*The American School of the Air*", writing much of the dramatic music.

Among the radio shows which he affiliated were "*Sherlock Holmes*", "*Bulldog Drummond*", and "*Joyce Jordan, Girl Interne*". Television credits included "*Strike It Rich*" and "*The*

Big Payoff".

Gradually, starting in 1936, pipe organs had began disappearing from radio programs to be replaced by electronics which were maintenance-free and movable. So, Buhrman, like many other organists, had to learn the intricacies of the new instruments.

"There were a lot of organists around New York," he says, "but not too many of them got much work. The work was mainly background music for soap operas, quiz shows and commercials. The stations didn't want to use much rehearsal time, so they got people they knew and kept giving them the programs. So, if you got into this little inner circle, it was just great.

"Not until the mid-1950's did the musicians' union, local 802 allow musical recordings on the networks. Every day, I would run clear across Manhattan from CBS to NBC to do a 30-second Crisco commercial.

"But, it was worth it. We were well paid. However, trying to get across Fifth Avenue, especially during a parade, was one of the wackiest things imaginable. Then I'd have to repeat the process in returning to CBS.

"Many of the radio musicians feared TV, and resisted it when it became a

force in 1947. But when the radio shows switched to TV, I went with them. It became even greater. They would record the TV show and continue it on radio for which they had to pay us. As a result, it was almost impossible to take a vacation — the job had become a treadmill."

While living in Ridgefield, Connecticut, Bert played the organ in St. Mary's Church for three years. Here he met the future Mrs. Buhrman, a widow. He was widowed in 1957 as was his wife-to-be. Each had been married twenty years. She was going back to England to live in 1958, but Bert followed her, persuaded her to marry him there, after which they returned to the states.

When Mrs. Buhrman's daughter, Suzanne, desired to enter a college other than one in the east, Bert's suggestion of Drury College in Springfield, Mo. was followed. Here, the pieces which led to the Wurlitzer installation, began to fall into place. Bert had longed to get back to the Ozark region as a release from big-city pressures, having maintained an interest in the School of the Ozarks by contributing to the student fund for years.

On a visit to the latter college, the president, M. Graham Clark, and

Bert Buhrman and the head of the student crew on organ maintenance, James Fisher, clean the reed of a Tuba pipe with a five-dollar bill. National currency does not leave lint when used in this fashion. — (Bert Buhrman collection)



Buhrman in discussing pipe organs, wanted to secure one for the chapel. A church in Springfield, Ohio was giving up its large Skinner because improper chambers prevented maximum effect. The college secured it, the money to install it coming from Mrs. W. Alton Jones, whose husband, an oil magnate, was killed in a plane crash.

For 15 years, Bert Buhrman had played for "The Guiding Light" on radio and later on television. This was his final scheduled program before folding his tent for the return to the middle west.

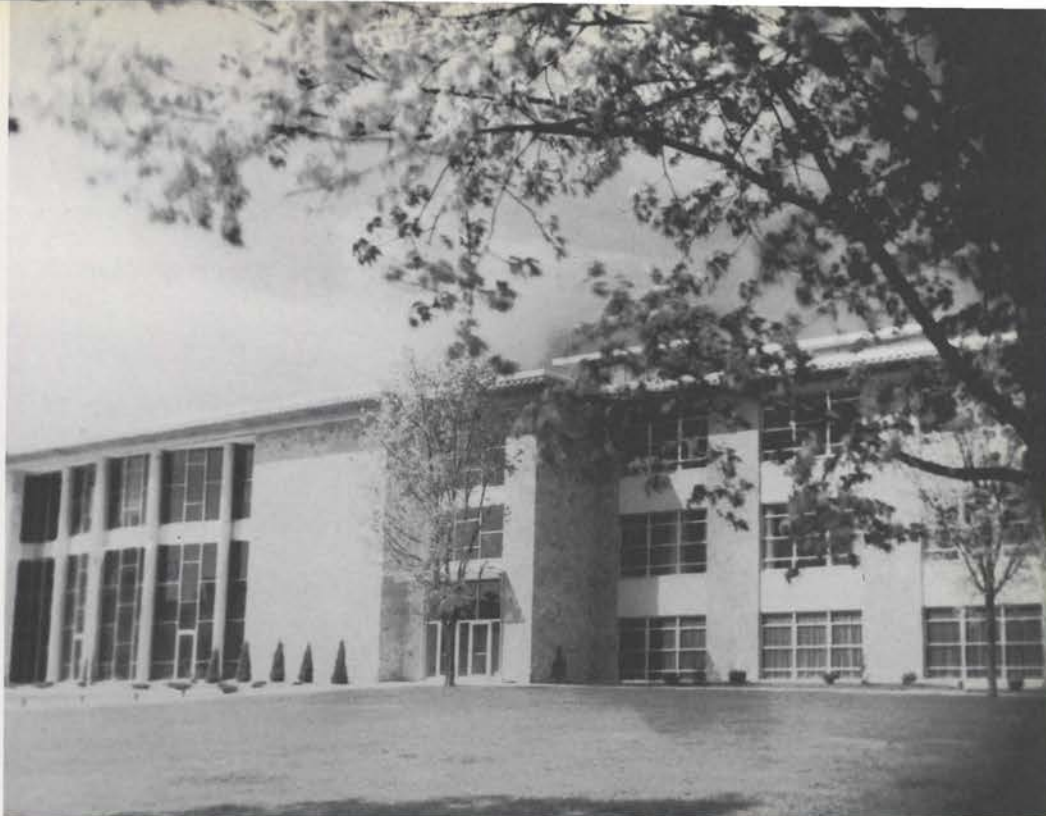
So, in February 1963, Mr. and Mrs. Buhrman closed their Victorian-style house, shipped their possessions, air-expressed their three tranquilized cats, loaded their golden retriever into their Thunderbird and were off to Missouri.

Bert thought he had eased himself into semi-retirement after years of broadcasting, church work and recording, but upon arriving at Pt. Lookout, Mo., forgot about ignoble ease, and continued the strenuous life. His campus duties included overseeing the installation of the 2300-pipe Skinner in Williams Chapel. An electronic had previously provided the music. The Skinner installation was dedicated as a memorial to W. Alton Jones.

"I had been looking for an organ for years to put into my own studio," Bert relates, "but never could find what I wanted. Evidently the Lord was looking after me not to let me get it that way. The new theatre in the Nettie Marie Jones Learning Center had room for an organ, but no thought had been given toward doing anything about it. The large electronic we had taken out of the chapel and put into the theatre.

"I mentioned to Dr. Clark one day that I thought it would be nice for us to have a theatre organ, never thinking he'd like the idea. To my surprise, he thought it a capital suggestion, but how to get one? We had been so fortunate the first time when I found the Skinner up for grabs. Would good luck strike again? But, here is where THEATRE ORGAN Magazine takes a well-deserved bow.

"I tried everything, was successful in nothing until I read in 'THEATRE



The Wurlitzer is housed in this splendid edifice, the Nettie Marie Jones Learning Center. The auditorium is to the left. The College of the Ozarks is 40 miles south of Springfield, Mo. (Bert Buhrman collection)

ORGAN' about the instrument Bob Dilworth had secured for the John Dickinson High School in Wilmington, Del. from RKO. He advised me to contact Walter Froelich of RKO. In the late sixties, the RKO-Stanley-Warner chain was disposing of its remaining pipe organs in theatres by giving them to colleges, schools and other tax-free institutions. Mr. Froelich looked over our credentials, and made available to us the 3/15 Wurlitzer which had been installed in RKO Keith's Theatre in Flushing, N.Y. in 1928. Once again, Mrs. Jones provided funds for installation. This lady loves pipe organs!

Arrangements were made to remove the organ during late August 1969 between semesters. A crew of students was sent with two trucks under the supervision of a professional technician to do the work. They worked nights and mornings when the theatre was not in use.

On the return trip, the large transport truck was sideswiped on a hill near Salem, Indiana. The tractor was completely demolished. Miraculously, no one was killed, though one boy had to have knee surgery. The load shifted six feet forward and out the front of the trailer. Damage was considerable,

and everything was thrown in all directions.

The trailer lay in the ditch for four days before it could be removed. The workers who tried to get it out and wheels put under it said it looked hopeless. Didn't we want them to just 'dump the whole business in a nearby quarry?'

"At hearing this," says Bert, "I rose in righteous wrath and said, 'Certainly not! At least, send it here and let me look at this thing I had worked so long and diligently to get.' As things turned out, there were many times I wished I had let them dump it as they wished.

"An ironic twist occurred which was of benefit to us. I didn't go to New York; not being mechanical, I didn't want to waste the money. I would have loved to have heard the organ in its original home, however. The crew couldn't move the relays, so left them in the theatre. Probably the wreck would have put them into a state beyond repair. Mr. Froelich took them out months later, and sent them to us.

"The odds seemed insurmountable when we began trying to work on what must have been the biggest jigsaw puzzle of all time, trying to fit broken and crushed parts back together in the basement of the audi-

torium in the Jones Building where the whole mess was unloaded and spread around.

"Much of the work was done in the various school shops, and a fine job it was. So much of the task was of a nature never attempted here, but the insight of the men and students was nothing short of remarkable.

"Of course, we also had professional help on such things as console renovation; the left side was caved in by the wreck and the stop rails sprung. The chests were raked by heavy parts pushing against them in the wreck and had to be practically rebuilt in many cases. Work, tedious, work, had to be done on the main cable from the console to the relays which consists of 1380 small wires which have no color coding or other means of identification.

"The cable got under both the console and the blower during the wreck and was fractured in several places. I remember one day during which one professional organ man and I spent the entire day trying to trace wires, after which only two had been traced and repaired. The frustration became unbearable more days than not.

"Much credit for repairing the damage goes to more than 100 students, and to Roy Dodgen and his machine shop crew; Stanley Dixon and his men from the metal shop; Melvin Walker and the cabinet shop; Lester Allen and the electric crew; Marvin Riley, Joe Lewallen and the transportation department; Hal Lane of the sign shop; Elmer Braswell, the construction superintendent; and Walter Haskew, the architect.

"Prior to actual installation of the organ, chambers for the pipes were built on either side of the stage in the Jones Auditorium, and excavation for the installation of the console lift was done. Finding solid rock where we had intended to place the lift mechanism made that job different and more complicated than we had planned. It seemed that we took out the necessary rock by the spoonful rather than bucketsful. The console is raised and lowered by a helical gear, remodeled from the original equipment in the New York theatre.

"By the late fall of 1970, the organ

was finally playing, somewhat. Then began the long shakedown period of trying to get things regulated and sounding properly, plus having such things as broken wires continuing to crop up.

"After a disastrous experience with a firm I had engaged, I finally heard about David Junchen and he came down and did the final work on the organ. I give him credit for the sound we have. My blood pressure zoomed and the ulcers started bleeding when he said what he wanted to do, but things weren't sounding right and I had to take the chance. It worked out beautifully. That boy is a genius with tremulant adjustment, winding etc. It seems most people I have known say that tremulant adjustment is a matter of luck as much as anything else. Dave says not, and proves it! He deserves much praise for the excellent work he did for us."

The installation was completed early in 1971, and the organ was tested in a few programs, being checked out carefully by Bert Buhrman until he was completely satisfied with the results.

On April 18, 1971, 2,000 turned out to help the School of the Ozarks dedicate its newly-installed Wurlitzer in the 1000-seat auditorium. About 1250 attended the formal dedicatory program, and 750 attended an encore concert later in the day. President Graham Clark, in a very simple ceremony, expressed the school's thanks to Mrs. W. Alton Jones, now a member of the school's board of trustees, for her support of the two organ projects.

"We dedicate this organ to the glory of God for the good and useful purposes of students of the School of the Ozarks, the faculty and friends," said President Clark.

Burt Buhrman played the recital which included an original score written by the organist entitled "The Wurlitzer Saga". Pianist Luis Rojas joined to present a piano-organ duet in the "Rhapsody in Blue" to close the program. The event was an immense success with people coming from many miles away, including those from St. Louis and Tulsa ATOS chapters. Highway 65 was completely blocked for 45 minutes with cars of those who

thought they had come early enough.

Burt says that the Wurlitzer now sounds as it was intended when first manufactured. "The experts now agree that we have a sound very similar to the famous Paramount Theatre studio organ in New York which Jesse Crawford used for his recordings and broadcasts.

"Included in the specifications are sets of reeds which have become the piece de resistance of all — Brass Trumpet and Brass Saxophone. There is a complete toy counter which had to be rebuilt, having been crushed in the accident. Included are Snare Drum, Bass Drum, Kettle Drum, Harp, Traingle, Xylophone, Glockenspiel, Orchestra Bells, Cathedral Chimes, Crash Cymbal, Tambourine, Castanets, Chinese Block, Tom-Tom, Sand Block, tuned Sleigh Bells, Marimba, Train Whistle, Automobile Horn, Thunder, Bird Whistles, Surf, Telephone Bell, Street Car Bell, Horse Hoofs and Gong.

In July 1971, a series of Sunday afternoon concerts on the Wurlitzer was given by Bert, and each was a sellout — tremendously successful. The air-conditioned auditorium is a very busy place, used constantly by college groups and by organizations from surrounding towns.

The most recent project involving the organ was the production of a record "Nostalgia". This was accomplished by Bert in September 1971, and the disc was scheduled for release in November. One thousand were pressed in the initial venture, and judging from the advance orders, those will not be enough.

In the summer of 1972, another series of Sunday afternoon programs will be held. Advance notice will be forthcoming in Stu Green's Vox Pops column for those who would like to hear this relatively new installation.

"We are most happy to greet fellow ATOS members and show them the organ whenever they are in the vicinity," Bert says. "We had practically a regional convention with St. Louis, Tulsa and Kansas City ATOS members here for the dedication. Perhaps we can host a national convention sometime. All the facilities are here. It isn't Utopia, but the way the world is, it's a very relaxing place to be." □