



Publicity portrait of Gladys Goodding when she was working in theatres. (Bob Beck Coll.)

Gladys Goodding

Theatre
Organist
Turned
Stadium
Musician

by Lloyd E. Klos

Who is the most popular baseball stadium organist today? Boston Red Sox rooters will swear that ex-theatre organist John Kiley can play the national anthem as no one else. Across the country, Los Angeles Dodger stalwarts will argue that Helen Dell ranks supreme among the artists performing on manuals and pedals in baseball parks.

But for those of us who remember baseball before expansion of the major leagues, Gladys Goodding, who reigned as Dodger organist for 15 years, was the queen of her profession.

Gladys Goodding was born in 1893 in Macon, Mo., one of four children of Joseph and Mabel Riley Goodding. Both parents were musically-inclined which accounted for Gladys' inherent love of it; her mother taught her the piano. When her parents died in 1910, she and her younger brother were sent to the Masonic Home in St. Louis. Here

she was given formal organ and voice training, played in the chapel, and stayed past the usual age when children moved on. She got involved teaching the younger children and worked in a music store by playing piano and selling sheet music.

She also had time to pitch on the home's baseball team, becoming so proficient that she threw curves. Years later in an interview she said, "I could hardly believe it, but a fellow who became a professional told me I had developed a curve, so it must be true. Incidentally, it was here where I learned the hidden ball trick."

Following her days at the home, she went to Kansas City, Mo., to live with her brother Leslie, and worked in a silent movie theatre, playing piano. Here she met Robert R. Beck, who played drums in the theatre orchestra, and they were married in 1914. After living on a ranch in New Mexico for five years, they returned

to Kansas City where they were divorced.

Gladys Goodding then hit the Chautauqua circuit with Thurlow Lieurance in 1921, and took a sextette of saxophones on tour in 1922. Later in 1922, she went to New York City where she wanted, because of her clear soprano voice, to get into musical comedy or light opera. "But I was a woman with two children and needed the security of a steady job."

So, turning from the uncertainties of the stage, she became an organist on the Loew's circuit in New York, first at Loew's Columbus Circle Theatre, then at Loew's Orpheum until the advent of sound movies. The theatre experience with its rapid changes of moods and registrations, stood her in good stead for her years as a stadium organist. Next came stints at the Hofbrau at 48th Street and Broadway, and the Downtown Athletic Club.

In 1936, Gladys became organist

at Madison Square Garden, a post she was to hold until her death 27 years later. One of her duties was to sing and play the "Star Spangled Banner" before each event. She was asked how many times she had done this and she replied that she hadn't kept track, but "each performance was as inspiring to me as the first."

She had a special ability to amuse the crowds and irk the athletes and their managers by her seemingly innocent renditions at appropriate moments. For example, after a boxing match at the Garden, a loquacious manager whose fighter had lost the decision, complained in a lengthy interview from ringside. Gladys played "Good Night, Sweetheart" as background music for the episode.

Miss Goodding always had warm respect for the Garden fans. "They are wonderful, and any unpleasantness experienced there has been slight." It was her custom to arrive at the Garden an hour before an event was scheduled to get her music in order. She always played with sheet music before her. Prior to her illness in 1963, she missed only one event at the Garden, a tennis match — a truly remarkable record for 27 years of service.

Late in 1941, a Brooklyn hockey fan told her that he'd like to hear her play at Ebbets Field. Liking the idea and being a woman of action, she fired off a letter to Larry McPhail, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. A few days later, she received a reply, stating that she'd be hearing from McPhail on the idea. Early in 1942, she received another letter, saying she had been accepted as Dodger organist. Her initial playing spot was in the reserved section behind the Dodger dugout. Later, she was installed in a glass-enclosed booth, high above the field, a position she was to occupy until the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles after the 1957 season. Gladys Goodding became a living legend at Ebbets Field.

The best-known story about her occurred during her first weeks there. One day when the three umpires emerged to receive the lineup cards at home plate, Gladys played "Three Blind Mice." "I knew the head umpire, Bill Stewart, who was one of the hockey referees at the Garden and I felt Bill could take it. I just had to play it!

"So I did, Bill looked at the other umpires in disbelief, and they looked at me. Bill told me later that he had waved to me and told his cohorts he knew me. They said, 'So she's a friend of yours, eh?' I later apologized to Bill and he forgave me. It was one of those things which had to be done, but it's never been done since, and I doubt if it will."

Gladys Goodding used special music as the team's organist. She wrote their theme, "Follow the Dodgers," which she played at the beginning of each game as they ran onto the field, and there was always "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." During the last two years at Ebbets Field, she employed the Mexican handclapping song "Chiapenecas," which became a part of the seventh inning stretch and during times when the team was behind and needed the fans' encouragement.

Following a Dodger victory, she'd play such songs as "What a Day This Has Been" from *Brigadoon*. When the team lost, the number would depend on the opposition: the Cardinals would get "St Louis Blues," for example. Had the 1951 playoff game, in which Bobby Thomson hit

the famous home run, enabling the Giants to enter the World Series, been played in Brooklyn, Gladys would have played a Scottish song because of the hero's ancestry.

When Brooklyn lost the World Series to the Yankees in 1952, she played "What Can I Say Dear, After I Say I'm Sorry?" Following the loss of another series, she played what she considered the saddest song, "This Nearly Was Mine" from *The King and I*.

"Mine was a wonderful relationship with the players and fans," she said. "Before games, I serenaded the players on their birthdays, playing their state songs and favorite numbers. Gil Hodges' favorite was "Laura," "O Solo Mio" was requested by Carl Furillo, "On Wisconsin" was for Andy Pafko's alma mater, the UCLA song was Jackie Robinson's choice, and "My Old Kentucky Home" appealed to Pee Wee Reese." But Gladys' versatility came to the fore when opera-loving broadcaster Vince Scully requested excerpts from *La Boheme*.

Her favorite player? It was Pee Wee Reese, who became Dodger shortstop in 1941, a year before she

Gladys Goodding was in her first year as official Dodger organist in 1942. The console was situated in the stands near first base.
(Bob Beck Coll.)



joined the organization. "He's one of the nicest fellows you'd ever want to know; a gentleman on and off the field, such a grand guy with a lovely family. It was he who presented me with my diamond-sapphire 10-year ring in 1952. When they had Pee Wee Reese Day in 1955, Mr. and Mrs. Larry McPhail came up from their farm especially for the event. Pee Wee is well thought of, and not only in Kentucky."

Asked about her greatest thrill at Ebbets Field, she replied, "There have been so many that I couldn't pick out one. One day in 1956, Duke Snider came to bat, and because of poor performance lately, was given a good booning by the Flatbush Faithful. I got angry about it and hollered out the booth, 'Put it over there on Bedford Avenue, please, Duke,' and he did, changing the jeers to cheers."

Had Gladys Goodding lost a court case early in her Dodger playing days, things would have been totally different. There was a retired organist by the name of J. Reid Spencer, who lived in the neighborhood of Ebbets Field, and complained that he couldn't sleep in the afternoon because of the musical acoustics which hit his home in a peculiar way. He took his case to court, acting as his own attorney. The local court decided against him, so he took the case to the state supreme court.

"Oddly enough, while we were

waiting for the case to come to trial, he gave me some of his own music to play for him, which I did. The case was dismissed on the grounds that the complainant couldn't hear well. He had cupped his hands to his ears to listen to the judge's remarks!"

During the first 10 years as Dodger organist, Gladys missed only one game, due to a commitment to play for a Scout-o-rama at Madison Square Garden.

Though she played thousands of numbers at Ebbets Field, all heard by the Dodger fans, there was an occasion in 1951 when she unknowingly was playing the organ for herself. It happened at a night game when a thunderstorm stopped the contest. Gladys closed the window of her booth to avoid the rain, and began to play light music.

After 15 minutes and noticing no reaction from the crowd, she opened the window to find no music coming from the speakers; the electrician had turned off the PA system. She immediately called him on her intercom, power was restored, and Gladys' music was again enjoyed by all.

When not playing for sporting events, she ran amateur shows, and directed the music for a Major Bowes' amateur talent unit. She also appeared at Carnegie Hall, was chairman of a group of ladies who worked at The Lighthouse, transcribed books for the blind on her Braille

typewriter, and saw to their distribution. Her eyes were pledged to the eye bank. At Christmastime, she appeared at Stern's Department Store in New York, playing yuletide music.

During World War II, Gladys Goodding made appearances at the Stage Door Canteen, in addition to her other assignments.

Asked if baseball were her favorite sport, she replied, "I can't say it isn't my favorite, but I love hockey. It's fast and so rough! Boxing the same. When I first went to the Garden, I couldn't watch either as the violence gave me the shivers. But, I learned to watch all the contests, and now I like them all. I've studied the finer points of each sport, so I can appreciate it more."

Her work at Madison Square Garden had its perilous moments as attested by two paragraphs from the *New Yorker* of December 6, 1958: "If soccer is to become a regular feature at Madison Square Garden, Gladys Goodding will have to have more protection. Miss Goodding is the Garden's venerable singing organist. In the course of a six-game, seven-team American league bash recently, a ball off the foot of the outside right for the Newark Portuguese came bulleting out of the arena, well above the lower stands and smack at her.

"Miss Goodding ducked just in time, the ball ricocheted harmlessly off the top bank of her keys, and a few minutes later, she was retaliating spunkily with 'The Colonel Bogey March.' It was a near thing though, and if the sphere had found its mark, the incident would have been tantamount to defilement of a national monument for Miss Goodding has likely rendered 'The Star Spangled Banner' in line of duty more often than any American. We suggest that for the next soccer night at the Garden, she be surrounded by an honor guard of Marines."

When the Dodgers left town after the 1957 season, and Ebbets Field was slated to be razed for an apartment project, Miss Goodding continued at the Garden. She loved to entertain in her Belvedere Hotel apartment which was decorated completely in Chinese. She accumulated porcelain figurines and quartz elephants as a hobby. Though she

Miss Goodding entertained at the Stage Door Canteen in New York during World War II. Here, in 1943, she plays and sings with Shirley Booth, star of *My Sister Eileen*. (Bob Beck Coll.)



loved New York, she did make several trips to the West Coast to visit family and friends. she could have retired to the St. Louis Masonic Home, but preferred to keep working and assure her independence.

She loved animals, always having a dog. She also loved riding horses, using mounts in Brooklyn. In 1958, she won the American Legion Citation for New York County.

Associated and contemporaries have warm memories of the organist. Theatre organist and Hall of Famer, Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier remembers seeing her when she came into the Hammond organ studios in New York to practice.

Dodger Chairman of the Board, Walter F. O'Malley says: "Gladys was a good friend of my wife and myself, and of course, she was absolutely tops at the keys of the Ebbets Field organ. She was familiar with every person in the Dodger organization and always came up with an appropriate rendition — sometimes teasing, sometimes pleasing, and always in good taste and key."

Arthur "Red" Patterson, Dodger vice president, was the press secretary of the old Brooklyn Dodgers and remembers the organist very well. "We practically revered Gladys Goodding. She was so quick to come up with the proper songs for various occasions and incidents on the ball field, that she became a tremendous part of the Ebbets Field scene. The "Three Blind Mice" episode, however, resulted in that number's being eliminated from her repertoire by the National League office. But, it got a tremendous hand when played the only time."

Walter "Red" Barber, who broadcast the Brooklyn Dodger games with Connie Desmond from the "catbird seat" in Ebbets Field, recalls, "when she hired at Ebbets Field, she was the first organist in a baseball park, and it caused a mild rhubarb as some of the people in nearby apartments complained of 'noise.' But all ended well and quickly. She was very, very good, was able to play a tune which matched pretty much any situation which arose, and we had many in those days in that place! Gladys was very busy, very good-natured, and she contributed much to various sporting events. She was a pioneer."

Her last public appearance was at



Her favorite Dodger of the hundreds whom she saw play in Ebbets Field was Pee Wee Reese, the shortstop. Gladys receives a ring from the team captain in 1952 symbolizing ten years as Dodger organist. (Bob Beck Coll.)

Gladys at Madison Square Garden in 1946, where she played for 27 years. (Bob Beck Coll.)



Madison Square Garden, Saturday evening, November 16, 1963. Two days later, she died of a heart attack in her apartment.

Thus came to the end the illustrious career of Gladys Goodding, theatre organist, turned stadium musician. She was the first to play for a major league baseball team. But she will forever be remembered as the one with a most colorful personality, and a real penchant for playing appropo music at the proper moment.

Editor's Note: We thank Mrs. F. Miles Magnuson of Ashland, Kentucky, and Robert E. Beck of Davenport, Iowa, for supplying us with pictures and information about their mother. Without the material, this feature would not have been possible. □

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The Cinema Organ Society
22, Oakwood Close
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London, England N14 4JY

HURVITZ GOES A.W.O.L.

(AT WURLITZER ON LEAVE)

Never let it be said that organist Lou Hurvitz didn't make it from St. Paul to "Broadway" the hard way: music lessons from mama at eight, music throughout high school and the University of Minnesota band (Lou majored in percussion instruments), studied with Ashley Miller, and currently a percussionist with the U.S. Military Academy Band at West Point. Hurvitz is far too young to have been influenced by flick organists the first time around. A SENETOS (South Eastern New England Theatre Organ Society) buddy, John Caruthers, speculates that the turning point in Lou's musical career was exposure to the late, great Eddie Dunstedter. Whatever, he now holds membership cards in the N.Y. and Conn Valley chapters.

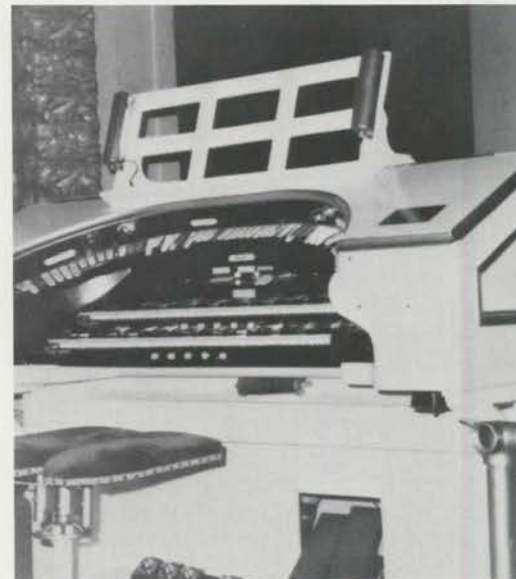
So how, you ask, does a talent like this — with an exclusive and binding contract with Uncle Sam — make it to Broadway? Are we talking about the same "give-my-regards-to" Broadway celebrated by George M? Sort of, if you recall that Cohen was born in Providence, R.I., where the most glamorous street in the 1890's was in fact called "Broadway" — the same Broadway where Lou Hurvitz concertized last October. To avoid conflicts of interest with our Armed Forces, SENETOS and the Columbus Theatre management arranged an invitation only "Appreciation" Concert so that buffs from all over Yankee-land could hear both Lou and the Mighty-Nice-Little 2/6 Wurlitzer.

Yup, it's a small Wurlitzer. All six ranks plus toy counter fit into one chamber. Not many artists could make it sound like a Publix in spite of the gorgeous restoration job by the SENETOS crew. Lou sure gave it the old Army try!

A talented young organist, a beautifully behaved Wurlitzer and the scrumptuous Columbus Theatre — the future looks bright for all three, especially if West Pointer Hurvitz ever gets the urge to turn in his "sword" for a posthorn and Howard seat. Good show! □



SP 7 Louis Hurvitz, member of the U.S. Military Academy Band at West Point.



Console of the 2/6 Wurlitzer.

Pipework of the Columbus Theatre Style D Wurlitzer showing the six ranks of pipes.

