

A gift of love . . .

ONE MAN SAVES ORGAN

by Christopher Thorn

Nineteen sixty-eight was the year citizens of Erie, Pennsylvania witnessed the demolition of their theatre heritage — namely the destruction of Shea's Theatre, Erie's former showplace of vaudeville evenings, silent movies and full stage theatre productions under the direction of scores of road company producers.

It was also dubbed the year of the "rescue" because a maintenance man from Erie's Gannon College — ATOS member Robert (Joe) Luckey — directed 80 college fraternity boys in a 12 day evacuation of the Shea's most valuable possession — a 24 rank, three-manual pipe organ made by one of the city's organ manufacturers — the Tellers Pipe Organ Company.

The Shea's, and Tellers, constitute significant landmarks in Erie's history. The Shea's roots stretched back almost three-quarters of a century, and Tellers was the offspring of three organ craftsmen who originally worked for A.B. Felgemaker, an Erie pipe organ master of 100 years ago.

During its festive 64 years, Shea's Theatre changed management — and names — three times. Opened in 1904 as the Majestic, it was the brainstorm of Erieite Frederick B. Downing, an entrepreneur and theatre lover who often frequented New York's own Majestic playhouse. It was Downing who contacted the Majestic's architects, McEffatrick and Sons, to build a facsimile of the Majestic in downtown Erie to establish a permanent residence for big time theatre in the lakeside town.

Opening night at the Erie Majestic was the gala affair of the town. From that evening on, dozens of theatre stars such as Grace George ("Pretty Peggy"), Edwin Holt ("The Cardinal") and James H. Hackett ("The Crown

Prince") trekked across the Majestic's unusually huge stage. The theatre became a household word and the center for live in-person entertainment in the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, New York and Ohio.

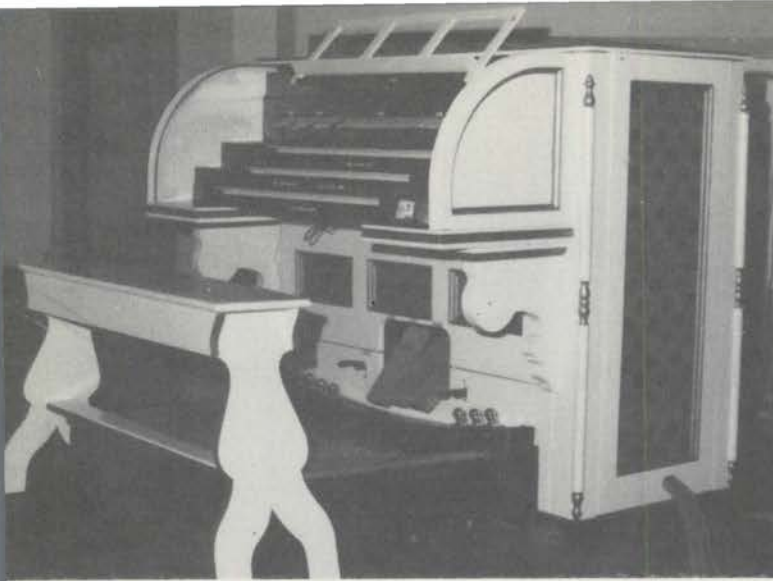
The most prominent stars at the Majestic were William Faversham in "The Faun" and Ethel Barrymore in "The Witness for the Defense." "Ben Hur" proved to be the theatre's most spectacular production when a treadmill was set up for horses and chariots in the great chariot race. The Majestic had one of its more historical moments when it hosted the Erie Cham-

ber of Commerce and honored guest, President William H. Taft. The Majestic was also used for high school graduation ceremonies. During the festivities of the class of 1909, a man named Seth Steiner talked about "wireless telegraphy" and gave the first public demonstration of it.

During the 1910's, the Majestic divorced its original owners and became the Perry. Around 1920, its new managers decided to enhance the atmosphere of its rich green and white interior, velour curtains, gold trimmings and green ingrained leather seats; they contacted the Tellers Organ

Shea's Theatre, Erie, before demolition in 1968.





The refinished Tellers console.



Joe bought a true horseshoe console, a two manual Marr and Colton, (seen here refinished) for the final installation of the Tellers.
(C. Thorn Photo)

Company about the installation of an organ.

The Tellers Company was a church pipe organ company, but apparently the Perry owners were somewhat confused about the technical and characteristic differences between church organs and theatre organs. Tellers installed a straight, 24 rank, three-manual organ, and it was not until 1930 that the organ received its theatrical qualities through the addition of the percussion section.

When N.A. Shea, a theatre chain owner, bought the Perry in 1931 and crowned it Shea's, the theatre quickly resumed its place as showcase of theatrical entertainment and continued to produce the only legitimate theatre in Erie until the 1950's. The Tellers organ was only used, however, off and on for a period of five years during the 1930's. Its organists were the showy "C. Sharpe Minor" (Charles Sharpe Minor) and Percy Le Seuer, owner of a local music conservatory. The organ was soon forgotten and collected dust for the next 35 odd years. The Stanley-Warner Corp. purchased the aging building in 1962 and converted it to a movie house until its demolition in 1968.

The Organ Companies

The Tellers Pipe Organ Co. originated from a rich heritage in pipe organ manufacturing in Erie, once the fertile ground for four organ companies which earned the city the nickname of "pipe organ capital of the world" at the turn of the 20th century.

In 1906, the company was founded by two brothers, Henry and Ignatius Tellers, and William Sommerhof, three craftsmen from Erie's A.B. Felgemaker

Pipe Organ Co., the city's pioneer industry in the trade, founded in 1872.

Felgemaker originally moved his entire works from nearby Buffalo, New York to Erie, and established a prosperous business in church pipe organs and portable pipe organs. He was credited with the invention of the portable while still a youth. In Erie, he was the contemporary of Frederick Burdette, a substantial manufacturer of reed "cottage" organs and Anton Gottfried, another Erie church organ manufacturer, recognized in music circles as the leading artist in reed and pipe work, and inventor of pipes resembling tones of orchestral instruments.

The Tellers Brothers — Sommerhof venture became the Tellers-Sommerhof Pipe Organ Co. and received its biggest impetus in 1918 when Felgemaker closed his factory. The infant company began fulfilling incomplete Felgemaker contracts and later became Tellers-Kent through a change of management.

Tellers made over 1,000 pipe organs

Joe gets the last strains of music from the Tellers before its dismantling in Shea's, 1968.



(20 for theatres) until its closing in 1972 when the company's heir, Herman J. Tellers, retired and sold to Lawrence Phelps and Associates. Phelps and the Durst Organ Supply Co., Inc. are the remaining pipe organ companies in Erie today, although Herman Tellers still runs an organ service company.

Many Erie churches have Tellers, but the company has instruments from coast to coast. Tellers built a pipe organ of 3000 pipes for the East Carolina State Teachers College in Greenville, N.C., and specially installed an organ in the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts for the 100th anniversary of the American Guild Organists in 1966. The company's most impressive and highly esteemed instrument is a three-manual, 80 rank organ in Orlando, Florida.

The Rescue

When ATOS member Joe Luckey pulled the Tellers organ from the Shea's theatre it was found in deplorable condition from years of idleness. The 1500 pipes were dust bins littered with aged popcorn, mice droppings and spider webs. With the aid of students from Erie's Gannon College, the organ's evacuation split it into four huge dusty piles located in the attics and basements of various college buildings around the campus. At that time, Joe decided to rebuild the Tellers and donate it to Gannon.

This first venture of Joe's into the world of theatre organ cost him only \$300 for the entire Tellers, although in the next five years he invested \$4,000 into the instrument.

The reason for the organ's varied locations around campus was so Joe could quietly procede on the organ's

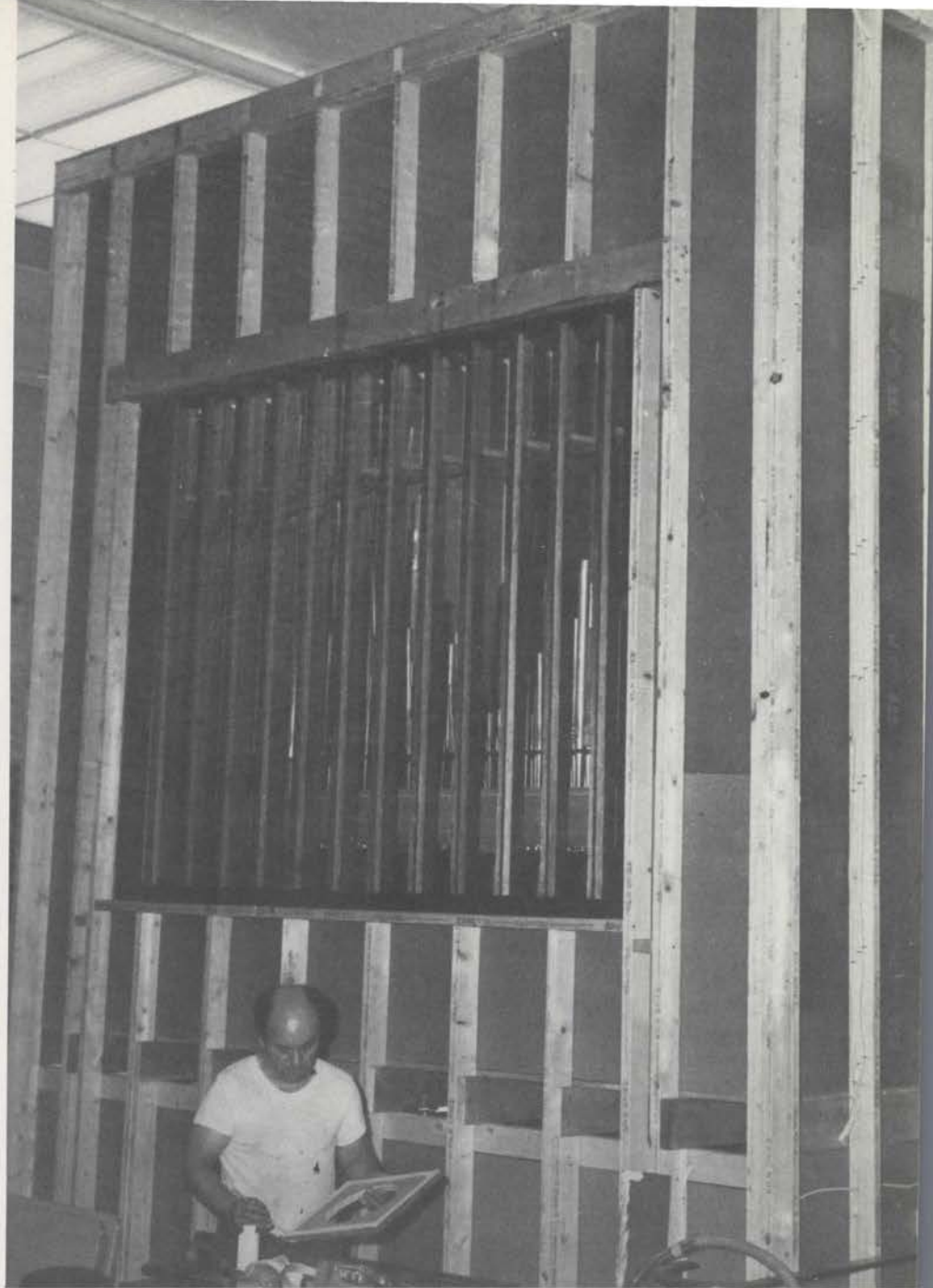
rejuvenation to the point where he could *then* divulge his work to the college. During the snowy winter of 1969, a half-year later, he secretly began cleaning the organ's xylophone, drums, chimes and marimba harp.

Later, while Gannon students rocked on the upper floors of the college's Student Union, Joe labored away in the basement for months on end cleaning 50 years of Shea's dust out of the organ's pipes. With 12 foot troughs thoughtfully loaned to him by a roof installer, Joe circulated soapy water through the different pipes with an old vacuum cleaner and ancient refrigerator evaporator pump. After one and one-half years of cleaning in his spare time he began rebuilding the Kinetic blower which produced six and one-half inches of static pressure.

Permission for Joe to set up the Tellers temporarily until a permanent site was selected came soon after ("you can't hide an organ *too* long," Joe said), and Joe chose a large classroom on the first floor of Gannon's military ROTC building. The classroom was nicknamed the "sleeping parlor" because students frequently dozed off there due to poor ventilation. The college gladly relinquished the room to the Tellers.

Over the next three and one-half years, Joe averaged four hours an evening rebuilding the Tellers in the building. He restructured the room by dividing it into two separate pipe chambers and left a work area in the center. The original Shea's swell shades were installed and a separate chamber to squelch blower noise was built. Joe had completely stripped the console in the meantime and had refinished it in white, red and gold trim. The console sat on a platform on coasters in the

"Ham and Organ". Joe plays the first notes on the Tellers in the ROTC building after long years of hard work.



Joe puts some of the finishing touches on the accompaniment chamber. Both chambers will be covered with wood paneling. Dimensions: Width — 12 feet, Depth — 10 feet, Height — 16 feet. Each chamber is divided into two levels — the lower level contains the more noisy components of the chamber, the switchstacks and relays. Each chamber has a built-in lighting system, and the relays and switchstacks are on coasters so that they may be moved around easily. Colored lights will be placed around the top of each chamber. (C. Thom Photo)

hallway, and was connected to the pipe chambers by a 75 foot main cable enabling the console to be wheeled out into a larger area for use. With the donation of wire from the local phone company, Joe somehow managed to rewire the chests while Herman Tellers, last owner of the company, rewired the console and had the reeds voiced after 30 years of idleness.

One day, in an unpretentious but anxious ceremony, Joe eagerly hooked up nine of the 24 ranks in a test run

and heard the Tellers for the first time since he dismantled it several years earlier. Describing the moment as one "big rush of blood to the head," Joe expedited his plans for an official dedication of the Tellers to Gannon College.

Concert tickets were printed for 300 persons and Joe purchased red, white and blue bunting for decoration. It was to be a festive affair, such as at Radio City Music Hall where the organ is rolled out from behind curtains, but

the floor caved in one week before the event when the blower shaft began slipping. This began a short period of the "doldrums" for Joe, who after suffering colossal disappointment and months of exhaustive labor, almost threw his hat in the ring.

Since that moment two years ago, the organ has been completely rebuilt. The straight chests were converted to unit chests for more versatility. At the start of summer 1974, permission was granted to install the Tellers permanently on the second floor of Gannon's former library in "The Commons", a cultural room dedicated to the arts. With the desire to have a genuine theatre organ, Joe retired the original three-manual Tellers, and bought a two-manual Marr and Colton horseshoe console, once painted fire-engine red and from a theatre in Wyandotte, Michigan.

The two-manual standard unified Marr and Colton console has six tremolos, five presets on each manual, main and solo swell shoes and a crescendo pedal. Nine of the 24 original Tellers ranks are split up into two separate pipe chambers, each 12 feet wide, 10 feet wide and 16 feet tall. Within the chambers the pipes are elevated on a floor four feet above the ground to leave a section underneath for the noisier switchstacks and relays. Each chamber is insulated with fiberglass and has masonite walls. The swell openings are each six by eight feet and employ the original Shea's shades, each with 12 shutters.

The main chamber contains the Salicional, VDO, Celeste and Flute. The solo chamber has the Tibia, Clarinet, Diapason, Vox Humana and Tuba. Joe plans to add the Cornopian, Gamba, Gamba Celeste, Open Diapason and Oboe Horn at a later date. Wind at five and six inches is supplied by Bobco blowers.

Joe's five year relationship with the Shea's Theatre organ will come officially into function early this winter. His one man persistence over the years vis-à-vis the Tellers, will bring pleasure to Gannon College students (an organ club is already in the offing) and to Erie citizens wanting a renaissance in theatre organ. Joe envisions his organ being used for background music for campus mass, weddings, parties, silent movies and for concerts by theatre organ musicians on circuit tour. The Gannon College officials are overwhelmingly pleased. After all, it is rare

of a man, even a maintenance man, to devote his time, energy and meager salary to an organ — and then give it away. Joe's generosity is based on the saying he mutters daily, "Even the little guy can do his share." □



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ROSEBUD, Lee Erwin playing the "Fox-Capitol Wurlitzer Pipe Organ." Angel No. S-36075 (also on cartridge and cassette tape). Available at music stores.

Ever since Burt Bacharach won an Academy Award with the most achronistically inept movie score we've

ever heard (modern jazz to background "Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid" — in the 1870's!), this reviewer has been suspicious of the whole "Oscar" nonsense, particularly when the excellent and descriptive Elmer Bernstein score for "True Grit" was largely ignored at that time. The Academy did it again this year by awarding arranger Marvin Hamlisch an "Oscar" for cueing "The Sting" with someone else's music. Yet we can be thankful to Hamlisch for rediscovering the talents of Scott Joplin, whose musical contributions to Musical Americana go far beyond the "rag".

Because the demand set by the popular film emphasizes "ragtime," the more mature works of Joplin (a ballet and two operas) must wait until the reborn "rag" craze subsides; for the moment the rags lead the popularity parade. Yet producer Patti Laursen has avoided a parade of rags, realizing their limited range and construction could produce an undesired monotony. So only six of the ten tracks are Joplin tunes, and these are not all rags. Lee has wisely drawn from the empathetic works of Kerry Mills, Eubie Blake and Harry Guy for variety and contrast. Joplin's tunes are *Rosebud* (a two-step), a group of *Original Rags*, *Solace* (a Mexican serenade), *Chrysanthemum* (an intermezzo), *Stop-Time Rag* and *Eugenia* (a slow march). Sandwiched between these gems are Mills' march, *Whistling Rufus*, Eubie Blake's *Chevy Chase*, Guy's *Echoes From the Snowball Club* and the familiar sounding *At a Georgia Camp Meeting*, a delightful two-step by Kerry Mills which sounds as though it should have been one of Stephen Foster's upbeat tunes.

Lee Erwin's performance of the tunes is most expressive. He avoids any



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