



Private Paris Organ Safari

by Bill Reeves

Back in 1949, as an (earplaying) amateur organist with a Hammond Model B at home, I decided, with my wife, that we needed a trip to Europe. An impoverished high school teacher in a constant state of financial embarrassment at the time, I had to sell this organ to help finance our trip; but, as we decided to live in Paris for the winter, I vowed to investigate the organs there, and in the fall of 1949 away we sailed from New York on the small French liner *De Grasse*, an old ship used as a troop transport in World War I, but comfortable. It offered us the opportunity to practice our school French on the ship personnel before reaching Paris, but I think it was Chaucer who first noted, about 1400, that school French was quite unlike the French

of Paris, and we found out how right he was — early!

Arriving in October, we found Paris cold-d-d. My wife, appalled at the prices of warm winter coats, bought a length of thick wool and set about with a French pattern in the metric system with her thread and needle in our hotel room to make herself a winter coat. She couldn't understand the French directions, couldn't fathom the metric measurements, and with every stitch, in her ladylike mild profanity, called upon the Lord to witness that she could never complete this blankety-blank project. But complete it she did, emerged into the freezing weather with a beautiful, warm, grey coat which got her through the winter with, shall we say, fine style. She was

The Reeves in mid-Atlantic on the Queen Elizabeth returning from Paris in 1950.



Bill and Doris say goodbye to serge in Paris in 1950.

wearing it the day we visited the Louvre which, like most buildings in Paris during the nation-wide fuel shortage, had no heat. We could see our breath as we gazed on the Venus de Milo, and with chattering teeth I told my wife we'd have to get out of there before we got cirrhosis of the Louvre!

About that time I got an itch to play an organ, and on a friend's recommendation I looked up a kind of church-convent-school which he knew had a pipe organ. A courteous French nun, mistaking me for a real organist, said she'd be pleased to allow me to practice, and led me into a small auditorium with an ancient, but electric, instrument the make of which escapes me. We got it turned on, but it wouldn't play. Together we monkeyed with stop tablets until we finally got a hoot out of it, but turning on more stops seemed only to cancel all sound altogether, so I had to be content with one rank and also in this sacred atmosphere avoid my customary tunes like "Five Foot Two" and stick to the very few more dignified numbers I knew, such as Pearl Curran's "Dawn."

Disappointed at this fiasco, nostalgic for our sold Hammond, and yearning to run off some of my old popular stuff of the twenties and thirties, I next looked up the French Hammond Agency which had an American manager fluent in French who invited me to sit up to one of their old Model A organs, the only kind he had. So, attired in my hat and heavy overcoat in the freezing showroom, I boarded the demonstration model and was in the midst of "Ida, Sweet as Apple Cider" and

"Am I Blue" when in walked a beautiful young woman whom the manager introduced as Mademoiselle Somebody, associate organist at the great Gaumont-Palace Theatre. She spoke no English, but conveyed to me that she liked my "American" style of playing, and would I please continue? No, I wouldn't, not with a pro around, and I persuaded her to take my place, where she gave us a delightful concert. She had come in to complain to the manager that the Gaumont organ was always on the blink in one way or another, that she refused to play it anymore, and that she wanted a Hammond installed behind the curtain.

This gave me a bright idea, and, since it was morning, I went straight from there to the stage door of the Gaumont and inquired for the organist, who came in shortly, invited me into the basement where we entered an elevator which proved to be the rising console of the mammoth 4/14 Christie pipe organ, and together we rose majestically into the 6000-seat empty auditorium. He was the very personable, friendly Tommy Dessèrre, who was to preside at this organ for a total of 30 years until 1960 when the 1500 pipes were auctioned off. But I have never learned who made the winning bid, how much it was in francs or dollars, and where it was re-installed. But, despite Mademoiselle's complaint about it, somebody got a honey. Its tones were beautiful, and it made even me sound good!

First Tommy played, and then courteously allowed me to run off "Make Believe" and other of the six or seven hundred old popular pieces I knew. All this reminded me of an account I had once read of the black American pianist-organist, Fats Waller, who, down on his luck in his youth, bummed his way to Paris and looked up the internationally famous Marcel Duprè, organist at the Church of Saint-Sulpice, who, as Tommy had done with me, invited Fats to join him on the organ bench where, as Fats later related it, "Fust he play de God-box, den I play de God-box." Racial differences quite apart, Waller and Duprè became instant friends with a curious common bond.

This recollection gave me another brilliant idea. One Sunday morning my wife and I made our way to the

Church of Saint-Sulpice to hear the great Duprè and were directed up a long stairway to the organ loft, already full of Marcel's friends and admirers waiting to hear him play. The console was located right outside the pipe chambers, which meant that this instrument must originally have been an old tracker-action type, close enough to the pipes to be operated by mechanical levers before the invention of electrical switches. Somebody in the years since had electrified and renovated it but had left the console right there next to the louvers and pipes. Just then Marcel Duprè himself stepped in, recognizable from photos we'd seen, and after nodding to his friends, seemed fascinated by my wife's hand-sewn coat and cute little French hat. Ordinarily not the forward type, she nevertheless took immediate advantage of this opportunity to introduce us, to tell Marcel that we were leaving for America in a few days and that we couldn't go without hearing him play, that we had unfortunately missed his concert tours in the United States, but had heard his records and considered him the world's greatest organist. Well, that, and the coat, did it! Ignoring me, Marcel invited her, as he had with Fats Waller, and as Tommy had with me, to join him on the organ bench, where, because of the cold, he played the service in his beret, overcoat, and mittens with the fingers cut out.

Duprè could do what many musicians can't do — all the time he played, never missing a note, he carried on a conversation with my wife beside him, discussed his love for his children and grandchildren and how much he enjoyed them as a family man. Then came the big closing Bach number, the only piece for which Marcel didn't read the notes, and for which he whipped off his fingerless mittens and opened up that organ with everything it had. So close to the pipes, and in such a small room, we were stunned, deafened, but it was the most terrific Bach we'd ever heard! We've never forgotten it, and have always counted this occasion one of the great experiences and privileges of our lives.

In two days we sailed for home and have never revisited Paris, but we have our memories, if you'll pardon me, to keep us WARM! □

DINNY'S COLYUM

as
transcribed
by
Del Castillo



Us riters we don't always know just what we are gettin into, like for instince I got to gabbin on about how many holydays we got in this country, strichin from end to end so to speak I counted up 36 witch dont leave much time to get a weeks work done especially sence the gov. has changed all the holydays to week ends irregardless of which day of the week they is really on so as to give all the workers a extry day off. Like for instince Washintons Birthday comes on Wednesday and Memorial Day comes on Tuesday but they move the both of them up to Monday witch seems pretty silly to me but then I dont have to work five days a week so I guess maybe I would feel different if I did.

Of course all the holydays I men-shuned aint reely official or they is only in certain parts of the USA like for instince Patriarts Day in Noo England Gen. Robert E. Lee in the South and Johnson Day in Texas and Huey Longs Day In Looisiana. But now the latest I read about and this is pretty confusin is Sun Day witch will be on Wednesday the 3 of March. You would of thought the least they could do if they want a holiday about the Sun would be to put it on Sunday but I guess that would be too easy.

So anyways accordin to our mayor here in LA who is Mayor Bradley and is one of the Bored of Directors of Sun Day this is to lead the USA into the Solar Era. So now you know why we got another holyday and what it is for. Here in LA they already got a So. Cal. Solar Energy Assoc. and like they say, they know that here in LA it wont rain on May 3, so they are goin to have a lot of events only they don't know what they are yet. Well, that figures. Politishans are like that.