

LUELLA EDWARDS WICKHAM

Sweetheart of the Console

by Lloyd E. Klos

The major purpose of THE-ATRE ORGAN is to document the careers of the people who lived the silent picture era at the console of an organ, furnishing mood music and effects to enhance the flickering photoplay. One notable lady, Luella E. Wickham, spent many years at this long gone occupation. When asked to supply notes for a biographical sketch she most graciously agreed to co-operate, although in one respect, she was at a disadvantage. Some years ago, many of her possessions were lost in a fire. These included old-time pictures, scrapbooks and other memorabilia relative to her career. But this grand lady of 81 summers possesses a sharp memory, and the following epic is largely through her efforts.

"I was born in Port Gibson, N.Y., and when I was six, our family doctor, who was a fine pianist, walked in and heard my struggling on our old pump organ. He advised my father to trade the organ for a piano so I could start lessons. My father, being ill at the time, said it was out of the question until he was able to return to work. However, our doctor felt differently and took it upon himself to see that I got an instrument and a teacher. Lessons were 25 cents an hour in 1898.

"I studied with that lady for about a year until she told my parents to get someone more advanced. Again, our

After the Keith's organ was installed at the State Fairgrounds, Luella performed at it on several occasions. Here, she poses at the refurbished console. — (Wickham Collection)



doctor found a teacher, Professor Zinger, who had studied in Paris under Franz Liszt. This man gave me wonderful training. I had to work faithfully, but it paid good dividends in the long run. I practiced from one to three hours a day, besides doing my school work. Today, I find pupils who believe an hour a day is too much for practice.

"At fourteen, I became organist at St. John, the Divine Episcopal Church in Syracuse, where we had a choir of between forty and sixty. I stayed there until I was married in 1911. Two months after that, I substituted at the Savoy, which was then the largest movie theatre in Syracuse. It had a nine-piece orchestra, and the price of admission was ten cents.

"One day, the Savoy's pianist bent his elbow too many times between the matinee and evening performances. The overture began, and I discovered that pages 3 and 7 were missing from the score, so I stayed in key and faked it. The next day, the job was mine. The manager paid my way into the musicians' union, and I stayed with the company for several years, playing pit piano. When they built a new theatre, I was named first pianist.

"With an orchestra, the pianist or organist simply watched the director, who had a list of cues for the music. The musicians each had a packet of music in which each piece was numbered. When you got the nod, you simply whipped out the appropriate number and started playing."

Often, Luella worked alone at the piano or organ and made up her own "show" as she called them — music to accompany whatever action appeared on the screen. She'd look at a movie when it first came in and took it from there.

"Then came a period of pit work with vaudeville, legit theatre, musical comedy, cabarets, dinner music, and symphonic work. In 1922, I returned to theatres for straight organ work under contract, which was to continue until three years after they installed talkies.

"Next came some short engagements as guest organist in several cities. These included the Strand theatres in Boston, Hartford and Pittsfield; the Brooklyn Strand; the Cameo in New York; the RKO Palace in Rochester, and the Lafayette and Shea's theatres in Buffalo. I also played piano in the Patsy Conway Band



Luella Wickham, second from right, instructs senior citizens at the Corinthian Foundation. She has been doing this each Wednesday for the past eight years.

which toured the Keith and Loew's circuits.

"Then David Marr asked me to demonstrate Marr & Colton organs, which I did for seven years. I can't give you the names of any theatres because all my press notices, music etc. were destroyed in a fire. However, I will remember the W.K. Vanderbilt summer home at Idle Hour, Long Island which housed two pipe organs. One was a player organ in the music room, and I was so surprised to see them put the rolls on the mechanism in the bench. But it played beautifully, taking all registration changes and expression without a control as a player piano had to have.

"The other Vanderbilt organ console was in the center of the big hall, at the curve of a large circular staircase. This I played manually.

"Shortly after the Vanderbilt experience, Mr. Marr took me to a recording organ, situated in the town of Camillus, N.Y., and I made several rolls of request numbers, two of which went to W.K. Vanderbilt, the remainder to Marshall Field in Chicago."

The bulk of Luella's playing was, of course, done in Syracuse. According to information retrieved from several sources, including the bulging files of colleague, Stu Green, Luella played the Crescent, Eckel (3/8 Wurlitzer), Empire (3/10 Marr & Colton), Regent (Austin), Rivoli (2/7 M&C), Strand (Austin) and Temple (2/6 Wurlitzer).

Rochester-born Stu Green was quite a theatre organist himself during the late twenties and early thirties, principally in the Syracuse neighbor-

hood houses. Those were the days when the palm glissando had yet to be born. Stu says, "I remember Luella Edwards very well. She played the Syracuse Rivoli for years on a 2/7 Marr & Colton, long gone. (Syracuse was a very good Marr & Colton town). I was the pimply-faced adolescent who sat in the first row with eyes and ears of adoration.

"Anyway, Luella Edwards was the gal I went to the Rivoli to sing-along with, regardless of the film. The first movie I recall seeing there was the second-time-around of *The Birth of a Nation*, and I saw it the night the Bastable Building burned down. Must have been 1922!

"I talked with her many times whenever I could get up courage to go down to the console and visit. I always felt guilty about talking while an organist was working, but she was very gracious. Our last conversation was while the Rivoli was still playing silents, though the main-drag movies along Salina Street had 'gone sound' — not yet 'talkie', just canned music and sound effects.

"We both agreed that this 'sound hoax' perpetuated on the public couldn't last, and she alluded to a particularly bad film, starring George Jessel, which audiences were leaving in mid-movie. It was *My Mother's Eyes*. Well, we both were dreaming, hoping the public would demand quality. But now we know better, don't we? By the way, the tune she was playing when we discussed the Jessel film was Percy Grainger's "Country Gardens."

"Luella did sing-alongs and spot-



In March 1965, Luella Wickham entertained 1,800 at RKO Keith's in Syracuse. Here, she poses at the 3/11 Wurlitzer console. — (Tom Anderson Photo)

light solos on the tiny M&C, and it wasn't until years later that I learned how small it really was! I never knew anything about it, always believing it was a six-rank Wurlitzer, until I ran across a Diapason clipping which stated it was an M&C. It was a sweet little organ.

Luella remembers a frightful experience at the Rivoli. "One evening, there was a fire in the theatre. The head usher rushed to the console and said, 'the boss says not to stop playing.' At the moment, I was starting 'The Flight of the Bumblebee', and I didn't think to switch to anything else. I just put in the most terrible evening of my life — with the bumblebee and fear! Half an hour after that, I couldn't even play and my hands were still lame the next morning!"

Luella says that most of the opportunities she had in the golden days were just luck. "I was there when they needed someone, and I was used in emergencies to fill in when needed. I have never received a degree, but was a special student under Professor Harry Vibbard, head of the organ department at Syracuse University. There are many fine compositions and studies by him still to be found. I also studied with George McNabb, of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester. Lessons for a period of ten weeks in New York City were a great aid in my concert and theatre work."

Talkies appeared in 1927, and the slow, steady change in theatre presentations evolved. Luella played into the thirties in Syracuse theatres because she had a contract, but she did only prologues and exit numbers.

"After leaving the theatre, and in

order to support my little family, I had to find work other than music over a period of several years. I managed a dry cleaning store for about eight years until my manager told me I shouldn't be in that kind of work. So, having a knowledge of bone China and gift items, I opened a gift shop and ran it for eleven years, until I sold out for cash by going door to door. I then managed another dry cleaning store for about a year.

"I had a chance to go with a Conn Organ dealer, staying with him a few months until I happened to play a Baldwin organ which impressed me very much. Asking the Baldwin dealer for a job, I was accepted. Though I retired from the Goss Piano and Organ Co. in 1970 after 20 years, I still have my studio in their store where I teach piano and organ. During the years from 1930 on, I played in lounges and clubs on weekends to augment my income.

"In 1969, I was made Honorary Member of the Niagara Frontier Chapter, ATOS and later designated their "sweetheart". In February 1972, four theatre organists, Doc Bebko, Frank Olson, Andy Jarosik and Harvey Elsaesser, played a concert as a salute to me at the Riviera Theatre in North Tonawanda. These gentlemen put on a beautiful show. I finished the program, playing the console down, and was presented with a large plaque for my sixty years of theatre playing. I also received from Fanny Wurlitzer, wires from Stu Green, Eddie Osborne and others, plus flowers from all over the United States. I couldn't begin to carry them all. The console was covered with beautiful bouquets.

"The following summer, I retired as organist of the New York State Fair after 17 years. But, you have no idea what a merry-go-round I'm still on. From morning until 7 or 8 P.M. each day, I teach. Wednesday mornings for eight years I have taught senior citizens at the Corinthian Foundation. This project gives me real pleasure.

"That's it, I guess. People still seem to want me around, and it's great to be wanted at this age."

Those of us who have been privileged to hear this remarkable lady perform at ATOS conventions, and at programs involving the New York State Fair's 3/11 Wurlitzer, indeed want Luella E. Wickham, the Sweetheart of the Console, to be around for many years to come! □

TIVOLI SCORES AGAIN

On September 5, 1973, the Women's Auxilliary of the Salvation Army sponsored a buffet dinner and theatre party held at the Tivoli Theatre, in Frederick, Md. and home of the 2/8 Wurlitzer featured at last



Ray Brubacher and Dick Kline share the spotlight at the Tivoli Wurlitzer in Frederick, MD.

year's ATOS convention. At 8 p.m. a half hour organ concert was played to a most enthusiastic audience of over 900 by organist Ray Brubacher. The response at the end of the program indicated that the organ will be soon put to more frequent useage of concerts and motion picture programs.

After the showing of the new Ross Hunter production of *Lost Horizon*, Dick Kline, a familiar name to ATOS members was at the console for the exit music which turned into a half hour program because no one was willing to leave their seats as long as the Mighty Wurlitzer was alive and sounding. This is proof positive that even in a smaller town as Frederick, people do remember, and those who prior to September 5th, had never heard the sound of the theatre organ will remember and hopefully will return to promote the Tivoli Wurlitzer. □