

HAROLD JOLLES

Veteran Theatre Organist

by
Lloyd E. Klos

When the writer became an avowed theatre organ buff in 1959, one of the first theatre organists he met was Harold Jolles who was playing the 4/18 Marr & Colton on Sundays in Buffalo's Roosevelt Theatre. The theatre is gone, the organ is owned by an enthusiast, but Harold lives with his memories of the first great era of the theatre pipe organ.

He began studying piano at the age of ten. In those days, there were no electronics, so practice time was a bit difficult to obtain. He studied for a time with Samuel Thorstenberg in Jamestown, N.Y., and got a small amount of practice time on a 4-manual Hook & Hastings in one of the churches. He also studied in Buffalo under Irwin S. Binder at Plymouth ME Church. When he heard the great show-man-organist C. Sharpe Minor at Buffalo's Lafayette 3/15 Wurlitzer, Harold decided to become a theatre organist.

"I was in the balcony of the Lafayette when C. Sharpe Minor stationed a violinist in the pipe chamber for added effect, which the patrons thought was being done by the organist. He used slides, telling how he had blended stops to imitate a violin, and wiggled his fingers on the keys to simulate the vibrato! Once, using the Vox Humana, he imitated a quartet's singing; another time he stationed a soprano in the Solo Chamber, and he said one could make the Wurlitzer sound like the human voice.

"I never saw Minor or Henry B. Murtagh in tux or tails, but Albert Hay Malotte always wore a morning coat and striped trousers in the daytime and tails at night. Arthur Martel also favored formal dress at the Lafayette.

"Never have I heard a Wurlitzer 260 with the volume the Lafayette had! It had

no crescendo pedal, but there were two pedals, one for full organ, the other for everything, including percussion. Martel was a great exponent of lots of voice, including the 32' Diaphone which lay horizontally above the proscenium arch."

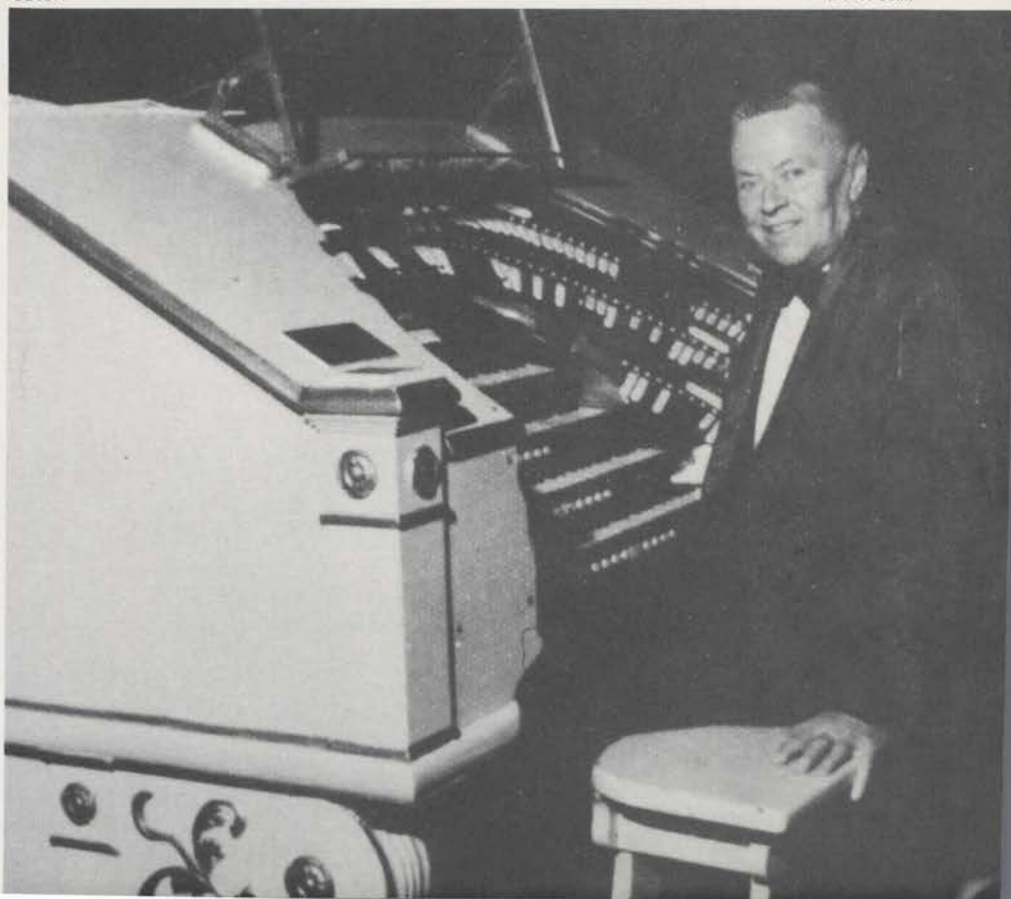
Harold had a few lessons from Hall of Famer Murtagh, and then enrolled at Rochester's Eastman School of Music in the fall of 1923. "When I arrived at the Eastman, there was no first-year class in motion picture accompaniment, so I played the *Hungarian Rhapsody #2* from memory for Jose Iturbi and was placed in the second-year class. The stu-

dents took turns at the 2-manual studio Wurlitzer, playing a portion of a picture. How I loved that! I remember particularly Pola Negri in *Passion*. In those good days, some students wouldn't take their allotted practice time on the Wurlitzer, so so fellow student Eda Roman and I would race to the studio for open practice time.

"The teachers were John F. and Robert J. Berentsen who alternated at the 4/155 Austin in the Eastman Theatre. Hammond and I became good friends, and he helped me a lot."

Among Harold's classmates were

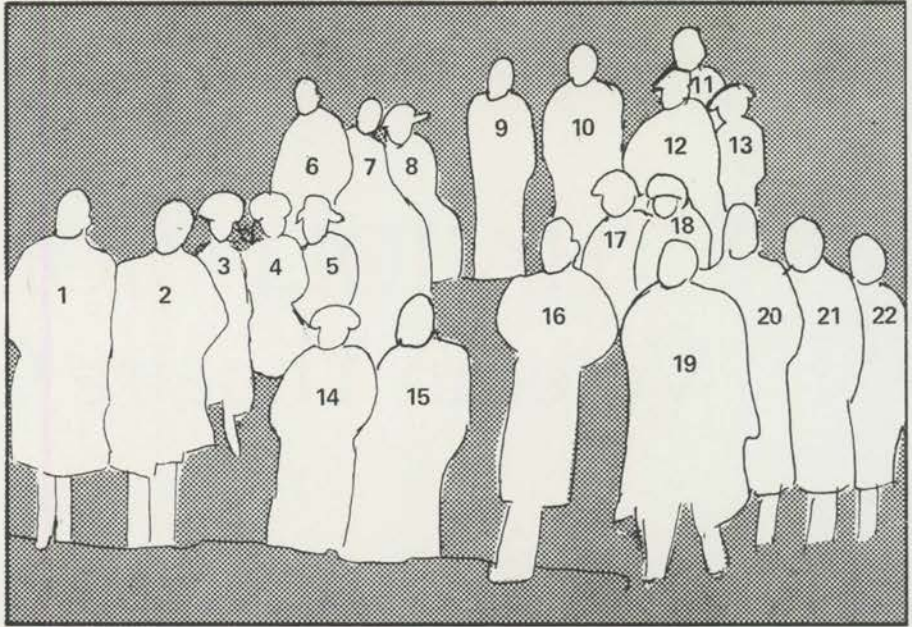
Harold pauses at the console of the RKO Palace Wurlitzer in 1965 while concertizing in Rochester. (Jolles Coll.)



Betty Raub (later known as Rosa Rio), Eda Roman, Mildred Perris, Fred Meyers and Mrs. Gladys Brown. Harold greatly impressed Hammond, and through arrangements with George Eastman and house manager Reuben Mamoulian, he played *The White Sister* one morning. They were further impressed and Harold was given permission to play for the supper hour and the last show of the day for four months preceeding his departure from the school in 1924.

"I recall the Regent Theatre on East Avenue, around the corner from Gibbs Street, which had a 1914 3-manual Hope-Jones Wurlitzer. I played it for a couple weeks while the organist was ill. The tremulant would not work for the Tibia, and when I sought permission to get it going, the manager refused. The tremulant on the strings was really big — almost shook you off the bench!" (That organ was removed in 1973 and placed in storage by "The Filthy Fifteen" crew of RTOS).

"I could have stayed at the Eastman organ, I suppose, but I wanted to get out and try my wings on a real Hope-Jones



A group of students, teachers and friends who visited the Marr & Colton Organ Co. in Warsaw, N.Y. in 1924, pose in front of the M & C office building. They are (1) David J. Marr, M & C President; (2) John Hammond, teacher; (3) Hazel Hippwell, student; (4) Mrs. Robert J. Berentsen; (5) Mrs. John Hammond; (6) unidentified student of Harold Gleason; (7) Mr. Roberts, student; (8) Betty Raub (Rosa Rio), student; (9) Harold Harper, student; (10) Jack Colton, M & C voicer; (11) Fred McKibben, student; (12) Eda Roman, student; (13) Eda's sister; (14) Gladys E. Brown, student; (15) Robert J. Berentsen, teacher. Students: (16) Harry Bareuther, (17) Mildred Peris, (18) Wanda McCuen, (19) Edwin Paddock, (20) Fred Myers, (21) Harold Jolles, (22) Richard Wallace.

(Jolles Collection)





The Lerner Theatre in Elkhart, Ind., where Harold was organist for five years. The marquee in 1924 advertises six acts of vaudeville and Buster Keaton in *The Navigator*, "a shipload of laughs." (Jolles Coll.)

type theatre organ. As Jamestown, N.Y. was near my home, I took my first job there at the 1000-seat Winter Garden Theatre — on a tracker action instrument! It had a beautiful tone and fast action. The theatre had a fine orchestra, too.

"After a few months, the owner wanted me to play his 1700-seat Palace Theatre down on Third Street. It featured five acts of first-class vaudeville, had a 3/15 Marr & Colton and another fine orchestra. That was where I first heard Paul Whiteman's concert orchestra and *The Rhapsody in Blue* with George Gershwin at the piano.

"When I was at the Palace, Frieda Hempel, the German opera star, was giving a concert at the Winter Garden, when the theatre's cat walked onto the stage and proceeded to preen herself. Mrs. Hempel burst out laughing as an usher removed kitty. If it had happened to Fify D'Orsay, oh boy!

"A small theatre in Jamestown had a model 109 Wurlitzer. It had a Flute, which was a Stopped Diapason; String; Vox Humana; Tuba; and a piano console with a 61-note keyboard. I frequently played it and had a ball.

"One day at the Palace, I became ill as the console seemed to be moving. I went downstairs and even the floor was heaving. Jamestown was having a rare earthquake!

"It was in Jamestown that pianist Gretchen Sach came to me one day and said, 'Have some candy.' I tried it, liked it,

and ate quite a lot of it. A short time later, while accompanying the picture, I had to leave hurriedly in the middle of the film for the emergency relief station. My new nickname was Jolly Jolles — after my introduction to Ex-Lax.

"The Palace owners asked me to go to the Wurlitzer factory in N. Tonawanda in 1924, to see about getting a 260 like Buffalo's Lafayette. I did, and shortly

after returning to the Palace, was coming up the aisle when a hand shot out. It was Fanny Wurlitzer, and C. Sharpe Minor was with him. What a thrill!

"Fanny said to me, 'Boy, if you'd get one of our organs, you'd really get somewhere.' He also said that he didn't hear any strings on the Palace organ. I told him they weren't working. This led to my calling the Marr & Colton Co. in Warsaw, N.Y. and asking them to get the organ in perfect shape as Minor was to play for three days (Fee: \$300). The company put in a new blower, a new console and more ranks. Upon completion of the work, M&C got me fired for being friendly with Wurlitzer!

"John Hammond sent for me to come to New York City where I substituted for Rosa Rio at Loew's Willard for two weeks while she was on vacation. The organ was a 3/57 divided Austin, and in that big vaudeville house, it sounded great. I also subbed occasionally for Hammond on the 4/28 Marr & Colton in the Piccadilly. One afternoon, he asked me to play the picture at the Pic, saying he'd be back in time for his solo. I developed a cold sweat, wondering where he was! He did get back, sliding onto the bench just in time."

One of Harold's memories of New York was Hall of Famer Frederick Kinsley who made a number of Edison Diamond Disc recordings in the early twenties on the Hippodrome Theatre's

The Elco (formerly Lerner) Theatre as it is today. It seats about 2,000. (Jolles Collection)



Midmer-Losh. "I had four recordings by him, including *Poor Butterfly*. When playing in New York, I went to hear him but was not impressed by the organ." The M-L was replaced in 1926 by a 4/29 Wurlitzer which eventually saw service in Albany where Rex Koury became featured organist.

"I had a successful tryout at Loew's New York Roof for a regular position at Loew's 86th Street Theatre. I soon quit however, because the manager was too hard to get along with. Loew's then sent me to their new Coney Island Theatre, a 2500-seat ornate picture house with a large Moller and a 25-piece symphony orchestra. The organ had a drawknob console, but in every sense a theatre organ with a 32' Contra Bourdon and a 32' Bombard. It was a beautiful organ and I enjoyed it until the fall of 1925 when I went West."

Harold moved to Elkhart, Indiana where he played a Kimball in the Lerner Theatre for five years. With the exception of three musicians, the orchestra was the same as it was in the Palace in Jamestown. "Sylvester Stambaugh was the organist whom I succeeded at the Lerner, a 2800-seat house. He had played for Lerner a long time, first on a straight 2-manual Kimball down the street in a small vaudeville theatre. He told the owners he'd quit if they put in a 3-manual organ in the Lerner. So, what should have been a 3/11 was a 2/11 but had the big sound of Kimball. It was the finest sounding Kimball I've ever heard, and it had a piano and 32' resultant.

"When I first went to the Lerner, I was told I'd never get the audience to sing. I started with slides on 'I Scream for Ice Cream'. At first, no sound from the patrons. Then I said, 'Let's hear just the gals'. I played pretty loud, but could hear some of them. Then I asked for the men, telling them I'd play loud. I put on crescendo, and when they got going well, I stopped, leaving them singing acapella! Everyone had a good laugh, I had 'em from then on, and there was no problem.

"I used to go to Chicago once a month to take lessons from Jesse Crawford, using the same organ on which he made his first recordings (*Valencia* etc.). It gave me the opportunity to hear other organists as well. Many organists in the old days let their playing do their talking for them. Doc Bebko will say the same thing. I heard Jesse Crawford, Arthur Gutow, Milton Charles, C. Sharpe Minor, Henry B. Murtagh, Albert Hay Malotte and many more. Not a word out of them!

"I took six months out to play the 3/11



The Lerner Theatre's Kimball console. It was at this keydesk that Harold fed a pet mouse. It was the finest Kimball he had ever heard. (James Coll.)

Barton in the Orpheum Theatre in Springfield, Ill. I did not like the organ or the manager. He wanted me to play popular music through most pictures. The theatre was beautiful, almost a replica of Rochester's RKO Palace, and like the Palace, the property is now a parking lot. The organ was given to a high school, and at last report, hardly usable as its maintenance was neglected.

"While in Elkhart, a young tuner from the Kimball factory came every three months. He was a good fellow and stayed at our home. He told me that the New York Roxy Kimball had 54 ranks. Milton Paige told me the same thing years later when on a visit to Buffalo, he tried out the Roosevelt M & C.

"The Lerner Kimball had gongs, bells, auto horn, aeroplane sound, surf etc. on buttons above the top manual. I'd been using the aeroplane sound one day and it stuck! I went up to the chamber and cut the wire which was the only thing I could do. The owner told me to keep it disconnected, so I couldn't use it again.

"The relief organist at the Lerner was a woman who had studied with Stambaugh. I had a pet mouse who used to come out on the console near my right hand, and I'd keep some crumbs for him. One day, the mouse came out and jumped onto the lady's hand. She let out a shriek and made a hasty exit.

"The carpeting in the Lerner was deep

and therefore given to static electricity. The girl ushers enjoyed touching their fingers to my neck while I was at the console, just to see me jump from the shock!

"The console was on the right side of the pit. We once had a one-ring circus on the stage, complete with high-wire acts, horses, three elephants and Clyde Beatty's lions and tigers. The stage, was very large and high, and looked a great deal like the Saenger's in New Orleans. The orchestra's drummer sat next to the console. There was a chimpanzee on the stage, chained to a tricycle. He evidently didn't like drummers, because he came to the edge of the stage and showed his teeth. The drummer reciprocated. The monkey came right over the apron, tricycle and all! The drummer went one way, I another! Later at the Orpheum in Springfield, he did the same thing, even though the Barton console was on the left side of the pit.

"Another day with the circus still on the bill at the Lerner, I noticed a small monkey, chained to the door of the girls' backstage dressing room. He was blind in one eye, but cute. He'd peek in at the girls and beckon me to take a look. I asked his owner what he was up to, and I was told that the monkey wanted me to get into position so he could bite me!

"The Lerner was a beautiful theatre and apparently still is as I saw the Main Street of Elkhart on TV news awhile ago,

and two good views of the theatre (now the Elco) were shown. It looked like new, and its big facade looked much like the Rivoli in New York. It had the most beautiful mezzanine lounge I've seen. When I played there, it had a large vertical 'Lerner' sign.

"I remember the first picture I played at the Lerner was the *Lost World*. The patrons had never heard a picture really played, as Stambaugh usually employed popular music for most pictures. However, the one I really enjoyed playing was *The Phantom of the Opera*. In the scene just before the massive chandelier fell, I stopped playing, then came down with an arm on the great and pushed the crescendo pedal at the same time! Some of the women in the audience screamed!"

With the demise of the theatre organ, Harold Jolles turned to farming in 1935, running a dairy farm in Cattaraugus, N.Y. He never lost his love for the theatre organ, however. When a crew of enthusiasts, led by Harry Radloff, began restoration of the 4/18 Marr & Colton in Buffalo's Roosevelt Theatre early in 1957, the owners of the theatre, George and Morris Rosing, were persuaded to feature the organ as part of the Sunday programs at 5 and 8 P.M. Harold was chosen for the job which continued into 1962 when the theatre was closed and later razed.

As a result of this activity, Harold engaged in serious practice and began teaching. He had to sell his dairy herd and some acreage. But the greatest kick Harold got from his new endeavor was to watch the children who were growing up in an era in which the theatre organ was new experience for them. Quite often, they'd come swarming from their seats and group around the console, their eyes popping over the display of pistons, tabs, manuals and switches.


The writer fondly remembers a 2-in-1 concert at the Roosevelt, Sunday morn-

Harold performs at the 4/18 Marr and Colton in Buffalo's Roosevelt Theatre in 1962. The organ was his favorite and he labeled it "the equal of any Wurlitzer I ever heard."
(Jolles Coll.)



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ing, January 31, 1960. This was an affair to commemorate the complete restoration of the 4/18 Marr & Colton. Harold worked the first half of the program, playing such numbers as a medley of Roaring Twenties hits, medley of Southern songs, Kreisler's *Liebesfreud*, and three original Jolles' compositions: *When Evening Shadows Fall*, *Little German Waltz* and *Japanese Polka*.

Second organist was Eddie Baker (Dr. Edward J. Bebkko) and he performed a sing-along of Twenties hits, a Gershwin medley, a march medley and *Brazilian Sleighbells*. This concert, the first for the fledgling Niagara Frontier Chapter, was the affair which greatly heightened the writer's interest in the theatre organ, and also convinced him that there were fine-sounding organs other than Wurlitzers.

"I always believe it would be fun for Doc and I to do another concert sometime. During my career, I was fortunate in never having to play in a run-down theatre. I always had a good, big instrument which was kept in tune."

There was an occasion when the practical humor of Roosevelt organ boss Harry Radloff and his assistant, Heino Olandt, caused Harold Jolles no small measure of frustration. The boys decided upon a practical joke, and proceeded to wire in a bigger number of stops and effects to Harold's favorite combination he used to open his Sunday programs. On the appointed day, as the audience started to fill the auditorium, Harold's

hands came down on the manuals for the first note and everything but the kitchen sink sounded off! The boys were seated directly in front of the console, and Harold turned around, glared at them and uttered some unprintable oath! The boys innocently smiled back!

In generalizing on the past, Harold Jolles offers some timely comment. "Read John Muri's articles on playing a motion picture in the 1974 issues of THEATRE ORGAN. The young should follow his advice and I am in complete agreement with what he says. A good theatre organist made his score a work of art and many people used to go to the theatre to: (1) Hear the organ, and (2) see the picture. Bob Berentsen and John Hammond at Rochester's Eastman were a rare pair. Their scoring of a picture was very smooth. Rosa Rio and I learned much from them. You had to be good in those days to stay five years in one spot. Look how long Don Baker was at the New York Paramount — 14 years! Of course, some organists had the wanderlust and traveled extensively.

"My favorite pipe organ? The 4/18 Marr & Colton in Buffalo's Roosevelt was the equal of any Wurlitzer I ever heard, and Tom Grierson said the same thing when he played it in 1961. Kimball built a wonderful organ and I never heard a bad one. I also have fond memories of the Eastman Austin.

"I can't begin to describe how most of us organists loved our jobs. In those days, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays were the big days and theatres were filled to standing room. The rest of the week was good. Imagine seeing five acts of first-class vaudeville, a good picture, a scenic, a comedy, newsreel, coming events and an organ solo — all for 65 cents!

"A good solo organist owed a lot to the operators in the projection booth. I never had to push a button to change slides, the operators handling the whole routine. Once I did a presentation entitled 'Chinese Temple Garden.' It was a film whose scenes were in Chinese and faded into English. As the mood changed, so did the color wheel, and it made a very nice solo without slides."

Since the closing of the Roosevelt, Harold has operated his farm and played an occasional concert. He has performed twice for the Rochester Theatre Organ Society, and for the Niagara Frontier Chapter of ATOS of which he is an Honored Member. "Yes, I would really like to do it all over again, and I hope in that far off place, there will be music and a beautiful pipe organ to play."