

When one recalls the New York Paramount Theatre, he associates it with the illustrious names of Mr. & Mrs. Jesse Crawford, Sigmund Krumgold, Fred Feibel, Don Baker and Ann Leaf who played there. One who also played both the theatre and studio Wurlitzers, though not as well known, was Jack Skelly. He was associate organist at the time Jesse Crawford was featured soloist, and Fred Feibel did his morning show. Not long ago, we persuaded him to share his life story with THEATRE ORGAN readers.

"I was born and raised in White Plains, N.Y., and at the age of eight, began the study of piano, my first teacher being a nun. I was still in school when a style 170 Wurlitzer was installed in the Strand Theatre in White Plains, and it became my ambition to play one after hearing Will Gilroy, the house organist. The difficulty was in obtaining an organ to practice on, but I studied with the organist of St. John's Church in White Plains and was fortunate enough to be able to use the organ afternoons for practice. Later, I took lessons at Wurlitzer's in New

York City to become acquainted with the theatre organ. The teacher-demonstrator? None other than Don Baker.

"My first chance to play in a theatre came when I substituted at the Rye (N.Y.) Playhouse. The management wanted me to continue on a permanent basis, but I couldn't because I still had four months to go in high school. However, they offered to hold the job, and after graduation, I became the regular organist there. The Rye Playhouse was used for previews of First National pictures. When a preview was scheduled, I

JACK SKELLY - NEW YORK

Jack Skelly at the console of the Aeolian pipe organ in Westchester County Center, White Plains, N.Y., in 1975. The bulk of his pipe organ playing in recent years has been done on this instrument. (Alfred Porto Photo)



would spend several mornings at the First National Studios in the Bronx where the picture was run for me while I scored it. Playing for a movie was the most interesting musical work I've ever done, mainly because all types of music had to be used.

"The Playhouse had a model 135 Wurlitzer, but I was looking forward to playing bigger organs. When the new RKO Theatre opened in White Plains in November 1927, I became organist there, playing a style H Wurlitzer. After the first year, organ playing was limited as the talkies

As told to Lloyd E. Klos

took over. Finally, the RKO theatres dismissed the organists. I was there two years, however.

"In late 1928 or early 1929, Frederick Kinsley was made chief organist of the RKO chain. He had all the organists in the New York metropolitan area take a small ad in *Variety* for several weeks. I was at the RKO in White Plains and the only name I remember was Will Gilroy at the RKO 86th Street Theatre in New York.

"In the meantime, with my desire to play bigger organs, I studied with Egon Putz who, with Sigmund Krumgold, had opened the New York Paramount when Jesse Crawford became featured soloist in 1926.

We used the Paramount studio organ and the Rivoli Theatre's Wurlitzer for my lessons. My first opportunity to play the Paramount Theatre Wurlitzer came when I opened the show for Putz.

"While at the Paramount, I was the recipient of an autographed picture of Jesse Crawford, because of a kindness I had shown him. At the end of the orchestral overture (with organ), a cipher occurred on a low tuba note. The 10-minute newsreel went on, to be followed by Crawford's solo. With no organ technician available, Putz sent me scurrying to

orchestra for the overture, and the organ was a part of that.

"One week, Stuart Barrie appeared as soloist at the New York Paramount and gave a great performance. He played Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C# Minor." In the last strain, with almost full organ, he played the three thematic notes throughout on the pedals. Scintillating!

"A CBS radio show *Paramount on Parade* was broadcast from the Paramount Theatre studio thrice weekly, featuring stars of the current stage show. This noon-day broadcast

was MC'd by Ted Malone (*Between the Bookends*), and opened with an organ solo by Fred Feibel. The balance of the half-hour show I played when needed for organ or piano accompaniment. I recall Fats Waller on the show one week, and besides his pianistics, he took a turn at the organ for a solo.

"My other radio work consisted of a weekly half-hour over Westchester's WFAS, using the Wurlitzer at the RKO White Plains Theatre, or the Westchester County Center organ.

"In May 1935, the Paramount

PARAMOUNT ORGANIST

the upper right chamber. I stopped the cipher moments before the start of Jesse's solo. That was the 'kindness' to which he referred on the picture he gave me.

"Jesse Crawford was a non-pareil soloist. He was a complete showman and his well-chosen registrations, whether for ballads, novelty tunes or whatever, made for delightful listening. He was truly great and his audiences always showed their appreciation with attentiveness and applause.

"When Krumgold went to the Paramount Studios in Hollywood, Fred Feibel took his place and I had the opportunity to do more playing because Fred had a busy radio schedule. Feibel was one of the finest organists I've ever heard, with his superb technique and brilliant arrangements. His *Organ Reveille* at eight each morning was a delight to hear. I was happy and fortunate to have been associated with him.

"Part of my work consisted of playing the Rialto Theatre organ before the show opened mornings. The Brooklyn Paramount organ was added to my list of 'organs I have played' when I did a two-week stint there, substituting for the house organist. (It may have been Elsie Thompson, but I'm not sure). Don Baker was the featured soloist, and he called Feibel, asking for someone. I was elected.

"At the time, Rubinoff, the famous violinist, was conducting the

Jack Skelly at a Hammond in 1940. He entered the Army the following year for a four-year stint. (Costain Photo)





Jack at the console of the famed Paramount Studio Wurlitzer. (Skelly Collection)

went all-sound and Feibel became staff organist at CBS while I did the final two weeks at the theatre for him. After a period of no live music, Don Baker became organist there for 14 years, and the introduction of the name-band policy proved to be a sensation, which is well-remembered.

"With organ work at a low ebb in 1936, I became pianist and musical director for Jack Powell and his famous trick-drummer act. Playing many top spots, my biggest thrill was performing before President Roosevelt. The occasion was the annual dinner given by the Vice President for the President with about 35 persons in attendance, including Chief Justice Hughes and leading senators. Burns and Allen, then on radio, also entertained, and Powell's act used my piano accompaniment. It was a memorable occasion for me, playing as the President sat just a few feet away.

"Doing one week with Powell at Loew's Capitol in Washington, I naturally had to try out the organ which Art Brown played, so I used it mornings, long before the show started. At Loew's Hippodrome in Baltimore, I did the same thing, and during a week's stay at Shea's Hippodrome in Toronto, I also tested the organ mornings.

"The act did two months at the St. Regis Hotel's formal Iridium Room in New York where Emil Coleman's

orchestra played. While in New York City, Powell played many benefits between shows, giving me the chance to sit in with many name orchestras including Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians at the Waldorf-Astoria, and Vincent Lopez at Hotel Taft, among others. On a one-night date at Henry Ford's estate in Dearborn, Mich., I played during the act with Glen Gray's Casa Loma Orchestra. A party was held there by Henry Ford II with the entertainment consisting of the Casa Loma Orchestra, Jack Powell, and Hal Leroy.

"Powell played the Christmas holiday show at Radio City Music Hall and I had the opportunity to add the Music Hall organ to my list. Willie Eichler, one of the organ technicians at the Hall, knowing I had played the N.Y. Paramount and was now with Powell, recommended me to Dick Leibert, the chief organist. Dick allowed me to play the exit music at night which was my total experience with that organ. While there, I was privileged to audition on the studio Wurlitzer for Erno Rapee.

"Playland, the huge amusement park on Long Island Sound at Rye, N.Y., has had an organ since 1937. That year, it was featured during summer season with an organ recital each evening and amplified through the park's sound system. I was the soloist at these recitals. For the winter season, the organ was moved into Playland Casino where it is still used. In the meantime, different models have been installed. I played the winter season at Playland, which is owned and operated by Westchester County, and then would play the summer season elsewhere.

"In 1938, I was organist with Harry Reser's Cliquot Club Eskimos, noted radio orchestra of the thirties. His was one of the finest name orchestras to use a Hammond organ and we went on the road with a 12-piece band plus a girl vocalist. When on a one-week stand, we broadcasted nightly at 11 o'clock over an NBC coast-to-coast hookup. Reser was a great musician and an excellent arranger. That fall, he returned to

radio and had to use studio musicians.

"So it was Playland Casino again, and the following summer, I did the Jersey shore bit, playing at Avon Inn, Avon-by-the-Sea (just below Asbury Park).

"The Westchester County Center in White Plains, N.Y., has an Aeolian 4-manual pipe organ. The Center is a huge auditorium, built in 1930. I have played many events there, from the thirties to the present. The bulk of my pipe organ playing in recent years has been done there.

"An interruption came in my civilian career in 1941. In April, eight months before Pearl Harbor, I was drafted into the Army. *Good-bye, Dear, I'll be Back in a Year* turned out to be four years and four months for me. I was at Ft. Bragg, N. Carolina, the first two years, and during Carolina maneuvers in the fall of 1941, I would go into the nearest town, looking for an organ to play. About that time, organs were put into all Army chapels and I was assigned to the Chaplain of my regiment. I played church services and gave many organ recitals throughout Ft. Bragg, while also playing weekly at the Officer's Club on the main post.

"The last two years were spent at Camp Van Dorn, Miss., and my final assignment was at the Headquarters of the Fourth Service Command in Atlanta, Ga. From there, I was discharged at war's end after spending all my service time in the States.

"Upon discharge, I moved from White Plains to Rye where I still reside, and was in time to begin the season at Playland Casino. The summers were spent playing the country clubs and cocktail lounges of Westchester. In 1948, came a return to Broadway where I played at Iceland, a Swedish-American restaurant on Broadway near 52nd Street, which later became the International Cafe and where now stands a 41-story building.

"With the installation of an organ in Madison Square Garden's ice skating rink (also named Iceland), I became organist there and remained for 20 years. While there, I was also organist for Arthur Godfrey's TV ice shows for 2½ years. Godfrey and his cast used the Gar-

CHICAGO IN '77

ATOS National Convention

den rink twice a week the year 'round and when there was an ice show, I did as many as 14 rehearsals a week. At the dress rehearsal the day of the show, the orchestra would take over with Lee Erwin at the organ.

"Readers will remember some of the Godfrey Show cast: Tony Marvin, Janette Davis, Archie Bleyer, Haleloke, the Maguire sisters, Julius LaRosa, Si Schaffer, Marion Marlowe and the Mariners. This was in the days of 'live' TV shows and it all ended suddenly when Godfrey entered the hospital for a hip operation.

"While at the Garden's skating rink, organist Gladys Goodding also played there at the main arena. When she died, everyone wondered why I didn't try out for the job downstairs. The reason was that I played eight sessions a week for 11 months a year, making my salary superior to hers. We expected to be in the new

Garden, but it was decided at the last moment not to include ice-skating. So, my 20 years at the old Garden ended.

"Gladys Goodding's name was made more well known by a conundrum which made its rounds among sports fans:

"Who plays for the Dodgers, Knicks and Rangers?"

"After everyone tried to answer with the name of an athlete, but couldn't, the correct answer was Gladys Goodding.

"I am now (1975) playing again at Playland Casino, doing my 11th season there over a stretch of more than 35 years. On a personal note, I've recently become a grandfather, when my daughter, Sharon, gave birth to a girl, Lauren.

"I became aware of THEATRE ORGAN magazine during 1975 when an organ buff, residing near



When Jack eliminated a cipher at a crucial time, the great Jesse Crawford autographed this picture.

(Nathan Photo)

Jack plays a Hammond for a chorus in a Ft. Bragg chapel in 1942. The picture was run in *Click* magazine, and his friends saw it in Hawaii and England. The magazine has long since ceased publication. (Skelly Collection)



me, gave me a lot of back issues. Noting the numerous references to the New York Paramount prompted me to contact Lloyd Klos, who asked for the opportunity to work with me to compile my biography which I was pleased to do. Just as it was a thrill to play the marvelous New York Paramount Wurlitzers, it is indeed a thrill to see the renaissance of the theatre organ. Cheers to ATOS for the promotion of this revival! □

BALOGH TO OPEN GRAND RAPIDS PIZZERY

Following a successful three-year stint at Bill Brown's Organ Stop Pizzas in Phoenix and Mesa, Arizona, Charlie Balogh will be joining Mr. Ron Walls as featured artist in his new pizza venture, "The Roaring Twenties," in Grand Rapids, Michigan, commencing March 1, 1977.

Charlie joined Bill in January of 1974 as Associate Artist and has played in both Arizona locations. He also helped in the rebuilding of the Denver Fox Wurlitzer which is now installed in Organ Stop Pizza in Mesa.

Charlie was also one of the artists at the National ATOS Convention held in Philadelphia last summer. □