

# RED WING'S Kinder Wonder Organ

Oscar Wintervold, stage manager, with organ raised on its Southworth lift in T.B. Sheldon Munciple Auditorium.  
*(Jim Welch Photo — Courtesy of Red Wing Republican Eagle)*



What even a small community can accomplish by way of reviving interest in organ music is evidenced by the experience of Red Wing, Minnesota, where a 51-year-old instrument has been restored and repaired and put into active use in the T.B. Sheldon Municipal Auditorium to the delight of increasing numbers of townspeople and tourists.

Red Wing is a very small town with great civic pride. Its total population is little more than 12,000 and its county market area involves only 32,000. Nonetheless it has eight industries, employs 8,000 men and women, has an arts association, historical society, an opera club, a community chorus and now a renewed theatre organ.

Thanks partly to a brisk local chamber of commerce, Red Wing has become a tourist center for both winter and summer recreational activity. Included among attractions is a small river steamboat which carries passengers several times a day up and down the Upper Mississippi.

The Sheldon Auditorium, built in 1905, is the oldest municipally owned auditorium in the United States and is on the National Register of Historic Buildings. In 1926 a Kinder Wonder Organ was installed and, until the advent of talkies, it was played daily for silent movies. During this time Rose Morley, still active, was the player.

As happened so often throughout the United States, the Kinder pipe organ at Red Wing was played infrequently once the movies found their new voice. Gradually the attrition of time caught up with this fine instrument and it was used less and less. The day even came when there was talk of junking the organ because of the cost to repair it.

At this point, in 1976, two prominent citizens of Red Wing, interested in organ music, came to the rescue; E. Hawley Foot, president of S.B. Foot Tanning Company and William Sweasey, chairman of the Red Wing Shoe Company. Foot also was chairman of the Bicentennial Commission. Between them, they decided that something must be done to save the Kinder Wonder Organ. In particular, both felt that, in addition to accompanying choruses and soloists, the organ could be used to play for

silent movies as it had in other decades.

Although the organ console had been stationary when installed, Foot felt that it could rise in much the same way as organs used to in big city theatres. Foot was convinced that a hydraulic lift, built by Southworth Machine Company of Portland, Maine, for his own plant, would work as well to raise the organ at the theatre.

In the meantime, the organ was removed from the auditorium by

Arndt Organ Supply Company at Ankeney, Iowa, for cleaning and repair.

Foot had expected that the organ would be returned in time for a Bicentennial celebration but he underestimated the work which had to be done.

It took nearly a year to get the Red Wing organ in shape for reinstallation in the auditorium. Finally the day came when Oscar Wintervold, who had been stage manager since the organ was first installed, could



Rose Morley, former organist at the auditorium, at the electronic in her home.

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To the writer's knowledge, the use of a Southworth dock lift to raise the organ is the first instance of its kind. Where lift devices were used in theatres in other years they usually were installed as elevators. But an installation of this kind is uneconomical today because of initial and operating expense and the lift purchased was more than adequate for the job. It comprises a scissors device actuated by hydraulic action and controlled by electric push button.

"The organ looks like a piece of wedding cake when it comes up," Bob Arndt explains.

The grand reopening of the Sheldon Auditorium with its renewed Kinder Wonder Organ in place occurred on February 9 with the celebrated Lee Erwin of New York at the console. According to the *Red Wing Republican Eagle*, cheers went up from the capacity house when they saw the spot-lighted organ and Lee Erwin rise from the pit. Practically the entire population of Red Wing has been in the house since and they cheer the heroes and hiss the villains during the silent films.

The reopening was, of course, but the first step in a revived use of the Sheldon Auditorium for silent films. Sponsored by the chamber of commerce the house periodically shows silent films for townfolk and its reputation has spread far and wide and is increasing tourist business in Red Wing. □