

# THEATRE ORGAN RESTORED in new MEXICO SCHOOL

Submitted by Robert C. MacNeur

Dennis James performs for the New Mexico Military Institute.



April 3, 1973, will be noted as a red letter day for organ lovers in the Southeastern New Mexico region in which the New Mexico Military Institute of Roswell, New Mexico, is located.

On that date Dennis James, an ATOS artist affiliate, performed an organ recital as an accompaniment to a silent film classic, *The Mark of Zorro*, at a pipe organ which has been silent for ten years. But the event was more than just another of young James's highly entertaining and nostalgic evenings in the world of early cinema, for he played a forty-odd year old Hillgreen-Lane pipe organ whose colorful history matches its size and versatility.

The organ has three manuals, and 14 ranks with chimes, xylophone, and harp stops. Installed in the Sunshine Theatre in Albuquerque in 1928, it was donated to NMMI in 1940 while Pearson Auditorium was under construction. Unfortunately, the organ was severely damaged in a truck accident in transport. Alva Wilson, a Roswell cadet, installed the organ in Pearson while attending NMMI. The organ was maintained and kept in repair by Mr. Bill Brown of Phoenix from its installation through 1950. In fact, Brown recently donated a Wurliizer relay to replace an inefficient system.

Since 1963 the organ has suffered from disrepair and some vandalism. Some time during that year the starter cables for the organ's blowers were damaged and efforts to isolate the damage were to no avail.

In 1971, two New Mexico Military Institute cadets, whose avocational interests include vintage musical instruments, set about repairing the largest pipe organ in southern New Mexico, which had rested out of use for seven years in Pearson Auditorium on the NMMI Campus. One of them was Cadet Sergeant Ronald J. Blessing of El Paso, Texas. Blessing graduated from the junior college division during 1971-72 and transferred to a senior college to continue his education. The second cadet was Cadet Recruit Robert C. MacNeur of Oakland, California, whose previous experience included work for the San Francisco

◀ At the console of the Hillgreen-Lane Pipe Organ he has worked on so diligently over the past two years, Cadet Robert C. MacNeur has developed his skills as an organist during his preparation of the NMMI organ for an upcoming recital.



office of G. Walton Guidry Company. He has rebuilt one theatre organ with the help of Mr. Dennis E. Mockel of Piedmont, California. Mr. Mockel is now a sophomore at Oregon Technical Institute, where he is majoring in physics. Dennis is the designer of the first direct relay system, built especially for a two manual Robert Morton theatre organ in Piedmont High School. Mockel's work provided the

initial inspiration for MacNeur. Bob has also assisted in the structure of an antiphonal organ for a three manual Moller pipe organ now in the Piedmont Community Church.

Both cadets did extensive research on the NMMI organ prior to beginning its repair.

In 1972 Bob was joined by a Roswell retiree who was approached by NMMI as an organist for that

school's Sunday Chapel. The prospect of playing a pipe organ instead of an electronic organ was too much for Mr. Jesse P. Reed. Reed joined MacNeur in time to help the cadet complete repairs on over 100 ciphers or leaks in the 1200 pipes of the organ. Additional pipe tools, tin solder, magnets, new pipes, rectifiers, tubing and many clamps were ordered and put to work. By Thanksgiving, when Mr. Reed happened to learn that Alva Wilson, the organ's first devotee, had taken up residence in Roswell, all three manuals and eleven ranks were in full operation. With Mr. Wilson's help the project has reached virtual completion.

Untold hours of labor by Mr. W.P. Brown, Mr. Wilson, Mr. Reed, and three cadets, Blessing, MacNeur and a newly recruited Dennis Alley of Roswell have gone into the restoration. To a man, however, they insist that the April 3 concert made it all worthwhile.

During the concert James explained that he wished to bring back the age of the silent era by selecting pieces which were highly popular during the 20's. But the special presentation of the *Mark of Zorro* silent film was the highlight of the evening's performance.

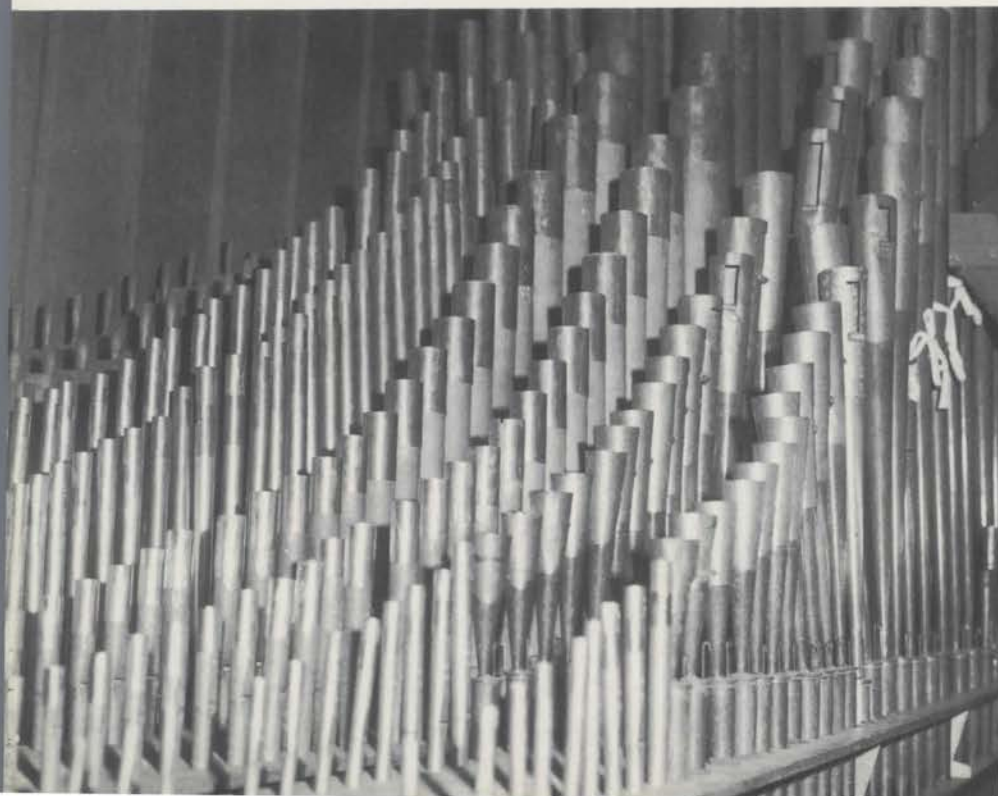
The evening concert was dedicated to Mr. Alva Wilson for his 45 years of dedicated work with the Hillgreen-Lane Organ. A plaque was given to Mr. Wilson in his name by Cadet MacNeur and Major Reames.

Dennis stated after the concert that he enjoyed playing the organ because it was, "a very 'classic' theatre organ, with an independent swell and great which can be only mixed with couplers. There are almost as many couplers as there are speaking stops. The layout is such that in theatre style playing the top manual becomes the accompaniment, the middle becomes a quasi-Wurlitzer bombarde and the bottom becomes the great!" □



Dennis Alley, Jesse P. Reed, Alva Wilson and Robert MacNeur recently removed every pipe in the NMMI organ for cleaning. Mr. Wilson used the occasion to discuss the condition and needs of the organ with the two young men who have been preparing the organ for its first recital in twenty years.

This view of the swell chamber of the Hillgreen-Lane in New Mexico Military Institute's Pearson Auditorium is an impressive sight.



**moving?**

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