

ARNOLD LEVERENZ

Organist at the Tacoma Pantages Theatre

by Lloyd E. Klos

During the 1976 ATOS Convention, the writer renewed acquaintances with Mr. and Mrs. Homer R. Johnson of Tacoma, Wash. Mrs. (Jane McKee) Johnson was a theatre organist in that area, still is a teacher, periodically plays at the Pizza & Pipes Restaurant in Tacoma, and has a top-grade recording to her credit.

The Johnsons interested the writer in doing a story on Arnold Leverenz who served as house organist in Tacoma's Pantages Theatre for over 10 years. They agreed to collect material from him and his wife, Marie. Interviewing Mr. Leverenz was a difficult task due to a stroke he suffered about 15 years ago, and communication with him is limited. Mrs.

Leverenz assisted as much as possible in providing information and pictures.

When the material arrived there seemed to be almost as much data on the Pantages Theatre as on the house organist. Therefore, this narrative has been divided and the story of Tacoma's Pantages Theatre will appear in the next issue.

Arnold did a lot of broadcasting. Here he plays and MC's his own program in Tacoma.

(Leverenz Coll.)



Arnold Leverenz, whose theatre career was centered in Tacoma's Pantages Theatre, was born in Manitowac, Wisconsin, in 1894. His mother was musical and played a parlor pump organ, which may attest to Arnold's latent musical talent. He had a year's piano instruction, starting at the age of eight, but the organ became his forte. He'd lock himself in his grandmother's room and play the pump organ.

As an organist, he was largely self-taught, developing his own style, and had a great talent for improvising intricate scores for motion pictures. Particularly adept at changing tempos, he seemed to thrive on fast playing. Often, the theatre manager wanted an extra vaudeville show on weekends. This meant that the feature and newsreel had to be run in an hour! A pretty fast pace resulted, but Arnold always did it with a flair which never sounded ridiculous.

Before he moved west, he played piano on the road for the Ziegfeld Follies, a job which provided him some excellent training for the period when he accompanied vaudeville acts.

His brother had been living in Tacoma prior to Arnold's arriving there about 1915. His first theatre job was at the Colonial in 1916. The house originally had a two-manual Estey church organ which subsequently was moved to Stadium High

School, and was succeeded in the theatre in 1920 by a 2/9 Wurlitzer special.

Arnold also played the 3/15 Wurlitzer in the Rialto Theatre in Tacoma. The sound of the organ was exceptional. It has since been installed in Big Bob's Pizza in Burien, Wash., augmented by the organ from the Seattle Coliseum, to make a 42-rank instrument.

The Colonial and Rialto were around the block from each other, were operated by the same owner, and Arnold played relief in both houses.

He also had a stint in the Liberty Theatre in Seattle, between 1918 and 1921, at the same organ on which the great Oliver Wallace achieved his fame. The organ is still in use. It was reinstalled in the PLU gym for awhile, and then sold to the Church of the Nazarene in Spokane which put \$50,000 worth of repairs into it. Electronic relays, new ivories and stop tabs, and a refinished console were included. The traps are still with it, and the organ sounds very well, according to Homer Johnson who has played it.

As we mentioned before, as an organist, Arnold was self taught. Some of his illustrious contemporaries were: Jesse Crawford, Oliver Wallace, Henry B. Murtagh and Albert Hay Malotte, all of whom are Hall of Famers and all of whom Arnold knew.

Arnold Leverenz at the Pantages 3/10 Robert Morton console. At the end of silent pictures, the keydesk was moved to the left side of the orchestra pit, but without an elevator. (Leverenz Coll.)



At an Elks party, he entertains members and their wives a few years ago.

(Leverenz Coll.)

The Liberty Theatre in Seattle, which was opened in 1914, featured Murtagh at the Wurlitzer, succeeded by Wallace, and then Arnold Leverenz for a brief period. Albert Hay Malotte was a great picture accompanist, all-round organist and composer (Malotte set "The Lord's Prayer" to music). Jesse Crawford was the King of the Theatre Organists.

The Liberty was owned and operated by Jensen & Von Herberg, the same organization which operated

the Liberty Theatre in Great Falls, Montana. Our subject also had a six-month stint in the latter house. Then came his 10-year period at Tacoma's Pantages.

The organ in the Pantages was a 3/10 Robert Morton and boasted the first console elevator in the Northwest. It was water-operated, absolutely silent, and was located front and center behind the orchestra pit, three rows of seats being removed for it.

The chambers were under the stage and designated "woodwind" and "brasswind." The console had double bolsters and was highly unified. The manuals were accompaniment, solo and orchestral. The top two were identically unified with all pitches, plus octave couplers. This allowed the organ to be built up into a big, almost dazzling ensemble which completely filled the house in spite of its being an under-the-stage installation. The Pantages circuit had several organs installed this way.

Arnold played the Pantages from the opening of the organ in 1923 until talkies became a regular feature of the bill, albeit the only organist who regularly played it. On his days off, or during rare appearances elsewhere, it was played mostly by the late Donad V. Ball.

Pantages, who used to say that he spoke seven languages, "English as bad as any," was a gifted show-

man. In his chain of theatres, the Tacoma Pantages was always regarded as one of his best, due no doubt to Arnold Leverenz' popularity as house organist. He used to MC his broadcasts from the theatre, which didn't hurt, either.

In early 1926, a reviewer in one newspaper had this to say about a portion of the Pantages bill:

"Max Frolic with his augmented orchestra, playing late hits, gives Tacomans pit music extraordinary. Then follows Arnold Leverenz with as fine a songalogue as he has yet staged. While Frolic and Leverenz are steady diet as house acts, they are showing this week what can be done in the way of really high-class entertainment."

In 1927, Arnold played two big memorable pictures in one week, and vaudeville was suspended. They were *What Price Glory* and *King of Kings*. During the former, the unoccupied stage hands shot blanks into garbage cans behind the screen during battle scenes, while the organ thundered by use of handfulls of keys on the bottom octave of the 16' Diaphone and Ophicleide. His accompaniment of the latter film was such a memorable experience, according to Homer Johnson, that the public returned several times just to hear the organist play the pictures. The earthquake, storm and crucifixion scenes were the most noteworthy.

During his vaudeville days, Arnold had the opportunity to meet some of the great performers and work with them: Bob Hope (with whom he played golf), Jack Benny, Burns & Allen and Singer's Midgets. At one engagement of the midgets, Arnold did a walk-on with them. Rather short in stature himself, the midgets could still look up to him, and it got a laugh.

Occasionally, Arnold took time off from his Pantages duties to open an organ elsewhere. His friend, organ builder Sandy Balcom, remembers his opening a three-manual Kimball in a Longview, Wash., theatre.

Arnold entered radio in the twenties with many broadcasts from the theatre. The first were from the Pantages on Tuesday evenings during vaudeville presentations. They actually put vaudeville on the air in those infant days of radio!

Homer Johnson recalls that often

after the last show, the theatre's outer doors would still be open, and people would wander in to witness a broadcast. "I used to sit down front to listen. One time, Arnold told me he got a letter from people east of the mountains who said he played better than Jesse Crawford. This amused him and he intended to send the letter to Jesse whom he had met in Chicago. I didn't miss many broadcasts. Those were the days when one heard the kind of music everyone liked."



Mr. Leverenz, 83, looks much like this today. Until 1974 he served the Tacoma Elks Lodge as organist. (Leverenz Coll.)

In the late twenties came the alliance of theatre chains through transactions, name changes, etc. The Pantages became the RKO Orpheum about 1929, and became the Roxy in 1934 under the John Hamrick organization. Things were never the same afterward.

During the depression, admissions which had been 50 and 60 cents before, were reduced to 15 and 35 cents, but still not enough attendance to sustain pit orchestras, vaudeville and organists.

By 1933, he broadcast directly from the studio of KMO, using its Robert Morton (now in Tacoma's

CONCERT CANCELLED

It has been announced that the concert, scheduled for September 30th, featuring Ron Poll at the Vancouver, B.C., Orpheum, has been cancelled.

There will be a concert at the Orpheum in December with George Blackmore as the artist.

Sacred Heart Church). He also broadcast for Tacoma Savings & Loan Association on an electronic in his home. His radio period ran until 1945.

One of his radio announcers was John Porter who introduced him with the phrase: "The finest pipe organ music on anybody's air."

During the depression years, after vaudeville was dropped, it was up to the organist to attract patrons to the theatre, which Arnold did. It became the period when the theatregoer's attitude had changed from the "Ain't we got fun" attitude to that of "Now, entertain me." A half-hour before the start of the movie, he performed a daily concert which resulted in almost full houses. He played "songologues" with two girls sometimes sitting atop the console. One spotlight presentation used two school desks as props for a "School Days" routine.

Following the days of radio, Arnold Leverenz was musical director of Tacoma's Afifi Temple Shrine for many years, was organist for the band which accompanied the grandstand show at the Western Washington Fair. In 1949, he played at The Top of the Ocean, a restaurant which featured seven-course dinners, starting at \$1.50! He played a solovox during the dinner hour. In later years, he was organist at the Piper Funeral Home in South Tacoma.

More recently, he played an electronic at the late-lamented Steve's Gay 90's in South Tacoma. Though he was never a teacher, he did coach several students.

After his stroke in 1962, he remained active as organist for six years for the Tacoma Elks Lodge which enjoys the largest membership in the United States.

Several times in recent years, Arnold Leverenz has played at events when he wasn't seen by the audience, such as the church service when Mrs. Leverenz' sister passed away. People, upon hearing the music, said that they were sure it was he that was playing.

Homer Johnson says that people often inquire about Arnold Leverenz, because "they have enjoyable memories of his talent and unique style."

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