

THE HUGH DODGE STORY

by Lloyd E. Klos

There have been a number of theatres in the United States which have boasted more than one console for their pipe organs. The Roxy in New York had a triple-console Kimball; the Denver Paramount, New York's Radio City Music Hall, and Rochester's Piccadilly, dual consoles. This is the story of an organist who manned one of the consoles in Rochester's Piccadilly Theatre — Hugh J. Dodge, one of "The Console Twins", as he was known in the late twenties.

Mr. Dodge was born in the attractive little village of Lockport, New York, west of Rochester. He was the only musician in the family, and studied piano at an early age. In his first year of high school, he organized, directed and played in his own dance band.

Because of his experience with the dance band, Hugh was hired by an Italian impresario in Lockport to accompany first-run foreign films. A lot was rented in the Italian section of the village and chairs took up every available square foot of space. The piano was placed behind the screen, so our hero saw the action in a reverse fashion.

The first production was *Dante's Inferno*, with Italian subtitles, and considerable nudity for a 1919 vintage picture. There were hundreds of extras, and the acting was of very poor quality. For the love scenes, Mr. Dodge played "Romance" by Anton

Rubinstein. But, for the hell scene, he gave them the "Anvil Chorus". As many of the immigrants had been to LaScala and other homes of opera, they vented their displeasure over the choice of music. The series ended after only four performances!

At the age of 15, Hugh was hired to play the piano for the dinner hour in Lockport's 1752-seat Rialto Theatre. The house had a 4-piece orchestra which accompanied the silents.

The Rialto management eventually bought an organ which added a new dimension to motion picture playing, and was a boon to the small theatres because it replaced the more expensive orchestras. Far more important, there was a greater variety of music obtainable from an organ, instead of the pianos and nickelodeons which preceded them. No matter what the make, if it imitated a single violin one minute, or a thundering cavalry charge the next, gee, Dad, it was a Wurlitzer!

Dusty Rhodes was the first organist at the Rialto, and Hugh Dodge served as his substitute during his supper hours or whenever Dusty was inclined to take time off, which was often. Some of the pictures which Hugh remembers working, were the original *Peter Pan* with Betty Bronson, *Madame DuBarry* with Gloria Swanson, and *Charlie's Aunt* with Sidney Chaplin.

Desirous of hearing some of the organists who were playing other the-



Hugh Dodge at Rochester's first Hammond in the Peacock Room of the Odenbach Restaurant in 1935.

atres, Mr. Dodge one day hopped aboard a Buffalo, Lockport & Rochester interurban trolley car, and headed for Buffalo. He first visited Shea's Hippodrome where Albert Hay Malotte was presiding at the console accompanying a Harold Lloyd picture involving a haunted house. Malotte's playing of "The Funeral March of the Marionettes" instead of the familiar spooky music to capture the mood demanded on the screen, made a lasting impression on the young organist. This piece, 40 years later, was to become the theme of the television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

Mr. Dodge next visited the Lafayette Theatre where the master showman-organist, C. Sharpe Minor, would take his place at the 3/15 Wurlitzer in full dress suit, white tie and white gloves. "There was truly a trick organist. He could make the organ snore with clever use of the Vox Humana, or take a popular song like "April Showers" and make a real production number out of it. He created a picture of a milk wagon making its early morning rounds by employing the xylophone for clanking milk bottles, and wood blocks for the clop-clop of the horse."

Minor would station a violinist in a chamber, who, at a prearranged signal, would play a solo, while the organist would simulate the playing at the console. As the 'stage-door Janes' gathered about the showman afterwards, they would be lavish in their

praise of Minor's artistry. He didn't object to this one bit!

An artist whom Hugh Dodge watched carefully was Henry B. Murtagh who played the Lafayette around 1922. Up to that time, Hugh had had no formal training so the impressions which these artists made on him were great.

About 1923 while he was substitute organist at Buffalo's Elmwood Theatre, the organist, Roseauz, gave Hugh some lessons on the Three-manual Wurlitzer. Quite often during a lesson, he would excuse himself and be gone for a couple of hours, leaving his pupil extra time for practice.

Even before its big neighbor to the west, Buffalo, Lockport had a radio station — WMAK, owned by Norton Laboratories which made bakelite for radio consoles. Hugh had a half-hour spot with a dance band. The program was so informal, the announcer would bring in coffee and a tray of doughnuts while the show was on the air. The participants would stop and enjoy the snack and no one worried about "dead air". One day, however, as the announcer arrived with the food, he tripped, fell, and food went flying in all directions, the coffee pot and tray banging about in the studio. And, it all went over the air!

While in Lockport, with the right atmospheric conditions, the station could be heard in Scotland. Eventually it moved to Buffalo.

After high school, Mr. Dodge entered Rochester's Eastman School of Music for a summer course. He was interested in the motion picture organ course but found he was wasting his time because of his previous experience in Lockport and Buffalo. He therefore enrolled in the classical organ course under Abel M. DeCeaux, a man who had nothing but contempt for the "movee organ."

As Hugh had to realize some income while a student, he auditioned as a movie organist for Victor Wagner, the director of the Eastman Theatre Orchestra. As the Eastman, Regent and Piccadilly theatres were leased to Paramount-Public, he did substitute work at these houses, the latter two having Wurlitzers, the first an Austin.

In the fall of 1925, he became regular organist at the Piccadilly. Some of the pictures he accompanied during this period were *The Mark of Zorro* with Douglas Fairbanks, *What Price Glory* with Dolores Del Rio, Victor

McLaglen and Edmund Lowe, *Safety Last* and *Grandma's Boy* with Harold Lloyd, *Huckleberry Finn*, Laurel and Hardy epics and a documentary-type film, *Nanook of the Frozen North*. *Nanook* had plenty of drifting snow and gale-like winds and Mr. Dodge featured both preludes and fugues of Bach. His background music resulted in favorable mention for the "movie organist" by the Times-Union Theatre reviewer, Amy H. Coughton.

Hugh Dodge's daily schedule began at 8:30 in the morning with class sessions at the Eastman School until 10:30. Then, he'd walk a few blocks to the Piccadilly where he'd play until two, then, back to Eastman for more classwork until about five o'clock, returning to the theatre for the dinner hour. Occasionally, he'd have a late show at ten. Besides accompanying the movie, he would often play with the orchestra, giving the music more substance.

The organ in the Picadilly was a 2/9 Wurlitzer, installed in the 2250-seat theatre in 1919. The orchestra directors included Arthur Newberry, who was also a violinist in the Rochester Philharmonic, Seward Seward, and Al Metzdorf.

In late 1928, the Piccadilly was closed for refurbishing. Sound was coming in and the theatre was to be re-wired for the new medium. A model 240 Wurlitzer with two consoles was installed; one a three-manual, the other a two-manual. Hugh Dodge and J. Gordon Baldwin were chosen as organists and became known as "The

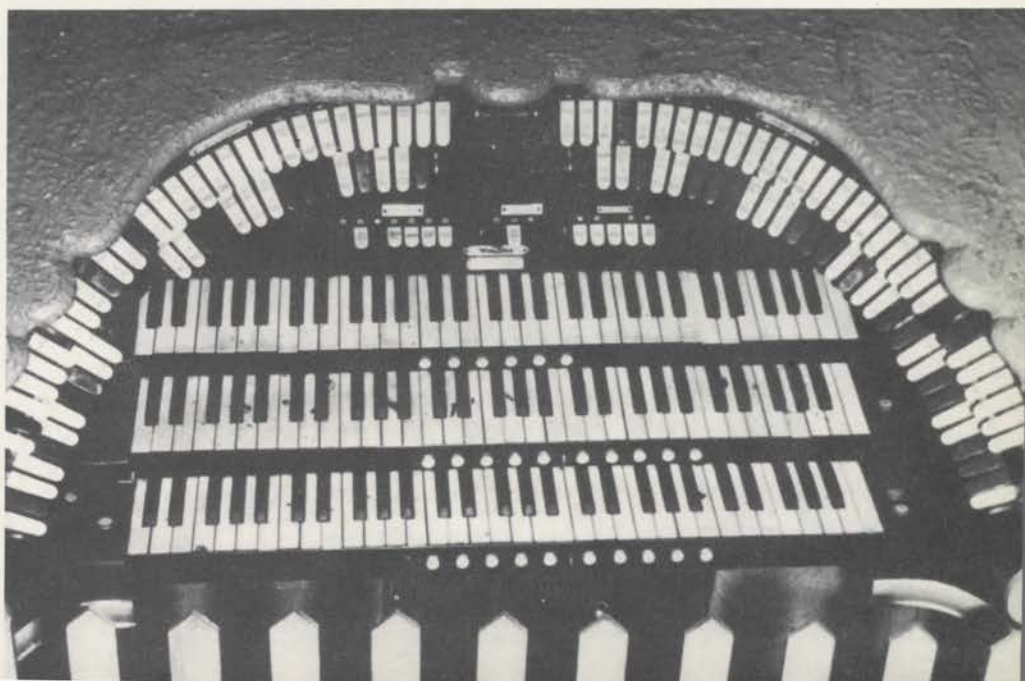
Console Twins."

When the Piccadilly reopened on February 9, 1929, it featured the first serious all-talking screen drama to be presented in Rochester, *Interference* starring William Powell, Evelyn Brent, Clive Brook and Doris Kenton. The movie ads exhorted the public to "Hear Them Talk". However, the big names on the marquee were those of singer Marion Harris and the late Eddie Peabody, the banjo king.

Mr. Dodge recalls that the movie drew good crowds daily during its two week run. Prices ranged from 25 cents to 60 cents, with children admitted for 15 cents at any time. A newspaper critic's review, pasted in Mr. Dodge's scrapbook, called the movie "a thorough all-talkie, featuring a cast chosen for suitability to spoken dialogue in voice and diction." Hugh further notes that the first sound was produced from records and not on a film track, and that sometimes the operator picked the wrong record for a particular sequence, resulting in confusion. The voices of William Powell and Clive Brook were reproduced with clarity and excellent quality but the higher voices of Evelyn Brent and Doric Kenyon did not reproduce so well. That's the way it was during the talkies' infancy.

"The Console Twins", Dodge and Baldwin, used to work up their presentations to perfection. Hugh classifies Mr. Baldwin as extremely capable along these lines. Overtures went well for a time — "1812", "Light Cavalry," and "Poet and Peasant."

The three-manual console from the Piccadilly. When theatre was remodeled in 1948, it was moved to the side and a picket fence erected around it. It is now in the Three Coins Restaurant in Louisville, Colorado. Fate of the 2-manual console is unknown. — (Lloyd Klos collection)



DEPARTMENT OF COINCIDENCES

Marches were also well received. In time, however, the patrons demanded lighter music. The remaining silents continued to be accompanied by both organ and orchestra, as were comedies and news-reels. However, sound was here to stay and, as time went on, the organists had less to do.

J. Gordon Baldwin was released as organist and eventually became musical director of WHEC in Rochester, playing its studio Wurlitzer installed in 1934. Later, he left town for parts unknown. Some say he went to California; others say he went to New York. If anyone knows of his whereabouts, the writer would be most interested.

In 1930, the Piccadilly began a policy of stage shows, using the organ for solos and song slides for a year. Hugh Dodge entered the broadcasting field, first for WHEC, then for WHAM, broadcasting from the Madison Theatre in 1930 and 1931. The theatre had a style E Wurlitzer and Hugh became his own announcer. The theatre's coming attractions were announced on this 3-times-a-week program in the late afternoon.

In 1934, Mr. Dodge became organist and choir director of St. Monica's Church, a position he has held ever

The February, 1973 issue of *THEATRE ORGAN* contained three articles concerning two organists from Franklin, Pennsylvania, neither of whom had heard from the other in 30 years. Two articles by Anson Jacobs,

since. In 1935, industrialist and restaurateur, Fred J. Odenbach, signed him to play dinner music in the Peacock Room of his Odenbach Restaurant, using the first Hammond organ played publicly in Rochester. Another local organist had claimed he was the first, but Mr. Dodge easily refutes this.

Mr. Dodge looks back on his theatre days with fond remembrances. He feels his career as organist-teacher is that much richer because of this experience. He says, "To be a good teacher organist, you needed, besides the basic equipment of a musician, a retentive memory and keen originality. All these factors were necessary to be successful."

A gentleman with character, a musician of note — that's Rochester's Hugh J. Dodge. □

who was more than "a small part of the golden era", also told of the latest disposition of the 3/9 Wurlitzer in the Latonia Theatre in Oil City, Pa.

The report of Potomac Valley Chapter's November meeting tells of another organist originally from Franklin, Jim Smiley. Jim writes that "Jake", as Anson was known to his many friends, was the inspiration for Jim's changing his college engineering course to organ studies.

"Jake" played at the Orpheum Theatre in Franklin on a two-manual Seeburg-Smith organ of about 10 ranks. Frequently, a road-show picture would be accompanied by organ and a small orchestra, in which Jim's father, Burt Smiley, played cornet. Needless to say, Jim and his brother always sat in the pit to admire the way "Jake" conducted from the console. Nobody ever played marches with more gusto and fidelity to voicing than "Jake".

Jim also recalls that he came to Oil City at the request of the owners of the Latonia Theatre to become second organist when the theatre opened. A quirk of application of rules by the American Federation of Musicians lost Jim the job, which was filled for a short time by imported non-union organists. Later, union organists were brought in, featuring Arlo Hults. Years later, Arlo followed Jim in a combo at the Neptune room in Washington, D.C. where they became friends.

It goes without saying that Jim Smiley is anxiously awaiting progress in the reinstallation of the Latonia organ with hopes of playing it again someday. □

Rochester's Piccadilly Theatre where Hugh Dodge played the first all-talking picture "Intolerance". Date of picture is February 1929.



Closing Chord

John A. Holywell of Unionville, Ontario, was killed when his car smashed into a tree on November 3. John, a charter member of the Niagara Frontier Chapter ATOS, was a dedicated theatre organ enthusiast. Always ready to assist fellow members in moving, installing or maintaining their instruments, he was working on his own installation recently. His widow and two children survive. □