

# HOWARD BURTON

## Theatre Organist and Technician

by Lloyd E. Klos

There is an old adage which reads: "Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door." Howard Burton of Marion, Iowa must believe in this somewhat. However, he doesn't employ a mousetrap as a magnet for his friends; for about ten years, he has maintained and played theatre organs in his home. And this hobby has lead directly into a thriving business which produces solid-state relay systems for pipe organs.

Mr. Burton is a former theatre organist, and so, came into the theatre organ hobby quite naturally. Born in Clark County, Iowa, in 1901, he began four years of serious piano study at the age of 17, followed by several years of dance band work in the area.

Beginning in November 1923, he played, in succession, piano, Photo-

player and organ in the 1000-seat Strand Theatre in Creston, Iowa. He accompanied the silents and vaudeville there until the winter of 1926-27, when he played a four-month engagement at the 600-seat Rex Theatre in Geneseo, N.Y. He then returned to the Creston Strand where he played until August, 1929.

Desiring to improve his technique, he entered the Knauss School of Theatre Organ Playing at Allentown, Pa. "My instructor was Mr. Raymond E. Horlacher, first assistant instructor. My study began on a 2/4 straight-console Kimball, and after the first month, I advanced to a 3/11 theatre Kimball, on which I completed the course. I also had some instruction on a 3/11 Wurlitzer."

He branched a bit into radio, playing on KMA in Shenandoah, Iowa, and on KSIB in Creston.

By this time, the talkies had arrived and from December, 1929, until his retirement, Mr. Burton was employed as a projectionist, in a radio and music business, as an electronic inspector for the Federal Government and, for 11 years, worked at Collins Radio Co. in Cedar Rapids, retiring in 1968. "During my years with the government in several locations, I always managed to find a theatre pipe organ which was made available to me for practice and enjoyment. These included instruments in the Granada in Kansas City, Kan.; the Lincoln in Lincoln, Nebraska; and the Orpheum in Sioux City, Iowa.

"Upon moving to Marion, I discovered the 3/13 Barton in the Iowa Theatre in Cedar Rapids and later was engaged to play Sunday solo spots at the Paramount for three years. I have enjoyed helping with the restoring of the Paramount Wurlitzer, which has made a comeback via concerts."

Following his retirement, he has devoted much of his time to building solid-state relay systems for pipe organs. Before this, however, Mr. Burton in the early sixties installed his first pipe organ in his home, a 2/7 Geneva with harp, chimes and piano, controlled by a straight console. "It is my understanding that this organ was originally installed in a small theatre unknown to me, then returned to the factory, and about 1930 was installed in the Fairbank Funeral Home in Muscatine, Iowa. It was removed from the home in 1961, rebuilt, and after a friend informed me of its impending sale, I bought it."

By 1970, Mr. Burton convinced himself that he wanted a better instrument. "I wanted an organ with

Howard Burton at the 3/11 Wurlitzer in the Cedar Rapids Paramount. He played Sunday solos from 1958 to 1961. (Burton Coll.)





The maestro at his Wurlitzer Opus 778 console. The organ has been enlarged to ten ranks with a harp added. (Burton Coll.)

all the goodies on it — the accoutrements of a theatre organ, such as drums, bells, xylophone etc.” So, he dismantled the Geneva, selling some parts.

A friend, and former student at the Knauss School, Kenneth W. Smith, was instrumental in Mr. Burton’s acquiring a Style E Wurlitzer, Opus 778, shipped in January, 1924, to the 960-seat Paramount Theatre on Chicago’s Milwaukee Avenue. The theatre later became the Logan. The organ was the first of 14 Style E’s to be installed in the Windy City. Used until 1937, it was removed and placed in storage in the Chicago area until 1967, when it was purchased by Smith whose home was in Evergreen Park, Ill.

“Ken did much reconditioning, and was in the process of installing the organ in his home when ill health forced him to take things easy. I bought the organ in July, 1970, and with the wonderful assistance of Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Steiner of Cedar Rapids, we made three round trips to Evergreen Park to bring it here.”

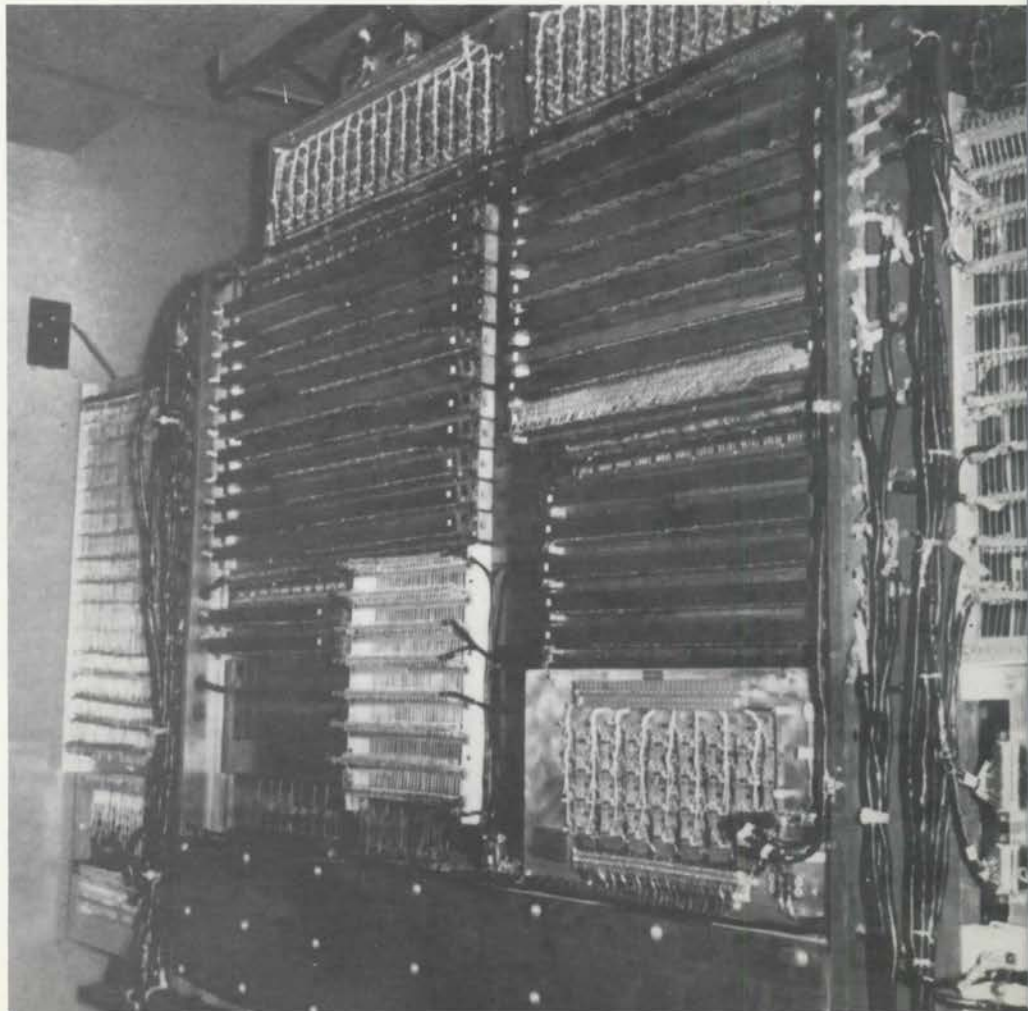
The organ originally had seven ranks: Diaphonic Diapason, Concert Flute, Tibia, Violin, Violin Celeste, Vox Humana and Trumpet. An Oboe Horn, Salicional and another

Vox have been added. Percussions include Glockenspiel, Chrysoglott, Xylophone and Chimes. Traps include Horses’ Hoofs Surf, Bird and Train Whistle, Auto Horn, Fire Gong, Doorbell, Siren, Sleighbells, Snare Drum, Bass Drum, Cymbal, Crash Cymbal, Triangle, Chinese Block, Tambourine and Castanets. It looks as if Mr. Burton’s quest for an organ “with all the goodies” has been rewarded.

Power is supplied by a 3 hp, single-phase 220-volt motor, and a Spencer blower provides 15” of wind pressure. All leather has been replaced with new leather, or modern materials. The console, originally painted white, now has seven coats of varnish. The studio in which the console is housed, measures 13’ x 27’ and seats 25. The console is placed at the opposite end of the studio from the pipe chamber. A Chickering 5½’ grand piano is located directly in front of the swell shades.

One innovation has been the placing of all chests and relays on casters to facilitate maintenance and cleaning. All electric connections are

The switch stack and the solid-state relay system. The arrangement allows for additional ranks and the entire unit is movable to facilitate cleaning and maintenance. (Cedar Rapids Gazette Photo)



equipped with plugs for the same reasons. Another nuance is that the original electro-pneumatic systems of relays has been replaced by the Burton Solid-State Relay System. There are a total of 276 power transistors and 3051 series diodes in the system.

The pipe room temperature is kept at 68 degrees in winter. A dehumidifier is run during the summer months. The temperature approximates that of a church or theatre.

Although Mr. Burton plans for additional ranks and percussions, symbolic of many theatre organ owners, the organ is now 90% playable. He is equipped to show silent movies, and has started a movie library, which already includes films of Chaplin, Laurel & Hardy, Lloyd, Arbuckle and Semon. He is equally proficient at accompanying the silents on organ or piano. □



Console of Howard Burton's first organ, a 2/7 Geneva, installed in his home in 1961. The console was completely rebuilt. (Burton Coll.)

## Closing Chord

**Ira Swett**, a former member of the L.A. Chapter, who gave several midnight concerts at the Wiltern Theatre many years ago, and recorded two LP record albums there, passed away March 12, 1975. Born in L.A. on May 18, 1913, Ira lived there most of his life, attending Polytechnic ("Poly") High School, where he played the pipe organ in the auditorium with the late Phil Olson and the late Truman Welch, both of whom were well known to theatre organ buffs in Southern California.

Ira later attended USC, where he continued his studies in music, then worked for many years for the Salvation Army as its program director. He was also a radio organist for several years, and played over different radio stations in the area, including a regular Saturday morning broadcast over KFVB, using the 3-manual Wurlitzer which subsequently became the property of the late Joe Kearns.

Ira was best known nation-wide by the electric railway buffs for his well-documented histories of various streetcar and interurban lines. He owned perhaps the largest collection

of photos of Pacific Electric Railway cars in existence. During World War II, he published a monthly newsletter for electric railway buffs serving in the armed forces, keeping them informed of what was happening on the various electric railways. This newsletter later evolved into periodic treatises on specific railway systems which were so thoroughly detailed that the editor of TRAINS magazine coined the phrase, "Ira Swett-thoroughness."

**Roderick Hallowell "Sandy" Macpherson**, a member of the Theatre Organists Hall of Fame, died on March 3, 1975 on his 78th birthday.

Born in Paris, Ontario, Canada, he became a musician after holding several assorted jobs. He played theatres in Hamilton, Ont., Buffalo (Shea's Hippodrome), and Syracuse (Empire), before going to England where he was featured organist at the Empire, Leicester Square in London. He then succeeded Reginald Foort as staff organist of the BBC, a position he was to hold over 25 years.

During World War II, he played numerous radio programs for both the home audience, and soldier audience overseas, "Sandy's Mailbag," "Sandy's Half-Hour" and "A Message From Sandy" being among the popular shows.

After the war, he continued in broadcasting, though on a smaller scale, and also served as a church organist. He retired a few years ago.

(His complete biography appeared in the Winter '64-'65 THEATRE ORGAN).

**Dr. Arthur J. Movius, Jr.**, prominent surgeon in Billings, Montana, had two hobbies — ham radio and theatre organ. Movius was destined to be a medic; his father, also a physician, founded the clinic where his son practiced the healing art. The son loved to converse with far-away places via his ham rig with about the same zeal he had for playing the organ. He was an accomplished musician and his residence was pipe-equipped.

At 1:00 a.m. on an April morning, Dr. Movius was found unconscious in his ham radio room. Taken to St. Vincent's hospital, he was pronounced dead on arrival. Burns on his body indicated accidental electrication. He was 64. His wife Evelyn, survives.

Organist **Bea Bailey (Sheehan)**, who teamed with pianist/organist Ramona Gerhard for "Twenty Flying Fingers" radiocasts over WCCO, Minneapolis, during the '30s, died at her Minneapolis home in mid-April, reports Alden Miller. □