

Mildred Fitzpatrick

by
Lloyd E. Klos

Photos not otherwise noted are from the Fitzpatrick collection.

Never far from a piano or organ, Mildred Fitzpatrick poses with her Hammond at home in 1970.



When a person's contemporaries are practically unanimous in their praise of him, that is a very high compliment. But, when that person's contemporaries are from the opposite sex, the compliment achieves supreme status. Over 45 years ago, Chicago organist Mildred Fitzpatrick was given this highest accolade by her male contemporaries: "The outstanding woman organist of the time."

Mildred Maginn Fitzpatrick was born in Chicago, and from her mother, Irene Maginn, derived her love and talent for music. Mildred's earliest memories of her mother's musical activity were formulated at the Ashland Theatre in Chicago, a nickelodeon with vaudeville, at Ashland and 49th Street. A family ran the theatre as was often the case in those days. The father, Henry Schonestadt, was manager; Henry Jr., his assistant; another son, Arthur the projectionist; and daughter Bertha, the cashier.

"Mother furnished the piano music for everything," Mildred says. "Playing vaudeville required good sight-reading and transposition because no one sang in the original key. Mother had a good musical background, was a good ear player and improviser and played perfect accompaniment for the pictures.

"I played relief for her on Saturday and Sunday when I was eight. She was my first teacher, and when I was eleven, she took me to Ernest Fristrom at the Metropolitan Conservatory of Music in Chicago for an audition. I was rather small for my age, and Fristrom, after eyeing me said that he didn't take beginners. Mother told him she had been teaching me since I was able to sit at a piano. He listened to my playing, gave me something to read, and after manifestations of surprise, agreed to instruct me.

"His price was \$6 a half hour. He charged my mother \$4, but charged nothing for my organ lessons. I traveled miles for my organ lessons, taking two street cars and the Oak Park "L" to the little church in which he played Sundays. I don't know what make the organ was, but I had to descend to the basement, turn on an electric switch, and turn a big wheel on a water pipe. By the time I returned to the console, the organ was ready to play. It had tracker action and I had a terrible time pressing the keys. I went twice a week to the church; one day for two hours of practice, the

other for my lesson and more practice. The first piece I learned was Rubinstein's "Melody in F."

On June 28, 1907, Mildred Fitzpatrick received her preparatory certificate from the Metropolitan Conservatory. On that same day, she was graduated from the eighth grade, and that evening, performed her first big concert, playing the first movement of Chopin's C Major Concerto. Her teacher was at a second piano. How she remembers that eventful day! Now, her career was ready to begin.

A movie theatre, which featured vaudeville on Saturday and Sunday, the Verdi, opened in her neighborhood at 35th Street and Archer Avenue. Mildred's mother was playing in a new theatre at 48th and Ashland, owned by George Theodore, one of the owners of the Verdi. The other owner was a young man, Kenneth Fitzpatrick. "Mr. Theodore knew I could play anything, so he asked me to wear long dresses and pile my hair atop my head to make me appear to be 16, which was the minimum age for musicians then. They asked me to rehearse the vaudeville acts which was easy after listening to mother for years.

"In a year or so, Mr. Fitzpatrick told me that the 390-seat Pastime Theatre on West Madison Street in the Loop area needed an organist who could also play piano for vaudeville. I went down and landed the job. The hours the first week were from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and the following week from 4 p.m. to 11 p.m. The girl who played the second shift was a wonderful pianist but couldn't play organ. After some instruction, I had her playing the 2-manual Kimball in nothing flat.

"My work at the Pastime enabled me to play for music lessons at the Chicago Musical College where I studied piano with Karl Reckze and Edward Collins, the latter a student of Rudolph Ganz. After I was graduated from CMS, I continued to study piano with Henriot Levy at the American Conservatory and later with Andre Skalski who came from Europe to teach at the Sherwood Music School where I also taught." It should be mentioned here that Mildred was graduated from the Chicago Musical College with highest honors, winning the diamond medal.

"A couple weeks after starting at the Pastime, the manager came down to the pit and told me how much I had



Mildred Fitzpatrick posed for this glamour picture in 1920 when she was playing at Orchestra Hall as well as the Boston Theatre. The feathers were a part of milady's apparel of that era.

improved on the organ, saying it was my piano playing which landed me the job, not the organ work. For a time, my organ teacher gave me a lesson every other week at 7 a.m. But since I was playing popular music in the theatre, I had no time to devote to 'long hair' any more. My salary was \$25 for a seven-day week, with no time off and no vacation."

Mildred was at the Pastime a little over a year when a 300-seat theatre was built around the corner at 21 North Clark Street by the owner of the old Morrison Hotel. The Boston Oyster House was in the basement of the hotel and that probably was the derivation of the new theatre's name, the Boston. "The manager, Mr. Miller, offered me \$50 a week to work in his theatre. My gosh! A \$25 raise!

"Naturally, I couldn't refuse and started playing the 2-manual Kimball in the Boston. About the same size as the Pastime's, it was called 'the organ with the human voice', and it had the finest Vox Humana one ever heard; the small size of the theatre made it very effective."

The Boston Theatre also had a Knabe grand piano in the pit, at which Mildred played the comedies and vaudeville acts during the several years she was featured there.

"The name of the Boston Oyster House was eventually changed to the Terrace Garden. It was a beautiful place and seats were arranged in terrace fashion. They had the best food and the best entertainment, all headline acts.

"Wurlitzer had one organ in town



Mildred . . . still attractive in 1943.

then, in their store on South Wabash Avenue where I practiced and taught. Ambrose 'Larry' Larsen, a very good demonstrator, sold a Wurlitzer to the Terrace Garden and I had been asked to go there, but didn't believe I had enough practice on a Wurlitzer yet. Larry was playing it, but his demonstrating and selling duties were increasing so much that he wanted out of the Garden. He talked me into giving it a try and in a few days, I could play it passably. I believe it was a 3/19 Hope-Jones Wurlitzer, and probably was the first Wurlitzer sold in Chicago."

Larsen is remembered as the organist of the *Little Orphan Annie* radio show of the thirties. Pierre Andre, the announcer, sang the theme and Larsen imitated, via the organ, a dog bark which was highly effective.

While appearing at the Boston Theatre, Mildred was "borrowed" to play special programs at Chicago's Orchestra Hall in the summer. A New York firm co-rented the hall to present previews of movies, using a 40-piece orchestra. The Hall's organ was always used with the orchestra for overtures. Then the orchestra opened the feature movie by playing five or ten minutes. The organ would take over, finish the feature and accompany all comedies and short subjects. Mildred also played a solo at all performances.

The programs at Orchestra Hall were quite extensive as a faded program, dated June 1919 indicates. Musical arrangements were by Walter

Blaufuss who 15 years later was to direct the "Homesteaders Orchestra" on the *National Farm and Home Hour* on radio. There were a Burton Holmes travelogue, news topics, the feature film, and an organ solo by Mildred Fitzpatrick. All this for 25 cents plus war tax. You really got your money's worth when you attended the theatre in those days!

"A lot of old-time organists remember the shortcomings of the organ in Orchestra Hall. It was strictly a concert instrument, it had pneumatic action, and when you played with the orchestra, you had to anticipate the beat of the conductor to synchronize the organ with the orchestra. No one liked to play it, but I got used to it. The series at Orchestra Hall continued for several years and I had a regular job playing the instrument."

In 1920, Mildred Fitzpatrick had a special engagement at the Ritz Theatre, playing a Kilgen Wonder Organ. Vaudeville, a feature movie, a comedy, newsreel, organ solo and overture were on the bill for only 30 cents!

After her stint at the Boston Theatre, she went to work for the Lubliner & Trinz organization, which owned several theatres in Chicago. Their biggest house was the 2000-seat Pantheon on Sheridan Road and Wilson Avenue, and they were building the 3000-seat Senate at West Madison and Crawford. This was before the Balaban & Katz' Tivoli was built on the south side.

"The supervisor of musicians for B & K, a violinist named Millstone, did their hiring and firing. He told me that if I

would work for B & K, I'd be the organist at the Tivoli. One day, he called me to his office and suggested I take a vacation; go to California and hear a fellow named Jesse Crawford whom B & K wanted to open the Tivoli. I had my trunk packed when I got a call from Mr. Trinz. He had picked me to open the Senate, but until then, he wanted me for the Pantheon. I stayed with the L & T organization."

When the Senate was opened in 1921, Herman Devries, critic for *The Chicago Evening News*, said about Mildred Fitzpatrick: "The organ is played with thorough command of its superb resources by Mildred Fitzpatrick. Here came a pleasure, a pardonable feeling of delight, for although the management had not been informed of my coming, I was astounded and charmed to hear Mrs. Fitzpatrick play my own "Souvenir d' Orient", which I had composed originally for piano. Mrs. Fitzpatrick flattered me unwittingly by an interpretation far better than I could have furnished. She has my sincere congratulations and thanks."

Mildred worked the Senate for a few weeks, then returned to the Pantheon where she stayed for five years, playing a 3-manual unified Kimball with traps and all the embellishments.

"When I started at the Pantheon, the scale was \$75 a week. When I was hired by Mr. Trinz for the Senate, he asked me what I wanted. I told him \$150, whereupon he instructed his secretary to make out a contract for that sum. When I worked at Orchestra Hall, I got \$145 a week. The orchestra director got

While playing at the Pantheon (about 1925) Mildred Fitzpatrick gave a luncheon for fellow theatre organists at her home on Sunnyside Avenue in Chicago. Standing (L to R) are Gwen Norine; unidentified; Mildred Alexander; Helen Franklin; Helen Westbrook; Helen Anderson (Crawford); Annabelle Vynne; Mrs. Getty. In front: Unidentified; Lita Burlingame.





Mildred Fitzpatrick designed the Kilgen which went into the Piccadilly Theatre, situated in this building. The photo is dated January 1927. The marquee indicates Ted Fiorito's orchestra was featured. The theatre's opening was delayed several weeks because Fiorito's engagement at the Edgewater Beach Hotel had to run its course. (Photo credit - Chicago Architectural Photographing Co.)

\$90! Jesse Crawford was the only organist in Chicago whose salary was more than mine. I never knew exactly what it was, but I never kept mine a secret.

"After Jesse Crawford came to town, our Chicago Society of Organists had a big reception for him in the Wurlitzer Building on South Wabash Avenue. We had a grand program, and as vice president of the organization, introduced him to the other organists, including Helen Anderson, the dark-haired beauty who was playing at the Roosevelt Theatre and a former student of mine. Helen was a very talented girl and played popular music very, very well. The simplest tune sounded great when she played it.

"Jesse played the Tivoli for a year, and when the Chicago opened, moved into it. Soon after, Jesse and Helen were married, combined their talents in a duo act, and became the most popular husband-wife team in show business.

"While at the Pantheon, I was chosen by judges from the National Organist Guild to present organ accompaniment to a movie for their program in Orchestra Hall, being chosen because of my familiarity with the organ. I hadn't submitted my name because I didn't believe I had the time to prepare for such a project. When Frank Van Dusen, the well-known concert organ teacher, announced at one of our meetings that I was chosen, I couldn't believe my ears!

"I never worked so diligently. The film I chose was *The Hunchback of*

Notre Dame and had to cut it to 50 minutes. One of our projectionists worked with me for several hours to edit the picture so it would make sense, and to make the organ accompaniment effective. I guess we succeeded because the club presented me with a beautiful Tiffany plate, inscribed as follows:

Presented To
Mildred Fitzpatrick
From
The Chicago Society of Organists
2-2-1925

"The plate sits on a table in my living room, where I use it as a letter and card tray."

The Pantheon Theatre always had an orchestra of 40 to 50 men, and presented big stage shows with stars such as Ruth Etting. A young concert violinist, just arrived from Russia, was booked for a week. His sister accompanied him on the piano and neither could speak English. The violinist was Victor Young and for his debut, he chose a very difficult but beautiful classical solo. He got very little applause, and his engagement was cancelled in a few days.

Armin Hand, the conductor, felt sorry for Victor and hired him for first violin, even though he had never played popular music. But, very soon he was playing it better than the other violinists. He composed his first song hit while at the Pantheon, "Sweet Sue."

Young later joined Ted Fiorito's orchestra at the Edgewater Beach Hotel. That orchestra was booked to open the new Piccadilly Theatre as was Mildred Fitzpatrick.

"While at the Pantheon Theatre, I also worked with the orchestras of Paul Biesse, Ralph Ginzberg and Isham Jones.

"I mentioned having almost played for Balaban & Katz at the time I was at the Pantheon. There was another. B & K built their first big theatre, the Riviera with a 3-manual Barton, at Lawrence Avenue and Sheridan Rd. on the north side. The souvenir program was printed for the grand opening with my name on it as featured organist. However, we hadn't agreed on salary. They offered me less than I was earning at the Pantheon. Whatever the scale was, I always asked for a lot more, but always got it!"

While at the Pantheon, she took on some pupils and has taught continuously since. Dr. Irma Glen was one, and she is still active as a church musician in California. (See Aug. 1971 THEATRE ORGAN).

The Piccadilly Building was built at a cost of \$4 million in the Hyde Park district of South Chicago. The structure included an apartment hotel which surrounded the theatre, the entire complex designed by Rapp & Rapp, well known architects of luxury theatres of that era.

"The owners of the Piccadilly owned

Interior of Piccadilly Theatre in Chicago showing Baldwin grand piano at right and imitation harp on the left. Pressure on the organ's right-hand swell pedal controlled the volume of the piano. The sound of the harp came from a real instrument behind the draperies. (Photo credit - Chicago Architectural Photographing Co.)



the first theatre in which my mother played. When they decided to have a pipe organ in the new house, they gave me the job of selecting the organ. The Kilgen representative was most cooperative in applying my ideas. I worked with the Wurlitzer design for the console and made many other changes to the 4/19 instrument, cost of which was \$23,500. I came across the salesman years later, but that will be covered further on."

The organ console, unadorned when it left the factory, was finished in Chicago in a gold-bronze decor. An outstanding feature of this organ was the Baldwin grand piano which was installed on a balcony beneath the right chamber. A harp was situated in a similar location at the left. The action of the right-hand swell pedal on the organ console controlled the expression of the piano. The harp, however, was a dummy; the real harp was situated behind curtains.

There was considerable trouble before the organ was ready for the grand opening. The generator gave trouble, Glockenspiel and Xylophone hammers slipped on their shafts and reservoir

springs snapped. All these contingencies, however, were eliminated in time for the opening, and the Kilgen personnel were given reason to be proud of their endeavors.

"The grand opening, scheduled for Christmas 1926, was delayed several weeks because Fiorito's contract at the Edgewater was not terminated until then. Al Short and his orchestra were engaged for the period and he requested his organist, Leo Terry, be present. Since my contract was already signed, I agreed to having Leo play. He and I had been good friends for years. The opening was January 23, 1927, and I followed Leo at the Piccadilly a few weeks later.

"My first organ job on radio was in 1926 on WGN before the national hookups began. The program was *Sam & Henry*, featuring Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, later known as *Amos 'n' Andy*. I also did a show called *The Smith Family* which started Jim and Marian Jordan, later to be more famous as *Fibber McGee & Molly*.

"Later, I had a 26-week dramatic detective series. Bob White was producer, and Don Ameche debuted as an

actor. I had to imitate an auto horn which played "How Dry I Am". What a headache!

"In 1928 after leaving the Pantheon, I did an hour program at noon over WHT, later WBBM. We had a 3-manual Page of about 18 ranks which I called my 'loose leaf' organ because although it was a fine instrument, it didn't have the 'wow' on the Tibias a Wurlitzer had.

"That program was the wildest thing I ever experienced. Pat Barnes (later on NBC) was the station manager and announcer, and sang a song on each program, usually "Laugh, Clown, Laugh", and for an encore, something like "Sonny Boy". We had a live audience, separated from our studio by a plate glass window. The switchboard operator took down the requests, a girl would hurry them into the studio where two more girls would pull the equivalent number from several stacks of alphabetically arranged sheet music. Another girl would place it on the console music rack.

"I had two or three daily programs, sometimes more. On Sunday, I had a church broadcast with choir, and one morning after the show, I went into an adjoining studio for my coat and fox fur scarf. Both were gone! After investigation, I learned that the loss was all mine because in those days, furs or diamonds owned by those so close to the public could not be insured. I had to buy a new outfit the next day."

While playing in 1928 for WHT (named for William Hale Thompson, "Big Bill" Thompson, former Chicago Mayor), Mildred Fitzpatrick went to teach at the Sherwood Music School, a position she was to have until 1944. The school had three 4-manual and one 3-manual Moller organs which were used from 8 a.m. until 9 p.m. for teaching and practicing. One organ was in a studio which was equipped with projector and screen to aid in the teaching of accompaniment to silent pictures. Training was given in all phases of theatre organ work: features, comedies, newsreels, song slides and scenics.

"All lessons were paid in advance, \$12 per hour. Lessons missed were made up during the 10-week term. I had many students who eventually worked throughout the country. But, the bottom dropped out when sound replaced the silents. The only jobs were for solo organists who could also play sing-alongs."

However, Mildred taught theatre

Mildred played the Marbro in 1935. This photo, taken in May 1927, shows the marquee advertising a tribute to Charles Lindbergh, with Albert F. Brown at the console of "the world's largest organ". (Photo credit - Chicago Architectural Photographing Co.)



solo work and coached students in radio technique well into the 1940's. She also continued radio work. When WENR became a network station, she played requests on a morning show for several years called *The Sunshine Hour*. Morgan L. Eastman, the station manager, conducted a symphony orchestra, and never allowed recorded music on his station. Live music was his preference.

Mildred played at several radio stations after the WHT and WENR tenures. She also played piano over WGES and WEDC.

"In 1935, I was playing alternate weeks at the Marbro Theatre on Chicago's west side, and at the Granada Theatre in Rogers Park on the north side. I played solos, most of the feature and all of the short subjects. We had big stage shows in both houses which were run by the Marks Brothers in competition with Balaban & Katz. Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians appeared at these theatres for nine weeks before they left for their long stay at the Hotel Roosevelt Grill in New York.

"My introduction to the Hammond electronic was through the Kilgen salesman with whom I worked on the Piccadilly organ. In 1935 when I got a call from him, asking me to meet him at the Hammond Clock Co., I wondered if he were selling clocks as no one had heard of the new instrument. Upon arriving at the factory, my old friend Porter Heaps was demonstrating one for a church group. The church music sounded great, but how would my popular material sound on it? Porter set up the registration to simulate a Xylophone and I did a fast rendition of "Nola". That convinced me! Twice a week at 7 a.m., I went to the factory to practice and in two weeks, I took a Hammond job at Harding's Restaurant.

"Another friend, Dean Herrick, was playing at the Bismarck Hotel and wanted to leave for South America to work for MGM. I took that job, too, playing both of them for five years. The Bismarck engagement was great; from three to five, playing in the lobby for the cocktail hour, then alternating with an orchestra for dancing until 1 a.m. Some of the biggest bands in the country played there several times a season and had floor shows in the Walnut Room: Wayne King, Ted Weems, Art Kassel, and Eddie Varzos.

"While at the Bismarck Hotel, I had to ask for more money because of my extensive purchases of evening gowns,

shoes, cosmetics etc. For my five-year engagement there, my salary was \$250 per week. I don't believe I was overpaid at all! I taught at Sherwood in the morning for sixteen years, going from place to place by taxi, seven days a week.

"The organ speakers (at the Bismarck) were called Hutter columns. In those days, there was little tremulant on the Hammond until the Britton Speaker (now Leslie) was invented.

"The advent of the Hammond in 1935 saved many organists from starving, as the country was in the darkest recesses of the depression. Sherwood installed a 3-manual Wurlitzer, later used by WJJD, and Fred Beck, a fine organist, broadcast with it."

By 1937, everyone wanted to learn to play the new electronic organ, Hammond being the only one. To keep the money coming in, Sherwood began to install Hammonds. "But if I live to be 100, I will always miss that wonderful feeling when, with the blower on, you grab some chords with both hands on a pipe organ and push until the roof seems to take off! That's what the pipe organ does for me!"

Mildred worked mostly on Hammonds from 1937 until 1943 when she began an engagement at the Chicago Ice Arena which had a 3/18 Wurlitzer with traps and percussions exposed above the organ loft. When she started, only half the organ was playable and when the boss didn't believe it, she listed all the unworkable stops. He brought in an organist who helped install the instrument 35 years previously to check her out. He was Dr. Loring and had

worked for Wurlitzer to defray expenses while attending college. He agreed with her report completely.

"The boss of the arena had a fit! A repairman and tuner worked for weeks, the restoration job costing over \$600. During the last week the Arena was open in 1954, I did some recording for the Boulevard Recording Co. MGM was supposed to market the records, but nothing came of it. I have some transcriptions which take two hours to play, but they are only half the recording I did. A popular vocalist, Nick Nobel, sang with the organ."

"The Ice Arena Building was sold to CBS in 1954 practically overnight. They didn't want the organ, and I could have had it for nothing. But, I found out what it would cost to get it up to my home, and even if I got it there, I had no place to put it! Bud Taylor tried to get his old boss in Kalamazoo to buy it for his restaurant there, but the owner couldn't see it.

"A man made a tentative deal for the organ, but backed down when he found he'd have to construct a building for it, even though it was to be featured at an outdoor skating rink. Then, Herb Shriner, the late Hoosier comedian, bought it for \$600 and it cost him about \$5,000 to move it to New York and install it in his home. I had a standing invitation from Herb to play it any time. Following his death, the organ was reinstalled in an orphanage in Connecticut."

Mildred moved to Michigan when the Ice Arena closed. As she didn't want to play in saloons, she started teaching and before long, had a big waiting list.

Mildred's home in Gobles, Michigan. The property which she describes as "a little bit of paradise", is 110' by 150', has fifteen varieties of trees, and is near Lake Mill. Several improvements have been made to the house, including a glazed-in room, since this photo was taken.



Her studio was in a Wurlitzer store, and it was equipped with an organ, a piano and a modern version of the old Bartola. The many concerts she gave were mostly on electronics: Wurlitzer, Conn and Baldwin.

"My biggest thrill since I have been retired was in September 1962 when I played the wonderful 4/34 Wurlitzer in the Detroit Theater Organ Club's first home, the Iris Theatre. I was the first woman organist they presented and the tape of the event is one of my proudest possessions. I've had to turn down several requests for return engagements

due to illness and a couple of accidents to my left foot.

"I am now living in what used to be my seven-room summer home in Gobles, Michigan and which is now fully winterized. I call it *Hillside on Lake Mill*. There are many beautiful trees nearby, and I feed the birds twice a day. The property is a stone's throw from the lake and it is just a heavenly location; a little bit of paradise."

Like most musicians of stature, Mildred Fitzpatrick has had several of her compositions published. "In My Wonderful Dreams of You" was pub-

lished by Will Rossiter of Chicago. "The Verdi Rag", a piano solo, was written during her tenure at the Verdi Theatre.

We have brought the readers of THEATRE ORGAN the story of one of the finest theatre organists of the golden age. Though her work was always based in Chicago, she was proficient enough to be labeled by her contemporaries as "The outstanding woman organist of the time." With such praise, no additional words are necessary. To Mildred Maginn Fitzpatrick we wish many years of happy and contented retirement. □



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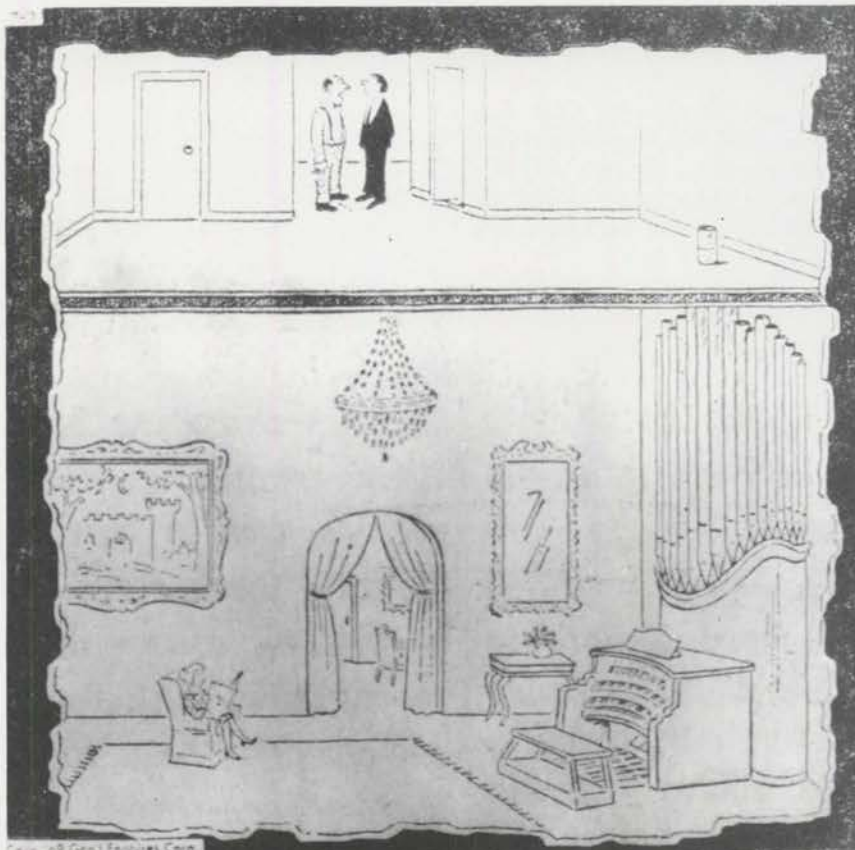
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NED RIDDLE

"If you decide to take the apartment, there's one thing I think I should tell you."

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