

Nostalgic Memories

by Charles Wright

I have been a member of ATOS for several years and also an enthusiastic reader of "Theatre Organ" and the predecessor magazines for a somewhat longer period. Some of the most interesting articles which I have read are those covering the restoration and installation of theatre organs in members' homes. These ambitious projects naturally require a vast amount of time, effort and money, not to mention the knowledge and necessary know-how.

The thought occurred to me, how does one first acquire the ambition and perseverance so necessary to develop this extensive and complicated pastime and hobby. No one can possibly give the answer but I am going to attempt to put down on paper the story of how I first became interested in the theatre organ about 45 years ago. From that early date I have maintained a constant interest in the organ. For a time I acted as the Montreal service man for a Canadian builder of church organs, an activity I will admit to following, more for the opportunity it gave me to play the various organs than for the remuneration derived therefrom. During the late 1930's I took a trip to England principally to visit the cinemas and to examine their Christies, Comptons, Conachers, etc. As a tribute to the Wurlitzer organs I found time while over there to cross the Mersey from Liverpool to visit Birkenhead, where Robert Hope-Jones carried out his original development work on the unit-organ principle.

However, to get back to my story, a



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few months ago I had just finished reading an article in "Theatre Organ Bombarde," and my thoughts went back to those early days when I first became interested in the theatre organ. I decided then to put into words a few nostalgic memories.

"The year is 1926-1927, and radio receiving sets are still in the experimental stage, and I had spent quite a busy night 'hooking-up' a simple and somewhat primitive 'One Tube Set.' I had a pair of Brandes earphones attached to the output end of the contraption. The time is about 11:30 p.m. and I have my set tuned to the old CHYC radio station in Montreal. But instead of hearing one of the local dance bands, usually on the air at this time of night, I hear music that is different, and to me, far more satisfying. I am receiving a program of organ music broadcast direct from the Capitol Theatre located in downtown Montreal."

This was the first time that I had had

the pleasure of listening to a theatre pipe organ, previous to that time I believed pipe organs to be large instruments installed in churches and other large auditoriums, and used only for sacred and serious types of music.

The organist playing at the Capitol Theatre that evening was the late Mr. Norton H. Payne, affectionately known as "Buddy Payne" to the theatre patrons of this city.

The late evening mid-week broadcasts continued to be aired from the Capitol for a few weeks and then like many other good things, they came to an end. However I had received an inspiration and my favorite instrument was to be the theatre organ. That was over 44 years ago, today I am still of the same mind.

My next ambition was to visit the Capitol Theatre and to see and hear Mr. Payne playing this wonderful organ. Despite the passing of time I can still recall my impressions of the

first visit to the Capitol and of seeing the organist seated high at the elevated console accompanying the silent pictures on the screen. I made many similar visits to this theatre, as often as my limited finances would allow, not perhaps to see the organ but rather to have an opportunity of hearing the organ.

The organ installed in the Capitol Theatre was regarded by many Montrealers to be the most beautiful toned theatre organ in the city. It was built in Canada by the Warren Organ Company, equipped with a four-manual horseshoe console, mounted on a hydraulic lift in the center of the orchestra pit. An interesting feature of this installation was the group of colorful display pipes, about 20 in number mounted high on the south wall of the theatre to the left of the proscenium arch.

Alas, came 1929 and talking pictures were being installed in our principal movie houses, the Capitol being one of the downtown "big-four" was quick to take advantage of the new invention, though not the first in Montreal to install talking pictures. After the arrival of the sound pictures the Capitol organ continued to be used for a short time, principally for short interludes, also a few bars would be played on the organ to "finish-off" the Paramount News Reel, and sometimes to join the pictures. It was always a thrill to hear Mr. Payne blend the organ into the end of the news-reels, perfectly in registration, pitch and tempo to play the last line of the signature tune used by Paramount at the time to end the news-reels.

Around the year 1930 the Capitol organ became silent, and on subsequent visits to the theatre we failed to hear the once familiar sounds of the throbbing Tibias, or the distant whisper of the soft Vox Humana. For several months afterwards I believe the Capitol organ received regular servicing, perhaps in the event that "talkies" were only a passing fad, in which case the showing of silent movies along with the organ accompaniment could have been quickly resumed. Unfortunately, this was not to be.

With the closing of the Capitol organ, Mr. Payne became the feature soloist at the Palace Theatre on St. Catherine, a block east of the Capitol. The Palace was operated by the same chain as the Capitol, and was equipped with a two-manual Warren organ. Though a smaller organ than that of the Capitol it was also a beautifully toned instrument, and we greatly appreciated listening to Mr. Payne playing

his all too brief interlude between the pictures. The console was located on the stage at the left corner, with the organist facing the audience. From what I can remember, it was not a horseshoe console, and the only effects I ever heard were the chimes. It was possibly a modified church organ, as I believe the Warren Co. were principally engaged in building church organs while they were in existence.

I have always considered it to be regrettable that when I was legally old enough (at the time one had to be 16 years old to attend the movies in Montreal) and financially able to visit the theatres, it was also about the time that the organ was no longer considered to be a box-office attraction by the managers, and in most of our theatres so equipped, ceased to be heard. However, I had already discovered my favorite type of musical instrument and so, with our "available resources" rapidly diminishing, I did endeavor to find the location of all other Montreal theatres equipped with pipe organs and to arrange visits to the theatres before the early morning shows, started to at least see their organs. Some of the theatre managers were cooperative, some were not. However, I was successful at a few theatres. I was also lucky, as they were still connected, intact and playable.

Following my initial acquaintance with the two Warrens mentioned earlier I was soon to learn that the "Mighty Wurlitzer" was regarded as being the most popular theatre organ throughout the world. From the results of my local survey I was fortunate to learn that at that time we had four (4) Wurlitzer installations in Montreal theatres, the locations being as follows:

St. Denis Theatre	3-manual
Imperial Theatre	3-manual
Papineau Theatre	2-manual
Midway Theatre	2-manual

All the above installations carried the famous Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra nameplate. The larger two at the St. Denis and at the Imperial Theatres, were equipped with two 3 manual consoles, the top keyboard being of 37 notes only. It will be interesting to mention here that the Imperial organ was perhaps a unique installation as a very good photograph of the console appears in the Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra catalog, reprinted by the Vestal Press together with a letter of recommendation on the merits of the organ. Due to a friendship which I developed with one of the organists who played at the Imperial I was fortunate to have assisted with some repair work on this organ. I recall that it was an excep-

tionally well finished organ inside. I was told that Mr. Hope-Jones was present in the theatre during the final installation. Being a very conscientious man, every pipe and other component had to be adjusted to his particular satisfaction, regardless of the time required to do so, and the fact that a deadline had to be met for the grand opening of the new Montreal showplace back in 1913. The Imperial contained about 10 or 12 ranks and was installed in two chambers above the arch on either side. The catalog photo mentioned shows the console on the stage, at a later date it must have been moved to the left side of the orchestra pit, as it was in the latter location when I had experience with it in 1931.

A few blocks further east in Montreal we have the St. Denis Theatre which had the largest Wurlitzer theatre installation in the city. It was a larger version of that in the Imperial, also a "Special," it contained additional ranks and one feature that I well remember, it included a "thunder stop." The St. Denis is a large theatre with a wide stage and well suited for the large organ.

The two remaining Wurlitzers, at the Papineau, also the Midway, were equipped with piano style consoles, 88 keys on the Accompaniment and 61 on the Solo manual, similar in appearance to those used with the smaller Photoplayers except that they included a 32 note pedal board and also a back rest on the bench. No doubt these consoles may have been practical for motion picture work, even though in appearance they lacked glamor. The Papineau installation contained 6 ranks: 2 flutes, 2 strings and 2 reeds. It was a Model 160, installed in 1920. The pipes and effects were contained in a chamber to the left of the proscenium arch, and the console contained a piano action from which was also derived a "mandolin effect."

The Midway organ was about similar in size pipewise, but it was a "pit" installation, almost the entire orchestra pit formed a panelled chamber. The sloping top surface being fitted with large swell shutters which continually opened and closed following the movement of the swell pedal. I remember the light beam from the projection box reflecting on the moving shutters produced an unusual effect to one seated halfway down the theatre. After visiting many other theatres I have failed to find any other with the organ installed quite like that of the old Midway. This was a long and narrow theatre building with a balcony shaped something like a hairpin, the balcony being only two seats wide at the ends near the

screen. The organ, though far from the largest in Montreal, did however appear to be the loudest to an enthusiast sitting in the front row of the balcony, almost directly above the pipes. Fortunately, it was usually possible to find these seats vacant, for while it was almost impossible to see the picture comfortably from this location, it was on the other hand, a most excellent vantage point to look down on the organist and to hear the pipes in all their glory. I would assume this organ contained the usual percussions but all I ever remember hearing was the Glockenspiel and the Drums.

So far I have given a brief description of the two Warrens and the four Wurlitzers that we had in Montreal. The seventh and final theatre installation in the city was a three-manual located in Loew's Theatre. This was a Moller instrument. Unfortunately, I did not visit this movie and vaudeville house during the time that the organ was used and I have not been very successful in gathering much information concerning the installation. Apparently it was mainly a straight organ with a few unified ranks and having a very conservative style of console. It may have been a modified church organ, the only effects anyone ever remembers hearing being the Cathedral Chimes.

The seven installation described above were the only theatre organs to be used in Montreal theatres, though it is possible that a few other theatres in Montreal and vicinity did at one time or another have photoplayer installations. Friends have told me that they remember hearing organ music in the smaller theatres that certainly did not have any "permanent" organ installation, therefore a photoplayer could well have provided the organ music that was heard. I regret to say that none of the Montreal theatre organs have been preserved, on the contrary, all have been removed from the theatres, some were sold for scrap during the war period, some were dismantled for possible re-use of parts, and I believe a couple have been re-installed in other locations outside of the city. This completes the highlights of my memories of the seven local theatre organs, which until the arrival of sound pictures provided thousands of Montreal theatre patrons with satisfying accompaniment music for the screen presentations.

Perhaps I may depart from the unit organ for a moment to tell of another organ well known to many through the medium of radio. This was the three-manual Aeolian-Skinner located in "Tudor Hall," a concert hall in the Ogilvy Department Store in Montreal.

It was a concert organ of about 20 ranks. The console being similar to a church organ style, it was equipped with tilting tablets located on 45 degree jambs, it included harp and chimes and also an automatic player mechanism. Situated directly below the Tudor Hall, was the "Adam Dining Room." A grille in the dining room ceiling allowed the organ to be heard by the dining room patrons. The organ was installed about the year 1929 and plenty of publicity was given to the "opening." For a year or so regular recitals were offered every afternoon, sometimes with piano accompaniment. Also radio broadcasts of a classical and semi-classical nature were a regular part of the store's activities. The organist who opened the Tudor Hall organ and continued to play for several years was the late Doctor Herbert Saunders, F.R.C.O. Eventually the organ broadcasts and the recitals in the store were heard less frequently and then a change of policy took place in the Hall. Sponsored broadcasts were made from the Tudor Hall organ once or twice a week.

The presentations consisting of light romantic music and popular music of the day, and played by organists who formerly had been our regular Montreal theatre organists. I naturally enjoyed and appreciated these broadcasts, and while the Aeolian-Skinner was a straight organ and of course lacked a "toy-counter," under the skillful hands of our popular organists it sounded very good, and quite a contrast to the rather more serious music played by Doctor Saunders. Being acquainted with most of the performers, I attended many broadcasts, often sitting on the end of the bench at the console, which I can add was a most enviable privilege to have in those days. The organ was removed from the store and re-installed in a local church during the 1950's.

Before I conclude this article I would like to refer briefly to still another interesting organ installation. This was a three-manual Wurlitzer. However, it was not installed in a local theatre, this one was installed in a large private residence located on the summit of the mountain in the Montreal suburb of Westmount, which I might add is really the Beverly Hills section of Montreal. In this fairyland setting, around the year 1933 was installed a beautiful modern Wurlitzer of about 12 ranks complete with all the customary theatre organ percussions. The console, located in the large living room, was of light wood finish and was designed on modern lines. The chambers were located behind a large grilled section of the wall forming one entire side of the

entrance foyer, a beautiful winding staircase at the end of the grille led to the upper floor of this elaborate residence. The organ was specially built for the residence and was a modern installation throughout.

A series of evening broadcasts was made from this location during the mid thirties, the series known as "The Winchester Organ of Romance" and sponsored by the makers of Winchester Cigarettes, a male vocalist was featured on the broadcast. I am sure that many local radio listeners enjoyed these nightly programs, as did the writer. The presentations consisted mainly of request numbers sent in by the listeners. The exact location of the organ was never given during the broadcasts, this was kept a secret. Being a confirmed organ fan and fortunate in having many organist friends at the time, it was no problem for me to learn of the "secret location." I then wrote to the owner explaining my sincere interest in the Wurlitzer organ and previous experiences. By return mail I was favored with a kind invitation to visit his home and to play the organ, and to be sure and bring some friends. I will say that the evening turned out to be a most enjoyable and entertaining event. My friends played mostly church music, while I tried to do my best with the popular numbers of the day, making generous use of the glockenspiel, xylophone, drums and all the other percussion effects. Being a brand new installation, it was truly a joy to play. It responded perfectly to all types of music, with superb tonal quality, and everything worked which is more than I can say for some of the theatre organs I have tried. I seem to have a faint recollection that an earlier series was broadcast from this organ, and that it was called "The Phantom Organ." I am sorry to say that the organ was removed from the residence many years ago, and I have no knowledge of its present location.

In conclusion I am sure it is fair to say that perhaps the greatest thrill and satisfaction which an organ fan and enthusiast can experience is that which is received when he has the opportunity to play a Wurlitzer or other theatre style organ for the first time. I had that experience many years ago and can still appreciate the enjoyment received. I had previously tried out many church organs, but to play a favorite number on a theatre style organ for the first time using the many varied tonal effects and percussions is a thrill. Yes, thrills and satisfaction that this pastime and hobby can alone offer to an enthusiast. □