

Schnitzelhaus mit Wurlitzer!

by Lloyd E. Klos

The Schnitzelhaus Restaurant (It's not all German; there are conventional items on the menu, also.) was started in 1970 during the summer recession. The place has been cursed with several bad breaks, but dogged determination and devotion of all concerned have made possible an operation of the first calibre.

The idea of a pipe organ in a sophisticated restaurant was Mr. Tenges', who declared: "What we need is an authentic Mighty Wurlitzer theatre organ in our restaurant. Then, we would really have something to talk about besides fine food, good atmosphere and the like."

He had been in New York in February 1968, and a friend suggested he go to the San Francisco area and see the installations there. Most of the places he visited were pizza parlors, but he was convinced that the idea would work in the restaurant for which he had plans.

Returning to Milwaukee, Tenges contacted Don Lorusso, an organist he

had seen perform in restaurants in the area. Don was asked his opinion on a pipe organ in a restaurant, and if he'd be interested in playing it. His immediate response was: "I think it's great; when do we start?" First, an organ had to be obtained. There was one available in California, but it would have been extremely costly to acquire and transport it.

Lorusso contacted a friend, Ben Ludwig, telling him of the proposed project. A few months later, Mr. Ludwig disclosed the availability of a 3/11 Wurlitzer Opus No. 1033 in the Milwaukee Elks Building. The organ had to be removed within three days or be destroyed with the structure.

Lodwig arranged for the organ's removal, placed the components in a semi-trailer and moved them to his garage until space in the restaurant was made available.

Mr. Tenges now had his Wurlitzer which would help to establish the mood in his emporium of the "good old days when eggs cost 25 cents a dozen, butter went for 19 cents a pound, and beer cost a nickel a glass. Movies then were the latest releases from the studios of Keystone, Metro, Sennett and others. And what made those movies so enjoyable? The Mighty Wurlitzer! It was the only sound which was stereophonic in those days, and in the huge showplaces such as the New York Paramount and the Roxy, the theatre organs' rumbling sound made reality vanish for a few delightful moments and we could dream..."

Once it was agreed as to where the pipe chambers were to be located, construction began. It was planned to rebuild and install the organ in 60 days, but the project took from May to November 1971.

It should be mentioned here that the organ in the Schnitzelhaus is owned by the L & L Music Co., a

Editors note:

Theatre organist Dr. E.J. Bebko is an inveterate traveler, always on the look out for theatre organs.

He found a unique installation in Milwaukee last November, conveyed the information to Lloyd Klos, who contacted restaurateur Eugene Tenges. Mr. Tenges graciously gave the information contained herein and supplied the photos for our use.

Front entrance to the restaurant. Sign at left advertises the Mighty Wurlitzer Pipe Organ and its two organists, Don Lorusso and Gary Sette. — (E. Tenges Photo)





While Don Lorusso plays for a sing-along, Mrs. Andrea Romano, assistant manager and hostess, dispenses liquid refreshment. — (Hanish Associates)

General view of glassed-in pipe chambers. — (E. Tenges Photo)



partnership of Ben Ludwig and Don Lorusso, from which it is leased by the restaurant.

Mr. Tenges believed from the start that he had an excellent organist in Don Lorusso. English-born Don began playing the organ at seven. Eventually, he established an impressive background in ultra clubs in England and the United States, and had his own show on the BBC. Highlight of his career was a Command Performance in 1947 for the Royal Family.

The Schnitzelhaus organ was played a few weeks before opening night. But, while it was being checked out the night before its grand opening, the 7½ HP motor conked out in a cloud of thick, black smoke! Three men worked over 20 hours to rebuild the motor. But, the organ opened on schedule and the Schnitzelhaus was thereby assured of its start as a tourist attraction in Milwaukee.

Bad luck continued to rear its head, however. Four weeks later, following a guest appearance on a TV talk show, Lorusso suffered a heart attack on the steps of the TV station. It would take weeks for the chief organist to recover, and a search for his replacement was instituted. One was found, but during his first night, he received a telephone call from a neighbor, informing him that his house was on fire! Out he went!

Several players were used until Don Lorusso was able to resume. One who did a superb job was Garry Sette, who began his career 16 years ago as a classical pianist. He has had considerable experience teaching piano and organ, and for several years, was featured at restaurants in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Rewarded by being named second organist at the Schnitzelhaus on Don's return, he has proven very capable and popular.

The playing schedule now has Don playing Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings, and Gary playing Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings as well as for Sunday brunch. Thus, patrons are given choices of two styles of playing, an arrangement which has worked very well.

The pipes, percussions and toy counter are located in two glassed-in chambers, fully visible to the diners. The blower is housed in a separate building adjacent to the restaurant. The white console is situated on an oriental-rug-covered platform, also in full view of the patrons.

Everything about the restaurant revolves around its main attraction, the organ. The management sponsors highly successful "Old-Time Radio Nights". Its advertising radiates the 1920's mood. Silent movies have been screened, and sing-alongs are part of the nightly bill of fare.

The printed menu, uniquely designed, opens like the front doors of the place. The menu items reflect the importance of the organ: "Wurlitzer's Pipe Dream" or "Organist's Dream Boat." Stories of organs in general and the restaurant's Wurlitzer in particular, are included for the public's edification. The menu can be mailed, as space is provided on the back for message and addressee.

Books of matches are distributed, and these publicize the organ, old-time movies and sing-alongs. The restaurant is identified as "The Home of the Mighty Wurlitzer Theatre Pipe Organ". Ingenious advertising of its prime asset will be a big measure in the success of this restaurant.

Mr. Tenges says, "Things are now working extremely well. We seem to be attracting a tremendous amount of out-of-town interest since there is nothing like it anywhere in the state of Wisconsin. The closest restaurant with a pipe organ installation is Martinetti's in Crystal Lake, Ill., about 150 miles away. So far, mostly local talent has played the organ, but we had ex-Radio City Music Hall organist, Dr. Edward J. Bebko, try it out back in November. "I want to give recognition and appreciation to those who have made our project possible. The organ was installed by Roger Welch and his associates from the United Organ and Bell Co. in Milwaukee. Dave Olson ATOS and Gary McWithey ATOS assisted in the installation and now attend to its maintenance. A great deal of overhauling as well as remodeling were done by Mr. Bill Klinger ATOS, also of Milwaukee, who is well known around the country for his efforts in organ installations. Without the help of these able men, the success of our venture would be in doubt."

Should you ever be within 100 miles of Milwaukee, the Schnitzelhaus awaits you. It is the only restaurant (March 1973) in Wisconsin having a theatre pipe organ as part of its nightly entertainment. That alone should serve as a beacon to guide theatre organ lovers to "The Great Eating Place With the Fun Name." □

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The man who conceived the idea of having an organ in his restaurant, Eugene E. Tenges, poses in one of the chambers — (Hanish Associates)

Gary Sette at the console while his cohort, Don Lorusso, looks on. — (Hanish Associates)

