

# SAN DIEGO'S MUSIC MAN



by Robert Whinery

Edward G. Borgens, executive vice president of Organ Power Restaurants was fuming over a recent item in THEATRE ORGAN in which he was depicted as "playing as his health permits."

When a man can come out of active retirement at seventy-five to work twelve-hour days, he can hardly be called feeble. Ed Borgens

Ed Borgens today. Still going strong and no 'as his health permits' problems.



has been racing through life since he was twenty and shows no signs of stopping.

Ed was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, the son of George and Mary Borgens, immigrants from Germany. Music has been his love since age nine when he started piano lessons. His schoolmates in Lincoln called him "sissy" for this, so he took time out from practice to "civilize" a few of them with his fists. "Guts" is a characteristic trait which has served him well in life. Two years ago he smashed his right fingertips in a car door just before a concert. He played the concert in excruciating pain, and later lost the four fingernails. But the show went on.

His life is replete with interesting activities, enough for a full-scale biography but his memories of the roaring twenties are of special interest for it was then that he developed his talents rapidly. Ed turned out to be a rare combination of complete musician and astute businessman. Let's see how it happened.

In 1936 San Diego staged the World's Fair, mostly in Balboa Park. Central in the exhibition was the world's largest outdoor organ, a 4-manual Austin, and the promoters contacted Chicago for an organist who could play all types of music with expertise. They were referred to Ed Borgens in Lincoln, Nebraska,

During World War II, Ed gives the downbeat to start the "Poet and Peasant Overture." He's conducting an orchestra comprised of carefully auditioned Convair Aircraft Co. employees who volunteered for troop entertainment at the Port of Embarkation.

and he came to San Diego for daily performances during the next six months. Why, of all the organists in this country, was he selected? The answer is found in the twenties, when the cinema pipe organ reached its zenith.

Ed graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1923, music major, pipe organ, and for the next two years led a double life, teaching music in the Lincoln high school and playing the Lincoln theatre organ at night. The latter was so profitable that he abandoned teaching. Pipe organs were being installed in hundreds of theatres, so employment was secure with high pay for those who could provide background music for silent movies.

Great theatre organists emerged as the era of movie palaces and organ building peaked, among whom were Jesse Crawford and Eddie Dunstedter. Ed Borgens played in several Minneapolis theatres all of them just a few blocks from where Dunstedter was playing. He took every opportunity to study Eddie's technique first hand. While Crawford was a master of tonal coloring, Dunstedter's forte was counter melody, and Ed Borgens wanted detailed instruc-



Earliest available console shot of Ed while he was playing the Kimball at the Capitol Theatre, Aberdeen, South Dakota, in 1927.

tion in the art. So he went to the McPhail Conservatory in Minneapolis, where Dunstedter taught a select few, and auditioned successfully. For a year he was instructed by the master while still playing his theatre job, and emerged as an able theatre organist, proficient in all types of music.

Ed was fortunate to have completed this year of instruction when he did, for this was the time of great opportunity for organists, and he was ready when his big chance came.

In 1925 a subsidiary of the Publix corporation needed a guest organist to travel through its theatre chain. In those days orchestras were featured along with organists, and the guest organist had to work with various orchestras and on different consoles. No time to practice, the guest organist just sat down and played while sight reading.

A team of four judges was assigned to audition twenty applicants for the job. The judges were all professional musicians and included Eddie Dunstedter, so the contest promised to be rough.

The rules were simple: the candidate had five minutes to get the feel of the console, then played whatever he was told to, transposing on command, until the judges knew his

abilities and deficiencies in detail. One after another faced this firing line, and it finally came time for Ed Borgens to try.

He faced that console against four indifferent judges and nineteen competitors who all hoped he would fall on his face. But he didn't. Ed gave a short prayer, went through the mill and won the position. He remembers this as the toughest test he ever had, but winning it was much more than gratifying, because it put him in contact with the Finklestein and Rubin five-state theatre chain in the days of vaudeville, and he thus became familiar with every aspect of show business.

For the next three years he travelled as a solo organist. Sometimes he rushed in to substitute for an ailing colleague, entering the pit in the dark while the silent movie was running, mounting the organ bench quietly and softly fading in the music.

Changeovers from orchestra to organ became quite an art form. For large theatres with twenty five piece orchestras, the organist could blend in with the violins while the orchestra members dropped out one by one until the organ took over completely. This was done so skillfully that the audience scarcely noticed it.

Ed's observation of show business — booking acts and films, problems common to all theatre managers — was later to serve him directly when he became the assistant to one theatre owner and again when he operated his own place. Indirectly, a background for business was developing which would characterize the decades following the theatre organ-vaudeville era.

From 1925 through 1929, Ed opened a great number of Finklestein and Ruben/Paramount theatres as representative of the Wurlitzer and Kimball Organ Companies. First Wurlitzer trained him in organ installation, trouble shooting and repair — for very good reasons. He was scheduled to open newly installed organs over five states, each of which would require some debugging. No matter how carefully made or installed, the shakedown during the first week could expose sudden trouble, and no technician was standing by. Pipe organs, fully unified, have amazing possibilities for both performance and malfunctions.

Ed opened theatre after theatre, playing solos and doubling as organ technician. Town names read like a cross section of northern Americana — Aberdeen, Fargo, Minot, Albert Lee, St. Cloud, Duluth, Mankato, Eveleth, Virginia, Superior, Eau Claire, and Clearwater — mainly the rich iron ore belt. Most of these theatres were equipped with medium size or small Wurlitzers, but Ed recalls an especially lovely Barton in a Hibbing theatre. Its console was on an elevator. He was a very busy man during this five year period, always

Ed during his second stint at the Lincoln Theatre (1933-1936).





Ed in 1936, when he arrived in San Diego for a six month engagement — which has stretched to the present.

on the go, and enjoying it thoroughly.

In 1927, the “talkies” were considered a joke — at first. The Musician’s Union reported that the big Vitaphone discs were always “out of sync” with the picture, giving ridiculous results, and that neither orchestras nor organists had anything to fear from this passing fad.

But the “fad” period passed with the introduction of Movietone and Photophone sound-on-film about a year after Vitaphone, and suddenly musicians *were* out of work. Solo organists held on for a while for intermission concerts, but gradually they too were phased out.

Ed Borgens was one of the last to go, and when he did he took up broadcasting organ music from the York theatre in York, Nebraska for several years. His theme song, “Here Comes the Showboat,” was well known all over the midwest and was heard on the east coast at night when radio reception was better. The station’s engineer was an ambitious lad. He supercharged the transmitter power to reach southern California. The FCC wasn’t long in detecting this and pulled his license. Thus ended the year of 1931.

Oscar Johnson owned a five-theatre midwest chain in the ’30s. He knew that Ed had abilities beyond that of being an organist. In 1932 Ed became Oscar’s assistant, and gradually took charge of the five

Nebraska and Iowa theatres as general manager. Two years of this experience equipped him well for the step — his own movie house.

He operated his 1200-seat Humbolt theatre in Humbolt, Nebraska, for two years and made so much money at it in the heart of the Depression that the building owners would not renew his lease. They wanted to collect the profits. But Ed had the knowhow. This operation included variety shows and cowboy pictures, attracting patronage from a large farm area. Not just anyone would dare open his own first enterprise in the bleak, money-scarce depression. His success was no accident, considering his experience.

In 1935 he broadcast organ music over the midwest network of CBS from the Lincoln theatre, Lincoln Nebraska. He also played at the Orpheum in Omaha, some fifty-six miles distant once a week on a Wurlitzer organ.

The year of 1936 was a turning point in Ed’s life, for it was then that he left for San Diego to play the Austin organ at the World’s Fair. He refused the offer at first because he was well established as manager of the Hammond Organ Depts. for six music stores in Nebraska and Iowa. This was too good to leave for a six-month contract. Then Nebraska was bit by a blizzard that buried roads and homes in snow, and Ed couldn’t even leave the house. Business stopped.

The Fair authorities seized this opportunity to send him a telegram: “Come to the land of sunshine and orange blossoms and leave that land of ice and snow.” That did it! He accepted by answering “California

In 1926 the Fargo Theatre, Fargo, North Dakota, used Ed’s name in lights to attract customers.



A 1936 photo showing Ed playing a concert on the 53-rank outdoor Austin organ in San Diego’s Balboa Park. He has played it many times in the years since the Fair and refers to it affectionately as ‘the old walrus.’

Here I Come” by telegram, and the countdown took place over the radio. He ended his final Lincoln broadcasts with the song of the same title.

On Friday, March 13, 1936, Ed arrived in San Diego to play “that old walrus,” as he puts it, to hundreds of thousands of people. He played classics, theatrical, accompanied vaudeville on the open air Austin and was heard on world-wide broadcasts from the Fair. His versatile background was employed fully, and he frequently worked from original manuscripts for the special daily shows. Eddie Dunstedter would have been proud of his pupil.

Ed Borgens fell in love with San

Diego, and from 1937 to 1940 was the Hammond Organ salesman for Thearles Music Company in that city. He did very well, but the World War II years brought scarcities in everything, so he became personnel director of Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego. He came to the attention of the firm's president, Major Reuben H. Fleet, and was appointed to head a new Convair department of Entertainment and Recreation. He organized bands, choirs, orchestras; some for men, some for women, some mixed. They played "live" dance music from 1:00 a.m. until 6:00 a.m. for the factory "swing" shift, both for recreation and to "keep them out of trouble." The high point, however, was a world-wide OWI broadcast of the "Messiah," featuring a 300-voice chorus and orchestra organized and directed by Ed Borgens.

At the Fleet household, Ed was giving weekly organ lessons to Dorothy Fleet, the Major's wife. They had a five-year old lad named "Sandy." Thirty-five years later, the aforementioned Sandy started collecting pipe organs as a hobby, and one day he came to Ed's apartment in La Jolla to discuss possibilities of commercial enterprise. Ed promised his support, other stockholders were signed, and Organ Power Restaurants was born. The firm now operates three eateries with organ music. That's quite a story in itself. It traces Sandy Fleet's interest in organs to its source — Ed Borgens.

Following World War II, Ed decided to start his own music store right across the street from his old employer's store. George Scott of the Walker-Scott department store took Ed to lunch and told him he



Ed at the time he opened his San Diego music store (1949).

would be bankrupt in a month if he tried to compete with the established store. Scott then offered him the management of the new organ department in his department store. Ed refused, preferring to be on his own.

His new store on Broadway was stocked with four pianos (all he could get) which sold fast leaving him with empty space. It appeared that Scott had been right, but then Ed got the Baldwin dealership and within a year was moving fast. Ed eventually expanded to five stores in San Diego County. He became the

district manager for Baldwin for half of California and all of Arizona.

Once, in Phoenix, he demonstrated Baldwin Organs at a fair. A woman kept coming back to hear him every hour, so Ed decided to find out why. It was the same routine each time, he told her, but she replied that he sounded so much like an organist that used to broadcast in Nebraska years ago. He turned and played his old theme, "The World is Waiting for the Sunrise" and then

Here Ed accompanies a tumbling act, conducting one of the many bands he organized to entertain troops during World War II.



turned back to find her in tears.

"You're the one!" she said.

"Yes," he replied, "I'm Eddie Borgens of Lincoln, Nebraska." Ed says he can't play that song in concert today without someone recognizing him, even after forty years. Millions must have listened to those broadcasts.

Ed met another girl in Phoenix. Her name was Lillian, and she soon became a part of his life. Matrimony followed. That was twenty-nine years ago. The love affair continues to this day.

Ed's civic activities in San Diego are legion. He's a Mason, church president, chairman of many things past and present, and leads a more active life than most men half his age. His interest in schools is paramount, and over the years he has taught music appreciation through organ concerts, carefully explaining the mechanics of the instruments and sound effects. Many thousands of children have heard him play in their school auditoriums, and today he happily continues at Organ Power with special programs for school groups. And how those kids love a

theatre pipe organ!

When asked why he didn't play scheduled times at Organ Power, Ed replied "We have fine young organists who need to emerge. I had my era, now it's their turn." So he still plays for special occasions, church concerts, and is actively involved in music in his 75th year, as always. He has a two-manual Baldwin in his apartment.

Recently, Reginald Foort (now in his 80's) played a concert and made two records at Organ Power, Pacific Beach. It was interesting to hear those two old pros exchanging experiences during lunch. They sure had a lot to say about the roaring twenties, organs and music generally.

Ed Borgens' life has covered the whole span of the theatre organ, from its beginnings in the teens of this century, through its great days, then its obscurity up through its rediscovery in recent years. He has combined music with successful business ventures and good citizenship. It was a lucky day for San Diego when that 1936 mid-western blizzard started him whistling "California Here I Come." □



Baldwin factory rep. Dan Sheeran (right) presents Ed with the company's diamond pin award for selling the most (over 200) large Baldwins in a limited time. The one karat sparkler award was a world first for both Ed and the company (1965).

*For those who couldn't make it in 1976 . . . and those who'd like to do it again*

## ORGAN SAFARI II TO ENGLAND IN 1977

See and hear the wonderfully restored Comptons, Christies and Wurlitzers of England. Featured artists will include Ernest Broadbent, Douglas Reeve, Len Rawle, Robin Richmond and Robinson Cleaver.

Tour guides are all organists, active in the British organ world. The Safari is open to members and non-members and will operate on scheduled airlines.

September 30th departure from Los Angeles and New York. Price of \$995.00 includes air fare, hotels, transfers, admissions, motorcoaches and most meals PLUS plenty of time for organized and independent sightseeing throughout.

**14-day itinerary includes Liverpool, York, Manchester, Stratford, London, Southampton, Brighton and North Wales.**

For further details contact Patty Barnes  
**Simonton Travel Service**  
6900 Santa Monica Blvd.  
Los Angeles, CA 90038

*SPECIAL OPTIONAL EXTRA  
SIDE TRIP TO SCOTLAND.*