

FIRE

DESTROYS KILGEN CONSOLE

Condensed from material submitted by
Carroll F. Harris and Bob Longfield

Two mortal enemies of pipe organs, vandals and fire, struck the Kilgen/Wurlitzer in the Grant Union High School, Sacramento, California on the night of December ninth.

It was a foggy Sunday evening, the type of night law enforcement officers dread. The lone school watchman had been harried by groups of teenagers who had kept him running from one part of the campus to another. About 11:23 he saw an orange glow light up the eastern sky. He hurriedly finished locking the west-end compound gates and headed toward the glow. It was the old, well-seasoned, wooden gym totally engulfed in flames!

This is what the *Sacramento Bee* of Monday, December 10, 1973, had to say:

"Two fires at Grant Union High School, believed caused by arsonists, destroyed the boy's gymnasium and a rare theatre pipe organ in the auditorium last night. Thirteen units and 50 firemen responded to the call at 11:24 P.M. The gymnasium fire was contained at 3:24 A.M. today, while the auditorium fire was put out moments after firemen arrived."

The arsonists broke into a school maintenance shop to secure a large supply of paint thinner. A liberal quantity of thinner was used to kindle flames along the whole back wall of the gymnasium.

Meanwhile, across the sprawling campus the vandals broke into the auditorium and doused thinner over the heavy cloth dust cover of the



Kilgen Custom Built console at Grant High School. — (Photo by H. A. Sommer)

Kilgen console which made an excellent wick. They also soaked a sleeping bag with more of the fluid and placed it under one leg of the opened main curtain on stage.

The stage fire did little structural damage as the curtain material was flame retardant and the stage itself was protected by a sprinkler system. However, the organ console was completely destroyed since it was beyond the area covered by sprinklers.

There was some water damage in the organ chambers due to the fact that the chambers are located in the stage area and one of the catwalks acting as a gutter, directed water down a wall into the solo chamber. The exact amount of water damage has not been determined at the time this was written. The auditorium itself was not damaged except for smoke and soot which blanketed the interior.

Sierra Chapter Chairman Dale Mendenhall, Vice Chairman Larry Weid, Chapter Board members Chuck Shumate and Hall Wilmunder as well as other chapter members were on hand early Monday morning following the fire to assess the damage and offer any possible assistance. Upon discovering that water had reached the pipework, Hal Wilmunder, an electrician, restored the blower circuit to provide drying air while others dumped water from the affected pipes. The chapter members who surveyed the damage feel the organ can, and should be restored as soon as possible.

The history of the Grant Union High School organ is unique.

The organ was installed during the years of 1938 and 1939 by the now

The view from the audience of all that was left after paint thinner was ignited on the once beautiful custom-built Kilgen console in Grant High Auditorium. — (A Larry Weid Photo)



famous organist George Wright who was an undergraduate student at the time. He was assisted by several classmates. It was assembled and installed by the students under the direction of Fred Wood, a Bay Area organ builder. The pipework and chests are mostly Wurlitzer which were acquired from several theatres located in Redding, Calif., Reno, Nev., and San Francisco. The components were removed, transported and assembled by the students. Their efforts resulted in a 21 rank instrument. The console was custom built by Kilgen. It was well unified with four manuals, 235 stops, and 43 adjustable capture action combination pistons. In recent years the organ has been maintained and tuned by ATOS member David Sauer.

It was first presented to the public in a recital by George Wright, Howard Scott, and Emil Martin on December 8, 1939.

It is ironic that vandals attempted to destroy the instrument 34 years later, almost to the day.

Previous to the fire the Sierra Chapter and District Superintendent Dr. Edward T. Walsh had been discussing ways to increase student and community use of the organ. Plans for this were to have been worked out before Christmas.

The largest single use of the organ in the last ten years has been Sierra Chapter's twice-a-year silent pictures with the late George Seaver (who had served as Sierra Chapter's first Vice Chairman), Rex Koury and Emil Martin as console artists; and monthly meetings with such guest artists as Edgar Amstein, Stu Boyer, and Everett Nourse.

Superintendent Walsh has stated: "The organ will be restored". This determination reflects the spirit of the school's student body and faculty, lead by Principal S. William Malkasian.

The determined spirit was very much in evidence as radio, TV, and news reporters interviewed student body leaders and students after the fire. Further evidence of this spirit was shown when students successfully pleaded with school authorities to allow the annual Christmas program to proceed as planned, using the fire besmirched auditorium. The idea was cleared with fire officials who, finding no structural damage, told the students to go ahead.

The Christmas program was held on Monday, December 17th. Carroll F.



All that remains of the console. Note the two large coils in the upper left. These were holding coils of the Austin capture action.



All that remains of the boys' gymnasium. The main school building and auditorium is west of this location. Note the window panes. These are a plastic material which is becoming popular for use in locations where windows are subject to frequent breakage. — (A Carroll F. Harris/Harold Baxter Photo)

Main building of Grant Union High School. Buildings in this picture are poured concrete external walls with stucco. Arsonists gained entry to the auditorium (extreme right) by breaking a small pane of glass in a front door and releasing the panic bar. Destroyed gymnasium is behind photographer. — (A Carroll F. Harris/Harold Baxter Photo)



Harris an ATOS member attended and stated: "Never did a program show so much enthusiasm. There is talent in the school and the students were using it to show the arsonist(s) that fire couldn't kill school spirit and togetherness". Principal Malkasian received a loud, standing ovation when he was introduced. His remarks included words of encouragement received from George Wright. District Board Member John P. McCrackin also attended the program and reiterated the earlier statement of Dr. Walsh that the organ must be restored.

School mothers and community leaders alike have started doing what they can to help in the restoration. Sierra Chapter has offered their assistance in these efforts also. Plans are being made for two, possibly more, silent picture presentations for the school's benefit. Nothing is definite at this time. The Chapter had planned their next silent picture presentation for April with Emil Martin at the console. Another presentation had been planned for October with Rex Koury at the console.

Sierra Chapter's last use of the organ was November 18 when Emil Martin furnished the music for a silenced *Roadrunner* cartoon, and an equally silent, *When Comedy Was King*. The audience was one of the



The late George Seaver, Sierra Chapter's first Vice Chairman seated at the Grant Union High School custom-built Kilgen console. The white plate to the left of the short rows of stop tabs was translucent, with a light display showing the relative position of the swell shades. — (A Clint Savage Photo)

largest in years and included a noticeably increased number of Grant community residents.

One commercial recording was made on the 4/21 instrument. It was made by Ray Frazier and released by Concert Recording, of Lynwood, California. It was reviewed December

1972 in *THEATRE ORGAN*. Copies are still available from the school. A check for \$5.50 should be made out to: **STUDENT BODY, GRANT UNION HIGH SCHOOL**. The address is 927 Grand Avenue, Sacramento, California 95838. Be patient as their staff is small and their workload large.

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