

North Texas Chapter Acquires a Wonder Morton

by Joe Koski

Santa Claus came early to the North Texas Chapter. In fact, he started several months back, when through the efforts of Chairman Jim Peterson, backed by the efforts of previous chairpersons, we established our "non-profit" status and were donated the Loew's Jersey City Wonder Morton, complete with its beautiful 4-manual console and 24 ranks of pipes. That was only the beginning, and it's a long way from "all over" yet. Along with the donation of the organ came the responsibilities for its removal from the theatre and transportation to Texas. Then, too, it had to be stored where it would be readily accessible for the renovative craftsmanship of the members, and, last but not least, a decision made for its permanent home, complete with accessibility for concerts and practice. And along with all the responsibilities came the need for cash to finance all these steps toward the goal of a real super theatre organ installation in North Texas.

An inspection trip was made to Journal Square in Jersey City by Chairman Jim Peterson and Gordon Wright, with assistance from Gordon's son, Chuck.

After careful analysis by the chapter's organ acquisition and installation committee, it was decided that a move by professional organ movers would be the safest, quickest and actually most economical means of getting the instrument to North Texas.

It was arranged for professionals to move the instrument, crate it and ship all 15 or 16 tons of it to Texas via piggy-back truck and railroad freight. This was no mean price tag in itself, despite a very fair and equitable price quote from the pro's who moved it.

When one considers all aspects of insurance, removal tools and manpower, crating and packaging equipment, local building and traffic ordinances, access, experience in the craft of organ removal and transportation, and the many other items

(like having members of the Stagehands Local in attendance at the theatre while the removal was in progress) the professional route proved to be most expeditious. In fact it was so expeditious that the two freight cars with piggy-back trailers of Wonder Morton parts and pieces arrived about 2 weeks before they were expected. This resulted in an emergency roundup of all available members at 4 p.m. of a Tuesday afternoon. To add to the emergency, the original planned storage site for the organ was unavailable because the space was in use, and some real fast action was necessary to locate a new site. Fred Sturm, who had been designated to arrange for the storage, came through in his usual capable manner contacting Baldwin Electronic Industries at their plant in suburban Fort Worth. They donated warehouse space for the storage. The chapter benefitted in other ways too. The contact resulted in Sterling Brandley, the BEI official who arranged for the space, joining the chapter.

The call went out to all members to assemble at the BEI warehouse to unload the van which held our precious Robert Morton! Some were there on time, some got lost but finally made it, and others trickled in after their offices and businesses closed, but a fine group of warmly-dressed ready-for-work members joined together to warehouse our treasure. Some were "carriers", some were 'straw bosses' as to storage layouts, some jumped into the van and with the air of Gordon Wright's trouble light, began to hand out to waiting hands. The heavier pipes, chests, and reservoirs, were handled by forklift. It was sheer talent that lifted the huge console out of the van, placed it on a huge dolly and moved it gently into a special corner of the storage area. Everyone got excited over the percussion section as it emerged piece by piece. The big bass drum, the marimbas, the glocks and all special effects looked great. It all turned into a sort of winter picnic when Jan Nichols took orders for hamburgers and the "break" whistle sounded.

A photographer from the Fort Worth *Observer* arrived for pictures and remained a long time, fascinated by our project. Ed Eubanks, special

What a console! The 4-manual Wonder Morton from Loew's Jersey City awaits tender loving care from the North Texas Chapter. (FW Observer Photo)





John Vaden at the manuals, Gene Powell at the left corner, and Chairman Jim Peterson at the right corner help unload the Wonder Morton console. (FW Observer Photo)

events announcer for Channel 5, also arrived with a cameraman to cover the event for future TV coverage. (Note: it appeared on KXAS TV the following week as part of their news coverage on the 6 p.m. news. Several shots of members working on the unloading project, Member Gene Powell at the console of his theatre organ, and an interview with Chairman Jim Peterson. It was a good plug for the chapter, the organ, and ATOS.) Finally the last section was unloaded (about 11 p.m.) and a tired, dirty group gathered in a circle to close out an evening of hard work filled with a special joy of accomplishment knowing the job had been well done despite the short notice, change in storage plans and the unexpected early arrival of the Jersey City Wonder Morton.

We mentioned earlier that the many steps involved in acquiring the organ required financing. The funding problems are not yet over by a long shot, but steps have been made in the right direction. It all began (the fund raising, that is) with the Bob Goodwin Concert at Casa Manana in Fort Worth in September. We had just received word that the organ would be donated to us and used that as a vehicle to raise some of the expense money. Instead of an expected 150 attendees, almost 2,000 showed up to hear Bob on the Casa Wurlitzer (formerly in the Worth Theatre in downtown Fort Worth). The refreshments committee had to make some emergency acquisitions from a local bakery and food store, but all were served at intermission, and containers were strategically

placed to accept any and all donations. Admission was free, but the donations were gladly accepted. This started the Wonder Organ moving fund.

A couple of weeks later Gene and Denece Powell held a 30-hour "Organ Marathon" at their Organ World store in Garland. They were assisted in arrangements by several chapter members and the actual 30 (count 'em) continuous hours of organ music was provided by the best organists in the North Texas area. More than 35 good organists and musicians were involved in the playing of everything from the 4-manual 16-rank Kilgen installed in the Concert Hall at Organ World, to several plug-ins including synthesizers, rhythm-makers, et al. The affair raised a considerable amount toward the "Morton Travel Fund," while Dick Nichols used a U.S. map with the route of travel graphed according to the donations received at the time of each "passing of the hat." Estimating \$300 to each 100 miles, the affair moved our Wonder Morton a good distance down the road from Jersey City to Texas.

While many of the guests at the Organ Marathon had their requests honored by the various artists, a unique one was submitted by "remote control." Lois Scott, age 68, a former vocalist on radio station WRR and others in North Texas was confined to her hospital bed and couldn't make the Marathon. So, she telephoned a request for "Indian Love Call" on Organ World's Kilgen. Gene Powell obliged, while the

telephone was held at the most strategic location to pick up the sound so Lois could listen. It was a touch of theatre organ nostalgia for Lois and the in-house audience, too. Lois showed her appreciation through a very substantial donation to the fund.

Thus the funding program for the Wonder Morton moved along at a pace, but there's still a good way to go. Plans are under way for additional concerts and money-raising events. Jim and his committee are making every effort to find an adequate home in the North Texas area for this fine example of theatre organ art. Several places are under consideration and no matter where in the area the instrument finally resides, somebody will be dissatisfied with the driving distance. Our chapter area covers some 1,000 square miles, and the most distant members in any direction are 150 to 200 miles apart. Hopefully it will settle somewhere near the center of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex area, with both Dallas and Fort Worth as possibilities, as well as all the area in between and around us. The committee has a real job resolving the problem, with auditorium size and acoustics, potential financial aid, access by members for both working on and playing the instrument and many other factors to consider. This is a North Texas Chapter project and that includes several cities and towns.

THEATRE ORGAN will report the progress of this most worthy project in future issues. □

Jim Peterson (left) and Stan Guy (below the console) help BEI, Inc. personnel guide the console into its' temporary storage position. (FW Observer Photo)

