

WURLITZER

OPUS 1245

by Ralph O. and Louise F. Majors

CHAPTER I

The first one of the 303 Wurlitzer pipe organs delivered in 1926, the company's peak year, was Opus 1245, a Robert Hope-Jones 2/8 Style E Special with a white, trimmed-in-gold console, installed in Keith's Colonial Theatre, 5th and Ludlow Streets, Dayton, Ohio.*

The Colonial wasn't a new theatre, although by 1926 it was comparable to other flamboyant Movie Palaces across the country, as most of the lavishly decorated silent movie picture theatres were called during the Roaring Twenties. It first opened in 1912 as a playhouse, with live musical comedies, drama, and a ten to twelve piece orchestra.

Long-time residents of Dayton remember the tragic flood in March, 1913, when water rose 14 feet high at 5th and Ludlow Streets, well above the street lamps. The disaster caused the Colonial to be closed for remodeling and repairs, until 1915. A short time after the theatre reopened, it was leased by the B.F. Keith Vaudeville Circuit, an arrangement that lasted until the Spring of 1921.

One of the "old timers," Mr. M. T. Peaso, remembers paying 11 cents on Sunday evenings for an unreserved balcony seat at the Colonial to watch Harry Houdini's magic acts, sometimes three and four times, to see Marion Davis, and other popular stars of stage and screen appearing in person. The balcony seated 1,000 people. He claims, "It was a great old show house!"

In the Spring of 1921, the Colonial

was sold to Charles Gross, owner of another theatre, and it was closed until the Fall. It reopened as the Liberty Theatre and programs included five acts of Shubert vaudeville and a motion picture. It is believed Mr. Gross lost money at the Liberty Theatre for the next two years; but for whatever the reason, he sold the theatre in 1924 to the Keith interests. B.F. Keith had merged with the Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit and Radio Pictures to become R.K.O. It was enlarged, renamed Keith's Colonial, and became a motion picture theatre.

The first public announcement of the Colonial's magnificent theatre pipe organ installation appeared in both the *Dayton Daily News* and *Dayton Journal*, Sunday, January 31,

1926. Both newspapers ran a full page feature story. Headlines in the *Journal* read: "NEW \$20,000 ORGAN AT COLONIAL IS TO BE PLAYED FOR FIRST TIME TODAY." Pictures three columns wide were captioned a *View of the Colonial and Magnificent Organ installed at Colonial Theatre.*

The pipe organ's first presentation was made with the showing of *The Reckless Lady*, starring Ben Lyon, Belle Bennett, and Lois Moran. When shown a copy of the full page story from the *Dayton Journal*, last year (1976), Ben Lyon laughed heartily. *The Reckless Lady* wasn't a big hit, as I remember." But it brought back memories of his early acting and exciting flying experiences.

The story as it appeared in the

B.F. Keith's Colonial Theatre, Dayton, Ohio.

(Newsphoto)



*Statistics are from the Wurlitzer List by Judd Walton, with the author's permission.

Dayton Journal read: "The new \$20,000 Wurlitzer Hope-Jones unit organ which will be introduced to local theatregoers for the first time today in connection with the showing of Sir Phillip Gibbs' *The Reckless Lady*, the feature picture for the week, presents the highest and most advanced type of organ construction.

"It is entirely electric in action and is played under a high wind pressure, the response is instantaneous and all the orchestra effects can be operated and controlled by the one organist. This is particularly necessary to the proper presentation of a motion picture with its varying sequences and its multitude of themes and scenes. Modern motion pictures have a continuity which must be adhered to both in production and presentation. The leaders of the motion picture industry realized years ago the importance of music for the proper showing of a picture and makers of organs began their work of perfecting an instrument that would do just this thing.

"The organ installed this week in the Colonial Theatre is so constructed and perfected that it is able to instantaneously change its entire makeup and force to suit corresponding change of theme on the screen. The various combinations on the organ are so arranged and tuned that they produce the effect desired, no matter how difficult this may seem.

"In illustration, theatregoers will note that often in the showing of such scenes, as the interior of a church, the music played by the theatre organ to all outward appearance issues forth from the church itself. Other scenes are appropriately taken care of, the same thing being noted in the showing of cabaret and jazz palace sequences.

"In order to have this quality a vast number of stops, as they are called and musical combinations are necessary. Running over the keyboard of the console on the Colonial's organ one notes the following stops: Diapason, Bourdon, Trumpet, Tibia, Flute, Cello, Viol., Vox Humanna, Violin, Concert Flute, Dulcianna, Piccolo, Flute, Harp, Tenor and Snare Drums, Sleigh Bells, Tierce effect, Cathedral Chimes, Xylophone, Glockenspiel bells, Kettledrums, Orchestral Triangle and others of equal importance.

"The wonderful instrument, costing \$20,000 has the range volume and all the individual features of the finest of symphony orchestras. Every effect possible in an orchestra can be duplicated by the Wurlitzer organ. The result of their study by Keith's experts and investigation convinced them that there was but one instrument worthy to be placed in such a responsible position.

"Both the new Keith theatres in Cleveland and Buffalo, two of the finest theatres in the World, have installed Wurlitzer unit organs. Wurlitzer is the largest manufacturer of church and theatre organs in the world. Even now the most palatial homes in America are equipped with Wurlitzer organs. Thousands of churches all over the country use Wurlitzer organs, and almost every theatre would use no other organ."

Mr. Millard M. Blaettner, Keith's Colonial Theatre manager for many years, was pictured with the organ console in the *Dayton Daily News*. His wife Hazel Blaettner was organist. It is believed she was, or had been, a church organist and had the Dulciana added. It is known that four or five different organists relieved Mrs. Blaettner at the console, but to date, it is not known who they were.

Shortly after talkies replaced the silent films in the late '20s, the console of Opus 1245 was taken out of the Colonial's orchestra pit and stored. Eventually it was purchased by Mr. Robert Oberlander of Bethesda, Maryland.

In 1964 the Colonial Theatre was sold to the St. John's Lutheran Church and was razed in 1965 to clear the site for a new church edifice.

Mr. Oberlander stored the organ until he sold it to Mrs. Bonnie J. Carrette in Palm Springs, California. She was both unfortunate and unsuccessful in her efforts to get the instrument restored and installed in her Palm Springs home. Eventually she gave it to the Palm Springs Salvation Army. However, before it was discarded, she gave usable parts to first one and then another. And so ends the history of the Keith's Colonial Theatre, Dayton, Ohio. And what of Opus 1245? Well, it was believed to have been junked, and was so recorded by Mr. Walton in his Wurlitzer Listings and Supplements through January 1976.

CHAPTER II

Never in any of my wildest dreams did I ever expect to get to play a theatre pipe organ. They'd fascinated me as a youngster. I remember the theatre organists were my heroes and heroines and when my sister and I returned home, after the Saturday matinee, I'd try to play all the music I'd heard at the show on our piano.

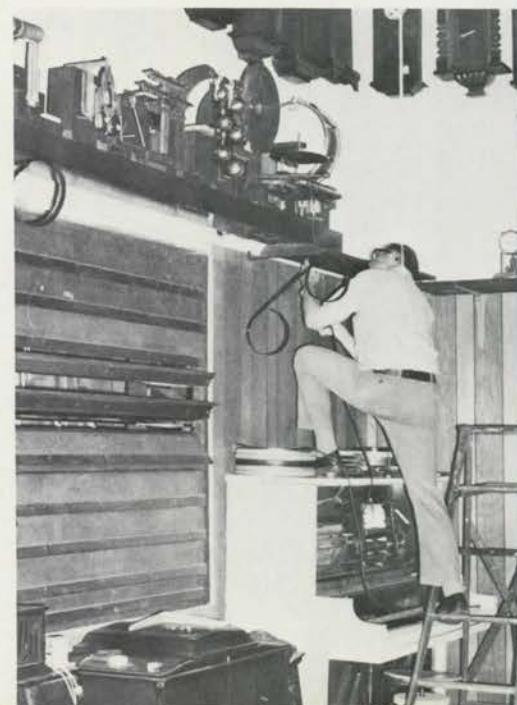
In April 1973, Ralph and I were visiting Jack Nethercutt at San Sylmar. Since the building was still under construction at the time, the pipe organ was not completely installed, but playable, and I was invited to play it. What a tremendous thrill! The resonance of the pipes was so vibrant and exciting in the huge, unfurnished music room area, it was as though I'd been hypnotized. For days that's all I talked about.

Then, a short time later, Ralph decided to make an offer on an old pipe organ in a warehouse in North Hollywood. He had no information as to the kind, size, condition or history of the instrument. For what he had bid, he felt he couldn't be hurt financially. A month or so passed and we had heard nothing about the organ. After talking to Bill Coffman and Bill Fields at Old Town Music Hall, El Segundo, Ralph decided to raise his bid slightly for his final offer.

Several months passed and we had almost forgotten about the pipe organ. In February, 1974, Ralph received a telephone call, was told his bid for the pipe organ was accepted

Ralph installs the toy counter.

(Louise F. Majors Photo)





Louise at the console of Opus 1245



Ralph unpacks the first truck load of "parts."

(Louise F. Majors Photo)

and the first truck load of parts would be delivered at noon the next day.

As it turned out, it wasn't misrepresented. We received four truck loads of "parts," bits and pieces, just about everything seemed to be disassembled, loose, hanging, warped, broken or twisted. When we began taking inventory, we learned how many parts were missing. It was at this time we found the date, 1-9-26 and Dayton, Ohio, written in the main chest, and were able to identify

Opus 1245.

At this time we joined ATOS. Experienced and knowledgeable organ technicians we met were invited to see our *treasure*. We were advised to sell what could be salvaged, junk the rest and start over. One or two were honest in expressing their opinions and said they didn't think anything we had was worth fooling with. With no pipe organ experience, it didn't seem likely we could ever restore it.

However, there were several who

didn't believe the task hopeless. With their encouragement, advice and assistance, Opus 1245 was restored, installed and playing in two-and-a-half years. Dean McNichols, Robert (Bob) Pittenger, and Paul Birk were like members of the family. Numerous others assisted. We're also grateful to those who sold us back the parts they had received from Mrs. Carrette.

Opus 1245 again has an identity, a home, and is being enjoyed and shared again. □



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