

Robinsons' Cipher Hill

by Lloyd E. Klos

The late Ben Hall once said in describing theatre organ enthusiasts: "There are many, including some of the hobbyists themselves, who think the whole bunch are just plain nuts!" Perhaps, but you could never label Dean Robinson and his attractive wife Merle, who live in Himrod, near Seneca Lake in Upstate New York, "nuts". They are as normal as any dyed-in-the-wool theatre organ lovers.

You see, the Robinsons are the proud owners of an excellent installation called "Cipher Hill", and it has been a gathering place for lovers of the big sound for a long time. But, let's go back a bit.

Dean was hopelessly hooked on the theatre organ at an early age. He was born in Sodus, N.Y. in the heart of the Lake Ontario orchard belt and at the age of 12, he had his first experience with a pipe organ; the 2/5 Marr & Colton in the 410-seat Rivoli

Theatre in Fairport, N.Y.

He specifically remembers accompanying the Saturday afternoon kid shows which starred cowboys, Ken Maynard and Hoot Gibson. After gaining more experience, he filled in as relief organist for the silent print of the Colleen Moore picture *Lilac Time*.

At about that time, Schine's 886-seat Temple Theatre opened in the same town, boasting a 2/4 Wurlitzer. Dean worked as relief organist there until the advent of the talkies, and stayed on to play exit music between shows for another three years.

As for other movies which he accompanied, his memory is dim. "Titles escape me, but I can still see Dolores del Rio's face in many, as well as Gilda Gray and Janet Gaynor."

His teacher was the late J. Gordon Baldwin, an excellent musician and instructor who was featured in several theatres in Rochester, including Loew's

Rochester, Schine's Monroe, and the Piccadilly, starring as one of the "console twins" with Hugh Dodge.

"When the sound came to the theatres," Dean says, "it eventually put me out of business." He changed occupations and went to work for Eastman Kodak.

Then, the war came, and Dean served in the South Pacific with an anti-aircraft unit. When he returned home in December 1944, the urge to play a theatre pipe organ manifested itself. "I took the telephone directory one evening, and literally called about a dozen theatre managers in Rochester whose houses I knew had organs, asking permission to practice. I purposely left Loew's Rochester (5/24 M & C) and the Palace (4/21 Wurlitzer) for the last. As expected, the answer from Loew's like all the others was a resounding 'No!' This was the season to be jolly, peace on earth to



RKO Palace drapes frame the console at Cipher Hill. The 100-year-old piano was rescued from the dump. Above the beams, which once supported a hay mow, hangs the \$11 chandelier. — (Floyd Tillman Photo)

your fellow man, remember.

"Figuring I might as well be refused by the best, I called the Palace. With no hesitation, Jay Golden, the manager, invited me to the theatre the following morning. Repeating the process for several days, I thereby had one of the best furloughs a soldier ever had. This experience really educated me on the difference between phony people and sincere people."

After four years in his country's service, Dean began playing the Hammond as a solo artist in the Buffalo area until about 1950. Then, for two years, he toured with the Cromwell Trio, a group similar to the famed "Three Suns."

It was about this time that Dean purchased the property in Himrod, N.Y. which was to spawn Cipher Hill. It is a lovely location on a gentle slope with unobstructed view of Seneca Lake, the largest of the Finger Lakes. The property included a good-sized barn which housed chickens, cows and other farm animals.

All this time, Dean never allowed the thrill of playing his own theatre

organ to dim into oblivion. He wanted to own one, a wish he had nurtured since childhood. As a member of ATOS, he had made contacts with key members through the years, expressing his desire. Thanks to Dick Kline of Frederick, Md., who had contacts with the Loew's people in his area, Dean was tipped off to the availability of the 3/11 Wurlitzer, opus 1256, in the Loew's State Theatre in Norfolk, Va. In November 1963, Dean purchased his "beast for the barn."

A week was spent in Norfolk in removing the instrument. "The theatre manager was something else," says Dean. "We worked under very unusual circumstances; only when the theatre was in operation from noon until 11 P.M. Yes, I could write a book about this phase of the operation. One day, we arrived on the scene a bit early, so knowing we couldn't work, got the idea to check up on who played the instrument when it opened in 1926. We found the answer in the microfilmed Norfolk newspapers. The first organist was Harry Zehm. Anyone ever hear of him?"

"When we first laid eyes on the organ, the console was in terrible condition. The manuals had been removed and sent to Loew's Theatre in Richmond for that instrument's restoration. There were no console pneumatics, no stop tablet contacts, no swell shoes and no crescendo pedal. The cable had been cut with a hacksaw. The pipe work, however, was in first-class condition, even though air-conditioning ducts had been installed in the chambers."

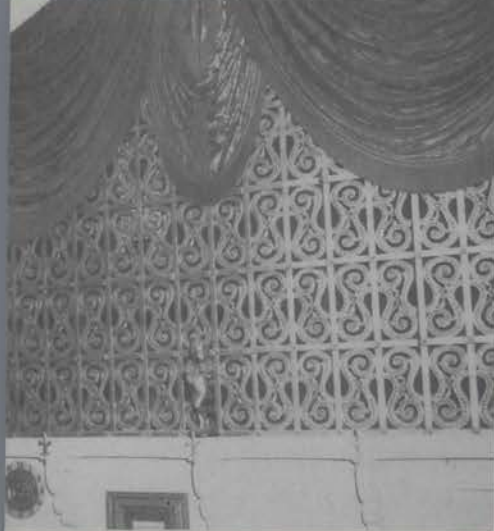
Six trips were required to transport the organ to Himrod, involving station wagons, U-Haul trucks and trailers, plus fellow members of the ATOS, without whose help, Dean would have been in trouble. For example, three sections of the relay stacks had to be loaded simultaneously, as they were connected with cables which could not be detached. Six men worked out the problem of loading these parts.

With the organ safely home and in storage, a big task confronted the Robinsons before one pipe could sound. The barn had to be cleared of animals and completely renovated, cleaned and painted. Did you ever clean a barn? Did you ever convert a barn into an organ studio? You recall that we said the Robinsons were not "nuts". We prefer to label them "extremely dedicated."

In January 1964, Dean began building the chambers for the pipes, a job

Dean poses with solo chamber pipe work, Chimes and Toy counter. Cymbals and Drums had been "removed" before the organ's purchase. — (Dan O'Toole Photo)





Re-constructed grilles from the RKO Palace front both the main and solo chambers at the opposite end of the room from the console. — (Floyd Tillman Photo)

which took six months alone. All electrical wiring he did himself. Remember that while this project was under way, Dean had other jobs — operating a fruit and vegetable stand during the summer, teaching organ, handling electronic organ sales, and playing at the Hilltop Inn in nearby Penn Yan.

The Robinsons can be very proud of their installation. You enter the main studio from the side, are immediately impressed with the warmth of the decor. To the left are red draperies from Rochester's former RKO Palace, plus a large curtain made by Mrs. Robinson, covering the wall behind the mahogany 3-manual console is situated on a fringe-decorated platform.

Hanging from the ceiling is a home-made chandelier which would fool anyone. Only the glass beads came from the RKO Palace, the rest was made from scraps of this and that, the whole fixture costing the munificent sum of \$11!

To the right, is the grill work for the chambers, more draperies and the original stage telephone all from the Palace.

Besides the Wurlitzer console, is a Hammond and a grand piano in the studio. The piano is at least 100 years old, and how Dean acquired it is amusing. While having lunch one day in Penn Yan Academy, Dean overheard instructions to the janitors to "throw that piano into the dump." Before anyone could move, Dean cried out, "The dump is my home; I'll take it!" Thus he acquired a lovely addition to his studio.

One walks down three steps to

Dean's office and is impressed with the wall displays of framed pictures, posters and clippings relative to his installation. A room off the office serves as a combined workshop and voicing room.

The organ at present (Nov. 1971) totals eleven ranks: 3 strings, Vox, Diapason, Clarinet, Flute, Tibia, Tuba, Kinura and Oboe. The toy counter includes auto horn, steamboat whistle, fire gong, bird whistle, drums, cymbals, castanets, marimba, glockenspiel and xylophone.

However, our "extremely dedicated" man has ideas for enlarging the organ. He has another Tibia; a Kimball from a theatre in Waverly, N.Y., a Marr & Colton French Horn from the Palace Theatre in Jamestown, N.Y., a Vox from the Family Theatre Wurlitzer in Batavia, and an Oboe from the late Austin in Rochester's Eastman Theatre. What's more, Dean's wife does not say "That's enough!" She is not a long-suffering Wurlitzer widow, but has contributed immensely to the interior decoration of CIPHER HILL.

The name "Cipher Hill", was bestowed on the project by Jim Webster of Penfield, N.Y., also a Wurlitzer owner. He walked up the road to its junction with Route 14 and planted a sign to that effect. It guides invited visitors to the site today. But, please don't drop in unannounced. Give the

Robinsons the courtesy of advanced knowledge of your coming. This should be the first commandment an enthusiast should employ — always.

Of their experiences with their magnificent undertaking, the couple say that they have learned a lot, especially concerning people with whom they have come in contact at CIPHER HILL.

Dean says, "I make no bones about the fact that I have been directed out of or kicked out of more theatres during my life than anyone else, simply because of my desire to play the theatre organ.

"For example, when 18, I was in Seattle, and one morning I was passing the side door of a theatre on Fourth Avenue when I spotted the organ console. I went in, turned it on and started to play. In no time, two burly janitors lifted me from the bench and carried me outside. (It is doubtful if they could do this today; Dean is not exactly a living endowment for Ry-Krisp).

"When I acquired the organ, I further learned how genuine folks were when they offered assistance to our cause. There were so many that I couldn't risk not naming everyone were I to list the names here. Needless to say, Mrs. Robinson and I are extremely grateful to each and every one of them."

Dean poses with console as it looked after its arrival in his barn from Norfolk in 1963. Horizontal beam is the present location for bottom of swell shades. — (Dan O'Toole Photo)





The CIPHER HILL console. When Dean bought the organ, parts of the console were missing, including swell shoes and crescendo pedal. They were replaced by shoes from an Allen electronic. — (Floyd Tillman Photo)

To me, the Robinsons represent the ideal theatre-organ-loving couple. They have a beautiful piece of property with a panoramic view, a fine installation, enough work to keep busy. Yes, they even have a peppy Labrador Retriever called "Tibia." Dean continues to keep his hand in as an organist by playing a 3-manual Conn at the Dresden Hotel in Dresden, N.Y., and does an occasional concert for his ATOS brethren. What more could a couple want?

No, indeed, the Dean Robinsons are not "organ nuts". Just "extremely dedicated." □



Letters to the Editor concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are encouraged. Send them to the editor concerned. Unless it's stated clearly on the letter "not for publication," the editors feel free to reproduce it, in whole or part.

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To the Editors:

I wish to reply to Mr. Zabel's comments about "Painless Tuning". The intent of the article was to acquaint the reader with the necessity of tuning an organ, and the basic principles and problems involved; so that he could evaluate the methods and devices available to assist him in tuning with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

The Editors are undoubtedly aware that before attempting to write on

Pipe work in main chamber of CIPHER HILL organ. — (Dan O'Toole Photo)



such a subject, I investigated the normally encountered aspects from both a theoretical and practical point of view. This included over a year of experience with the various tuning devices, using each in turn to tune the same instruments. It was hoped that this would provide the fairest basis for judging the relative merits of each tuner, and I thank the manufacturers whose products I tested for generously supplying me with technical information and units for evaluation.

During the testing period, I overcame a prejudice against one type of tuner to the extent that I eventually bought one for my own use. My article presented the facts as I observed them, as unbiased as I could present them for the benefit of ATOS members, who could not normally expect to try each of the tuners for several months before buying one.

I have long been aware of inharmonicity in naturally vibrating bodies. Piano strings are a prime offender, and only within the past few decades have experts, such as William Braid White, explained this phenomenon in connection with "stretching octaves" when tuning pianos. This inharmonicity, or tendency for the harmonics to be slightly sharp of the fundamental and each lower harmonic can be seen in the strobe pattern. In tuning a piano, the problem is most prominent in lower notes, and is less pronounced the longer the piano is. While many professional piano tuners are not aware of the reason for stretching octaves, White explains that in actuality, the fundamental of a given note is being tuned to the most prominent harmonic of the note an octave lower. The strobe pattern usually shows up with greatest clarity or contrast on the band representing the *strongest* harmonic, so it is quite simple to tune the note until the most prominent pattern remains stationary.

The problem is almost non-existent in organ pipes as seen in a strobe pattern, and to include it in a discussion of tuners merely confuses the issue because no *one* tuning system is superior in dealing with the phenomenon. In reality, unsteadiness of speech, and unsteadiness of wind pressure present tuning problems of greater magnitude than the inharmonicity problem. Neither strobe nor audible tuner excels here.

Mr. Zabel somehow has the im-