

# The Carleton James Story

“MR. THEATRE ORGAN OF CENTRAL NEW YORK STATE”

by Lloyd E. Klos

**T**here is hardly a person with musical leanings living in a 75-mile radius of Syracuse, N.Y. who hasn't heard of Carleton A. James, Mr. Theatre Organ of Central New York State. This man's musical career has spanned the entire spectrum of the theatre organ, and is still going strong. And, if that weren't enough, he can be classified as the compleat organist, for he has played in such disparate places as theatres, churches and skating rinks.

He was born in West New Brighton, Staten Island in 1899 and as a youngster could play by ear. At ten, he was playing popular music; at twelve, he started piano lessons; and at fourteen, was playing piano in a theatre in Schenectady, N.Y. for silent movies. Another theatre in which he performed in those early years was the Gem in Oneida, N.Y. By age 16, while still in high school, he was making \$20 a week, quite a sum in those days for any musician. The theatre was the

Happy Hour in Schenectady, “with a saloon on one side and a cafe on the other. I was always smelling beer and fried eggs.”

When 18, a theatre owner asked him if he could play the organ. Like any ambitious youngster, he replied in the affirmative. Then, he set out to learn how to play one! His first organ playing was in Schenectady's Majestic Theatre on Albany Street.

Next, he went to New York City where he served as assistant organist to Ann Rose at Brooklyn's 4,000-seat Metropolitan Theatre. A month later, he became chief organist when Miss Rose became a victim of the flu epidemic. This was in 1918, and Carleton lived in an apartment building in Brooklyn. Downstairs lived the Menjous, Adolph and his mother. Adolph was getting small parts in the Essanay Studios until his mother bundled him off to Hollywood where he got his big break in the movies.

Across the street lived a family named Weiss, a member of which was making a name for himself throughout the country as an escape artist. Erich Weiss legally changed his name and was forever billed as Harry Houdini.

Carleton James then moved from the Metropolitan to open Loew's 83rd Street Theatre around the corner from Broadway. He was 20 and just missed the draft, as the war was over. James stayed at Loew's until 1922. *The Sheik*, starring Rudolph Valentino, had its premiere there. Norma Talmadge, William S. Hart, Buster Keaton, Bronco Billy Anderson, Leo Carillo, Mae Marsh and 20 other stars were present.

Moving back to Schenectady, he spent two years at the State Theatre. Then, he moved to Syracuse. The Erie Canal was still in the area of what is now Erie Boulevard. When North and South Salina Streets (Syracuse's main downtown artery) were joined, there was dancing in the streets. A family living in a barge resisted efforts

Carleton James at the Wurlitzer console in Keith's Syracuse at age 26. He served as chief organist at this console from 1925 to 1932. — (James collection)





of the authorities to make them leave their novel home, but "progress" won out. Shades of Urban Renewal!

James played the organ in the Strand Theatre when he first came to Syracuse. On February 28, 1925, while playing there, he felt an unusual movement as if someone were moving the organ bench. "Stop that!", he hissed, just as someone shouted, "The balcony is moving!" The Syracuse area was being shaken by an earthquake.

The Syracuse Sunday American in reporting the incident stated: "An erroneous report from the Strand Theatre said that the rear wall had fallen. The police patrol, waiting with a load of detectives to make liquor raids in the usual Saturday nite fashion, rushed to the theatre. The plain clothesmen found the theatre intact but its patrons panic-stricken in the street." All except Carleton James, that is. He remained at the organ console, playing as if nothing happened.

In late 1925, Keith's Theatre was refurbished and a Wurlitzer organ, opus No. 1143, was added to the house's facilities. Rubybelle Nason of New York played Keith's for the first three months with Carleton as relief organist. He then became chief organist, a post he was to have until 1932, and accompanied the silents until 1929. A substitute organist, Betty Lee Taylor used to powder her hands at the console in the summer. This was in the days before air-conditioning, or "even air-cooling" as the icicle-adorned marquees proclaimed in those days.

When he first played at Keith's the pit band conductor was Ken Sparnon, "and his word was law. Sparnon gave me five minutes for my sing-along, and to make sure I didn't run over, he stood at the pit rail with a stop watch in his hand. However, he took 10 minutes for his overture!" The author remembers Sparnon during the late thirties in Rochester when he conducted radio station WHEC's orchestra, "Ken Sparnon's Streamliners." He worked with organist Dick Hull, and had in his band accordionist, Justin Conlon, the only one in the area to play a 140-bass accordion.

Carleton James is probably the only organist to play during an earthquake and also during a robbery. The latter occurred on March 17, 1928. Two masked men hit Keith's manager with a blackjack, threatened the assistant manager with tear gas bombs,

and made off with \$4,500 in broad daylight at noon. Inside, oblivious of the dramatic event in the office, James played merrily on.

When Thomas A. Edison died in 1931, Keith's turned out the house lights, and Carleton played "Going Home" in total darkness as a memorial to the incandescent lamp inventor.

While organist at the Strand and at Keith's, James did radio broadcasts. "We are broadcasting our musical program direct from our stage every Friday nite through station WFBL in the Onondaga Hotel, Syracuse, N.Y.," the announcer would say. His name was Jackie Shannon, and is now Monsignor William J. Shannon. Another announcer was William Lundigan, who became a well-known actor. Those of the TV era remember Lundigan's host-

ing the *Climax* show in the fifties.

Once when James was preparing for his radio show which preceded the movie at Keith's, a girl came to him, one of a sister act, "Sunshine & Tempest", appearing in the stage show. She had a manuscript for a song which she brought from Cuba. James played it on his radio program, thereby becoming the first musician to air "Green Eyes", and this was ten years before it became a hit.

While visiting a theatre organist, Lew McCarthy, in Lake Placid, N.Y., they were walking in the neighborhood and Lew said, "Look! There's Victor Herbert!" Walking ahead of them was the King of American operettas, a corpulent man, with his wife and two of his children about ten feet back of him. It was a rule that he instituted when conjuring a new operetta; the

Carleton James at the organ console, at which he presided at Keith's for so many years, now located at the New York State Fairgrounds. He has presented many programs of silent movies and sing-alongs in the organ's new location. — (Tom Anderson Photo)





family was second in importance. It seemed an odd arrangement, but what music that man created! Herbert has always been one of Carleton James' favorite composers.

In 1931, Jimmy Van Heusen came into Keith's just before the show. James had never heard of him, neither had the world — yet. "He asked me to play one of his songs, and when I asked him if he had written any more, he replied, 'a couple hundred.' He later sent me an autographed copy of "Bluer Than Blue For You" which is now framed and hanging on the wall at home."

Another amusing incident occurred at Keith's. James was playing to open house with a couple hundred patrons present. He heard an unusual series of sounds coming from the organ; heavy pedal sounds. Looking at the audience and shaking his head, he said, "It's not I", Looking down, he saw a cat walking across the upper pedals with great dignity! Next day, a photographer came in, posed James with a cat, took a picture and sent it to a New York wirephoto service which sent it to newspapers throughout the country.

Carleton also remembers when author Harold McGrath came in with a box containing his hearing aid equipment. He set it on the organ bench and plugged in. McGrath was the writer of the first serial movie called *The Adventures of Kathleen*, featuring Kathryn Williams, which James played. This was before *Perils of Pauline*.

Our organist played music for Sonja Henie and received an autographed picture with the inscription: "To Carleton James — Thanks for the good organ music." Other autographed pictures in his collection are from Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll of *Amos 'n' Andy* fame, and from Irene Rich, the Welch Grape Juice gal (*Dear John*) for whom James played in 1929.

James played for Gordon McRae at a Nottingham School concert. He also accompanied Gordon's father, who was soloist at the Christian Scientist Church at which James played for five years. Before that, he spent 25 years as organist for Plymouth Congregational Church.

It was at Plymouth that he almost missed a date for the first time. After visiting his camp on Lake Champlain, he left in his boat enroute home. The boat grounded on a sand bar in the

middle of the lake, stranding him for six hours before State Police rescued him. He made his playing date on time and kept his record of punctuality intact.

For a time, he played at Paul's Roller Skating Rink and "The Alhambra" in Syracuse in the forties.

Carleton James is now organist at the Unity Church of Truth. The first organist to play the Lenten Service in First Baptist Church in 1926, he was described by a woman who wrote the Syracuse Herald: "He had the face of a poet, full of dreams, and he played with marvelous sympathy and a simple majesty."

James has studied straight organ and piano with eleven teachers, but his theatre organ style was developed by himself. He never married. "For years, I cared for relatives, and seven days a week were devoted to music. There was never time for romance. I was always in a darkened theatre in

front of a flashing screen during the week, and at a church organ console every Sunday."

James still keeps his theatre style alive by frequently presenting silent movie programs and sing-alongs at the N.Y. State Fairgrounds where is housed in the Harriet May Mills Building, the same 3/11 Wurlitzer he played so many years at Keith's. Thus, his career has come "full circle"; he played the silents in the days of glory, and now he is playing them during the era of nostalgia and the renaissance of the theatre organ. Recently, he has done *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *The Sheik*, and will do Mary Pickford's pictures soon to be released.

Equally proficient at accompanying Buster Keaton or Laurel & Hardy comedies as he is in doing great dramatic pictures such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Carleton A. James is indeed well qualified to proudly bear the title "Mr. Theatre Organ of Central New York State." □

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## BEN HALL MEMORIAL

The exquisite little 2/5 Wurlitzer which graced the late Ben Hall's living room is in the process of being installed in the Harold Lloyd mansion. Affectionately known as "Little Mother", this instrument is intended for accompanying silent movies, and will be under perpetual care by the Harold Lloyd Foundation.

The organ was obtained through

donations by ATOS members and turned over to the Foundation for installation. It will be known as the Ben Hall Memorial Organ. A plaque on the console will so state. Other memorabilia collected by the late Ben Hall will also be on exhibit.

THEATRE ORGAN will carry details on this worthwhile preservation in the February issue. □

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## JACKETS FOR OLD PHONO RECORDS AVAILABLE

From conversations and correspondence with many ATOS members, it has been learned that many of these theatre organ buffs have large collections of 78 rpm shellac recordings. Many of these are records issued by Victor of Jesse Crawford, as well as the other well-known organists of that era. One of our members, Douglas Marion, wonders if it would be possible to pool orders for heavy craft protective envelopes to be used on the 10" 78 rpm shellac records.

He investigated the possibility of purchasing these, as many of his records are stored in the paper jackets which have long ago deteriorated and offer little protection. He discovered that if ordered in a quantity of 500, which was all that he required, the

price would be about 23¢ per record envelope. These would be newly made out of heavy manila craft material without the 3" center hole. Further quotations indicated that if a quantity of 5,000 could be ordered, the price could be reduced to 13¢ per envelope.

He has asked us to insert this brief article to see if there are others interested who would like to pool orders in the hopes of reaching a total quantity of 5,000. If so, please address a brief note or post card to Douglas Marion, c/o THEATRE ORGAN magazine, P.O. Box 1314, Salinas, California 93901. If you will indicate the number that you will be interested in, he will check the results and be in touch should this project prove to be feasible. □