

The Chicago Theatre 4/29 Wurlitzer, console is located at left side of orchestra pit.
(Bill Lamb Photo)

THE WURLITZER THAT WOULD NOT DIE

by Bill Reiger

To say that there has been much interest in restoring the Chicago Theatre Wurlitzer to its original splendor would be an understatement. Jesse Crawford played his way to fame on it. From the time the last strains of music died away forever, organ buffs everywhere longed to hear the famous organ's tones again. But the management concerned itself with other things; they even built a stage out over the console for a special show in the 50's, perhaps to remain permanently. No replies resulted from the many CATOE letters sent in attempts to interest the management in a restoration project. They had been more difficult to reach than even the Oriental Theatre management, whose restoration project, incidentally, was

initiated after organist Hal Pearl's introduction of CATOE representatives to the owner. Again, another personal introduction to the Chicago Theatre manager, who didn't even believe there was an organ under the stage, sparked a flicker of interest. A probe beneath a thick layer of black velour proved that a dust-laden, desecrated console did indeed exist. More time lapsed; no word, no letters, no nothing.

Unexpectedly, one day in the spring of '71 while at work, one of the regional directors of the Chicago Theatre called on the phone and asked me to come down to the theatre and look over the situation and estimate how long it would take, how much it would cost, etc. to put the organ in good operation condition. Having been with

Balaban & Katz theatres more than 30 years, he said he remembered hearing the organ and had had many inquiries about it. Aware of other situations where either unqualified or unprincipled workers had done more harm than good, he asked that all activity on the project be kept strictly confidential until the fate of the organ could be decided. We hoped that the instrument could stay right there and be played again because the theatre was a Chicago landmark. The challenge was overwhelming. With our original crew, Fred Kruse, Val Escobar, Frank Pokorny and the author, the task was begun, after a long delayed go-ahead.

As the months passed we began to realize the great magnitude of our project. The theatre managers fre-

quently asked us when it would be ready. That was a difficult question to answer because the more we did, the more we found to do. Yet the management was most cooperative. The managers, chief stagehand Frank Carson, the electrician and engineer, often assisted us, even delaying the starting time of the movie when we were moving the console or setting up the unenclosed xylophones. We used the carpenter shop in the basement and were given access to several other work rooms. Much time was spent in preparing the work areas, building ladders, installing lights and telephones where needed, besides general cleaning.

I recall one particularly interesting evening when I received a frantic call from Val Escobar in the next room. He said, "Drop everything and come here immediately!" Expecting the worst, I met Val and the electrician grinning like Cheshire cats. "Follow us," they said and led the way upstairs, above the Solo Chamber, above the Percussion Chamber, to what? **THE BRASS CHAMBER!** "Christopher Columbus" Val had made a monumental discovery! We never even guessed there was another chamber. Later we found out that at least two of the ranks there, the Tuba Mirabilis, and the English Horn had been brought from the Uptown Theatre many years before.

But discovery didn't end there. Frank Pokorny found an old enameled coffee pot, a hot plate, and the coffee breaks became special treats. We found we could last longer — into the wee hours on Tuesdays, and all day Sunday. More crew members came: Bill Hansen, George Smith, Russ Joseph, Carl Tompke, Dave Schultz, Jim Gruber, Art Todesco, Harvey Williams, Milton Pearl, Walter Strojny, Terry Kleven, Joe Duci Bella and others. I know they all enjoy the restoration project as much as I do. Of course, the intermissions at the Chicago are filled with George Wright tracks and other organ tapes played on the excellent house sound system. In fact, the sound is so realistic that at times we wondered how the Chicago Wurlitzer could sound as good again, and how much more we had to do to get it like that once again.

The 29 rank Style 285 Wurlitzer was equipped with a second console which Mrs. Jesse Crawford played many years ago, but it was sold a year

or two before we got there.

The organ speaks from six chambers, most of which are approachable only by climbing steel ladders. Here's an analysis of ranks by chamber:

Main Chamber (10 Ranks)

Tuba Horn
Main Sax
Open Diapason
VDO
Celeste
Horn Diapason
Flute
Dulciana
Clarinet
Krumet
Marimba

Foundation Chamber (6 Ranks)

Harmonic Flute
Tibia Clausa
Main Vox
Diaphonic Diapason
Gamba
Gamba Celeste

32' Diaphone Chamber
(12 Huge Wooden Pipes,
low C is 32 feet high)

Brass Chamber (4 Ranks)

Tuba Mirabilis
Tuba Mirabilis
English Horn
Double English Horn
(Posthorn)

Solo Chamber (9 Ranks)

Solo Tibia
Solo String
Quintadena
Kinura
Solo Sax
Trumpet
Solo Vox
Oboe Horn
Orchestral Oboe

Percussion Chamber

Chimes
Glock
Sleigh Bells
Drums plus standard set
of traps and special
sound effects

P.S.

2 unenclosed xylophones
1 unenclosed marimba
1 unenclosed piano

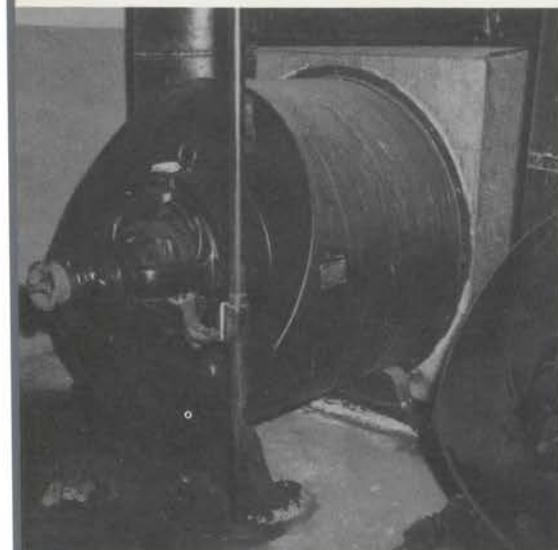
Behind the urns and tapestry is the main chamber.
(Bill Lamb Photo)





The regular crew (from left to right) George Smith, Frank Pokorny, Val Escobar, Bill Rieger, and Russ Joseph examine the console. Stagehand Frank Carson looks on from the stage.

(Bill Lamb Photo)



The 25 hp DC blower at the Chicago. The 10 hp blower at extreme right supplies 25" to some ranks.

(Bill Lamb Photo)

When we started, the regulators were a sorry lot. There were lots of them and all very sad, some with leather blown. But one at a time each of the four in the Solo Chamber was disconnected, carried home and re-leathered; likewise the four in the

Foundation Chamber, three in the Main Chamber and two in the Brass Chamber. As one might guess, our proficiency improved with each regulator we recovered. New gaskets were used at all wind supply pipe joints and some wind ducts were increased in size. Of course, this all had to be done before we dared turn on the blower.

Speaking of air, the blower room was not exactly tidy. The com-

mutators had to be dressed on each of the 10 hp and 25 hp DC 220 volt blowers. New brushed and brush holders were located, also new filters were installed after a thorough cleaning. The bearings were aligned and greased. The starter dash pots were cleaned and oiled. Most of this work could be done during evening theatre operating hours as long as we were quiet and careful.

Almost every time we entered the theatre we looked at the black heap (at the left side of the orchestra pit) under which was the remains of the console. This is the same console where Jesse Crawford presided from opening day, October, 1922, until 1926 when he went to New York and the Times Square Paramount. He came back for the Chicago Worlds Fair in 1933-1934 playing Kilgen organs.

Fred Kruse had started some work on the console and felt that to attack the problems better we should repair the lift, if possible. We found it located under the stage; a somewhat primitive hydraulic lift. It operated by turning a valve and letting city water pressure run into the cylinder, allowing the console platform to rise. Conversely, turning off the water and letting it run out of the cylinder into the floor drain would let the console platform descend smoothly. However, before we had achieved this simple operation many after-theatre hours were spent repairing valves and re-packing the main piston — after locating the proper sized oil impregnated material. The theatre hours, 9 a.m. to 12 midnight, and until 1:30 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, complicated the repair of the console.

We shall cover this in a coming issue, and supply a complete stoplist (if space permits) of the Chicago Theatre Wurlitzer. □

THE ROCHESTER THEATRE ORGAN SOCIETY

In Commemoration of its 10th Anniversary will present . . .

A WEEKEND WITH THE WURLITZER

Silent Movies • Songs • Dances
Concerts • Tours • Displays

Friday, November 1
8:15 P.M.

- Carlton James
- David Peckham
- Luella Wickham

Saturday, November 2
2:30 P.M. & 8:15 P.M.

- Dennis James
- The Singing Hoosiers

Sunday, November 3

2:30 P.M. & 8:15 P.M.

- Bob Ralston

For Ticket Information Write:

RTOS WEEKEND • Box 8114 • Rochester, N.Y. 14617