



The Harold Lloyd Film Museum Plans Ben Hall Memorial

by Stu Green

◀ Fountains and pools everywhere. They add to the authenticity of the mid-20's atmosphere which confronts visitors. But it's a cheerful nostalgia which reflects Harold Lloyd's upbeat image.

Shaded side entrance of residence opens on Cypress-bordered path to garden paralleled by a series of rippling cascades complete with chirping frogs.





Residence viewed across wide expanse of lawn. The organ-equipped living room is in this wing.
— (Stufoto)

The estate from the air. Residence is large building near top of photo. Ben Hall Theatre will go into the rectangular building adjacent to the curved structure just below photo center.



Our story starts in the early days of the film industry's romance with Hollywood. A young actor who had appeared in 64 one-reelers in two years as "Lonesome Luke" decided to change his image from that of a straight slapstick comic to one with much more warmth and human appeal, a shy young man with spectacles who solved his problems with hilarious ingenuity rather than brawn. The new image was an instant success, one which Harold Lloyd would project throughout his long career. This includes some 300 film titles since he adopted the horn-rim eyeglass frames in 1918.

It may seem incredible to some readers that we find it necessary to recap highlights of the Harold Lloyd career. "Everyone knows about Harold Lloyd" say those with long memories. But such readers are not in the major-

ity. It must be remembered that Lloyd's last film, *Mad Wednesday*, was released in 1949. Generations have been born since then.

The great success of Harold Lloyd's many shorts and few features made between 1918 and 1925 is reflected in the 16-acre Beverly Hills estate he built, starting in 1925. In the brief span of seven years, Lloyd became a millionaire. With an astute business sense, he bought control of his earlier films and bankrolled his subsequent ones. He spent a reported 2½ million building his estate which includes ten buildings. One can wander for hours along footpaths which course through thick forest growths to open on clearings with gazebos, reflecting pools, cascading streams, waterfalls, balconies which overlook the surrounding hills, and fountains — fountains everywhere.

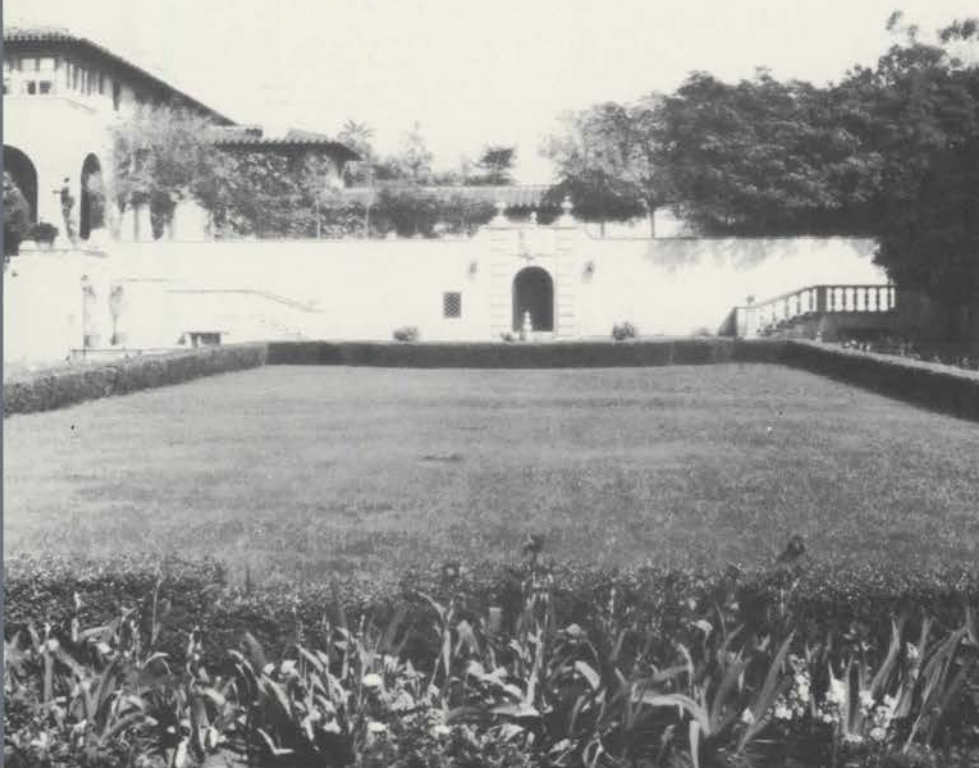
The huge Italian-Renaissance house emerges from the surrounding greenery majestically. It is bounded by arcades, patios, a great expanse of lawn and sunken gardens. An olympic-size swimming pool is prominent. The current value is said to be \$10,000,000.

But the master is gone. The man who personified the clean-cut American youth with a flair for getting into scrapes and out of them with much hilarity died at 77 two years ago. He willed his real estate for use as a film

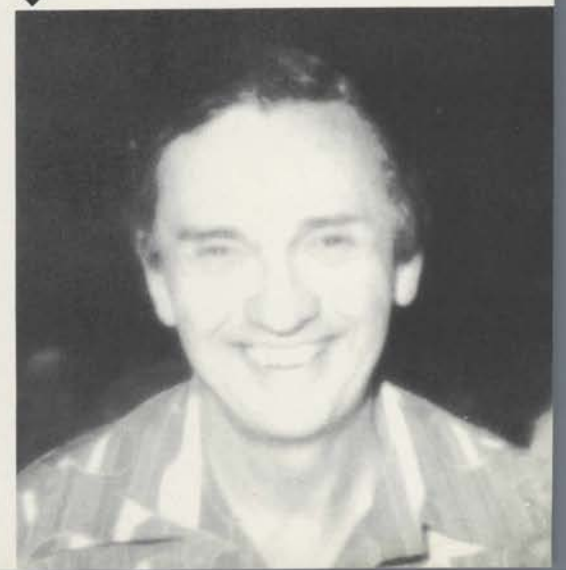


▲ Harold Lloyd and his leading lady, Mildred Davis, posed for this publicity "still" circa 1920. After their marriage, Mildred phased out her film career and left the spotlight to Harold. The marriage was permanent. One girl was born to the Lloyds; a boy and another girl were later adopted.

◀ The garden. Residence is seen at left. — (Stufoto)



▲ Past national ATOS President and "Man of the Year" Dick Simonton. A long time friend of Harold Lloyd, he was instrumental in securing ATOS participation in the museum project. — (Bob Hill Photo)





The dining room set for guests. — (Stufoto)

The living room, Aeolian 2/32 organ console is seen at right. Pipework is buried in cellar chambers. Projection room is concealed in space over window. — (Stufoto)



Screen Tarzan, Johnny Weissmuller, used to work out in this Olympic-size pool. — (Stufoto)

museum to be operated by a non-profit foundation.

One of the foundation's five trustees designated to administer the estate is Lloyd's close friend, Richard C. Simonton, who is also one of the founders of ATOS. Where Dick Simonton goes, the promotion of the theatre pipe organ is never far behind.

The third ingredient of our story involves tragedy — the death of theatre and organ historian Ben Hall at the hands of still unknown assailants in his New York apartment in December of 1970. Ben Hall, whose "The Best Remaining Seats" remains the definitive work about movie palaces of the 1920s, was a tireless worker for the theatre organ through his published articles and lectures. He is remembered warmly as the "MC" of several ATOS conventions. His death was a severe shock to ATOSers and theatre fans everywhere.

Among Ben's effects were numer-

Reporter Peg Nielsen admires Lloyd's permanent Christmas tree. It is decorated with baubles received from Harold's friends all over the world. In a room by itself, it is always ready for the holidays. — (Stufoto)





Ben Hall — (Bill Lamb Photo)

ous books and manuscripts, also a 5-rank Wurlitzer organ he called "Little Mother."

There is a strong and well-justified desire among ATOSers to perpetuate the memory of Ben Hall. The New York Chapter has been especially active in this area. It became a project of his home chapter to secure some of Ben's properties of historical significance and a campaign was undertaken to raise funds for the purchase of the materials, including the organ.

The emergence of the Harold Lloyd Foundation's film museum project dovetailed perfectly with ATOS desires to provide a fitting memorial to Ben Hall. Plans were made to convert Lloyd's handball court to a 150-seat

theatre to show significant films to museum visitors — the silent ones to be accompanied by music played on Ben's "Little Mother." Plans for the auditorium include a New York Paramount-style arch and facade. It will be designated "The Ben Hall Theatre." A permanent plaque on the organ console will further the Ben Hall memorial theme.

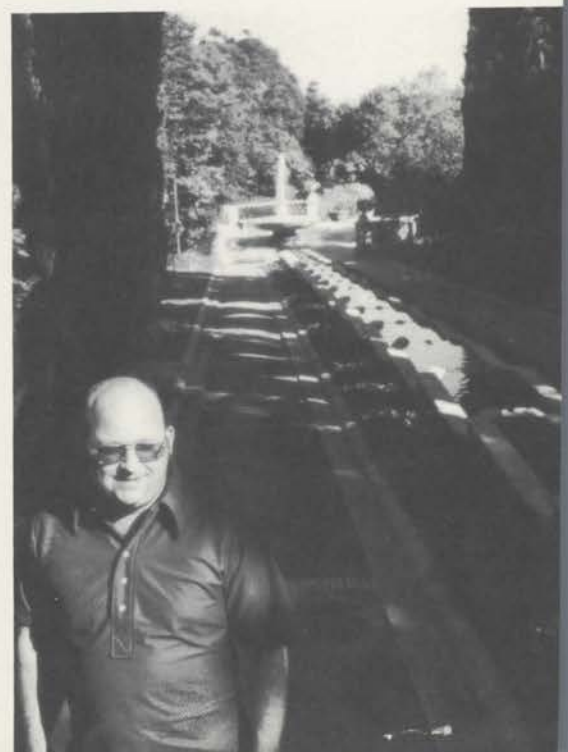
Those are the plans, but realization is some time away. Why? Lack of funds. Contrary to popular belief the comedian left only real estate in trust for museum use, no money for the realization of the project. That is the handicap the estate trustees have faced from the beginning.

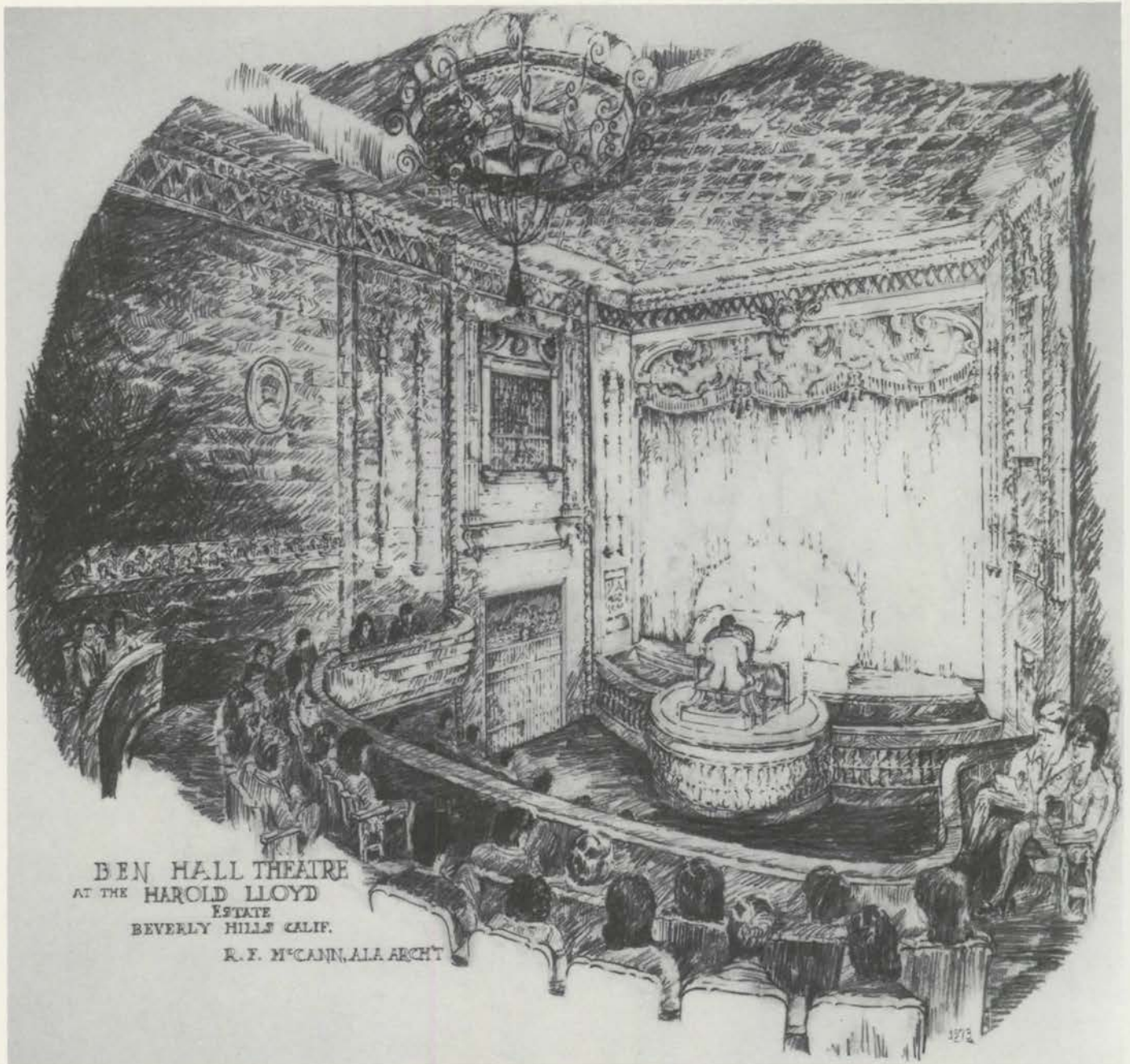
To coordinate the museum effort

the trustees sought a capable manager. They found him in Woodrow ("Woody") Wise, an ATOSer who has been involved with theatres since he started as an usher and projectionist at age 14. Easterner Wise, who was chairman of the 1972 ATOS convention in Washington, arrived in Los Angeles in the Spring of 1973 to face a host of Foundation problems, most of them having to do with money, or the lack of it. As manager of the entire estate, Woody's responsibilities include fund raising for the whole museum effort, one of which is the building and furnishing of the Ben Hall memorial theatre. While that project is very close to Woody's heart, the operation of the estate project as a whole must remain No. 1 priority. The grounds were opened to the public (so far only through Grayline Bus Tours) on May 25th. The gardens had to be put into shape, pathways paved, trees trimmed (some replaced), the waterfalls, cascades and fountains made operative, floors refinished, buildings repainted and handrailings installed to meet city codes covering tourist attractions.

Then there was the personnel; thirty five staffers are on the payroll, 13 of them gardeners. Woody estimates that operating expenses will come to \$400,000 a year (not including improvements).

Estate manager Woody Wise takes stock of work to be done on grounds. In the background is the often-pictured Cypress-bordered cascade series which leads to a pond and more fountains. — (Stufoto)





Artist's conception of the proposed Ben Hall Theatre interior.

How to get the project moving? The trustees did what any of us would do in a like situation; they secured a loan to tide the effort over its first few months.

If the museum idea should fail, the will provides for the property to go to the city of Beverly Hills and to UCLA. But Woody Wise is determined to make a success of the Foundation's museum project. With the loan providing some time leeway, he is seeking funds from rich and poor alike.

"Jack Warner footed the bill for the American Film Institute theatre," notes Woody, "All we need is a few 'angels'

like him. At the same time, small donations will be much appreciated. Every buck counts." To insure a steady effort in the donations department, Woody is organizing the Friends of the Harold Lloyd Estate, a group willing to help with the fund-raising project.

With income from tourists making a dent in the deficit, and time purchased in which to seek donations, Woody is confident of making ends meet for the first year of operation.

Although the Ben Hall Theatre will be funded separately, Woody sees this as an advantage; donations intended to

keep the memory of Ben Hall bright can be credited and applied directly to the theatre project rather than immersed in the general fund which runs the estate.

"It will cost close to \$200,000 to transform the handball court into a miniature of a '20s movie palace — even with volunteer work for the organ installation," says Woody.

Acquisition of the "Little Mother" Wurlitzer through the efforts of the New York Chapter was a notable step in the right direction too. It's the perfect instrument for the job. The limited space available for chamber use



Carolyn Kissel poses with one of the late comedian's Rolls Royce autos. — (Stufoto)



Neil Kissel, plumber, electrician and organ fixer.

Woody Wise inspects organ chamber in cellar. The Aeolian (with player) is in mint condition. It was put in shape by LA Chapter members before Lloyd's death. — (Stufoto)



and the miniature scale of the auditorium make a 5-ranker just the right size. The instrument is now in storage on the estate grounds.

Woody is still getting the "feel" of the huge project. He enjoys conducting visitors about the grounds, putting a roll on the 32-rank residence organ or showing off one of Lloyd's two remaining Rolls-Royce vehicles.

"Harold Lloyd sure went in for quality," says Woody. "Nothing but the best would do." As an example he points to the rain gutters on the estate buildings. On close examination one notes they are made of copper, both gutters and pipes.

He has especially kind words for the Neil Kissels. The family has been living on the estate grounds for several months with Neil acting as resident caretaker and maintenance man. In that time Neil has repaired many of the fountains and done much to improve the ancient plumbing.

"He's good with wiring problems, too" says Woody of the man who supervised installation of the LA Chapter's 3/16 Wurlitzer in the San Gabriel (Calif.) Civic Auditorium.

The only way to gain entrance to the Harold Lloyd estate at present is via Grayline Tours, 1207 West 3rd Street, Los Angeles, Calif. Phone (213) 481-2121.

During the coming months Woody Wise will be campaigning hard for funds to finance operation of the museum and to get started on the Ben Hall Theatre.

"Donors can designate their contributions for either the general fund or for the Ben Hall theatre," explains Woody. "I think I know already how gifts from ATOSers will be designated."

With a little good fortune (aided and abetted by Woody Wise's and the Trustees' skills as fund raisers), ATOS will have a permanent installation where the visiting public can be exposed to pipe organ music, and where a man who did so much to perpetuate the theatre organ will himself be remembered by generations to come through his theatre organ sounding forth in an atmosphere he would approve, the appropriately named Ben Hall Theatre — a tribute in perpetuity. □

CANADA LOSING ORGAN?

by Colin F. Cousins
Historian, HATOS

Readers may have heard of the recent destruction of Hamilton, Ontario's Capitol and Palace theatres, Canada's second and third largest. Their organs, both Warrens, were saved by members of the Hamilton Area Theatre Organ Society (HATOS) to be installed in a local high school. St. Mark's United Church, Dundas has purchased a 9 rank Warren for use in the services and in concerts. In Toronto, the Hippodrome Wurlitzer is being installed in Casa Loma, and the Imperial's large 4/24 Warren is going into the CNE Coliseum.

The fate is unknown, however, of the 3/19 Hillgreen, Lane (1949) presently installed in the magnificent Odeon Carlton, Toronto. The theatre, known as "The Showplace of the Nation", and one of the few theatres having a mezzanine restaurant (from which the movie could be watched while dining) is slated for destruction before the end of the year. The organ is for sale, but no buyers have come forth with the amount desired.

The organ is used for the final intermission on Friday and Saturday nights, and will continue in this way, as it has for the past 24 years, until its removal. According to the organist, Colin Corbett, there was to be a farewell concert sometime in May. □

Those Record Jackets...

In the December issue of THEATRE ORGAN, member and correspondent Douglas Marion reported the availability of record sleeves for old 78 RPM discs. The response has been slow. To date orders for only 975 have been received while 5000 are necessary to make a special production at a reasonable price.

Mr. Marion has asked THEATRE ORGAN to report the present status of this project in the hopes that others may wish to take advantage of this method to preserve old recordings.

For details, see December 1972 issue THEATRE ORGAN, page 28. The offer is still open to interested members. □