



After her theatre days, Edna played lounges and restaurants. Here she appears at a Hammond in Milwaukee's Clock Bar about 1947. (Sellers Coll.)

An Evening With Edna Sellers

PART III

Transcribed and Edited by Lloyd E. Klos

During the 1969 ATOS Convention in Chicago, a surprise guest was presented to the audience at Mundelein Seminary, former theatre organist, Edna Sellers. This gracious lady was married to another theatre organist, Preston Sellers, and when the latter was installed in the Theatre Organists Hall of Fame in 1976, the writer felt that the Sellers family was an excellent subject for a feature story in THEATRE ORGAN.

Thanks to CATOE executive Russell B. Joseph and his wife, Florence, Mrs. Sellers spent several hours during a visit to their home in late 1976, talking over the great days of the theatre organ as they affected her family. Through electronic gadgetry, this conversation was recorded, and following is the edited transcript of the highly interesting session.

PART III

RJ. — What did you do in the sixties?

ES. — In April 1962, I went to work at Math Iglor's Casino in Chicago. I was organist there and was assisted by Basel Cristol with a piano-organ duo whose mainstay was accompanying seven or eight singing waiters. The bulk of the music was accompaniments which necessitated score-reading. When I developed cataracts

in both eyes, and subsequently had surgery on both, my music-reading capabilities were very difficult. I eventually retired from active musical life, but still enjoy going to concerts, recitals, operas etc.

FJ. — You've had a very colorful career.

ES. — I've been busy all my life.

FJ. — It's a pity you didn't make records.

ES. — I did, but they've been lost. One of them was made on the WGN organ, through the control room. Somewhere, I have two 10-inch records made in Oklahoma on the WKY organ which turned out very well. I never wanted to make a commercial thing out of them, but wanted them solely for myself.

RJ. — Edna, we have some remarkable young talent today who never had the privilege of sitting in a theatre during the silent movie days. Yet, they do a fine job in bringing back memories of those days. If you had this room full of these youngsters for a seminar, what would your advice be to them?

ES. — I'm strong for learning the basics. Some of these people won't reach a goal at all until they get more basics into their knowledge.

RJ. — A lot of your contemporaries were self-taught; they learned by experience, from "the seat of their pants," as it were.

ES. — That's right. If you sat in with an orchestra, led by a good conductor, you could learn a great deal. Where are today's kids going to get that? They're getting it in a way in the rock style with combos. There are a number of young musicians who have been trained by excellent teachers; my grandson is getting it right now. But, I believe there should be more serious study.

RJ. — I don't believe any performer should mimic another. I'm thinking that the theatre organ should be exploited to its full potential of being adapted to greater varieties of music than it has been by many organists.

ES. — I feel the same way.

RJ. — I just wonder what the future of the theatre organ is as more are removed from theatres. What will we do when they tear down the last theatre? You can install them in pizza parlors, roller rinks and other places, but they are not the same.

ES. — No, they're not.

FJ. — The pizza parlor is a sort of fad right now, but families go in and children get to hear a theatre organ.



ES. — I hope this phase won't pass into history. The artists can further themselves if they have any potential at all.

RJ. — The theatre organ is probably the most unique musical instrument in history, when you consider its complexities, the special way it was tonally designed, its mechanical aspects. And yet, it had such a short life; about 10 peak years. It had been

in theatres in the teens, but it really developed in the twenties when the big movie palaces were built. An instrument of this type to have only a 10-year life is unbelievable.

ES. — I'm glad they're being preserved as much as they are.

RJ. — Did your parents ever hear you play the theatre organ?

ES. — My father didn't; my mother,

yes. They had moved to California and I brought her here once when I was at either the Chateau or the Covent.

RJ. — Your parents certainly would have been proud of you and Pres.

ES. — We had a wonderful life together. Pres was such a prince of a fellow. Musicians are supposed to be temperamental and fly off the handle, but not in our case.

RJ. — Did you have a competitive feeling about your musical attainments?

ES. — Oh, no. I always looked up to Pres, and he looked up to me the same way. He used to tell me at times when I'd get down-in-the-mouth: "Why you play better than I! I could never play the way you do." It was a shot in the arm, and I'd feel better right away.

RJ. — That's interesting because of what one hears about the Crawfords. Jesse seemed to be quite sensitive about his artistry and wasn't about to let Helen surpass him in any way at all.

Preston acknowledges applause at the Oriental.

(Sellers Coll.)



ES. — That's right. Jesse was a little difficult to get along with, and there were times he couldn't relate to anyone except Helen. He was an individualist, but I never heard his making remarks about Helen. He could about others.

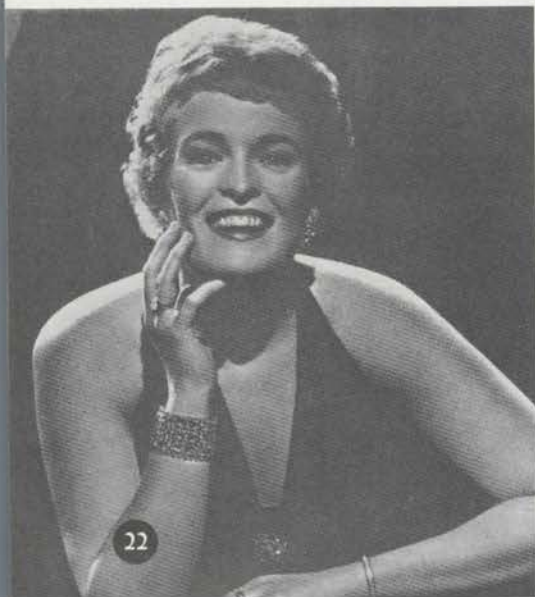
When Jesse first came to Chicago, he opened the Tivoli. When he opened the Chicago, Milton Charles took over the Tivoli. Jesse put out "his way" of accompanying a picture and thereby took away all the individuality of the person who was trying to do the job as he understood it. He did it with Pres at the Tivoli and it got pretty bad. He told me, "Edna, I can't take it." I believe he asked for a transfer. If he had stayed there, it would have sapped his individuality.

RJ. — We went to the Tivoli, but I can't remember the organ.

ES. — A 3-manual job, it was very beautiful and had lovely, lovely tibias. Preston said after his experience there, "I can't take anything from Jesse Crawford. He's wonderful and plays a ballad with those gorgeous rolls. However, I have a personality of my own; I can't copy his." He was right. No one should copy anybody.

RJ. — Maybe too many of the young organists are trying to copy other performers and are thereby losing their individuality. One of the greatest talents of any organist is a good sense of registration; many fail to exploit it. I look at registration the same way as, an artist painting a picture utilizes colors. You have to develop that same, spontaneous reaction to registration.

A glamour pose of Barbara Sellers. Note the remarkable resemblance to singer Jaye P. Morgan.



ES. — A great many organists don't have the ear which they should. They have technique, but not the artistry. I heard some work not long ago when everything came off very heavy. It didn't have the lightness of combination. Arthur Dunham hated heaviness and though he had power, his small feet used to dance over the pedals. He was a great technician and a fine, fine musician. He had what Ernest Lubisch had as a movie director — a light touch, when he required it. My husband had it, too. Believe me, I tried to absorb it because I know that's good playing.

RJ. — I sometimes feel shortchanged when you have a fine instrument and the artist never brings out the solo stops, but combines them instead. You have to exploit both ends of the spectrum. You can't play slam-bang music all the time and neglect solo voices. They simply are not compatible.

ES. — You can say that again! This is not boasting, but Barbara has that. She has that fine quality in her ear, and in her hands, and the style is all there. You don't get tired of her playing.

RJ. — She has made a name for herself thru her own efforts and talent. Tell us how she achieved success.

ES. — I knew she was ready for lessons when she was five. The public school music teacher, Miss McGreevy, came to the school to run a music class. After a couple sessions, she came to me and said, "Mrs. Sellers, I *have* to take your child for private lessons now, because she is so far ahead of the others. I answered, "Well, you can come to the house and give her lessons." She did for a long time until the next teacher, Helene Brahm, who was a pupil of Alexander Rabb. When she outgrew that teacher, I took her to Mr. Wells when she was about 14 and she got into serious piano study then.

Wanting to get into organ study, I sent her to Lou Webb, an NBC organist with theatre experience, who was a good classical and popular teacher. After a stint with him, she was out earning money. She has developed a beautiful style with very good taste and a personality to match. She is one who doesn't have a heavy touch, and has a nice following with a lot of people. Many con-



The second generation of the Sellers family of fine organists, daughter Barbara at the console in Chicago's Bismarck Hotel. (Russ Joseph Photo)

ventioners who've heard her at the Bismarck Hotel, return to hear her.

RJ. — Her appearances have been in hotels and restaurants?

ES. — Yes. There are not theatres to play, so where else can you go? She does pop music so wonderfully, she has to have a place to sell that.

FJ. — Would you say her style is more like yours or Preston's?

ES. — It has some of us, but it is mostly herself. Barbara had some coaching from us, but she went on to develop her own way. She is to make an album on the instrument she plays at the Bismarck, because she can't get another to put into the recording studio.

I am 77 years young and look back on my beautiful memories. I have two children, one very active in the musical life of Chicago; five grandchildren, two of whom will have received their Bachelors of Music in May 1977; and one beautiful great granddaughter.

I would love to hear from any friends or fans from the "Good Old Days." My address is 5240 N. Sheridan Rd., Chicago, Ill. 60640.

And so we come to the end of this extremely informative and entertaining visit with Edna Sellers. ATOS sincerely thanks Mrs. Sellers for the opportunity to share her interesting career with us. And to Florence and Russell Joseph for proposing the questions and manning the cassette equipment, our grateful thanks also. □