

# An Evening With Edna Sellers

## PART II

Transcribed and Edited by Lloyd E. Klos

**ES.** — Well, here's another amusing incident: We got our music in those days direct from the music publisher. Fran Allison, whom I'm sure people remember from *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* days of television, was married to a music publisher, Archie Levington. One Halloween evening on the way to a party, they stopped at our apartment on Kenmore to deliver some music, dressed as Buttons and Bows. It was the cutest thing you ever saw!

Once in awhile, one of these things

In 1944, Edna had a stint at WKY in Oklahoma City for NBC. Here, she poses at the station's Kilgen console. (Sellers Call.)



will jump into memory. They're up there, but aren't accessible all the time.

**FJ.** — Did you keep a Diary?

**ES.** — No, and I wish I had! It would be interesting today.

**FJ.** — Where was Preston playing when he died?

**ES.** — He was out at Vosno's, a restaurant on Waukegan Rd. at Demster in Morton Grove. The place is still there, and I also played there. Barbara was up the road at the Glenview Country House. Preston was 68 when he died in 1962, the same year as Jesse Crawford, and both died from heart trouble.

**RJ.** — Did you have any interesting experiences with the Crawfords?

**ES.** — I knew them well. I attended a baby shower for her, and she came to mine. When I could spare the time, I went to hear Helen and Jesse at the Chicago.

**FJ.** — Was there much partying among the organists?

**ES.** — There was some, but I never went much, as I didn't have the time. I wouldn't stay up late at night, simply because my work was very important, and I didn't want to jeopardize it.

**RJ.** — People sometimes tended to idolize a person, not because of what he did, but because of the name they always heard. I heard Jesse Crawford when we'd visit Chicago, but I remember him more for the records he made. What did the average organist think of him? Was he one of the super greats?

**ES.** — He was great, but I believe Helen surpassed him in her rhythm. She played marvelous, marvelous rhythm.

**RJ.** — Jesse had a style which was very even and never changed.

**ES.** — He did, and it was of such good taste. There was no one who ever surpassed him on ballads. Never. I was so thrilled at a recent CATOE concert at the Chicago when they showed pictures of Jesse and Helen on the screen, a marvelous tribute to them. He was nice looking, and Helen was so pretty and so talented!

**RJ.** — Just to settle a point as we've been talking about the Crawfords and the Chicago Theatre. There is still a difference of opinion as to where the two consoles were in that theatre; where the original was, and where the second was installed.

**ES.** — The original was on the right, and Helen's was on the left. When





Preston was equally adept on an electronic as he was on pipes. Here he plays a Hammond at the time of his appearances in clubs and lounges.

(Sellers Coll.)

they took hers out, the original was moved to the left.

**RJ.** — The console which is up at Mundelein Seminary is supposed to have been the original console. There was an accident to one when it fell off the lift, I'm told, shortly after the theatre was opened, and it might have been replaced by the one now in Mundelein.

**ES.** — I can't be sure of that point. But, we had Helen's white console at the Marbro, however.

**RJ.** — Were the two consoles exactly alike?

**ES.** — No. The second had to be played with a great deal of memory, because it was dormant in some parts. One had to remember where everything was on the other console in order to get what was wanted on the second. On a piston, for example.

**RJ.** — It had separate setter boards in the basement. In a lot of the later two-console installations, the second was a dummy as far as stop tabs were concerned. They didn't even operate. The Fox second consoles in Detroit and St. Louis had tabs for decoration only, and the registration was done thru the pistons. The Chicago's second console had a most horrendous wiring set-up because they must have installed it in a hurry.

One thing: I can't find any trace of

a lift for the right-side console. Did it have a lift or was it on the orchestra lift?

**ES.** — It could have been on the orchestra elevator.

**RJ.** — The left side has a lift, and I always believed that here might have been the location of the original console.

**ES.** — No, the original was on the right, of that I'm sure. I never played the original when it was on the right. I did my work after it was moved to the left. The other was gone by then.

**RJ.** — The lift on the left is a very archaic, water-powered one and rises only about three feet.

**ES.** — The Marbro had a tremendous lift. They used to call us to play community sings for New Year's Eve shows. This was during the "black thirties" when work was scarce. I played the whole show when the organ lift was stuck in the basement and they couldn't budge it.

**RJ.** — Any more interesting anecdotes with performers?

**ES.** — I used to talk with Sophie Tucker, but she didn't have much to offer. A pregnant comedienne once came to my dressing room and asked me to stop practicing. She was nervous and couldn't take it.

**FJ.** — Was there anyone at the theatre who could work on the organ if something happened during a show?

**ES.** — The Nelson brothers used to service it. You phoned them and lived with the trouble until they arrived. They were always on call, however.

**RJ.** — What happened if you had a cipher?

**ES.** — You almost had to give up unless someone could go up to the chamber for you. Press and I did it. He'd go up, find the offender, lift it from the chest and stick a piece of newspaper into the hole. You'd have a dead note, but that was the only thing you could do until the organ people got there.

**RJ.** — How often did they tune the organ in those days?

**ES.** — Anytime you'd ask for it. They were very good about that, and

constantly traveled from one theatre to another. It was a big business then. One of the Nelsons is still alive, I believe. Art Temple from Oak Park was kept busy and was a very good man. Ken Simpson, who did a lot of maintenance work for us, went to the West Coast and last I heard was servicing George Wright's equipment. He was excellent.

**FJ.** — Your career happened before women's lib. Would they pay a woman as much as a man?

**ES.** — They would, some of them. I always asked over-scale, and almost always got it.

**RJ.** — There weren't more than a half dozen very prominent women organists in those days — Ann Leaf, Rosa Rio.

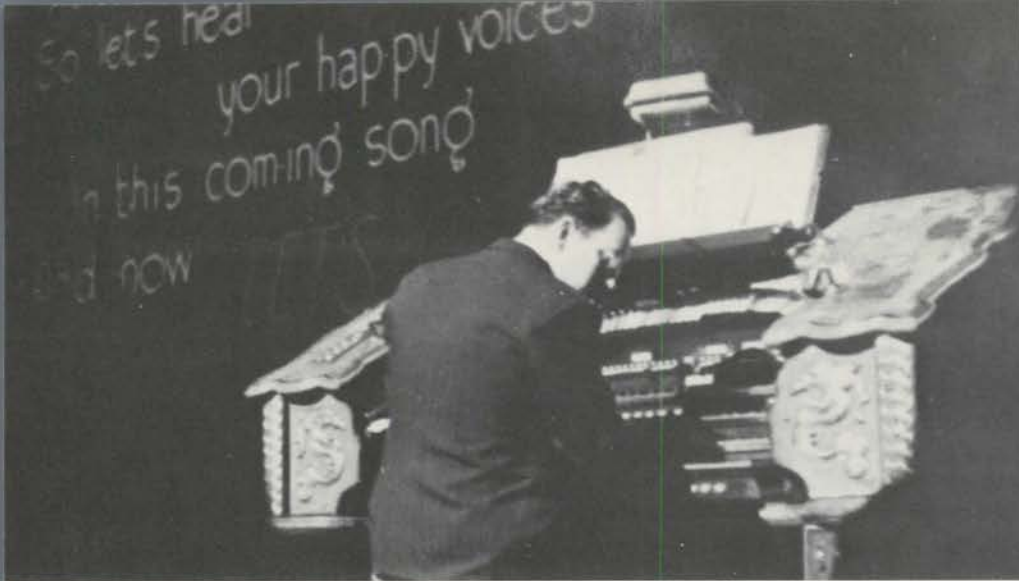
**ES.** — Ann Leaf. Oh, she was great! While I was working at WBBM with Milton Charles, he, Eddie Dunstetter in St. Louis and Ann Leaf in New York did a program, *The Three Consoles*. They didn't always relay it from the network in Chicago, locally, but if you were at the studio, you could hear it in master control. The program was something to hear. They were all so good! I believe Milton Charles played the smallest instrument of the three, but how he could play!

Irene Allan, Mildred Fitzpatrick (who was an attendant at my wedding), Helen Westbrook, and Basel Cristol were also fine musicians. Basel once played Sunday noon concerts at the Chicago with a small orchestra.

I think back to the men, too, who played in our era in this city — Arthur Gutow, one of Arthur Dunham's fine pupils; Albert Hay Malotte, one of the outstanding ones, well versed in the classics, and applied his knowledge to his theatre work; Henri A. Keates, who had a marvelous sense of humor and was so entertaining to be around; Dean Fossler; Arsene Siegel, a fine musician who later became an excellent arranger for radio; Len Salvo, whom I got to know during his days at WGN; and of course, Harold Turner of WGN who studied at one time with Marcel Dupre.

**RJ.** — When we were living in St. Louis, every Saturday afternoon I listened to organ music from the Edgewater Beach Hotel.





Preston accompanies a sing-along at the Oriental. He had great rapport with his audiences in getting them to sing. (Sellers Coll.)

**ES.** — I played there, too. The organ was a Moller, small but pretty. Believe the program was *Melodies of Yesterday*.

**RJ.** — No matter what I was doing on a Saturday afternoon, I'd stop to hear that program. I can still hear the announcer say: "... is playing the pipe organ in the Marine Dining Room of the Edgewater Beach Hotel, on the beautiful shores of Lake Michigan."

**ES.** — That's right. It was a remote show. They'd send an engineer out there with a truckload of equipment and he'd set up.

**RJ.** — I believe the Edgewater and the Drake were the only hotels in this area to have pipe organs. I faintly remember hearing the name of Sellers on those broadcasts.

**FJ.** — Did Preston play there, too?

**ES.** — He may have subbed for Herb Foote on occasion, but not as a regular stint. I subbed for Herb, who was a fine organist and was at the Edgewater for years. When he left, he did a stretch at WGN on a Hammond which led to other agency work which paid very well. He never went back to the Edgewater.

**FJ.** — Did you have to belong to the union?

**ES.** — Oh, Heavens, yes! I joined when I first came to Chicago. It was shortly after that when we had the first strike. Everything was so jumbled. Pres went to Buffalo as the strike lasted quite a while.

**RJ.** — I suppose if it hadn't been for the union demands in the thirties for

so many men in the orchestra pit, the theatre organs would have hung on much longer. The theatres couldn't afford an organist and a band when they didn't need them. So, they just shut down all the way.

**ES.** — And everyone couldn't get into radio, either. There wasn't enough work, so only the bigger names got in.

**RJ.** — There wasn't much broadcasting from theatres, either. The Capitol on the South Side was the only theatre I recall whose organ was broadcast regularly.

**ES.** — Yes, few installations were right for broadcasting.

**RJ.** — They didn't have the advanced mike equipment for proper pickup, either. Recordings were inferior, from a mechanical standpoint.

(At this point, the conversationists examined Russ Joseph's picture book on theatres and came upon some breathtaking views of the Oriental in Chicago and the Ambassador in St. Louis, both Rapp & Rapp-designed houses).

**RJ.** — The lobbies of both were very small. The Ambassador had a very unusual Wurlitzer, a special model, the only one of its kind. Like the Marbro, it had 21 ranks. The console had only four manuals, but it had an additional stop rail, and like the 36-rank Fox Wurlitzers, it had four banks of tabs on each jamb. Fred Pillsbury of St. Louis bought it, but I don't know its status. The theatre is still standing, however.

**ES.** — "Marbro" means Marks

Bros., and besides that house, they built the Marshall Square on W. Cermak Rd. and the Granada on Sheridan Rd. The latter is still one of the most beautifully preserved theatres in the city.

A manager of the Granada who knew Helen Crawford very well and had a high regard for her talent, was Roy McMullen who died in 1976 at 91. He used to pass the kids and me into the theatre when we lived in the vicinity. Years later, he came one evening to Henrici's Restaurant on Western Avenue, not knowing I was appearing there during the Christmas season. He almost keeled over when he saw me playing there!

Preston had put in one of our Hammonds with three or four speakers. He had a very good ear for sound and knew where to place them for maximum benefit. No matter how many he used, the music never got too loud or raucous.

**FJ.** — Did Preston play the lounges, etc?

**ES.** — Yes, he did.

**RJ.** — I would think after having seen the Granada chambers that it must have been a grand-sounding 4/20 organ.

**ES.** — It had a good sound, but not the quality of the 4/20 Oriental. The chambers were very open and it used to get so loud that I had to close the shutters considerably. I like the light touch.

**RJ.** — And a good sense of registration helps, too.

**ES.** — I remember one player who switched the xylophone and glockenspiel on and off — the only registration changes he did. I attended a concert one night and I thought I'd have a baby sitting there! It was horrible! I can't stand that. This organist never had the basics. Anybody does things like that when he's starting out, but as he progresses, he's supposed to improve.

**RJ.** — Like everything else, you wonder where people's sensibilities as to taste are.

**ES.** — It proves Dave Balaban's contention that 99% of the people are not intelligent and only 1% are. The average public does not understand. □

(CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE)