

“WINIFRED”

The Weber Wurlitzer

by James K. Jobson

THE THIRD DECENIUM of the Dick Weber family and their mighty Wurlitzer, “Winifred” was launched Sunday, June 12, 1977, when Atlanta chapter members were treated to a sneak preview at the Music Grinder Pizza Emporium. When the house lights dimmed, the shimmering gold curtains parted to display a fantastic array of pipes bathed in multi-colored lights under glass, with percussion presented in the magic of black light.

Walt Winn, spotlighted at the beautiful white and gold console, presented the organ in all its fabulous sounds and exciting lighting effects. The total presentation was so breathtaking it would be difficult to describe with words alone. You’ve got to see and hear it to believe it!

But let’s start this story from the beginning. It seems the Weber family is locked into a cycle of decades, the first of which began in 1957, with the purchase of the 3/15 Style 260 Wurlitzer from the North Park Theatre in Buffalo, New York. The instrument was in operation in Buffalo from 1926 until the middle or late thirties. Reclaimed by Dick Weber and his brother Bob, it was removed to Dick’s home on a hill overlooking Schenectady. As Dick describes it, the home was a large place designed while he was under the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright, with no right

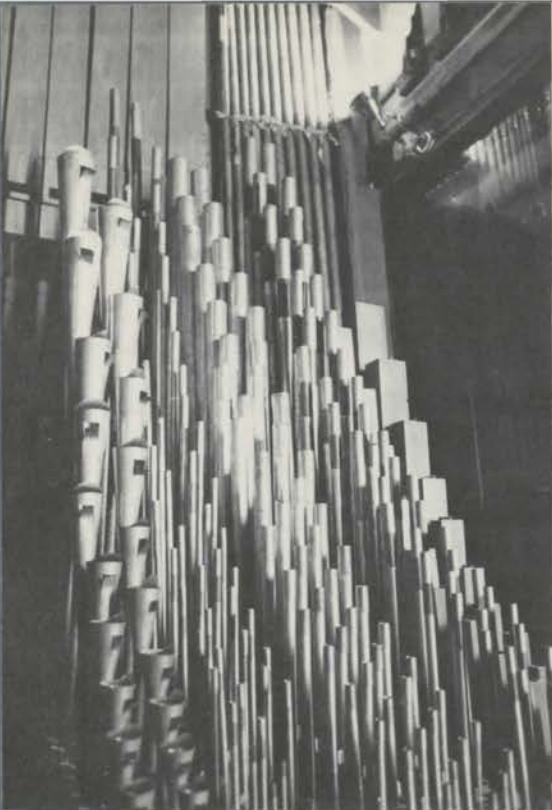
angles and a lot of glass. Winifred, as Billy Nalle dubbed the Wurlitzer, was thought of by the Webers as more economical to fill the huge home than with new furniture!

At any rate, Dick being a consummate diplomat as well as a confirmed organ addict, the family of three

daughters and wife Audrey were roped into helping with the rebuilding, installing and enlarging of the instrument with the addition of 7 ranks. The sound such an installation made in the large room with nothing but 120° angles and predominantly hard surfaces gave the

Winifred poses with “The Five Little Webers,” as Jay Mitchell affectionately calls them. A suitable third decade family portrait. (Tommy Thompson Photo)





Main Chamber under glass — some of Winifred's 25 ranks. (Tommy Thompson Photo)

family and many visiting organists a great deal of pleasure. You can hear that sound on Billy Nalle's recording, "Billy." Combine the sound with the spectacular scene through the glass wall of the Weber home overlooking the lights of Schenectady some 12 miles below, and you had the perfect setting.

Throughout the first decade after Winifred's "rebirth," maintenance and tuning were handled by the Webers — daughters Nancy, Sharon and Cindy, as well as Audrey, Dick and brother Bob. But, about 1964, Dick became somewhat uneasy with his complacency. Although it's hard for an outsider to understand fully, Dick explains he needed a change — to get away from the daily "grind" as art director for General Electric, the 12-mile trip each way every day to work. He needed a challenge in his life and a new interest all the family could participate in.

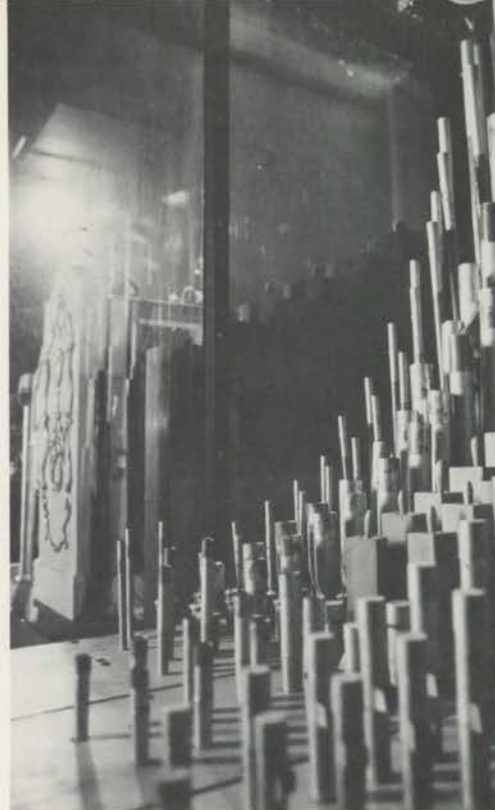
The itchy Weber feet led them to Plattsburgh, New York on the shores of Lake Champlain in the heart of the Adirondacks where they purchased the Strand Theatre and launched the second big decade. (complete story "A Family Affair" presented in August 1967 Theatre Organ/Bombarde Vol. IX #4) The entire structure was remodeled and modernized with air conditioning, new wiring and — of course — chambers for Winifred's 22 ranks

and a console lift. There followed in this resort area many stage productions of every sort including opera, as well as movies. The Strand became "alive" again, providing an outlet for the full-time impresario and his family to participate in Barbershop Quartets, Sweet Adelines, skits and other forms of show biz activity which, were it not for the enjoyment, might be called hard work. The "Winifred Sound" at the Strand is preserved on the RCA custom record set for *Readers Digest, The Organ Plays the Golden Favorites*, masterfully played by Billy Nalle.

By 1976, Dick, as usual began to take stock again. The daughters were growing up and would be fleeing the nest for their own pursuits; the family had enjoyed many rewarding times during their operation of the Strand, but the long, cold winters with heaps of snow were beginning to pall. In short, it was time to look for another outlet for the abundant Weber energy, and so they toured this country and Canada looking over the land with a view to locating a pizza emporium someplace where Winifred might be welcome, the climate a little more moderate, and the business of life simplified to an extent the daughters would have the freedom to develop in their own directions.

The place they found was on Franklin Road in Marietta, Georgia, just 16 miles northwest of Atlanta on I-75 at the Lockheed-Dobbins AFB exit — a free-standing building to accommodate the pizza operation with room for Winifred. The move

Walt Winn delighted Atlanta Chapter with his sneak preview of the mighty Weber Wurlitzer on June 12, 1977. (Tommy Thompson Photo)



Solo Chamber under glass — more of Winifred's 25 ranks. (Tommy Thompson Photo)

was started with the removal of the organ from the Strand in December, 1976 — all ten tons of it — during a blizzard which brought the chill factor down to minus 59° F. The wind was so high some of the workers were actually blown off the loading ramp. And in Marietta, the conditions were little better. The parking lot was unpaved and the area was in the midst of a rainy spell. The organ sat on the trailer in front of the building for 30 days before off-loading could be accomplished. And then the real work began.

The family got down to business again. New shutters had to be built and the chests had to be refitted to new quarters. Provisions were made for the addition of a second relay with switches for an additional 8 ranks in the new home — with all that extra wiring. Brother Bob was enlisted (along with his trusty soldering gun and the insulation provided by a bottomless martini glass) and they raised the first "noise" from Winifred just 5 weeks later. It was Walt Winn playing "Chattanooga Choo Choo" on the mighty Wurlitzer!

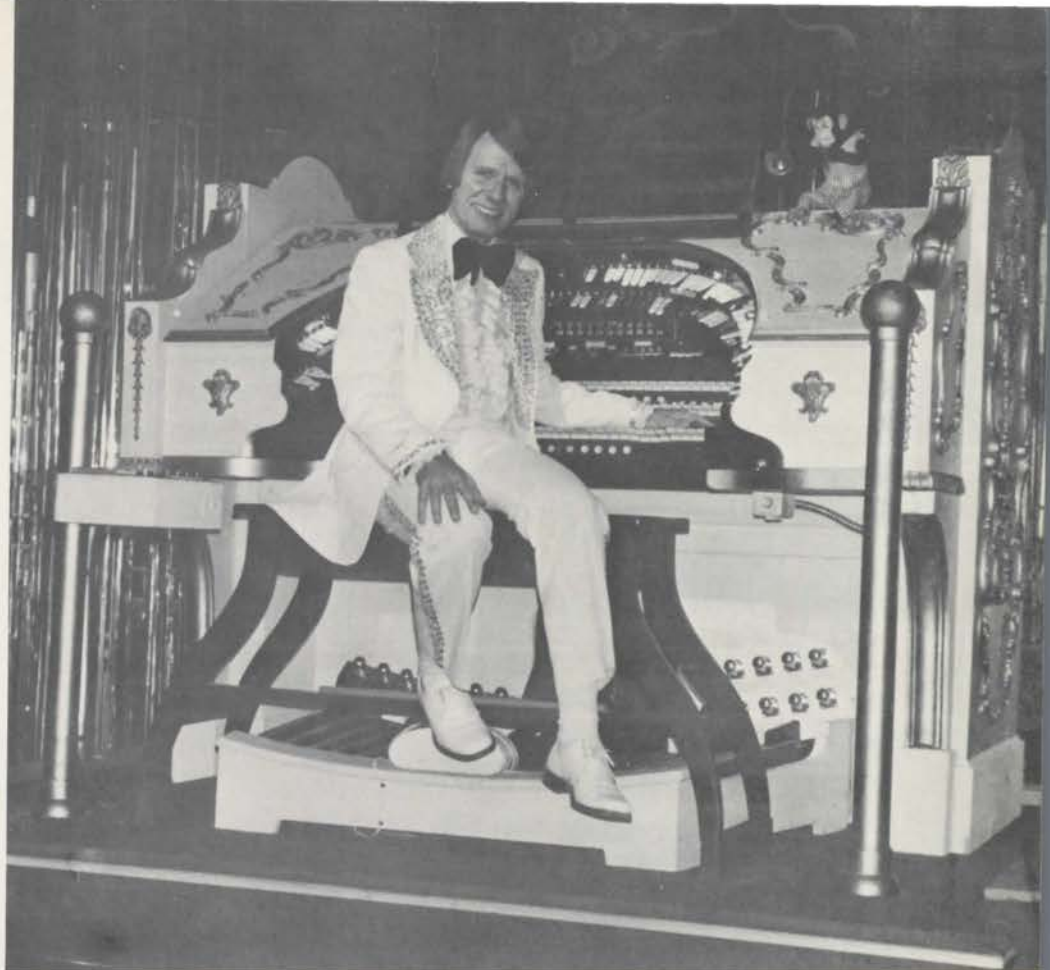
Now we Atlantans find ourselves the lucky beneficiaries of the third Weber Decade and are highly delighted to have these fine people among us. Chapter members find it impossible to visit the Webers in their Pizza Emporium less than once

a week — and when they do, sometimes overstay themselves until closing time.

Dick engaged Jay Mitchell, formerly staff organist for the Alabama Theatre in Birmingham, who, possessing the very special combination of talents required to handle this kind of instrument and its music, has built quite a following in the short time the Emporium has been open. His experience in the music field has given Jay a wide-range repertoire of both popular and classic works, and he handles the mike like an old pro, gaining immediate rapport with each night's audience. Something of Jay's personality and the Weber personality as well, has communicated itself to the public. Also featured is top-notch theatre organist, Walt Winn. Walt is a long-time Atlanta Chapter member who has been in evidence in the Fox tours, demonstrating the "Mighty Mo" with Bob Van Camp and has been very much on the scene, involved with the new additions to Winifred's ranks. Although he has his own sound-reinforcement business, we don't know when Walt sleeps — but when he is at the console, we let him worry about that.

The patrons at the Pizza Emporium are, for the most part, families. They bring the children — even the very young, who are fascinated by the light show, the lively music and an occasional silent movie. There has been no rowdyism, and the informality of the self-service operation maintains a level of restraint that speaks well both for the community and the Webers and their staff.

Atlanta Chapter is proud that the Webers will participate in the 1978



Jay Mitchell poses with Winifred for a formal portrait with the new king of the rhythm section, Henry, the mechanical monkey. (Dennis Naughton Photo)

Convention with a program at the Music Grinder. A most unusual experience awaits you with sounds and sights you'll never forget! Convention week will be a special time at the Music Grinder. Each evening of the convention, after hours, it will be open console for any professional organists who care to sample Winifred's charms. The jam sessions will likely go into the wee hours and promise to be a highlight of convention attendance.

Y'all Come! July 9-13, 1978. □

Exterior of the Music Grinder Pizza Emporium on Franklin Road, Marietta, Georgia.

(Tommy Thompson Photo)



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