

The Eddie Horton Story

by Lloyd E. Klos

Eddie Horton, theatre organist, known throughout Australia and New Zealand, as well as in this country, comes from the Nebraska corn country, having been born in Grand Island on April 7, 1893.

He started eight years of piano lessons in 1901. In 1908, he opened the first picture show in Grand Island, providing the piano accompaniment for the silents. A year later, he played his first organ music for a picture, using a parlor pumper for *The Passion Play*.

Eddie then toured the state with small shows until 1911. "I went to Denver, and in walking up 18th Street to Laramie St., heard a player piano in front of a nickel theatre. Asking if they had a piano inside (they did), I shut off the player, and went to audition for the manager. His name was Jack Becker, an operatic baritone, who came from the Whitney Opera House in Detroit.

"I played, he sang, and he gave me a job for \$25 a week. A month later, I went up Curtis Street to the Iris Theatre.* The owner bought me a nine-foot Decker piano which I played in the lobby, dressed in an Eaton boy outfit."

In 1912, Eddie Horton left Denver for Cripple Creek, Colorado, to play theatres there. In 1913, he went to Omaha to play a Seeburg orchestrion, and was billed as "The Seventh Wonder of the World," at the Princess Theatre on Douglas Street.

In 1914, it was on to the Starland Theatre in St. Paul, Minn. In 1915, it was the Princess Theatre in Des Moines, and in 1916, he returned to Omaha to

*Editor's Note:

There were two theatres in Denver with similar names. The oldest house was built in 1889 as the CURTIS. Several different names were applied to it over the years. In 1911 it was known as the "IRIS". A larger house called "ISIS" was built in 1913. This theatre had a large 4/28 Wurlitzer, installed in 1915.



Eddie Horton at the Allen three-manual organ in Albuquerque Civic Auditorium on April 21, 1970. "The biggest day in my life", says he. — (Horton collection)

play the Kimball in the Sun Theatre on Farnam St.

In May 1917, he left Omaha in a Scripps-Booth roadster for California. A faded clipping from the Omaha *Sunday Bee* announces the start of the trip. "Mr. Horton has become quite famous with the speed stunts he has pulled off with his Scripps-Booth eight, and it will be recalled that a couple months ago, he made a trip from Fremont to Omaha (38 miles) in one hour and 10 minutes, through six inches of snow and mud." Fast cars always had an appeal for Eddie Horton.

On the way to California, he stopped off in Denver, and played at the Iris Theatre, subbing for the vacationing Henry B. Murtagh. Associate organist was Henri Keates, later to gain his fame in Chicago's Oriental Theatre.

Eddie arrived in California, and played the Miller Theatre in Los Angeles, sharing his duties with Carlo Elinor. Then came work on the big Austin in Clune's Auditorium. Next, he opened the 5-manual Robert Morton in the Kinema Theatre at Seventh and Grand, playing until April 19, 1918.

He went to Camp Curry in Yosemite National Park as pianist, and program director until September. He then journeyed to San Francisco to play the Wurlitzer at the Strand Theatre, and later, the California Theatre on Market Street, also having a Wurlitzer.

While in California, Eddie made the first player rolls for silent pictures for photoplayers. He also drew the specifications of over 100 Robert Morton organs while in San Francisco.

Then came Los Angeles again in 1922, to play the Kinema (now Criterion) Morton. During Eddie's tenure at the Criterion, Victor Herbert, the famous composer-conductor, had a two-week engagement. He was very impressed with the instrument, and expressed the hope that "it will be one of the features of the programs, for an organ so remarkably equipped is bound to be enjoyed by the patrons."

The Criterion was operated in direct competition to Grauman's Million Dollar, and although Jesse Crawford was solo organist at the latter house, "Horton At the Morton" was emblazoned on billboards about the city.

In August 1924, Eddie Horton sailed for Australia where he began a 10-year stay "down under". He opened the Prince Edward Theatre, "The Showplace of Australia", in Sydney on November 22, 1924. He also played a command performance for the Duke and Duchess of England in 1924 at Sydney Town Hall.

For about a year, Eddie played New Zealand houses, then he returned in 1925 to Sydney for five years at the Prince Edward. Faded clips refer to him as "The Wizard of the Wurlitzer". He literally became a musical institution in Australia's largest city.

Early in 1928, Eddie had an engagement in Auckland, New Zealand. Though he played a Wurlitzer, a daily paper once referred to the instrument as a "Mangelwurlitzer." When he wasn't



Eddie Horton plays the Isis Theatre Wurlitzer in Denver in 1917. — (Horton collection)

at the console, Eddie could be seen early mornings or evenings in his "Hot Devil", a rakish automobile with a blue-striped hood and big electric bell.

After his years at the Prince Edward, Eddie Horton went on tour of some of the major cities in Australia. He had a lengthy engagement at the 3-manual Christie in Roxy's Spanish Theatre in Parramatta, New South Wales in 1931. While here, Australian Prime Minister Scull, accompanied by members of the Australian Parliament, made a special journey from Canberra to give Eddie a special award for his entertainment proclivities.

By this time, Eddie still a lover of sporty automobiles, had a sweet-looking Buick roadster. The engine was chromium-plated. Reports said it "has a remarkable turn of speed, over 80 MPH easily accomplished. Everyone knows when the car is approaching by the musical notes which issue from trumpets at the front of the car." One evening, Eddie was visiting his mother-in-law, when a miserable bouncer removed the trumpet assembly and made off. The horn was insured,

and it wasn't long before a new musical contraption was adorning the front of the sporty Buick.

Eddie's next engagement was six months at the State Theatre back in Sydney. Then, on to the Ambassadors Theatre in Perth in 1932, then the Regent Theatre in Adelaide and the Regent in Melbourne.

Mr. Horton returned to San Francisco in 1933. As the depression was in full force, jobs were scarce. He took a position with Ringling Brothers' Circus, and later was public relations and radio director for the Al G. Barnes Circus.

In September 1934, he began a stint at the Fox Miller Theatre in Wichita, Kansas. While here, he broadcast from station KHF, presenting a 30-minute program each Thursday morning. Requests were played, the requesters sending their choices to the theatre. He remained at the Miller until April 1935, when he returned to San Francisco to head advance work for the circus.

With work in theatres for organists in 1935 practically non-existent, Eddie

bought a Model A Hammond, and played night clubs for several years. In 1947, he came to Albuquerque, New Mexico as a guest of his former partner, John D. Garvin, manager of the Alvarado House. He brought his Hammond along, and stayed three years, playing in the dining room. He liked the beauty of the New Mexico area so well that he purchased property and made his home there.

Eddie has become a leading personality in Albuquerque. He was at the Golden T Lounge for five years, and had tenures in other establishments. He has been affiliated with station KOAT-TV, and had his own show, playing requests.

In 1969, he opened the new Holiday Inn Motel, and in 1970, the East Holiday Inn.

However, Eddie admits that his biggest day came on April 21, 1970 — "Eddie Horton Day", proclaimed by the mayor of Albuquerque. Over 1,100 persons turned out that evening at Civic Auditorium to hear a program by the honored guest, consisting of eleven numbers, a sing-along, and his accompaniment of *The Gold Rush* with Charlie Chaplin, all played on the 3-manual Allen electronic.

"I am now semi-retired, and have amassed several items of income," he says. "So I fish, travel, and enjoy the blessings which have been bestowed on me and my lovely wife of 35 years. She was an aerialist with the circus.

"A cheerful 'hello' to any old timers of my era. Would surely enjoy hearing from them. My address is 408 Penn S.E. in Albuquerque, and my phone number is (505) 255-0688." □

PRE-CONVENTION CONCERT

Of added interest to anyone traveling to the ATOS National Convention in Washington, D.C. is a concert planned at John Dickinson High School in Wilmington, Delaware.

Organist Glenn Hough and pianist John Reading will present a concert of semi-classical and popular music using the 3/28 Kimball theatre pipe organ and a nine foot grand piano on Saturday, July 8 at 8:00 P.M. The program is sponsored by the John Dickinson High School Organ Society and tickets are \$2.00 reserved and \$1.50 for general admission.

AWARD WINNERS...



Eleanor Weaver of Connecticut Valley Chapter presents awards to the winners of the 1972 Annual Scholarship Contest. From left to right: Albert Rohe, Kathy Roberg (2nd place), Janet Hassel (1st place), John Hadburay (3rd place), Linda Lovallo, Gerry Bilak and Sandy Barnes.