

"Little Mother" makes the trip!

by Bob Stratton

A Los Angeles Chapter ATOS Board Meeting was held at the home of the late Harold Lloyd, screen star, on August 14, 1972 to make plans for the moving of the Ben Hall organ from Ft. Lee, New Jersey to Beverly Hills, California. In addition to the board members, those present included Richard Simonton and Gaylord Carter, both National ATOS board members, and long time friends of Harold Lloyd. John Hoffman, L.A. Chapter member and excellent pipe organ technician was also present at the request of the Board.

Richard Simonton, a trustee of the Harold Lloyd Foundation, indicated that plans called for the complete renovation of the handball court into a 150 seat theatre. The interior will be done in the grand style of the fabulous twenties, complete with film projector and mini-stage. Gaylord Carter will conduct seminars on silent picture scoring and theatre organ playing techniques. In addition a museum is planned and memorabilia of the silent screen days will be displayed including, occasionally, Ben Hall's Moxie collection (a popular soft drink of the early 1900's) and other items from his personal collection.

Various ways and means were discussed as to how to get five tons of pipe organ from one coast to the other. It was decided the most economical way would be to fly two people to the East Coast, rent a truck, pack the organ and drive back across the country. John Hoffman and I offered to donate our labor in the name of the L.A. Chapter ATOS to the Harold Lloyd Foundation and, through Richard Simonton, the Foundation would cover all reasonable expenses.

Twenty-four hours later we were on a flight to New York.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16

Claud Beckham of the New York Chapter was most helpful. He offered directions to Ft. Lee, New Jersey, and said Lee Erwin, Chairman of the Ben

Hall Memorial Fund, would write a letter to John Inganamore, owner of the Mediterranean Towers – the apartment building where the organ was stored – to release the organ to us.

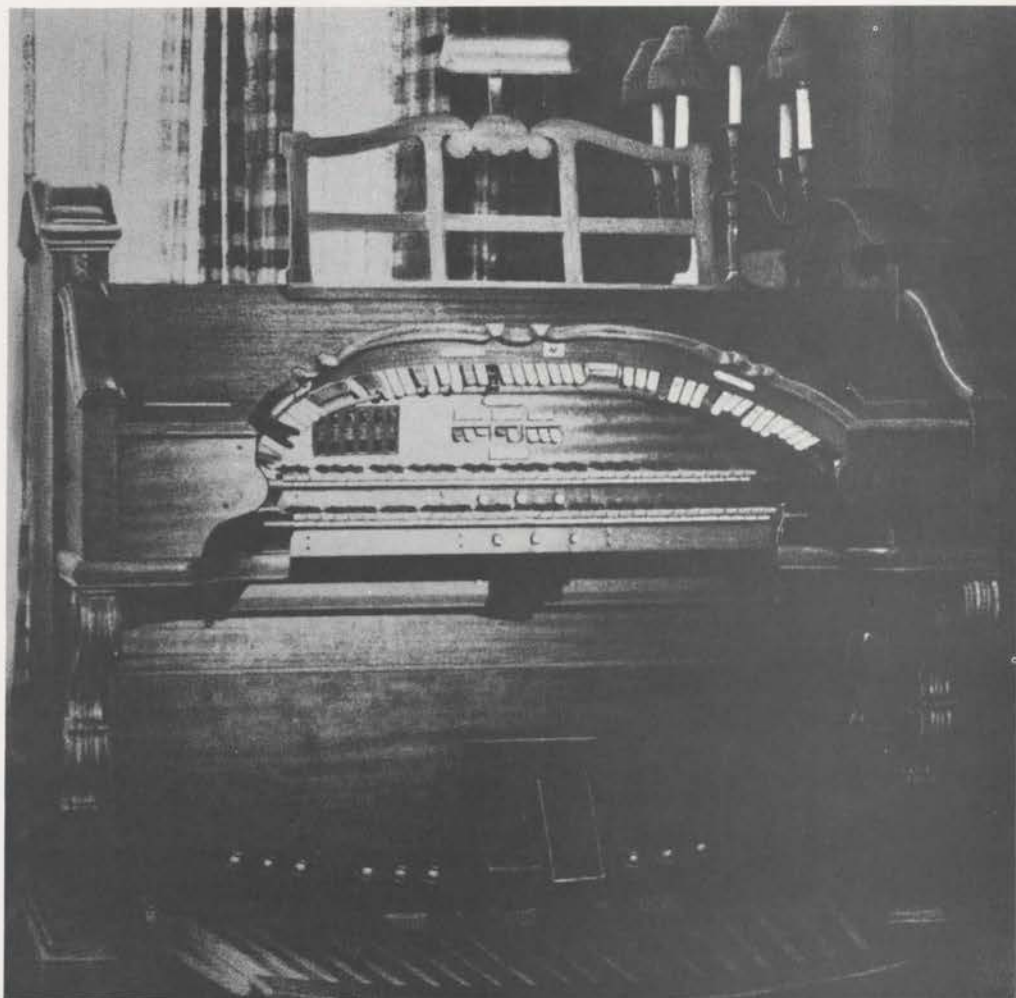
An hour later we were on our way to Ft. Lee, where we settled in our motel. We walked over to the Mediterranean Towers for our first look at "Little Mother," the affectionate name given by Ben Hall to his 2/5 Style 150 Wurlitzer pipe organ, which was shipped from the factory as Opus 2095 with 5 ranks.

Security at the apartment building was very tight with a door man, guards and TV cameras and monitors everywhere. Mr. Santora, the manager, was most cooperative, having had a call from John Inganamore which paved the way. We asked to see the organ

and were led by a security guard through two locked doors; and there was our new 5-ton friend who would be our constant companion for the next nine days.

After looking over the many parts we would have to pack, the 24-foot truck, which we had not yet seen, already looked too small. The grand piano with the Duo-Art Player caught our attention. John and I with all the bracing we could get from two concrete walls could not budge it – no way – much less lift it.

We kept two phones busy; one in the room and a pay phone right outside. While John made arrangements for lumber cut to size for pipe cases and for packing materials, I called the U-Haul truck rental in Montclair, N.J. and was told that we could only have



6 blankets instead of the 100 we ordered! Several calls to U-Haul officials produced no better result. We were also turned down by four piano movers who felt the job was too small, but finally got one to agree to look over the situation the next day.

Meanwhile John's problems were mounting. The lumber company didn't know what time they would deliver the next day, and shredded newspaper for packing the pipes was nonexistent.

Lee Erwin and I finally made connection. He had a busy schedule that week, doing shows and recordings 12 hours a day. We discussed our plans and Lee was very interested in every aspect. He had headed the Ben Hall Memorial Fund for over 18 months and, along with Richard Simonton, was instrumental in the donating of the organ to the Harold Lloyd Foundation.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 17

It was another beautiful day in New Jersey. We rented a car and while John went to get the packing material, I stayed at the Mediterranean Towers to wait for the lumber and plan the packing. John and the lumber people arrived simultaneously, and after the lumber was unloaded, we were off to Montclair to pick up the U-Haul Truck and 48 blankets which they had managed to find. On the return trip I drove the truck and I thought I could see the U-Haul personnel taking bets on whether I would make it out the driveway — much less to California.

Back at the apartment building the actual work finally began, 26 hours after we had first seen the organ, as we started the initial phases of packing. After building and packing the first two pipe boxes, we were already out of packing material. We were to pick up the balance on Friday afternoon. It took about a pound of nails for each two boxes and we soon ran out of them, too.

The piano movers came a little after 5 PM and were astounded when they beheld the Player Grand. In a little over an hour they had loaded and secured one Steck Grand Piano with Duo-Art Player, one Wurlitzer Style 150 Console (all panels that could be removed were, and it was laid on its end and dollied out), and the five-rank chest. The switch stack and relay were tied together with a 7-foot cable and each unit was put on a dolly and wheeled to the truck in tandem. As

the movers left we breathed a big sigh; the two of us could load the rest of it ourselves.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 18

We were too busy to take notes for this day, but here is the way I remember it. The organ was stored approximately 100 yards from where the truck was parked. It was all on the same ground level, but there were 7 doorways to traverse and six corners to navigate. There was some tight maneuvering which slowed down the loading. Most of the untuned percussions were loaded in the cab overhang. Blankets were wrapped around the parts and everything was placed together and tied with rope to keep the cargo from shifting. After each major section was loaded we stopped and examined it to insure that it would ride.

In the storage room with the organ were two supermarket shopping carts. We commandeered these and used them as dollies. All of the organ was transported from the storage room to the truck in this manner. The route took us through the main lobby where we had to compete for space with people, baby carriages, children, dogs, other market carts, porters with suitcases and the never-ending security people.

Our shortage of blankets was solved when in one of the janitorial rooms John discovered 25 or 30 4-foot stacks of newspapers. Permission was obtained from the management to let us take all we wanted; so the New York Times became moving blankets and the loading continued. The motor was put in front of the grand piano and wedged in with blanket and newspapers. The tuned percussions were upended and wrapped in blankets, stacked and secured next to the console; flute and tibia were nested and wheeled out on our make-shift dollies. The metal pipes were packed in seven pipe cases, stacked in the center front of the truck between the console and the grand piano. They just fit after many newspapers and part of the ground frame was carefully placed to prevent any movement. The blower housing and fans were put in back of the piano.

People who commented to us in the lobby couldn't believe that anyone would want to take this pile of "junk" all the way to California. Many just smiled — I don't know whether at us

or with us. A number of the tenants went out of their way to open doors for us and otherwise be helpful.

The "Grand Parade" continued as the storage room became empty and the truck full. The last item to be loaded was the organ bench, wrapped in our last blanket and placed in the last available floor space.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 19

We checked out of the motel at eight in the morning and I was told that Friday night the rates went up by \$3.00. We paid this and received 31¢ — all that was left of a \$15.00 deposit we had given the telephone girl. We had made over \$14.00 worth of local telephone calls since Wednesday, not counting the calls from the pay phone.

At 9 o'clock we pulled up beside the Rahway Theatre. Claud Beckham, his lovely wife Aline, and Allan Rossiter, New York Chapter Secretary, were the welcoming committee. In a truck that was almost full we managed to load 1100 piano rolls in boxes on top of the pipe trays, on top of the organ console, and on top of anything else that was flat. These were all secured in one way or another. Among these rolls was a rare one indeed: "Rhapsody in Blue" played by George Gershwin. There was also the Moxie collection and several boxes of glass slides. These things were the personal property of Ben Hall, and will be displayed at the Harold Lloyd Estate along with other items from the era of silent pictures/theatre organs, to help recreate those days when the "silents" were king. The Moxie collection was put on top of the piano rolls and roped in. The glass slides went between the tuned percussions and the truck wall — on top of the relay. We

Bob Stratton and friend — U-haul delivering "Little Mother" to Harold Lloyd estate.





John Hoffman takes time out at Rahway Theatre before trip to California with the Ben Hall Wurlitzer.

had left this space because we felt it was safe from falling objects in case the load shifted. It was also very heavily padded. Our suitcases and tools barely had room to sit on the floor as the rear door was closed. John and I looked at each other and smiled. The first phase was over — only 3,000 miles to go!

The Beckhams asked if we would like to inspect the Rahway Wurlitzer. A key was produced and we were permitted to play. The Beckhams were very kind; they stayed in the theatre and listened, but Claud couldn't resist coming down to the console now and then and changing registration for us. The time passed too quickly and we were forced to bid the Beckhams and Al Rossiter goodbye and headed west.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 20

California here we come! At 6 AM we were on the road. The driving plan was to change drivers every time we stopped for gas. This worked out to a turn every 2½ hours. Top speed was 60 MPH (governed) and the mileage was just over 5 MPG. We did notice that the oil pressure looked a little low, but being Sunday decided to continue after checking the level and finding it OK.

Plainfield, Indiana (20 miles west of Indianapolis) was host to the pipe organ that night; we had covered a little over 500 miles.

MONDAY, AUGUST 21

It was bright and early and another beautiful day. The oil pressure problem cured itself and Illinois and Missouri were green and lovely. A couple of hours out of Topeka we hit 30 minutes of rain. A call was made to some friends of John's and we had our second free night of lodging.

A most wonderful evening was spent in the company of two gracious

grandmotherly ladies. Their house was done in the style of the mid-thirties — warm and very homey. It reminded me of a movie set. In the parlor, beside a fringed floor lamp, stood a pump organ! John had to fix a cipher, but we spent a couple of delightful hours playing for a most appreciative audience.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 22

At 10 AM we were in Wichita, ironically the new home for the former New York Paramount organ, the "Mother" organ, after which "Little Mother" was nicknamed by Ben Hall. It is a 4/36 Wurlitzer, and it is sounding very good. We each had a turn at the console. Nice . . . Many thanks to Dave Bernstorf and Mike Coup's Dad.

The afternoon was spent worrying about the low oil pressure (the needle spent more and more time on zero) and stopping at truck scales in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. At the border inspection station in Kansas the officer wanted to charge a tax of some kind on our cargo. I told him my "truth-is-stranger-than-fiction" story about our project. He looked at me incredulously and shifted his gun belt. "Now wait," I said nervously, "If I wanted to lie to you, surely I could make up a better story than that?" He scratched his chin. "You're right," he said, and waved us on without a fee. I really did like Kansas!!

The oil problem was still with us, but nothing appeared to be hot so we drove on. The truck took its first quart of oil in Oklahoma. We made Amarillo, our scheduled stop for the day, just before it poured.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 23

This day was a vacation for us. Texas and New Mexico were gorgeous and John, being a railroad fan, kept me posted as to the trains we saw. He has memorized the entire passenger and freight schedule of the Santa Fe R.R. both East and West, and even informed me which train would be coming along next — long before it came into sight.

In Arizona at the inspection station we had to pay \$8.00 because the truck was not licensed for that state. Our true story just didn't work here as it had in Kansas. As I opened the back door for the inspector, a reflection caught my eye. One of the packing boxes filled with piano rolls and also containing the top octave, had broken and the little tibia pipes were lying all over the floor. No damage was done; the small metal pipes were retrieved and rode the rest of the way in the cab. The cardboard box was fixed with masking tape and the piano rolls repacked.

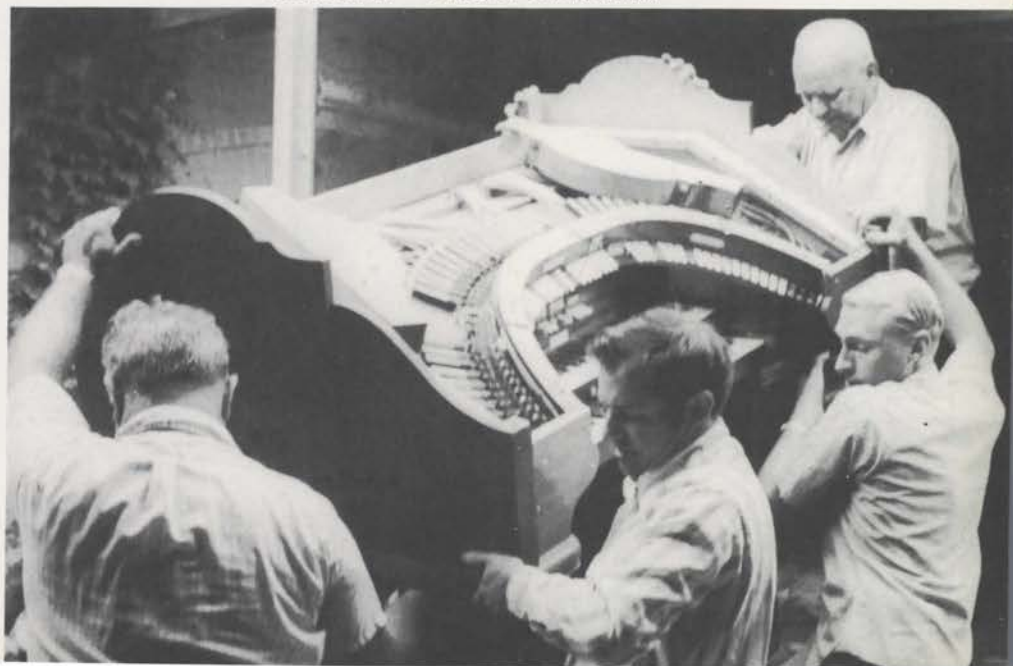
We spent the night in Winslow, Arizona and calls were made home, alerting our families and the unloading crew.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 24

Our last day on the road was good. While talking to a man in a U-Haul depot in Flagstaff we mentioned that we seemed to be having trouble with the oil pressure. "That's right," he responded immediately. "It's the gauge. The company has recalled a good percent of its equipment for that problem. Nothing to worry about!"

Crossing the California desert the

Unloading the console. L. to R. Gene Davis (back to camera), Neal Kissel, John Hoffman and Chuck Lander. — (Photo by Dennis James)





Organ in storage at Harold Lloyd's.

temperature cooperated by staying in the mid-90's. The truck responded by not heating up and the oil pressure stayed on zero the whole day.

We were home!

After notifying Neal Kissel, Liaison Chairman of the L.A. Chapter, of our arrival, it was early to bed. Only 30 more miles to the Lloyd estate, and "Little Mother" would be in her fourth home since leaving the factory.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 25

We were at the Harold Lloyd estate at 9:00 AM. Neal Kissel (Mechanical Supervisor of the estate), Chick Lander (Chairman of the L.A. Chapter), and Gene Davis were there to greet John, "Little Mother" and me. Walter Dymond, Chief Grounds Keeper since 1931, along with Dennis James arrived shortly thereafter, and we had our unloading crew.

The organ is stored in a garage on the grounds just across from Lloyd's two Rolls Royces. I figured that if the garage was good enough for the Rolls it would be all right for a temporary storage for the Wurlitzer. In 2½ hours the organ was unloaded, the grand piano was in the main house, its legs were back on, and Dennis James was on the bench playing "The Maple Leaf Rag" – Wow!

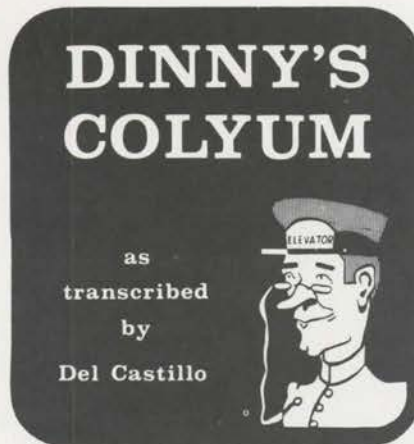
My last duty was to return the truck to a U-Haul dealer in Beverly Hills. You know that oil gauge read 60 lbs. of oil pressure all the way there!

The fabulous Harold Lloyd estate is now the permanent home of the late Ben Hall's prize possession, "Little Mother", a Wurlitzer pipe organ. ATOS has been invited to participate in the perpetuation of this instrument through donations, advice on the planning of the theatre to house it, technical planning and future maintenance.

Thus Ben Hall's dream will be

realized. A shrine for ATOS with his Wurlitzer organ as a focal point has been assured.

ATOS President Erwin Young has scheduled meetings with Dick Simon-ton and the other Harold Lloyd estate trustees to finalize plans for official ATOS participation. □



On acct. this here colyum dont come out every month, this is the first time I can say Happy Noo Year. I dont know why I say it anyways, when it comes to that. It dont seem to me like things is goin very good. I dont seem to be able to get up much enthoosiasm about the elekction or the govmont or the hippies or the way things is always costin more. But at that I guess I ruther be here than in Rosshia or Havana or Palestine or places like that there, so how about rememberin some of the things I liked pretty good like the weather in Calyifornia or the movies and musicals and concerts and quit thinkin about wars and earthquakes and floods and hi-jackin and muggins and gang killings and joovenile delinquince and stuff like that there.

First off on acct. this is a organ magazine I got a big bang out of some of the organ concerts, and maybe the biggest bang was the one Virgil Fox give that he called Heavy Organ. I aint goin to say much about it on acct. I rit it up in the colyum just before this one, but he sure sold me on how excitin a organ concert can be when he gets together with old Bach, Revelation lites or no Revelation lites. I notice in all the noospaper peaces I read about his concerts they all of them say they got as much of a kick about his talkin between peaces as with the peaces theirselves. I got to give a qvote from the Weekly

Variety where the riter says: When all the stops is pulled out on the powerful Passacalua (yeh, that's the way he spelled it, even I know better than that) the walls and seats litrally quake as screen explodes while a spotlight on the revolvin ballroom cristal above brakes into 1000s of lites dartin all over the hall – an absolootly incredible mindbender in total.

Well, that's the way I felt too, if I had the gift of gab to put it like that. Anyways it was one heck of a concert and I hope this Mr. Fox lives forever, and the way he looks and acts he just might. Then they is another organ player who kind of reminds me of Mr. Fox and that is Mr. Gaylord Carter who does these Flicker Finger concerts a-playin silent pitchers. I heard him do one awile back and on concert part of his show he put together a bunch of hurries like he plays in the chase scenes and it was a humdinger and his fingers and feet they was a-flyin as fast as Mr. Fox in some of his numbers. And then I get a kick out of the concerts some of these kids that are comin along so great like this Lyn Larsen who comes compleet with dimples, and Tom Hazleton who comes compleet by the yard, and dolls like Donna Parker and Carol Jones and Shirley Hannum to say nothin of the old timers like Ann Leaf who dont come by the yard on acct. she is the Mighty Mite. And besides organ players come by the foot.

But it aint only organ concerts I get a kick out of. They is symphony concerts when I can see guys like Lenny Bernstein or Zubin Mayta bouncin up and down on there toes and usin up energy like Mr. Fox and Mr. Carter, and now a noo young feller name of Michael Thomas who acts crazy the same way, and then they is the wild musicals like Jesus Christ Superstar which has got rithms and crowds a-yellin all over the stage like I never heard before, and operys like Suzzana by a guy name of Charlile Floyd with a lot of talkin and yellin in church and square dancin, and balletts like Cinderella by a Rooshian riter and then singers like Miss Joan Baez and Miss Arutha Franklin and Mr. Neil Diamond and I could keep a-goin on like this but all I started to say was they is a lot of good things to lissen to that takes your mind off the bad things, so I guess this is a pretty good place to live at that. □