



Anniversary day marquee. (Bill Lamb Photo)

THE CORONADO

ROCKFORD'S WONDER THEATRE

by Bob Schmoock

The Coronado, "Rockford's Wonder Theatre," a landmark of downtown Rockford, Ill., celebrated a major historical milestone by presenting two shows on October 9, 1977, for its 50th Anniversary. Both performances played to a full house.

Construction of the Coronado began in 1925. After construction of the foundation was completed, the steel skeleton was erected. And what a structure it was! Four hundred tons of structural steel went into it. Five roof trusses, each 116 feet long, 14 feet high and weighing 14,000 lbs., are supported on ten steel legs. The concrete balcony rests on a massive steel frame work. A ten-ton plate girder supports the structure above the proscenium arch.

After the steel frame, roof and outside brick-work were completed in the spring of 1927, the interior designers erected scaffolding and finished the inside of the building with the plaster castings and sculptures.

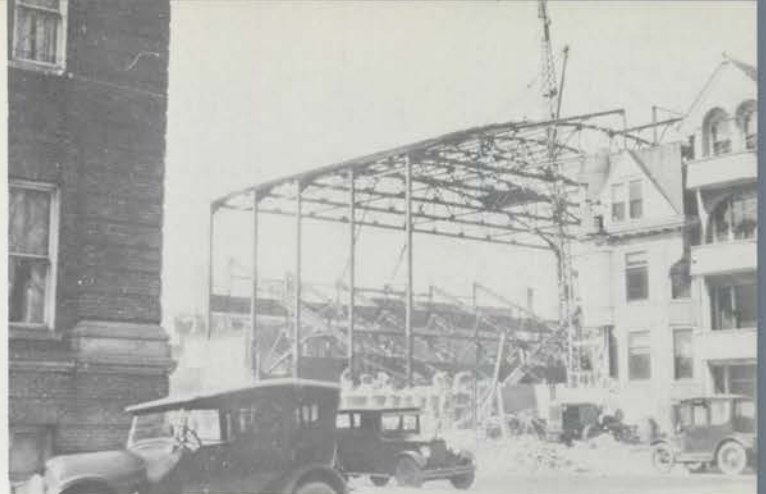
By September 27, 1927, according to one newspaper account, "Workmen rushing on double shifts are expending every effort to have Rockford's \$1,500,000 Coronado Theatre open to the public early in October." Mrs. Anne Johnson Linden said many of the delicate colors were applied as foil so thin that "it would turn to dust if you rubbed it between your fingers." Mr. Van Matre, president of the company which built the Coronado, said of the architect, Frederic J. Klein, of Peoria, "De-

signing a theatre of the magnitude of the Coronado is a stupendous task, one which requires months of study, research, and genuine inspiration. Mr. Klein gave his best to the Coronado, and it stands today as a monument to him."

While the construction was taking place, a contest was organized to choose a name for the new theatre. By May 4, 1927 the name "Coronado" had been chosen. The literal translation of the Spanish word "Coronado" pertains to coronation or the act of crowning. Francisco Vasquez Coronado was a famous Spanish explorer who came to the New World in 1535 and explored parts of what is now New Mexico and Arizona. The slogan "Rockford's Wonder Theatre," was also a



Many hundreds of musicians have been hoisted into view on the orchestra lift being formed here. Dressing rooms are beneath stage to left.



The huge steel skeleton of what was to be the Coronado.

prize winning entry in the contest that drew more than 3000 entries.

The interior of the theatre almost defies description. From the ornate lobby to the immense and sweeping grandeur of the proscenium, the motif is mostly that of a Spanish Village. Even the ticket booth is unique in design.

On October 9, 1927, the doors of the Coronado opened for the first time — the public's first opportunity to see what had been talked about for weeks. There were hundreds and hundreds of light bulbs in every cove and arch. A deep blue border completely surrounded the auditorium ceiling, and stars twinkled in a deep blue sky, while fleecy clouds floated overhead. These were sights never before seen in Rockford. The "Wonder Theatre" certainly lived up to its name. To top off the grand opening, the 4/17 Barton, played by Ralph Brigham, added its sound to the stage band, Dan Garry and his Playboys, and Archie Short and the Coronado Symphonette in the orchestra pit. Over the years, greats of stage and screen, and later radio and TV, would be performing on the Coronado stage. With the advent of "talkies," the organ ceased to have a major role in programming. Occasional stage shows were presented and once in a while, the organ was used for a New Years Eve sing-along.

Rockford Enterprises with W.N. Van Matre, Jr. as president, operated several theatres in the Rockford area under the name of Great States Theatres. Louis St. Pierre was managing director until 1948, George Contois was assistant manager and Henry Hanson was publicity director. (Henry still distributes posters for LOLTOS and occasionally works backstage at the Coronado.) Mr. Van Matre passed away in 1953, but

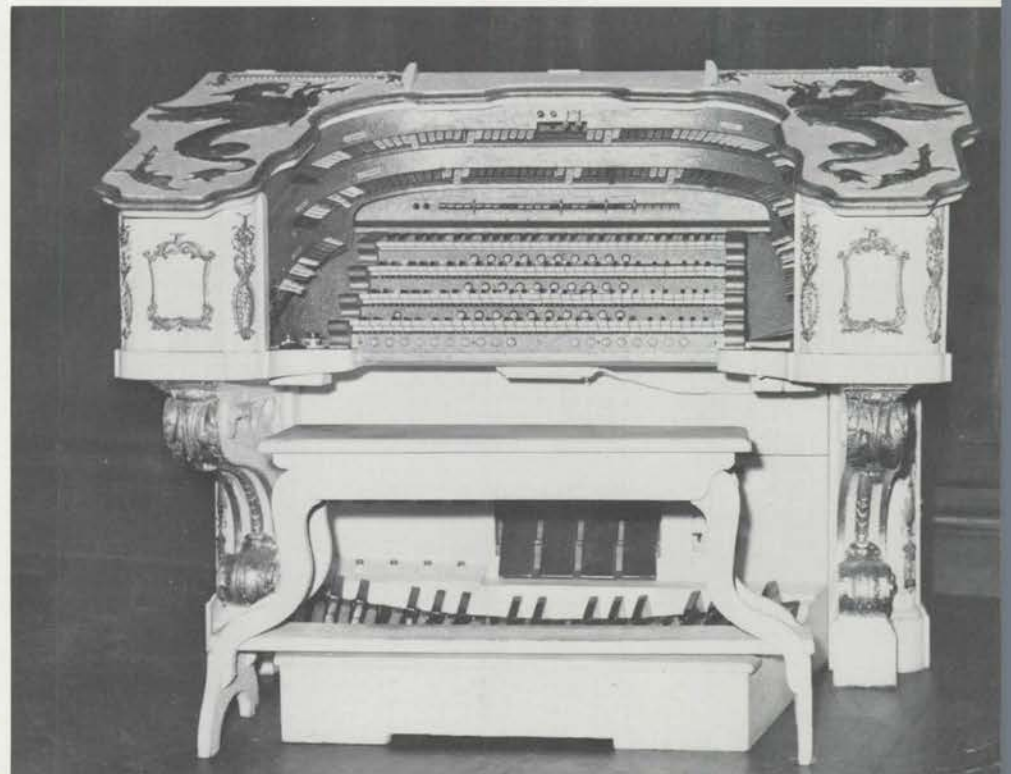
his widow retained ownership until 1970, when Kerasotes Theatres, a Springfield, Ill., based firm, purchased the Coronado. As Dennis Morlan, Kerasotes Northern Illinois district manager puts it, "Kerasotes is not in the business of closing theatres." Russell Stevenson was hired as manager, and remained in that post until his retirement in 1976, when his daughter, Mrs. Paula Christianson took over the duties. The Kerasotes people have improved the theatre with new carpeting, relamping, cleaning and an on-going program of good maintenance practices. The theatre is the home of the Rockford Symphony Orchestra and the Rockford Community Concert Association, and hosts numerous stage presentations that require an auditorium of 2500 seats.

In 1970, Orrill Dunn and George Smafield, Rockford members of

CATOE, approached the new owners, and received permission to restore the Barton pipe organ. The first public concert was held in 1971. In 1964, a group had done some work on the organ, and when their shows were not financially successful, they "borrowed" seven ranks of pipes to cover their losses. Consequently, the first concert was performed without some of the pipes. At present, all pipes have been replaced and the organ is back to its original size. Tonally, the organ is even better than on opening day because of relocation of some pipes and percussions. The Barton organ, built by the Barton Musical Instrument Co. of Oshkosh, Wis., is referred to in early advertising as "the Golden-Voiced Barton Organ." Later ads refer to the Grande Barton Organ or the Barton Grande Organ. After staging several shows under the

The Barton console, originally gold with red trim, now white with gold trim.

(Bob Schmoock Photo)





Dennis James opens the show with organ overture. (Bill Lamb Photo)



Right side of auditorium with towers and turrets of Spanish village. (Bob Schmoock Photo)



Harry Koenig entertains in the lobby. (Bill Lamb Photo)

CATOE banner, Land of Lincoln Theatre Organ Society of ATOS was chartered in 1973, and has continued the work.

As October 9, 1977 approached, the realization that the Coronado was about to celebrate a very important birthday brought about plans to as-nearly-as-possible recreate the opening program. Plans started one bitter cold night in January, 1977 with the appointment of committees. As the weeks sped by, talent was booked, the symphony orchestra arranged for, and the organ was given its final touches. LOLTOS members painted the dressing rooms, and Assistant Crew Chief Bob Tuttle rebuilt both of the remaining grand pianos (there were three).

On June 28, early arrivals to the "Chicago '77" Convention were

treated to the beginning efforts to have the theatre presentable for the Anniversary. All lights and stage equipment is working as originally installed, and the theatre is clean. No coal was ever used to heat the Coronado. City steam and in later years, gas heat kept everyone comfortable. In August the City Council gave permission to close the street in front of the theatre on October 9, and the Mayor proclaimed the week of October 9, Coronado Anniversary Week. Antique car buffs agreed to display vintage cars in front of the theatre. By 1 p.m., people were lined up three-quarters of the way around the block and at two o'clock, the grand old house was jammed to the eaves. Dennis James opened the program with the first song played at the Coronado, "In A Little Spanish Town." He continued with a 1927

ATOS member Vic Hyde does his thing on the calliope. (Bill Lamb Photo)

(Bill Lamb Photo)

Bobby Burgess and Cissy King give it their all in a 1920's dance routine. (Bill Lamb Photo)





View of the stage from center of auditorium beneath balcony.

(Neltz Photo)

newsreel and the silent Harold Lloyd classic *Safety Last*. Larry Guline and the Orchestra opened the second half of the program, followed by veteran stage personality Red Blanche as MC. He introduced the remainder of the acts, Vic Hyde, Roger and Shar, the Goetschi Bros., and finally, the featured dance team from the Lawrence Welk Show, Bobby and Cissy. At 7 p.m., the whole thing was repeated with another capacity crowd. Before both shows, Harry Koenig played beautiful music at the lobby grand piano.

The people of Rockford and the surrounding area have made it known that they wish the Coronado to remain just as it is; hopefully to celebrate many more birthdays in similar fashion.

Elaborate ticket booth carries out theme found in the lobby.

(Bill Lamb Photo)



The members of LOLTOS look forward with renewed enthusiasm to future work on the organ and in promoting the organ's home, the beautiful Coronado which still remains, "Rockford's Wonder Theatre." □



Doorman, member of Rockford's crack drum and bugle corps, The Phantom Regiment.

(Bill Lamb Photo)

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