

More About The Wurlitzer That Would Not Die

by Richard J. Sklenar

(You have read in prior issues of THEATRE ORGAN about "The Wurlitzer That Would Not Die." Another chapter of that story was written on October 2.)

The Chicago Theatre Wurlitzer is the last major theatre instrument to be restored to public use. Anticipation grew in CATOE during the five years necessary for the dedicated crew to complete the work it did on the instrument. When Walter Strony previewed the organ last New Year's Eve it became clear to most concerned that this was indeed a special instrument which needed a special show.

Most important to that show would be the choice of artists. Last June a number of organists in town for the National Music Merchants Show were invited to try the organ. Through unfortunate scheduling conflicts, other individuals in town were not able to be accommodated at that time, nor were all those who wished to listen, able to do so. These sessions were closed at the request of the CATOE Board of Directors since the organ was not yet ready for widespread public hearing and the artists invited to play would be at a disadvantage with an "audience" there.

With the information from these sessions, the CATOE Board selected Lyn Larsen to play the concert and to accompany Charlie Chaplin in *Easy Street*. Hal Pearl was selected to do the sing-along in recognition of his cooperation with crew leader Bill Rieger regarding the organ.

Lyn announces his next number to the nearly 3000 people in the audience. (Bill Lamb Photo)





The original four members of the organ crew. From left to right, Val Escobar, Frank Pokorny, George Smith, and crew chief Bill Rieger. (Bill Lamb Photo)



Chicago Theatre Manager Peter Miller (left) chats with Hal Pearl and Lyn Larsen in the lobby after the show. (Bill Lamb Photo)

In addition to the work done by the regular Chicago crew which you have read about previously, others were called on to help. Frank and Al Eshbach, Tony Tahlman, Paul Swiderski and Gary Bergmark helped tune. John Peters and I spent many all night sessions chasing dead notes. John also assisted in returning wind pressures to their original levels, wired the crescendo pedal and found all sorts of useful switches in the relay room which had not been connected to tabs. Tom Hardman fabricated a bench using the Oriental Wurlitzer bench as a pattern.

While that work was going on, relamping of much of the house was

accomplished. Coves, domes, niches, grilles and portals which had not lit for thirty years glowed again. The management was convinced that a stage extension over ten feet of the pit should come down. It did and the console was at last fully visible — a welcome addition since it sits on its original water hydraulic lift and only travels up a few feet. The theatre staff was excited enough to do more than routine maintenance in cleaning carpets, washing marble, touching up walls and repainting the orchestra pit floor, rails and wall.

CATOE and other volunteers were also busy. Gordon Doane created the direct mail flyer from original Wurlitzer ads about the Chicago

which are now in the archives of the Theatre Historical Society. Gordon also supervised preparation of the special programs with embossed tissue overlay covers tied with ribbon.

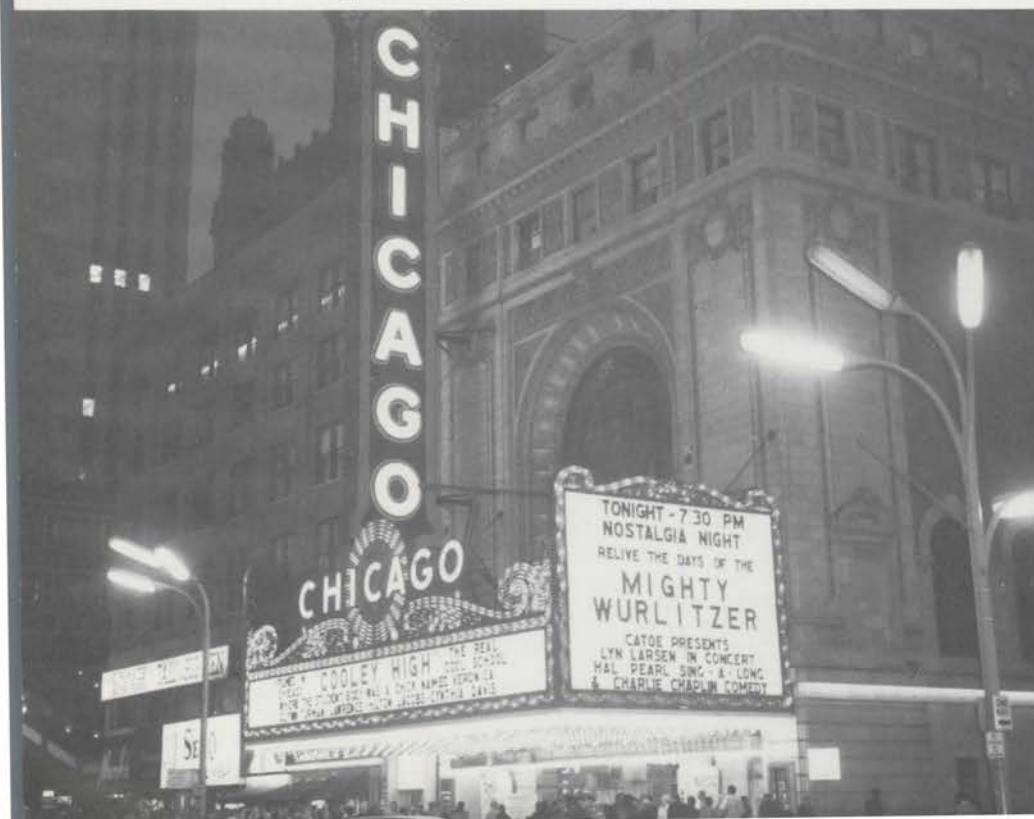
As showtime approached, organ builder Bill Hansen and assistant Al Erickson were hired on a professional basis to do the final tuning and regulation. They spent over sixty hours in the chambers, working on the reeds particularly. The twenty-nine ranks include two Brass Saxes, Brass Trumpets, Krumet, two English Post Horns, and two Tuba Mirabilises (Mirabili?). At 5:30 a.m. on the morning of the show, Bill started emergency repairs on a regulator which had just blown. It was in good working order by late afternoon.

By that time it was clear that a large turnout was to be expected. Publicity Chairwoman Cathy Koenig had secured numerous mentions in the daily press plus spots on three TV stations.

As the 2875 paid patrons gathered on show night, they saw the south face of the huge Chicago marquee proclaiming the "Mighty Wurlitzer" — quite a contrast from *Cooley High*, the then current feature film. Those in need of tickets noticed a red rose in a bud vase in the box office. When the great-coated and capped doorman opened the doors to admit the patrons they heard Harry Koenig playing the Steinway grand piano moved in for the event on the lobby promenade. And they saw greenery everywhere. Three truckloads of potted palms and plants turned the lobbies and foyers into a garden setting. And there at

Enthusiasts line up waiting for the Chicago Theatre's doors to open. (Bill Lamb Photo)

(Bill Lamb Photo)



the foot of the grand staircase was Managing Director Peter Miller, resplendent in tuxedo.

First nighters included visitors from across the country. THEATRE ORGAN publisher Betty Mason was there from Detroit as was *Console* publisher Tom B'hend from Los Angeles. Dennis and Heidi James greeted Dr. William H. Barnes. At least six ATOS chapter chairmen were present including Russ Joseph, CATOE; John Hill, Dairyland; Dave Knudtsen, Red River; Milton George, JATOE; Orrill Dunn, Land of Lincoln (with a whole bus load); and Ross Kirkpatrick, Central Indiana.

When they and the other guests entered the auditorium they saw the pit filled with music racks and a huge conductors desk, all courtesy of the Theatre Historical Society and in the far left corner was the black shrouded console. Anticipation was high as the black stain drape came off the console and Lyn Larsen opened with "Chicago." "Ohs" and "ahs" of recognition greeted a slide of the Chicago marquee at night years ago and local street scenes. Joe DuciBella was in the booth with operator John Smith coordinating films, slides and lighting. A few selections later the curtains parted again and instead of the screen, the well draped stage was revealed. Alden Stockebrand cued a lighting technician, borrowed from the Lyric Opera, to coordinate lighting as Lyn played. The next time the curtains opened the screen was back and Hal Pearl was at the console to do his "Hal Pearl Novelty" sing-along with slides from his collection.

Two hours after the show began a well satisfied, happy audience left the Chicago Theatre, participants in the most important theatre organ re-premiere in recent years. It was here, after all, that Jesse Crawford rose to fame. No small part of that ascent was the Chicago organ. Dr. Barnes pronounced the organ one of the finest theatre organs he has heard. Rumors that the organ was "buried" are not true. Every stop speaks out and is clearly heard. Volume levels are more than sufficient, even with a near capacity house. The organ has character. The sound is broad, lush, and full —



Console as it is today — completely done over from top to bottom.

(Bill Lamb Photo)

not bright or strident as, say, the Chicago Oriental Wurlitzer. The two Tibias, the two Voxes, the six strings plus all those solo and chorus reeds under the fingers and feet of Lyn Larsen brought forth some incredibly beautiful sounds, especially in the ballads. Larsen's style fit the instrument and the instrument fit the room. As the program that night stated: "The sound you will hear tonight — lush, varied, and full — is the kind of sound that theatre

owners, artists, and the public everywhere knew as the sound of the Mighty Wurlitzer."

Encouraged by the response on October 2, Plitt Theatres hope to do some type of Christmas show using the organ. CATOE and the Chicago crew are encouraged. The Chicago Wurlitzer will not die — not according to the response given Lyn Larsen, Hal Pearl, and CATOE on the eventful night of October 2, 1975. □

Photo from old Wurlitzer catalog. The interior of the Chicago Theatre showing two organs.

