

"In most issues of THEATRE ORGAN magazine, I read fascinating biographies of former theatre organists, and very often, mention is made of someone with whom I have worked or been associated. During the 1972 ATOS Convention in the Potomac Valley area, there were many of my friends and former associates there, and some whom I had not met previously but who approached me and said, 'Well, Billy Barnes! I've often wondered whatever happened to you! What have you been doing all these years? You look just as you always did.'

"Of course, that was the remark which impressed me most. After a lot of explanation, many of them said, 'Why don't you write up all of this for the ATOS magazine?' So, having given it a lot of thought and with a lot of urging from my friend and ATOS member Wallace W. Baumann, a native of Knoxville, Ten., I'm going to tell you in my own way what a wonderful life I've had as an organist for over 50 years. I've had opportunities thrown my way (and a few eggs, I may add!), have met people and visited places I would never have enjoyed had I not been an organist.

"There is no better place to start than my home town of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where I landed into the world on September 11, 1906 in a most unmusical family. However, after I had gained some modicum of success, my mother claimed that my talent came from *her* side of the family, while my father insisted it came from *his* side! Be that as it may, I'm glad I received it from one side or the other!

"When my sister was nine, my father bought her a piano. I was five then and from the beginning, I was obsessed with the idea of learning to play it. After my sister had lessons for about a year, her teacher decided to give me a try. It was no time at all before the teacher realized I had some talent and, although my father discouraged the idea, I was allowed to continue the lessons.

"Never will I forget my first recital, a duet with my sister which was held in a small schoolhouse in Hanestown, 12 miles from Winston-Salem. The preparation for, and the transportation to, the recital still are the basis of great merriment in our family. I was six then.

HARK! Ten Thousand Vox Humanas

THE BILLY BARNES STORY

Transcribed
and edited
by
Lloyd E. Klos



In the fifties, Billy spent several years touring the Sheraton Hotel circuit. (Barnes coll.)

"My sister wore her hair in flats around her head with a huge dog-ear bow of ribbon, fastened at the back. She wore an especially-made pink dress, made of the latest material, decorated in pink rosebuds. She wore high-top, black buttoned shoes. Today, she wouldn't be caught dead in such an outfit! I wore a dark blue suit with knee pants, white shirt, and a large bow tie which stuck out so far I could hardly see the piano keys!

"To get to Hanestown, we went in a Model T Ford, owned by my teacher's daughter, and replete with isinglass curtains. We were cramped like sardines as there were others who went along. To top it off, it poured rain! There weren't too many paved roads, and the car was covered with mud by the time we arrived at the recital hall.

"The program included other students in the area, and the teacher thought the event would boost her reputation, but after hearing us, I have my doubts! My sister and I played 'Pure As Snow,' the teacher sitting beside the piano, counting time with a stick. However, that recital was my undoing, for that night, I realized I was a ham, and come what may, vowed to be a musician. The taste of the applause was too great and it was like a shot in the arm.

"It wasn't long after this that my teacher turned me over to her son who had returned home to live. He was an excellent pianist and organist, having studied with a fine English organist — strictly classical and church. But he soon found that I was not one to confine myself to one type of music.

"Meanwhile, we moved to a house which was on a corner where the streetcars stopped to unload the local baseball players, and I soon found I could work a gimmick. Our parlor, which housed the piano, had a window, almost at ground level. As the ball players walked past this window enroute to and from the ball park, I timed my practice periods, playing loud when they came by. They stopped to listen, and eventually I got free passes to the ball games.

"Some of the players would come into the house so I could play their favorite numbers. One was an expert on the harmonica, and we played

duets. This was a lot of fun! How we used to go to town on some of those old-time tunes!

"I began hanging around the sheet music counters in the five-and-ten-cent stores, and listened to the girl pianists demonstrate the latest songs. I guess they felt sorry for me, looking so longingly at the piano, for eventually they let me sit in.

"My first job in music was at Woolworth's behind the music counter. I'd go there after school and play until 6 p.m., and all day on Saturday. The pay was \$3.50 a week which was a huge amount to me then. With my first week's pay, I bought my mother a dozen red roses, and spent the rest of it on chocolate-covered cherries, on which I became ill. I never have looked at another chocolate-covered cherry since!

"None of the motion picture houses in Winston-Salem had an organ then, but used a feature piano player and an assistant. After my success at Woolworth's, I decided to get into the movie-playing business. I used to go to the Saturday evening shows at one theatre which had occasional stage reviews, and sit behind the woman who played, doing this before the Woolworth job, but when working, spent my lunch hours and Saturday supper breaks at the theatre. I became acquainted with the pianist, remembering her name well, but for reasons coming up, prefer to keep it to myself. Let me digress a moment.

"When I was a youngster, the movies were in their infancy, and I do mean 'infancy.' The first movie I remember was presented in a place with no roof, but had an enclosure on three sides with the screen in front, no doubt a forerunner of the drive-in movie. We sat on rough, backless benches to watch the flickers thrown onto the white screen. And they were really flickers! The characters jumped around as if they were on a hot stove. The entire presentation was such an apparition that it scared me to death and I had to be taken from the theatre, (If it could be called that!). I sure wish I knew what that movie was. It's probably being shown today as a classic.

"Later, the movie theatres began using player pianos, in some places as a relief for the feature pianists, and how well I remember the piano

roll, playing the 'Barcarolle' from *The Tales of Hoffman* for every scene, over and over and over! But hearing the pianists was an inspiration for me to practice. I felt sure that is what I wanted to do, having visions of the kids' envy at school because I'd get to see all the movies free.

"So after meeting the aforementioned pianist, she allowed me to sub for her. She had one room fixed up backstage where she could relax during her breaks. I found out that when I'd relieve her, she'd go to her room and instead of taking a nap, she'd take a nip — or two. Many times, I'd have to get her back on the job when my stint was over. Ironically, the management found out what was happening, fired her, and gave me the job. He would have found out earlier if there hadn't been a long curtain between pianist and audience.

"If memory serves correctly, some of the pictures I played were *Polly of the Circus* with Mae Marsh (1917); *Orphans of the Storm* with Dorothy and Lillian Gish (1922); *Way Down East* with Richard Barthelmess and Lillian Gish (1920), and vamp pictures with Louise Glaum and Theda Bara. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was presented as a road show with its traveling orchestra, but later releases were played by the pit pianist. I have often wondered if they realized what they had started by using 'The Perfect Song' in this picture as a love theme, which everyone in later years credited to *Amos 'n' Andy*. (Organists Dean Fossler and Gaylord Carter played it on radio.)

"Few persons realize the excellent music which was used in the scores of many of the movies in those days. The Tschaiikowsky 'Humoresque' was used as a theme in *Way Down East* for the two old women's gossiping scene. Incidentally, when in Richmond, Va., recently, I was in a music store and heard a recording of this fine piece of music being played on a high-fi, which I hadn't heard since I played it for the picture. 'The Raindrop Prelude' and the overture to the third act of *Lohengrin* were used in the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, starring Rudolph Valentino.

"One of the first things a pianist did after being hired for a movie house was to purchase the Belwin

Picture Library which consisted of hurries, agitados, misteriosos, love themes — something for every mood. The names of Zamecnik; Berge; Savino (who also wrote under the name of Onivas — Savino spelled backward); Lutz, whose son is still carrying on in the music business; Gabrielle Marie, a French Composer; plus others, were on every cue sheet.

"When this music was being used, I was playing piano during the last year of grammar school, and the first two years of high school, and all this time, continuing with piano lessons. It wasn't long after taking over for my nipping friend, I got a better job at a vaudeville theatre in town which ran five acts on a three-day run. There was a small orchestra which played the vaudeville and part of the picture, and then I'd relieve them. The music was put in front of me and I *had* to play it — wonderful sight-reading experience. Again, I had to sit in many times for the orchestra pianist who was also a nipper!

"I made many friends who were in vaudeville and who have become famous names on radio, TV and records. The vaudeville in this part of the country was booked out of the Keith office in New York by Jules Delmar. Hence, tours were called The Delmar Time. Delmar was married to a performer, Jeanette Hackett, and in the late twenties, the two produced a marvelous Broadway show called *Delmar's Revels* which starred Patsy Kelly, Bert Lahr and others on their way to success.

"The Lincoln Theatre had been built in Winston-Salem in which was installed a one-manual Wurlitzer player organ with traps and pedals. I used to walk three miles to this theatre in the early morning before school, two or three times a week, to learn all I could about this instrument. I thought it just great — the living end!

"During my summer vacation, after my second year in high school, when I had an offer to play the organ in the Strand Theatre in Ashville, N. Car., I at least knew how to turn one on and had a pretty good idea of how to cue a movie. Also, the 450-seat Broadway Theatre in Winston-Salem had installed a Wurlitzer 105 on which I practiced before ac-

cepting the Ashville job.

"When the organ was installed in the Broadway Theatre, an organist, Mrs. Grant E. Lynn, was brought in from Washington. She and her husband were organists in the Earle Theatre in the nation's capital, and Mrs. Lynn played the opening of this fine theatre organ. I learned a lot from her in the short time she was in Winston-Salem. A short time later, a theatre in Salisbury, N. Car., installed a larger organ and Mr. and Mrs. Lynn went to live there permanently.

"In mentioning Washington's Earle Theatre, I am reminded of the 1922 disaster, five blocks away, at the Knickerbocker Theatre, one of the finest theatres in the country, with a large orchestra and a tremendous organ. There was a big snowfall which deposited tons of the white stuff on the roof. The organist came in to relieve the orchestra, and the vibration of the rumbling bass notes caused the roof to collapse. There were 98 killed, 133 injured and both architect and owner took their lives.

"Upon my arrival in Ashville, I rented a room in the home of a prominent family who somewhat took me under their wing, and a good thing, too, because, three weeks later, I came down with the mumps, which gives you a good idea how young I was to be traveling and considering myself a full-fledged theatre organist. But, I had some good fortune, also. After a week at the Strand, I was transferred to the Imperial Theatre where there was a two-manual Robert Morton, built by Wicks. I worked with a very fine English organist by the name of Alderson, who was also the organist at the Grove Park Inn which had a big four-manual concert organ. This I never got a chance to play, because Alderson guarded it with his life. But, the organ in the Imperial had the slowest action I ever experienced. We often joked that we could play a piece, walk to the back of the theatre and hear it!

"One of the pictures which stands out in my mind during that engagement was *The Painted Lady* (1924) with Dorothy MacKail and George O'Brien. I understand Dorothy is retired and lives in Honolulu. Also, I remember Betty Compson, Anna Q. Nielsen and Mahlon Hamilton in

The Rustle of Silk (1923). (About 1953 while playing the Sheraton Hotel chain, I met Betty Compson and told her of my playing this picture. She laughed heartily and said 'You must have been a babe in arms!' I mentioned the coat, trimmed with fox fur which she wore in the movie, and she explained that it was her's, not the wardrobe department's. Betty was connected with the House of Hollywood Cosmetics and she looked wonderful. She was very kind and invited me to spend some time in Hollywood with her mother and her).

"Before going to my next job, I had a few days free during which I visited a very fine pianist whom I knew, Joe King, of Terre Haute, Ind. Joe in later years became a theatre organist, but at that time, was playing piano in the Indiana Theatre in Terre Haute. Also, I visited two movie theatres having organs which increased my desire to be a theatre organist.

"About the end of my summer vacation in Ashville, I had an offer from the Mason-Stallings Theatre Co. in Kinston, N. Car. The salary was better — \$35 a week, which looked wonderful to me, so I took it. The picture I opened at the fine two-manual Robert Morton was *Peter Pan* (1925) with Betty Bronson and Ernest Torrence. (I understand that Betty married and lives in Ashville). During my one-month tenure in Kinston, I helped produce and act in a local stage show for one whom I'll never forget — Marie Davenport.

"School days were imminent when I received an offer from Richmond, Va., at more pay, which was a major inducement. My boss in Kinston was so reluctant to see me leave that he refused to pay my last two weeks' salary. In those days, one could not appeal to the union for there was none in small towns. I borrowed the money for train fare from a friend, promised to send the board money to the lady where I stayed, and was on my way. The money was soon paid to both persons.

"The theatres in which I were to play in Richmond were owned by Jake Wells who also owned the local baseball team, and his general manager was Harry Bernstein. It took a lot of persuading to get my parents' permission to continue playing in the theatre, and to continue my

schooling in Richmond. One factor was the opportunity to study with a fine organist, Flaxington Harker of St. Paul's Episcopal Church. He is still remembered for his fine composition 'How Beautiful Upon the Mountains' which is from one of his Christmas contatas.

"Harker was interested in running an academic school as well as an organ school and that was just what I was looking for. I could learn and play at the same time. He was a very fine man and I learned a lot from him, but unfortunately, his academic school was not successful.

"After a week at the Class B Isis Theatre in Richmond, I was sent to the beautiful 1500-seat Colonial Theatre, a very plush movie house. Marion Davies, Buddy Rogers, Richard Arlen, Louise Brooks and all the wonderful stars from the Paramount Acting School paraded across the screen in those days to my accompaniment. We had an orchestra and a two-manual Robert Morton, made by Wicks.

"Richmond was a unique theatre town. Within two blocks on one side of Broad Street, there were seven movie houses, including the Colonial and the 1500-seat National. Across the street, there were two others, a legitimate house, the Academy, and a vaudeville theatre, the Lyric, which went to pictures and installed a Marr & Colton organ. I was at the Colonial a short time when Bernstein sent me to the National. To me, so impressionable at that age, this was the greatest! There was an orchestra with Bert Hollowell as conductor and a very fine two-manual Robert Morton with an echo division. I can honestly say that this was one of the most beautifully voiced organs I ever heard.

"Greta Garbo and John Gilbert were making movies in those days. The National also had stage attractions and one of the popular groups booked was Fred Waring and His Pennsylvanians. This was real entertainment. The orchestra played the overture, the organist a solo. People came in evening clothes, the show started at a special time, and no one was seated during the performance. Popcorn, chewing gum and candy were not sold.

"There were a couple of intimate, family-owned theatres in Richmond. One of them, the 600-seat Brook-

land, a neighborhood house, had a fine three-manual Wurlitzer. This was the envy of all us downtown organists, for not only was the organ tops, but it was played by a splendid organist who became a favorite in that area, Carl Rond. He has long since passed on.

"It was in the middle twenties that the 750-seat Capitol Theatre was built in Richmond, a beautiful neighborhood house with a two-manual Robert Morton. I was offered the job there at more money and again abetted myself financially. I recall playing *The Scarlet Letter* (1926) with Lillian Gish and Lars Hanson. Later, I would live in the same house, Woodlodge, in Mamaroneck, N.Y., where the Gish sisters had lived when they were making *Orphans of the Storm* for D.W. Griffith at his studio on Travers Island.

"When I was playing in Richmond, there was in another theatre there a fine organist, exceptional in accompanying movies, but very eccentric. (In this field, one met the unusual and eccentric as well as some very fine people). A friend of Francis X. Bushman, he had started years before when Vitagraph's studios were in Jacksonville, Fla. When a coming movie was announced, he'd ask for the stills from the picture and would practice for weeks, studying the makeup of the leading lady! When he played the movie (and this is the truth!), he never sat at the console unless he was made up as near as possible to the leading lady!

"In later years, this organist did an act, using hats and wigs similar to the leading ladies in the movies he played: Mary Pickford with the curls, Norma Talmadge and her extensive makeup, etc. He'd play the themes from the movies and reach over to don wigs or hats!

"Every organist's dream was to get to New York. We all read the writings about the glorious Paramount with the Crawford, Milton Charles in Chicago and countless others. But New York beckoned to me. I had met a woman who lived there and who was a great encouragement to me. So it was arranged that I should give up my position in Richmond and visit her, pending my landing an engagement. The young people nowadays can't imagine the glamour in New York in those years!

What stage shows! What nightclubs! What speakeasies! What theatres! And what theatre organs!

"Before arriving in New York, I had planned a certain strategy. After a couple days in my friend's home in Mamaroneck, I ventured into the big city. The Wurlitzer Organ Company's building on 42nd Street had a small theatre with a two-manual organ in it. They held auditions, and the man in charge of this was named Hunnekus. I forgot his first name, but years later, entertained him and his bride in Berlin on their honeymoon. With fear and trembling, I went to see him. He was most kind and asked me to return the next day to play for the man who was in charge of hiring organists for a large chain of theatres. I had no idea who he could be.

"However, the next day, I returned and met Morris Press who auditioned organists for Paramount-Publix. After hearing me, he asked if I ever played the organ 'across the street,' as he put it. I questioned him about it and he said he was referring to the organ in the Paramount, the Queen Mother of all Wurlitzers! This was almost unbelievable! I was to go to the theatre and practice a few days to acquaint myself with the instrument.

"During this period, I played silent movies at the Rialto Theatre at the corner of 42nd Street and Broadway. The 1960-seat Rialto was still a fine movie house in spite of the competition with the Paramount, Roxy and Capitol. The orchestra there was directed by Joseph Littau and the organ was a 3/15 Wurlitzer. One of the ushers was Robert Weitman who is now one of the biggest names in the motion picture industry, having his own production company on the West Coast. A fellow organist was Tom Borsa who was a fine musician and whose name I've never seen mentioned in the magazines.

"After the last show at the Rialto, I would go to the Paramount for a midnight practice period. Several times, Mr. Crawford would be practicing, which meant I'd get up early the next morning for my sessions. There were Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Crawford as featured organists; Sigmund Krumbgold, an excellent organist and musician, played the movies; and Egon Putz. I suppose

if our names were listed in order of importance, I'd be at the bottom of the above list. It was usually my duty to play the last show after I was given the job as assistant organist.

"While I was at the Paramount, Mr. and Mrs. Crawford vacationed in Florida and Sigmund Krumbgold took over the solo spot. He featured a remarkable organ transcription of Mendelsohn's "Rondo Capriccioso." This was a novel experience for the Paramount audiences, and to prove how much it was enjoyed, Variety gave Krumbgold a sensational write-up, and he deserved it! Soon after, Mr. Krumbgold was no longer at the Paramount.

"One of the most impressive things Mr. and Mrs. Crawford did while I was there was a tribute to the Metropolitan Opera. Slides were shown, giving brief descriptions of an Opera while they played excerpts from the score, ending it with "The Pilgrims' Chorus" from *Tannhaeuser*, with Mrs. Crawford doing the rhythmic work on her console and Mr. Crawford playing the tremendous melody line on the main console. It was just the greatest!

"John Murray Anderson produced the glorious stage presentations in those years which were nothing short of sensational. How one man could think of so many ideas for each week's show, I'll never understand. Not only was there an orchestra in the pit, but there was a stage band, directed by Lou Kosloff until Paul Ash came from Chicago to lead it. Those were the days of real theatre.

"Pauline Alpert, the wonderful pianist (heard on so many player piano rolls) was featured in a stage presentation at the Paramount which was called *The Phantom Piano*. The instrument was suspended by cables and covered with aluminum paint. With all the house lights out, the effect was just fantastic! Pauline wore gloves, covered with the same material. Once, a tragedy almost occurred when a cable broke! Fortunately, the others held.

"I should make mention of the fabulous 4/21 Wurlitzer which was installed on the ninth floor of the Paramount Building for practice, recording and broadcasting. It was

an unusual installation. The two consoles were strictly skeletons; there was no wood work around the manuals, and you could see all the innards. But, it was a fabulous and wonderful experience to hear this organ. Mr. and Mrs. Crawford practiced their duets there.

"By the end of the twenties, the talkies were making inroads in the movie business and great changes were taking place. Orchestras were being let out, and organists were either good enough to be soloists, or were called only when the theatre needed background music for short subjects. Luckily for me, I was offered the soloist spot at the 3327-seat Loew's State Theatre, a top vaudeville and picture house on Broadway. This was in 1928.

"Before I went into the State, Loew's had an emergency in Harrisburg, Pa., and I was sent with great ballyhoo to the 1600-seat Regent Theatre. I played a 2/7 Wurlitzer for a 3-week special showing of *Ramona* with Dolores Del Rio, and I'll never forget the party the stage manager gave me the night before I left. There was everything possible to eat and too much to drink. But the thing which stands out at this banquet (and that's what it should be called) was the limburger cheese and German rye bread they have in Pennsylvania. It was really wonderful!

"Loew's State in New York had a four-manual Moller which wasn't bad. Very few people realize that Moller, Kimball and several of the present church organ manufacturers had built very good theatre organs. In turn, Wurlitzer made some good church organs. There was a pit orchestra for vaudeville in the State, conducted by a fine musician, Ruby Zwerling. The organ was played for the solo spots and with the orchestra for the overtures.

"During those years, Remick Music Co. employed Cliff Hess, who was a master of writing special material. (I wish I had some of the clever slide solos he made for me, but they were all smashed in shipping). Cliff did a lot for organists, had time to listen to our complaints etc. When the movie producers started making 2-reel shorts and most of the musicals, more and more of Cliff's time was taken by this work. If I'm not mistaken, he wrote

the first musical Bing Crosby was in. Many of the first talking pictures were produced in the Paramount Studios in Astoria, Long Island.

"While at the State Theatre, I broadcast on WPAP and WHN. On Sundays, deviating from the popular music, I usually had a guest artist. One broadcast I remember had Beatrice Posamanick, a concert pianist, and we did the Grieg *A-Minor Concerto*. I played the orchestra score on the organ while she did the piano solo part. A very popular composition then was 'Rhapsody in Blue.' *Variety* was very kind to me, saying that 'the organ in the State Theatre has seen a lot of usage, but this fellow, Billy Barnes, is certainly something of a pip, and we all enjoy him.'

"About this time, rumor was that Earl Carroll was going to produce a *Vanities* show with seven organ consoles in a spectacular scene on the stage. If this had been in the days of the electronic instruments, this rumor might have had more foundation. However, every organist on Broadway had visions of appearing in Carroll's *Vanities* at one of these consoles. Maybe that well-known over-the-door slogan might have been changed to 'Thru These Portals Pass the Most Wonderful Organists in the World,' instead of 'Thru These Portals Pass the Most Beautiful Girls in the World.' But like so many Broadway rumors, this was only a dream. There were plenty of organists who applied, including myself.

"At this point, I believe credit should be given to several organists who did so much for the silent movie and theatre business in New York who have rarely been mentioned in these pages. At Loew's Lexington was the excellent Marsh McCurdy. He came from Chicago, eventually returning there and has passed away. George H. Latsch had a fine reputation in the New York area. At one of the small uptown theatres, there was Bess Shugart, a fine musician who in later years became a good church organist. Fred Feibel was at the Rivoli, Arlo Hults at a theatre in Long Island and John Gart, an excellent musician and arranger, was playing in Loew's Metropolitan.

"It is very interesting to me that many of the big theatres are being 'modernized' and made into double

theatres — one downstairs and one upstairs. When I played Loew's State, there was a theatre building like this between 44th and 45th streets called Loew's New Yorker. Upstairs, Mr. Ernest Lutz and his assistant, Carl Von Lawrence cued all the music for the pictures run in Loew's theatres. There was also a conference room for meetings with the chain's organists. One can't envision the acres and acres of music which were stored in stacks in Mr. Lutz's department, requiring a ladder to reach some of it. But it was so wonderfully arranged and indexed that they could get any piece within a couple minutes. I've often wondered what happened to this immense collection of music. It astounded the imagination!"

In the December 1928 copy of *Around the Town*, published in New York and Chicago, appeared the following: "Bill Barnes, one of the youngest organists in the country, is featured at the Loew's State Theatre in New York. Barnes plays only restricted, high-class numbers, has personality and is a great artist. He and 'Skeet' Haithcox have recently composed a number titled 'Drifting Along.' The piece is handled by the Clarence Williams Publishing Co. and will soon be released."

"In those days, pipe organs in the homes of the wealthy were status symbols. Through one of the Rialto musicians, I made contact with William K. Vanderbilt who had a three-manual Aeolian player organ in his Mediterranean-style villa in Greenlawn, Long Island. He agreed to let me synchronize my theatre work with playing in his home, but sometimes I had to engage a substitute for the theatre. I'd take the Long Island Railroad to Greenlawn, where a chauffeur drove me to the home. I'd play, then the process was reversed. This was wonderful experience, and made possible only because of my theatre work and a great love of what I was doing. The home is now a museum and the lawns and gardens are a public park.

"In 1929, a friend who had great success in Australia as a singer, invited me to visit his family in England. I arranged a leave of absence from the State Theatre to make the trip. Rose Diamond followed me into the State, being a

friend of Ruby Zwering, the musical director. Since I was an employee of Loew's, I had access to their office in London. The personnel there saw that I had a wonderful time, and I was invited to play the famous Empire Theatre's four-manual Wurlitzer in Leicester Square.

("At the 1972 ATOS Convention, many of us went to Miller & Rhodes' Tea Room in Richmond to hear Eddie Weaver play. There was a party of about 14, seated near us, who were from England. I made myself known to them, and learned that the Leicester Square Wurlitzer I had played 43 years previously is now in the home of Len Rawle, son of one of the English couples present.)

"Being in England was just great. My friend had a place adjoining the estate of the Duke of Northumberland. It was June, and the beauty of those English gardens is impossible to describe. While in London, I had an offer to work for B. Feldman and his music publishing house because of my showing him some of my compositions. I have often wondered what the years would have brought had I accepted the position.

"Subsequently, I went to Paris. There was some talk of my playing the organ in the Gaumont Palace Theatre, but this didn't materialize.

It was in Berlin where I found the pot at the end of the rainbow. Walter Pierce, who had the Wurlitzer franchise for all Europe, I'd hoped to meet in London, but luckily met in Berlin. He made me an offer to remain in Berlin which was too good to turn down. On the Unter den Linden, between the famous Adlon and Bristol hotels, was a small, unique, but beautiful cinema, Die Kamera, which Wurlitzer used as a showcase. Installed was a two-manual Wurlitzer, Opus 2015, and everything about it was excellent. This was still a silent movie house which we'd call a 'classic cinema.' Pierce sold a number of organs as the result of Die Kamera's installation.

"During these years, Berlin was a glorious city. It was full of entertainers from every country, and there were many innovations introduced into the night clubs and theatres at that time. The Femina Restaurant and Nightclub was the first to have telephones from table to table. The 'ladies of the evening' could all be identified by their white fox fur pieces; that is, the *better breed* ladies of the evening. Know what I mean?

"I was in Berlin awhile before returning to the United States to play for my sister's wedding. Then, I got a cable to return to Berlin to open

the two-manual Wurlitzer, Opus 2019, in the Ufa Palast Am Zoo. The Ufa was Berlin's leading moving picture palace with an orchestra, organ, stage shows, etc. When the organ was installed, the theatre gave a series of Sunday concerts, featuring the organ (or 'orgel' as it is called in Germany), the orchestra and great artists. For one concert, the entire program was turned over to a fine pianist, Adam Gelbrunk, and myself at the organ. We did the 'Hungarian Fantasia' by Liszt, the Greig 'A-Minor Concerto' and 'Rhapsody in Blue,' among others. The program was well received.

("Moving to Paris during those fatal years in Germany, Adam changed his name to Adam Garner, where he organized the First Piano Quartet which came to the United States and was featured on radio, records and tours for more than 30 years. Adam and I remained close friends until his death in 1970).

"When I first went to Berlin, Walter Pierce was in the process of installing a four-manual Wurlitzer in the home of a very fine gentleman, Werner Von Siemens, one of Germany's leading industrialists. The Siemens family were very charming, entertained lavishly, and at their home, I seem to have met everyone of importance who visited Europe. I played there often for teas, musicales and all types of events. The hall in which the organ was located was an addition which Siemens had built to his already spacious mansion. I asked his 16-year-old son how large the house was. His reply was, 'We live in only 30 rooms unless we're entertaining.'

"The organ console sat on a platform at the rear wall of the concert hall. On either side of the console were four concert grand pianos, one a Steinway and one a Beckstein with single keyboards and the others a Steinway and a Beckstein, both with multiple keyboards, a Moore invention. Having an organ in one's home is a luxury, but imagine having two! In the drawing room, there was a two-manual Christie, and I rather looked down my nose at that!

"The pipes for the Wurlitzer were housed in four rooms, two on either side of the console and rising two stories. This organ was severely damaged by fire in July 1962 and was rebuilt by Pfc. Marvin Merchant, a

Billy Barnes and Adam Gelbrunk (L) check score for concert in the Ufa-Palast Am Zoo in Berlin. Gelbrunk later changed his name to "Garner" and organized the First Piano Quartet which acquired nationwide fame through tours, records etc. The organ here was a Wurlitzer style 200 special. (Barnes coll.)



G.I. stationed in Germany. (See THE-ATRE ORGAN, Summer 1964) If Mr. Merchant reads this, he will be interested to know I was the first person to play the organ after installation.

"Herr von Siemens was a fine conductor and on occasion would lead the Berlin Philharmonic. There were many times when he would have the entire orchestra from Die Stadt Opera at his home and conduct a private concert for his friends.

"As all good things come to an end, and the German Government would not extend my stay, I was invited by a friend in Austria, who wrote for the movies, to visit him as he thought I'd have an opportunity there. Through him, I secured an offer to play the Apollo Cinema in Vienna which had a two-manual Christie organ on an elevator. This was strictly a solo position as the theatre showed sound films, one of them a German version of *The King of Jazz* with Paul Whiteman. There was a stage band under Karl Kroll to accompany vaudeville acts, mildly resembling those at the New York Paramount.

"While in Vienna, the Kiba Film Co. decided to convert the Johann Strauss Theatre into a plush cinema, and I was chosen to play its Kilgen organ. The three-manual console was installed *under* the stage, and as it rose, the stage sections parted and the organist sat on a level with the stage band. After a month, the authorities would not permit me to ascend with the console for fear that the stage mechanism would fail and I'd be crushed to death. Having no desire to be called 'HAMBURGER Barnes,' I made my entrance from the wings. The refurbished theatre opened with Lillian Harvey, Willy Frisch, Conrad Veidt and a host of stars in *Die Kongress Tanzt* which was a great success and the organ brought much favorable comment. One magazine ran a story saying I came 'from the land of the tobacco plants in North Carolina!'

"The thirties were precarious times to be in Germany or Austria and eventually I thought it wise to return to America. Upon arriving in New York, I found things very bad, musically. However, a new face had sprung up, working in the offices of Shapiro-Bernstein, Harry Blair. Harry and his wife, Adele,

God rest their souls, were great friends of the organists. Harry and a group of us organists formed the Noonday Club, signing a charter which hung in his office.

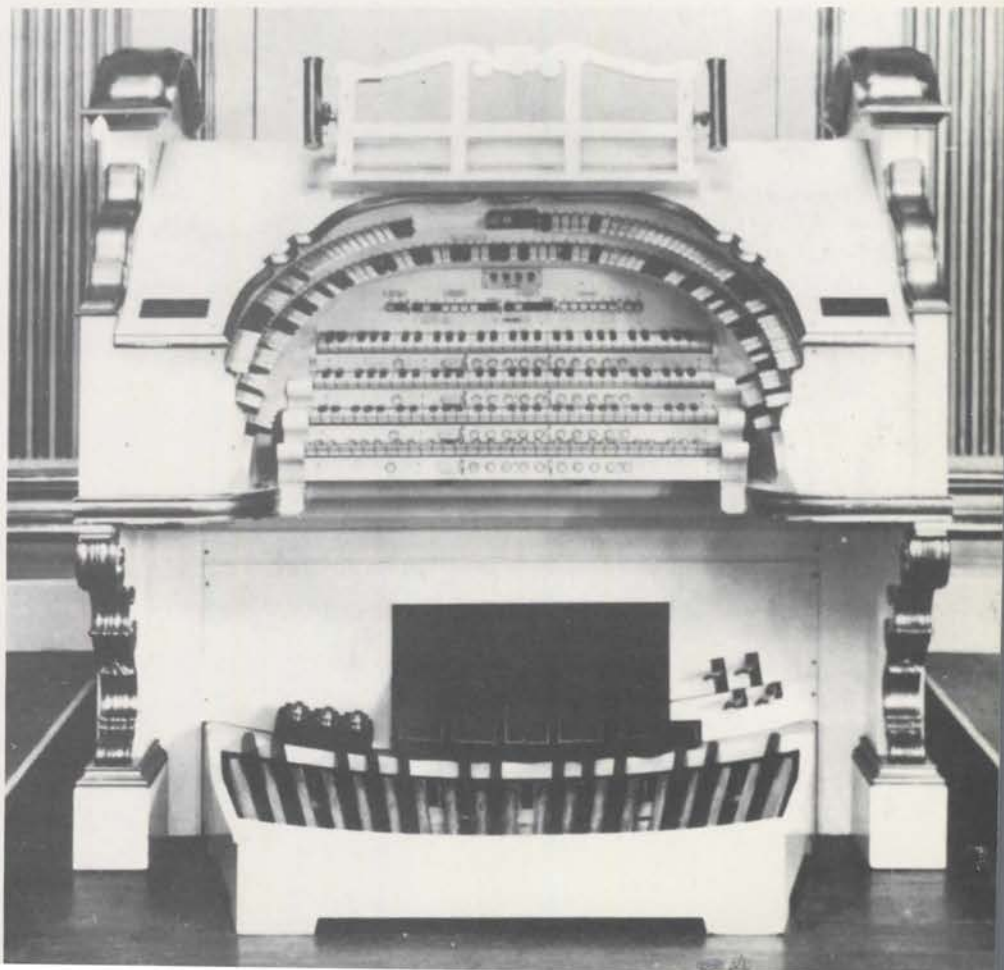
"Harry made a specialty of collecting musical material and news, and acting as a clearing house for those organists seeking employment. If you were out of a job or needed music or slides, you could wire Harry. Ask him for 'Sand In My Shoes,' and he'd know you'd mean 'Love Letters in the Sand.' One day, Harry told me he had a call from a Frank Boucher in Winchester, Va., who wanted an organist for the Capitol Theatre during the Lenten Season. I had no desire to stay in New York and spend the money earned in Europe, so I went to Winchester to see the organ.

"The 1000-seat theatre, operated by Warner Bros., and a dream of a showplace, had a two-manual Robert Morton in excellent condition. (The theatre has been replaced by a bank, and the beautiful hand painted mural which graces its back wall once covered the proscenium arch of the theatre. When the Capitol was being razed, there was a great

complaint from neighbors about the dust. Also, the demolition crew was asked to save the mural. After climbing into the rafters and probing with a chisel, the wrecker said that the mural could not be saved because it was 'painted on the plaster.' However, when the ruins were sprinkled to control the dust, the mural dropped to the ground, having been painted on canvas instead. It was sent to an outstanding artist in Washington who reconditioned it. So the valuable and beautiful painting, depicting the people of Winchester appealing to George Washington for food, was saved and is now a tourist attraction of the Shenandoah Valley. Thus, a part of a once-beautiful theatre lives on.)

"While in Europe, I had continued my classical organ training under several fine teachers in Germany and Austria, so in Winchester my classical training was put to good use. I accepted a church job as organist and choir director, opened my own music store, and had a class of pupils at the Berryville High School. There was no depression for me! However, theatre business in the thirties was very bad and every

Billy Barnes was the first organist to play this Wurlitzer 250 special in the Von Siemens home in Berlin. Later extensively damaged by fire, the console was restored by a G.I. stationed in Germany. (Barnes coll.)



avenue of approach was tried to improve conditions.

"Warner Brothers had a man working out of their Washington office, John Fernkoess. He, with Tom Baldrige, the manager of the Winchester Capitol, and I began producing small stage presentations which toured the Warner theatres in the Shenandoah Valley. Tom and I would go to Reading, Pa., and other cities where there were noted dancing schools, and also to Baltimore and Washington, talking to booking agents who might supply talent. It was remarkable the big names we hired for a 'song' in those days. Among them were De Carlos and Granada, the dance team who created the Carioca in the movie *Flying Down to Rio* with Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire; Frank Bernard and Marion Rich who had just returned from an engagement at the Folies Bergiere in Paris. (I worked with Frank and Marion when I went to Hamburg, Germany, to open the Wurlitzer installed in the UFA Theatre).

"Our little stage shows were assembled and rehearsed in the Academy Theatre in Hagerstown, which had a three-manual Moller. Then, we'd open the revue at the Tivoli Theatre in Frederick, Md., having a 2/8 Wurlitzer. (This organ was given a real workout in 1972 during the ATOS Convention with Hector Olivera knocking us all for a loop with his tremendous renditions. Fabulous!). I MC'd our stage shows from the organ console. When the revue hit the road after the Tivoli, I would leave it and Tom and I would start building another. John Fernkoess' help plus our idea saved the day. The theatres began running in the black for a change.

"Eventually, the minister of the church where I was playing, got a call to go to Knoxville, Ten., and he asked me to go along as his organist and choir director. A few months later, I joined him and as luck would have it, they needed an organist across the street in the 1984-seat Tennessee Theatre which had a 3/11 Wurlitzer on a lift. It was possible for me to start a church service or prayer meeting, run to the theatre, do my stint, and get back to the church before they could say 'Amen'. It took some minute timing!

"I broadcast from the theatre on

WROL, made some radio transcriptions and did background music for a number of silent movie shorts for a man in Knoxville who had his own studio and did a lot of film work for the Hollywood companies.

"When I arrived in Knoxville, the Hotel Andrew Johnson was having money troubles and had been taken over by a New York bonding company, Prudence Bonds. Luckily for me, they sent Harold Archer, a trouble shooter, to manage the hotel. I had lived in the New York hotel this man managed when I played Loew's State. He, his wife and I became great friends. One night, my telephone rang and it was Archer, saying that Leslie Sefton, president of Prudence Bonds, was in town and they wanted me to come to the hotel for a talk.

"They told me of tentative plans to open a new dining room, the project to evolve around my playing. The idea was that I entertain as if I were in my own home, informally greeting the guests, and in other words, doing a musical public relations job. Out of this idea grew the famous Johnson Hall dining room which was a success from the start, not only for its beautiful decor,

the music, service, and excellent food, but also because of the hotel's proximity to the Great Smoky Mountains.

("When I was playing at the Hotel Sheraton in Chicago in the fifties, I was approached three times by a later manager of the hotel, Esmond Braswell, strongly urging my returning with the admonition that if I didn't the Johnson Hotel would be closed. I was under contract to Sheraton and couldn't oblige Braswell. To my sorrow, it was closed, and I always felt it my fault. Attempts have been made to refurbish the hotel to its former grandeur but to no avail).

"In March 1942, I enlisted in the Air Force, saying nothing in my enlistment papers about being a musician. But my first morning at the induction center, I was sent for by the captain whose girl friend had been writing the scripts for a radio program I had been doing. He assigned me to a Special Services group where I did the Easter Services in post chapel, cooperated in two broadcasts for the induction center, and helped produce a show for the boys. After ten days, I was sent to Shepard Field, Texas, for

Billy Barnes at the 3/14 Wurlitzer in the Tennessee Theatre, Knoxville. He played here before and after his army service in World War II. (Barnes coll.)



basic training.

"I was there three days when they started casting for the first army show *Three Dots With a Dash*. Jeanne Madden, formerly of the movies, sang in the show. We used two pianos, one on either side of the Service Club stage, played by Jimmy Rogers Kelley (of Paul Whiteman fame) and myself. There was a large orchestra, many of whom later joined the Glenn Miller Air Force Band, and a line of chorus girls. The show was written by A.E. Hotchner, known as Eric to us, but later became famous for his book on Ernest Hemingway. Eric was aided and abetted by a most capable GI, Bud Bankson. The show was a great success, touring Texas, Oklahoma and other points in the Southwest. Much of the talent later went into Broadway productions. It was great fun except when having to make an all-night jump from one city to another in a GI truck which was more than a little rough.

"In Muskogee, Okla., we had a novel experience. Arriving late one Sunday evening, most of the troupe attended the Methodist Church service. With the arrival of so many soldiers, plus other members of the cast, the minister was a little 'shook up,' anxious to know just who we were, etc. After identifying ourselves, he turned the entire service over to us. We had a method in our madness for we realized that after service, the calibre of food in their homes would far exceed Army chow. We did this in several cities and are still grateful to those kind folk.

"Returning to Sheppard Field, I was there only a short time before being sent to New York for six weeks to work with the Moss Hart production *Winged Victory*. My principal duty was playing for rehearsals. This was a great experience and we were treated like kings. Returning to Sheppard, I entertained the GI's using Hammonds and playing piano in the Service Club. (Lloyd Klos and I discovered while working on this article that we were there at the same time but didn't know each other.) The Service Club entertainment was first-rate with such people as Tony Martin, Jeanette Mc Donald and tennis star Don Budge and others.

"Then I was sent to Randolph Field where it was my duty to set up the office procedure for a Chaplain's

Transition School which was eventually sent to the Aviation Cadet Center in San Antonio where I remained until discharged.

"Returning to Knoxville, I resumed my position with the Tennessee Theatre, the hotel and the church. In 1949, the Sheraton Hotel Corp. took over the Park Central Hotel in New York, renaming it the Park Sheraton. Knowing Helen and Stanley Melba who were booking talent for Sheraton, I was asked to come with the first group of entertainers to the Mermaid Lounge. There were Cy Coleman of 'Hey, Look Me Over!' fame, the Dardenelle Trio and myself. After a short stint back in Knoxville, I returned to the Sheraton chain for years of happy engagements which included most of their hotels east of Chicago: Providence, Boston, Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo. Some of them I played three and four times: the shortest engagement was six months and the longest two years each in the Chicago Sheraton and Cincinnati's Sheraton Gibson. The Sheraton in Worcester, Mass., I played four times and the public wanted to know why I didn't run for mayor!

"I was prepared to leave Cincinnati for another engagement when a stock broker friend talked to me about opening Hammond organ studios there. We formed a partnership called Musicana Inc., and I was named executive vice president.

I also played a year at the Hotel Alms. Just after finishing at the Alms, I was asked to sub for the organist in a very beautiful suburban eating place, just outside Cincinnati, named Martinelli's. The owner knew that his organist had something else in mind, so on that first night came to me and said: 'If you want this job, you can have it the rest of your life.'

"It almost turned out that way. I was there twelve years! During this time, I was teaching 46 organ pupils, playing every night, Sundays in a church and part-time on Sunday afternoons and evenings at a Country Club, and still had my financial interest in the organ studios. Using my tried and true musical-public relations tactics, my job at Martinelli's was a joy and again I am sad to relate that not long after leaving the place, it was sold. The owners had phoned long-distance several times, saying that if I didn't return, they'd have to close or sell. I hope this doesn't give the impression that I'm bragging, but I believe it points out that an organist, playing in a public place, can be MORE than just a musician. He can make it more than just a mere job.

"I reluctantly left Martinelli's because I wanted to spend more time with my 94-year-old father and my sister in Winston-Salem. Arriving there on July 9, 1971, I had a heart attack one week later. Upon learning of the busy schedule I had been keep-

When Billy played at the Sheraton Biltmore in Providence, R.I., his good friend, Roger Williams, stopped to listen. Rather apropos, since another Roger Williams founded Rhode Island. (Barnes coll.)



ing, my doctor was surprised that it hadn't happened sooner. After 11 days in coronary care and a month in the hospital, I came out none the worse for the experience, but wiser about taking care of myself. Fortunately, there was no permanent heart damage and I feel wonderful. Further, I believe I have a lot of good musical years ahead of me.

"Thinking back to the silent movie era, there comes to mind a movie pianist in Richmond who used to insist that the great Paderewski came often to his small theatre to hear him play the great pianist's Minuet. As I was young in those years, I believed him. However, I always felt that the silent movie player had to have a great 'understanding and feeling' between the artist in the film and the moods he was trying to portray to produce the music called for. The best movie musicians had to relive those scenes to play them effectively and no doubt reliving those characters week after week did have an effect on all of us. I trust mostly good effects.

"The greatest thing which could be said of a silent movie player by his listening public was 'he cued and played the picture so well that we forgot he was there,' which was the supreme compliment. It couldn't be too loud, timing had to be perfect, and an endless repertoire was required, most of it from memory. The silent movie player could not be a distraction from the film.

"My present-day activities? There have been numerous offers from agents and others for me to play engagements in other cities and maybe I may again take such a job. Fortunately, I invested my money wisely (annuities, bonds, etc.) and really don't have to worry unless something drastic happens to our economic system. But 'once a ham, always a ham,' so I'm sure the desire to play will always be with me.

"In 1972, I played the formal opening of a luxury eating place in Winston-Salem but on the advice of my doctor, did not extend the engagement. Later, I played for the regional convention of the AGO on a souped-up Seville organ in the lobby of the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Knoxville. It was amazing the number of church organists who said they'd like to study theatre organ with me and many of them admitted



Billy gives movie star Rod Cameron some pointers on playing an electronic. Cameron plays the piano well. (Barnes coll.)

they couldn't play a single selection without music.

"It is wonderful what the ATOS members have done to revive interest in the theatre organ. The enthusiasm I witnessed at the 1972 and 1974 ATOS conventions was just wonderful. And, more and more organists whom I know, who have never cared for theatre organ, are being won over to our side. How fortunate for those people who have these great instruments in their homes!

"The latest thing I have done was one of the greatest. The new Hyatt House Hotel in Winston-Salem had a formal opening, September 7, 1974 combined with a Symphony Ball. The event was almost indescribable in its grandeur but as one newspaper quoted me, 'It was like Solomon's Temple and a Feast of the Bacchanals'. Entertainment included the Winston-Salem Symphony, conducted by a most capable man, John Ieule; Les Elgart's Band (in the Convention Center which connects with the hotel across the street by an underground passage.); Larry Weiss, a fine pianist; Beverly Culbreath, outstanding opera and

pop singer; Clint Holmes and Company out of New York and Washington; the Symphony Chorale, directed by David Partington, and myself.

"I started the festivities in the hotel ballroom on an organ, later going to another organ on the fourth-level balcony, and then returned to the ballroom. Over 2,000 tickets were sold, many from out of the state, and there were those who came to me to say they had heard me in Chicago, Providence and Cincinnati. So, I can assure you, that there is a lot of pizzazz in the old boy yet!

"I am sure that when any member of the ATOS passes on to his just rewards, he will find in the after-life streets paved with shiny bars from Chrysoglotts, sidewalks paved with Xylophone keys, a fanfare welcome played on a hundred Post Horns and a heavenly chorus of 10,000 Vox Humanas!"

ATOS thanks Billy Barnes for this interesting and exciting account of his life. Thanks also to Captain Erwin Young, Dr. Paul Abernethy and his son for manning the tape recorder and capturing the story as it was told. □