

# GOODBYE TO THE CAL

by John Bigby — photos by John Bigby and Walter McCallum

*Most would agree that the cultural blight of landmark desecration, so far as theatres are involved, started in earnest with the razing of the New York Roxy in 1959-60. Since then all of us are the poorer for the levelling of such representative theatres as the Dallas Palace, the San Francisco*

*Fox and Paramount, the Los Angeles Metropolitan/Paramount, the Rochester, N.Y. Palace, the Brooklyn Fox, the Portland (O.) Oriental, the Minneapolis Radio City — the list goes on and on. Here and there groups have formed to fight the "progress" of ever-expanding parking lots in*

*place of theatres, and they have had some success. But in most cases the theatre is lost. The story which follows was written by cinema enthusiast John Bigby and appeared in the August 17-23 News-Herald (Santa Rosa, Calif.), and is reprinted with permission.*

On November 26, 1960, Jack Bethards held an ATOS (then ATOE) meeting and concert at the California Theatre. The house was the focal point of theatre organ interest in the Santa Rosa area for many years.

(POSTHORN files Photo)

*To set the scene, an editorial. In an August 1977 issue of the newspaper, editor David Bolling bristled.*

## **Culture vs Building Codes**

It came as no surprise recently that the City of Santa Rosa rejected a thoughtful offer by fans of the California Theatre to stage a retrospective film program honoring the era of Cinema the Cal has witnessed and hosted.

The explanation offered was that the theatre had been previously cited for not meeting building codes.

If United Artists, the theatre's previous owner, was not willing to make repairs why should the city, which bought the building to make way for an urban renewal parking lot?

But the California Theatre, and all it represents, does not fit into a simple management equation. There is much more to consider than building codes and abatement policies.

United Artists was permitted to continue commercial use of the facility until a few weeks ago. It is



logical, therefore, to assume that no one in city government was alarmed enough about hazards inside the theatre to require its immediate closing.

Why then should not private interests be allowed to lease the theatre, assume all liability, and give the Cal and its fans the kind of tribute appropriate for the passing of a local landmark?

Maybe one problem lies with a prevailing national insensitivity to things that are old, outdated, no

longer particularly useful. We are a utilitarian society, we pride ourselves on American efficiency and on the technology that has spurred our extraordinary material progress.

But we simultaneously hide our elderly away in nursing homes, we channelize and build over our creeks, and we destroy the monuments that connect us to the past. We seem to be content if history can be relegated to text books and video tape.

Maybe this has something to do with our national rootlessness and

the fact that not enough of us ever live anywhere long enough to develop a connection to buildings and streams and people. In our headlong leap forward maybe we don't often enough look back.

That's what made the proposal by John Bigby and John Lambert, two local film experts, so attractive. They wanted to take us all backward, into the American past, recorded in films once shown at the Cal. Their retrospective was to have been an acknowledgement of where we've all come from and, implicitly, a statement about how our culture has evolved.

It could have been a beautiful experience, for the Cal, for film fans, for anyone interested in pursuing cultural roots. It won't happen now, and that's a shame. It's a shame that city leaders don't place at least as much value in cultural enrichment as they do in building codes.

*Now to John Bigby's story, which we believe speaks for all of us who have experienced the destruction of a beloved theatre.*

#### **Gee Dad, It Really Was A Wurlitzer**

The 1800-seat California Theatre was built in 1923. For half a century it gave downtown moviegoers a sense of their place in the world, a tangible touch with the illusions of the past and present. Over the years the grandeur faded here and there, and the pressures of the automobile, television, and simple economics threatened the Cal.

There are people today with both a sense of the past and a vision for the future, though, and they have saved the California Theatre. It has been thoroughly renovated and, in its glory, will serve as a link in one of the nation's most exciting urban redevelopment projects.

By the end of September, the Cal Theatre will own a Wurlitzer organ. Once again the great pipes will, in the words of theatre historian Ben M. Hall, "make the marrow dance in one's bones."

The only trouble with this scenario is that the renovated California Theatre is in San Diego. And its "new" organ is the one originally installed in our own 1612-seat California Theatre in 1923. Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra (Style D-Special) Serial Number 0715 left Santa Rosa



Typical organ moving scene. The rented truck is ready to be packed with disassembled organ parts. Dick Grigsby and Sandy Fleet prepare pedal Diapason pipes for the long journey. Note the drum at right.

Some pipe organ components require muscle to move. The main chest is no lightweight.



August 6, 1977 in a rented truck headed south.

After 54 years on B Street, our Wurlitzer has a new home in a lovely old theatre. And our California Theatre is to be replaced by a lovely new parking lot.

Denied an opportunity to bid farewell to our Cal with a last series of great American films, denied even the courtesy of anything more than a two-minute telephone conversation by the Santa Rosa Urban Redevelopment Agency, a group of the Cal's friends had one last request: tell us when they are going to remove the Wurlitzer.

Urban Redevelopment, of course, didn't tell, but on Thursday, August 4, movie fan Wes Porter, manager of the new UA-6 and manager of the Cal before it was closed, placed a phone call: "They're coming at 9:00 tomorrow morning to take it out."

There's something very depressing about an empty theatre — all the more so when one knows it is never to open again. On Friday morning, three Santa Rosans who are involved in film in one way or another, and who happened to grow up in the Cal Theatre, met at the candy counter for the last time.

Tina Aslin, Walt McCallum, and I have decided to make, for ourselves, our own farewell to the Cal: a documentary film about the theatre. These are our reactions to two days in August 1977, inside Santa Rosa's last real movie house.

#### Friday, August 5

It is dark inside. McCallum comments that he had never thought about that: there are no bright lights when the show is over. It's always a world of shadows inside the Cal.

The rent-a-truck is backed up to the stage door. The Cal has a real stage, larger than the Oakland Paramount's we are told by Porter. It has dressing rooms, transient homes to vaudeville performers when they were riding the trains from one small city to another. It has a call board, an orchestra pit, and a band room under the stage. We find a bit of graffiti, dated 1929 — a mark left by some travelling saxophonist, more permanent than he must have expected, yet not eternal. By October the bulldozers will have erased what a half-century of dust merely obscured.

And the Cal has an organ. Two men have come with a truck to take it to San Diego. Introductions are wary: we don't want anyone fooling with our theatre, and they have had experience with fanatical organ enthusiasts in other removals.

The three of us — Aslin, McCallum, Bigby — are very depressed. So is Porter, though he won't let it show — a theatre manager in every best sense of the job, a man who cares for his films and his audiences, he cares for his theatre. He talks of

changes he had planned for "my lobby" to make the Cal even more pleasant.

The dismantlers are Wendell Shoberg and Bob Lewis, both of San Diego. We know nothing about theatre organs, and aren't going to give them trouble. They understand why we would want to film the place before it's gone. They understand movie houses and movie fans. We are comfortable with them now.

Shoberg goes to work. To us the organ is its visible self, the console



The movers gather for a formal portrait. Left to right: Fred Beeks, Ray Krebs (holding two Tibia treble pipes), Wendell Schoberg (one tiny Tibia), Sandy Fleet (with offset pipe chest), pilot Dick Grigsby Jr. (with Diapason pipe) and Bob Lewis (holding Tuba resonator).

Bulky switch stacks and relays are always a mover's headache. Fred Beeks (left), a veteran of many organ transplants, looks apprehensive.



in the orchestra pit. He's starting elsewhere, up in the chamber at stage left where the pipes are. That's the organ, we learn. Shoberg is a skilled worker, kidding the way journeymen do, careful to damage neither organ nor theatre, sure of himself.

Bob Lewis began playing theatre organs in a Phoenix movie house in 1930. He is gracious, willing to talk, yet bent on getting the job done. We learn much from both of them.

With them we explore the Wurlitzer's functions, written in Indian ink longhand on the fine wood fram-

ing in 1923. We spot the Trumpet, the Flute, the Cathedral Chimes. Piece by piece, wrapping each part as carefully as one wraps Christmas ornaments on New Years Day, they remove the Castanets, the Xylophone, the Glockenspiel. Backstage, over the next two days, all the Wurlitzer's effects — Kettle Drum, Snare Drum, Chinese Blocks, even the Automobile Horn — will rest, waiting packing, transit and patient reassembly.

There is a cloud on the horizon. We know that one Preston Fleet, wealthy San Diegan, has purchased

the organ. He is flying up to Santa Rosa to supervise and will arrive any moment.

Fleet will donate the Wurlitzer to the San Diego Chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society, which will be responsible for its care. Like Shoberg and Lewis, he is a member of ATOS.

Accompanied by his pilot, Dick Grigsby, and another organ enthusiast, Ray Krebs, Fleet arrives. Perhaps in his late forties, youthful and unassuming in short sleeves and a CAT cap, Fleet wears an "organ power" button.

We like him. We are genuinely glad that these men have care of "our" organ. We learn that, until recently, theatres were actually bulldozed with the organs still in place. Fleet bought his first theatre organ seven years ago — "when nobody wanted them" — for \$500. The Cal's Wurlitzer brought \$8000, we had been told, earlier in the week. We do not ask if that is so; it seems unimportant.

Shoberg, Lewis, Krebs work away. The organ had been placed in its chamber before the plaster grill work went up, but Urban Redevelopment wants the plaster left intact (for the bulldozer?), so the heavy, bulky, musical machinery must come out the hard way. With muscle and patience, with rope and mashed fingers, the job continues. Everyone calls Fleet "Sandy." He works as hard as any of the crew; indeed they seem to be equals, bound by their concern for the instrument.

I'm captured on film holding the end of a safety rope. "You're helping them take it out!" someone kids me. "No, I'm trying to keep it here," I answer, and I see myself in a Buster Keaton scene — five strong men pulling a piano-sized piece of wood and pipes down a narrow stair, me holding a rope at the top of the flight and convincing myself I'm all that's keeping the thing from moving.

But I know I am helping, and I'm glad. It's late. The three filmmakers are tired, emotionally drained as the movers are physically; but we are no longer depressed. The enthusiasm, the skill, the kindness of the San Diegans have made us forget the bulldozers.

Sentimentality reigns. We see the Wurlitzer as a real, physical organ — the heart of the Cal, removed to

Final moment. The doomed theatre witnesses the loading of the console, bound for a more congenial atmosphere for theatre organs — San Diego.



give new life to another body. "It's an organ transplant" one of us quips. Sandy Fleet has no doubt heard that one before, but he smiles. So do we.

#### Saturday, August 6

The job was to take three days, but the Cal's Wurlitzer No. 0715 is in such excellent condition that the crew hopes to finish today. For many years organist Jack Bethards has carefully maintained the Wurlitzer. Only two years ago the organ astounded a new generation of moviegoers in accompaniment to the silent "Phantom of the Opera" at one of the Cal's special shows.

McCallum, Aslin, and I take more pictures. From the stage, the ceiling mural of Chinese moderne peasants looks all wrong — out of perspective. We sit in the front row of seats; the perspective is correct, as it is from the last row of the balcony.

There's not much for the filmmakers to do now, but we're intent on waiting until the console itself is moved out. That promises to be the best visual material for our film. And we have other reasons to stay.

They need more padding for wrapping pipes. Aslin volunteers to go home and get old newspapers. "I don't believe it," Manager Porter says.

Sandy Fleet tells us about the Roxy in New York, about great organists and great movie palaces. He heard his first theatre organ as a child when Ed Borgens played in Los Angeles. "Borgens was a showman — he's the man who first put

the candelabra on Liberace's piano." Fleet learned to play only after he bought his first theatre organ.

Since then he has performed on over forty music tracks to re-issue silent films. He is himself a film producer — he mentions "Cabaret," which he helped finance, and talks with warmth about "Shinbone Alley," for which he won an award at the Atlanta Film Festival.

An Urban Redevelopment carpenter begins boarding up the fire escapes. I'm very glad Wurlitzer 0715 has a way out. Like the Cal itself, it deserves better than the city of Santa Rosa has given it.

Carefully repacked, rearranged, the truck is ready for the console. We've been directed to a book, Ben M. Hall's *The Best Remaining Seats*, which discusses movie theatre architecture and organs: "... there were a score or more manufacturers of theatre organs, but the Wurlitzer basked in the same sweet sunlight of generic familiarity as the Frigidaire, the Victorola, and the Kodak ... to the average moviegoer ... its rows of colored tabs, lit by hidden lights, arched like a rainbow above the flawless dental work of the keyboards ... if it could imitate anything from a brass band to a Ford horn to a choir of angels — gee, Dad, it was a Wurlitzer!"

The console is to be brought up the aisle, through the lobby, and loaded under the marquee. It's dark now, and we are worried about light. We ask Wes Porter if he can turn on all the neon around the blank mar-

quee.

"Yes."

We're beginning to realize that the shot for which we have been waiting in the Cal two days is not really visually interesting at all. But it doesn't matter. It means a great deal to us all, for the two days as well as the two decades we spent in that place.

The console goes up the liftgate into the truck. Wendell closes the door. "Can you close it again? I missed it with my camera."

He is exhausted, sweaty, eager to leave. He smiles, opens the truck door, and closes it again with exaggerated gestures worthy of a 1923 two-reeler.

We smile, too. We're on the sidewalk, and we'll never be inside the Cal again. We smile and our eyes are moist.

Wes says, "You know, I ought to leave the marquee lights on all night."

#### Sunday, August 7

After midnight, our Wurlitzer well down the road, I return and drive up B Street, past the Cal Theatre.

The marquee lights are still on.

It's a gesture Urban Redevelopment would not have made.

#### Postscript, Dec. 20

The California Theatre in Santa Rosa is now a vacant lot. We watched with heavy hearts as the loge seats — the first rocking-chair loges in America — were ground into the earth by the bulldozer's tracks. I'm glad the organ escaped that fate. □

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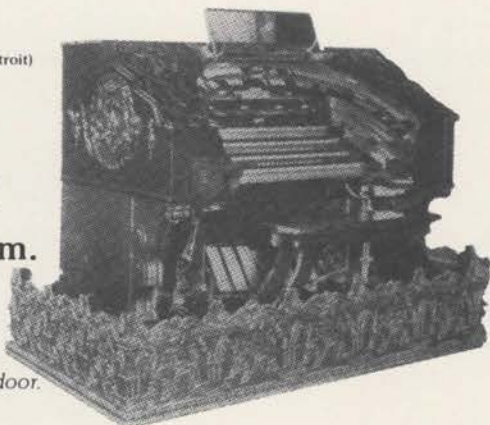
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