

The John Muri Story

by Lloyd E. Klos



One of the nicest personalities in the world of the theatre organ is John T. Muri. The author has known Mr. Muri for several years, having heard him perform four times. Each performance was a testimony to the man's capabilities as an organist, and as an artist in the accompaniment of silent films.

"I was born on October 4, 1906 in Hammond, Indiana in a fairly large but modest home, situated 35 feet from the Michigan Central Railroad tracks. (Thus Mr. Muri is one of the many theatre organ lovers who are also railroad enthusiasts). Both my parents were immigrants from Switzerland, my father coming from Bern, my mother from Lucerne. They first met in Chicago at a meeting of a local Swiss singing society.

"As a child, I was a willful youngster, but I do not recall ever having talked back to my father; he was too big, and had a hot temper. I didn't disobey my mother much for she had

her own ways of handling me.

"My first school experience was unhappy. Bewildered and bashful, I sat under a kindergarten table for some time before I was encouraged to come out and mix with the other children. I was always afraid of teachers, particularly one shop teacher who kept a 3-inch leather strap handy for disciplinary purposes.

"Outside of the usual childish fears, school life was relatively peaceful. I passed my classes, but never distinguished myself. I found great contentment in reading books, particularly *Pinocchio*, Thornton Burgess' animal series, the Oz books, and Lear's Nonsense books. As time passed, I progressed to more mature reading. As a freshman in high school, I'd go without lunch so I could purchase the weekly *Detective Story* magazine on Friday. When 15, I became a fan of Sax Rohmer and his Dr. Fu Manchu books, and at 17, discovered Chicago author, Harry Stephen Keeler's com-

plicated mystery novels whose web-work plots fascinated me. Later, I moved on to better authors, and now I am a fan of Lord Monbodo of Scotland and James Joyce."

It should be emphasized that Mr. Muri's reading proclivities stood him in good stead for the years ahead. One need only to read one of his columns in THEATRE ORGAN to realize how reading helped him gain an extensive vocabulary, coupled with excellent grammatical construction. Constant reading of good material will do this.

"I took to the piano without urging, very early. I first learned to play by ear without instruction, and as a result, it took a great deal of hard work and tough words by my teachers to get me out of the bad habits I developed in the early years.

"I took my first piano lessons at the Clifford Conservatory of Music in Hammond, Ind., did a little study in 1923-24 with Claude P. Ball, who taught theatre organ at Chicago's Kim-

ball Hall. Theory and advanced piano I took at Sherwood Music School in Chicago, and advanced organ with Arthur Dunham at the Chicago Temple in 1925-30.

"One of my best teachers was a man who didn't realize he was teaching me, Arthur Gutow. From 1923-26, I would go to the Chicago Theatre, week after week, to hear him give his morning concert at 10:45 and his playing of the current film, then hear Jesse Crawford do his solo.

"Sometimes, I stayed over to hear Mr. Crawford play the movie for the second show, but often I would leave the Chicago at 2 p.m. and go over to McVicker's Theatre where W. Remington Welch or Albert Hay Malotte was playing. It was during this time that I met Al Carney, second organist at McVicker's. He was very kind to me; he recommended me for good jobs, which I never took. I insisted upon remaining stuck in the Calumet region, south of Chicago.

"When I visited the organist at the Temple Theatre in Hammond in 1924, I discovered that the player was E. R. Howard, famous for his invention of the Howard Organ Seat. He asked me immediately if I'd take his job, as he had become tired of traveling from Chicago to Hammond every day. Thus, I had my first job handed to me at the age of 17, playing a 2/6 Wurlitzer. Every rank sounded bad, and the console, perched up in the ceiling above the pipes, gave me regular night-

mares of falling.

"A few months later, I learned of an opening at the Hoosier Theatre in Whiting, Indiana, applied for it, and got the job which was good for three years.

"In 1927, I received an offer to become organist at the Indiana Theatre at Indiana Harbor. The theatre had a nice 3/10 Wurlitzer which is still there." The Indiana patrons evidently liked Muri's work, because he stayed at the Indiana until the talkies put organists out of business. The organ remained unused until 1966, when, after a period of restoration by Chicago ATOS members, Mr. Muri rededicated the instrument. It has been profusely used since, including a feature presentation by Mr. Muri during the 1969 ATOS convention.

"In 1933, I became musical director of WWAE in Hammond. However, I sensed the demise of the organist on radio, so I worked to achieve my bachelor's degree, which I received at the University of Chicago in 1937. I have my employers at the station to thank for having made my radio schedule fit my programs at the university. In 1940, I received my master's degree from Indiana University. Wayne State University has recently awarded me a second master's.

"My bachelor's degree enabled me to take a position teaching English at Hammond Technical High, where I stayed for nine years. Then, I transferred to Hammond High School, which was the college preparatory school in town, and in 1965, I became

chairman of the English Department of Gavitt High School. In 1964, I joined the faculty of the northwestern campus of Indiana University at Gary, where I taught English on a part-time basis. In 1968, I resigned from both institutions and retired to Detroit on an Indiana pension, after 31 years in the Hammond school system.

For 27 years, Mr. Muri was organist at the Hammond Civic Center, playing for wrestling matches, basketball games, pancake breakfasts, music festivals, flower exhibits, and dog shows. On one occasion, he provided the sole musical background for an entire indoor circus for a week. The instrument was a highly amplified Hammond.

"In 1962, I was invited to play a concert for the Detroit Theater Organ Club, the second person to play a full evening's program for that group. From then on, my concert activities expanded."

He is adequately prepared for any type program, having several hundred hours of motion picture material which he can use to illustrate the work required of a theatre organist years ago. He has hundreds of slides, mostly complete sets of solos. And, he has many thematic cue sheets and complete musical scores which came with some of the bigger films.

"I have been teaching English at Wayne State University and Highland Park College for the past several years. I also lectured on music for the silent film (using slides I made of old movie music, both American and European), at a Silent Film Festival at Kent State

LAST CALL...



On the 22nd of January, 1974, a great silence was heard across the Isthmus of Panamá. The mighty Wurlitzer 3/27 had thundered its final performance. With the possible exception of Radio City, no theater organ anywhere has been enjoyed by more world travelers than has the Hotel El Panamá's Wurlitzer.

"Panamá Viejo" (Old Panamá) is the only stereo recording ever made of this fabulous instrument, and there will never be another! Recorded under natural conditions, Jon Fisher carefully chose selections, including both Latin and American favorites that best demonstrate the special qualities of this unique installation. The album liner notes detail the history, installation, and specifications of the organ. Truly a collector's item that can never be again.

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University, April 1971, accompanying no less than seven full-length features in two days' time."

Mr. Muri has played for ATOS Conventions in Detroit and Chicago, and only an airlines' strike prevented his playing at the 1966 convention in Portland. He has toured many installations in the Middle West and East, has a recording to his credit, and is a regular contributor to THEATRE ORGAN magazine, expressing the organist's viewpoint on facets of the hobby.

"I have assumed 20 acres of farm land in Michigan near Port Huron on which I plan to have 10 cottages surrounding a small lake, and a recreation hall in which I can install one of the two Wurlitzer organs I own, and show silent movies with music for the summer cottagers along Lake Huron between Port Huron and Lexington. We have planted vegetables, trees, corn, fruit, etc. and hope to have a substantial operation going soon.

"For fun, I am currently researching movie history of the period 1913-1916, using a Recordak microfilm viewer which I purchased for use with materials which I get from the Library of Congress, material which is not available in even the great city libraries of Chicago and Detroit. I have three major projects currently in research: (1) The silent serials of 1916, (2) The history of the earliest days of theatre organ, and (3) the Brenkert family of Detroit."

As if the above weren't enough to keep him busy, Mr. Muri is also getting ready two recordings; one on the Detroit Theater Organ Club Wurlitzer, and another on the Detroit Fox 4/36 Wurlitzer.

His concerts have been going very well. "We were sold out for the concert at Cedar Rapids, Iowa in April 1971, a week ahead of time - 2,000 seats. They printed "sorry - sold out" ads in the newspapers in May 1971 in Detroit for our concert in the Royal Oak Theatre, 1700 seats sold out a week in advance there. The crowds outside were so large two hours before concert time that they decided to sell standing room tickets in violation of fire rules, and contemplated doing a second show. How sweet it is!"

It is his feeling that the theatre organ has entered a new era which will see a tremendous popularity for that instrument. Thanks to John T. Muri and others of similar dedication, that era will be a long and brilliant one. □

Arrests in Grant Union Fire

The Sunday, March 10 edition of the *Sacramento Bee* carried the following two column headline: CITY YOUTH AID, 3 OTHERS ARRESTED IN SCHOOL ARSON. This was the first of several similar stories to appear in the next few days. On March 14, the *Bee* carried the headline: NINTH ARREST MAY BE LAST IN ARSON CASE. The headlines and accompanying stories related to the destruction, on December 9/10, 1973, of the boys' gymnasium and the console of a beautiful theatre pipe organ at Grant Union High School.

The suspects ranged in age from 19 through 47 years. The alleged ring-leader was an employee of the City of Sacramento, a "pillar" of the community, and a pastor of a church. A simplified version of their motive was: "To get some money into the community to improve conditions." Nothing more can, or should, be said at this time because of legal considerations.

Initial bail on the suspects was set

at \$100,000. In arraignment hearings bail has been reset at \$4,000 and \$2,000. Charges have been dismissed against two of the nine. One of the remaining seven has pleaded guilty to arson, and three remain in custody, unable to post bail. It should also be said that all those arrested are residents of the Grant High neighborhood. One suspect, still in jail at this writing, is the son of a man who has worked diligently through the years for the community to have the use of the pipe organ.

Balcom and Vaughn of Seattle, Washington have been selected to build the replacement console. It is to be completed early in 1975. George Wright, a Grant alumnus, has volunteered to play the rededication concert, having been one of a trio of artists who dedicated the instrument in 1939. Emil Martin, one of the other dedicatory artists, is a member of Sierra Chapter, and had been playing the instrument for Sierra Chapter activities. Howard Scott, the third dedicatory artist, is now deceased. □

You're Invited...

The THEATRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA invites you to GET INTO THE ACT by attending its fifth annual Convention in Detroit on July 7, 8, and 9, 1974. Convention headquarters will be the Sheraton-Cadillac Hotel, located in the heart of downtown Detroit.

The many interesting and magnificent theatres of the "motor city" will be visited during the course of the Convention and once again, you will be able to thrill to the magnificent pleasure palaces that made Detroit famous: the magnificent MICHIGAN THEATRE, the Auditoriums of the worlds' largest MASONIC TEMPLE, famed ORCHESTRA HALL, the stunning FISHER THEATRE remodeled from a movie palace of old into the foremost legit theatre in the midwest, the MUSIC HALL CENTER and many others including the fabulous Detroit FOX, still the second largest movie palace in America with 5042 seats in an oval-Byzantine auditorium.

The cost of the Convention is \$15.00 per person and \$3.00 for spouse and each child. Registration material and hotel information can be obtained from Frank Rossi, 3178 Hollywood St., Dearborn, Mich. 48124. Bus tours and a copy of the Historical Theatre Guide to Detroit will be included in the registration fee.

In addition, the Detroit Public Library Main Branch in cooperation with the Theatre Historical Society will host a huge display, running the entire month of July featuring the theatre buildings of the great Detroit architect, C. Howard Crane. Many rare, original photographs, plus sketches and original blueprints will be on view.