



ITINERANT PIPE ORGANS OF HAWAII

by John Jenkins

The year was 1921. The place was Van Nuys, California. Two 4/16 pipe organs were being readied in the erecting room of the Robert Morton factory before shipment to Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii.

Both organs, siblings in design, were being built for two new theatres about to open in downtown Honolulu. While the organs were almost of similar specifications, the theatres for which they were intended were operated by different owners and were of distinctively differing design.

The Green Brothers' Princess Theatre on Fort Street and Cohn's Hawaii Theatre on Bethel Street opened in October 1922 as show case motion picture palaces with sumptuous appointments equal to the finest on the mainland. Each had pipe chambers built in on both sides of the stage and each had facilities for stage performances and vaudeville, as well as motion pictures.

The large auditorium of the Princess Theatre, capable of seating many hundreds, was amphitheatre in design, with illuminated fountains below the organ grilles and even live models posing amidst greenery. The Hawaii with its broad auditorium was equally huge and boasted of a two-level cantilevered balcony, two lobbies and stageside boxes with wicker chairs. In Grecian architecture, it was like an opera house.

Both organ consoles were installed stage center in orchestra pits; the one in the Hawaii Theatre being on a lift, while the one in the Princess Theatre rested on the floor.

The Hawaii organ had a "slave console" but it was removed and returned to the factory.

Of great interest in both theatres

were collections of statuary, fine arts and paintings collected abroad by the owners. The Hawaii Theatre still has over the stage proscenium a large painting of Diana and her entourage consistent with the Greek theme.

Later, both theatres were acquired by Consolidated Amusement Company, a local corporation which now operates a large chain of movie theatres in the Islands.

The Hawaii Theatre remains in its original decor, somewhat faded and worn, but retains all the elegance of the great silent movie period.

Consolidated Amusement Company's new Waikiki Theatre on the local world famous Waikiki beach opened in 1936 with the new Model A Hammond plug-in which the company replaced with the pipe organ from the Hawaii Theatre. As the Waikiki was built without pipe chambers, two were added later above the "rainbow proscenium", now partially covered by a "wide screen".

A few years ago the Princess Theatre fell under the wreckers' ball, a victim of downtown urban development, but not before a determined group of pipe organ enthusiasts moved the organ three blocks away to backstage of the Hawaii Theatre. This group called itself the Hawaii Theatre Organ Club, later affiliating with the American Theatre Organ Society and is now known as Aloha Chapter.

Mention should be made that the Waikiki Hammond was moved to the Liberty Theatre where it was played regularly until Consolidated Amusement Company leased the house to an exhibitor who showed only Chinese movies. The Hammond was then moved to Aloha Chapter's club room in the Hawaii Theatre.

The Robert Morton, lying many months backstage in the Hawaii Theatre, was eventually installed in the empty chambers by William Blunk, with the understanding that Aloha Chapter would maintain it. Maintenance has been an on-going project of the chapter ever since.

A 3/10 Buehler theatre pipe organ was installed in Honolulu's Kaimuki Theatre around 1925, moved in 1954 to a church, and recently was acquired in part for installation in a private Honolulu residence.

The briefest installation was in the Kalihi Theatre, formerly known as the Star, where a 2/4 Wicks was installed about 1928 and sold in 1932 to a mainland mortuary.

This tale of itinerant Hawaii theatre organs would not be complete without a dramatic note about the 3/7 Robert Morton installed about 1925 on the "Big Island" of Hawaii in the city of Hilo's Palace Theatre, and later moved to the Hilo Theatre. The theatre and console were badly damaged by a tidal wave, but surviving were the pipe works, now installed and played from a Wurlitzer console in a private Honolulu residence.

Pipe organists in Honolulu Theatres included: Edwin Sawtelle, Don George, Alice Blue, Josephine Lude-mann, Gertrude Moffat and John DeMello. Mr. DeMello, staff organist for Consolidated Amusement Company, plays the Waikiki Theatre Robert Morton as a regular feature during intermissions at the Friday and Saturday evening performances.

The Robert Morton in the Hawaii Theatre is played almost daily at matinees for appreciative audiences by Aloha Chapter members and Mr. DeMello. It is frequently heard on Sunday mornings before show time, featuring guest artists or silent movies. The silents were most often accompanied by Honolulu's "Mr. Pipe Organ", John DeMello, who has the distinction of being actively employed as a theatre pipe organist for more than 50 years.

As a young man Mr. DeMello started out in the theatre with a piano, a Photoplayer and moved up to the big showcase pipe behemoths. Without him there would be no pipe sounds in Honolulu's theatres today.

The Hawaii Theatre Robert Morton is heard each week on Monday nights over radio station KNDI, featuring Aloha Chapter members and guests. □