

## Little Known Organist Identified...

# FRANK R. WHITE

by Robert A. Pereda, as told to  
Lloyd E. Klos

*When our feature story on Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier ran in THEATRE ORGAN several years ago, a picture accompanying the epic showed the five-man organ staff of New York's Roxy Theatre during its first few weeks. The fifth organist was Frank R. White. Through the years, we wondered about him; how good an organist he was, his strong points as a musician, etc. Still, not too much is known about him.*

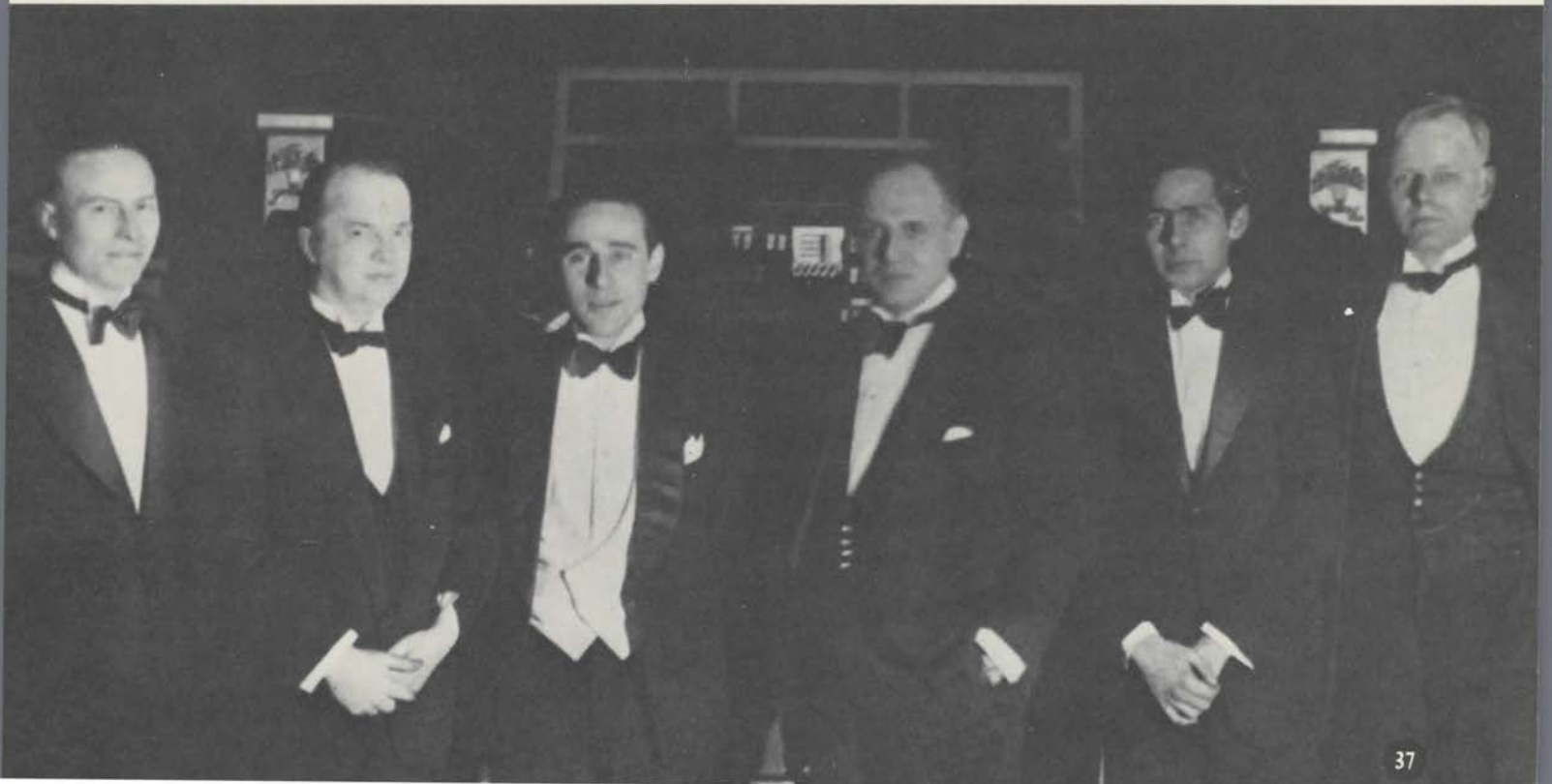
*Fortunately at the 1974 Detroit ATOS Convention, it was our pleasure to meet Robert A. Pereda, an organist living in Vero Beach, Florida. A good friend of Hall of Famer Fred Feibel, Mr. Pereda knew Frank White intimately during the years of the theatre organ's first great era, and he subsequently probed the recesses of his memory for information about Mr. White.*

"The name of Frank R. White

is not well-known when names of theatre organists are discussed," says Mr. Pereda. "He was, however, one of the early pioneers and it was my good fortune to know him in my youth when he was coming to the conclusion of a long career as a theatre organist. I have never forgotten that I owe him something, in fact, a great deal, for the friendship and encouragement he showed me.

"Frank White was a successful

Roxy poses with his organist staff about two months after the theatre opened in 1927. Left to right, they are Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier, Deszo von D'Antalfy, Lew White, Roxy, Emil Velazco and Frank White. White was the oldest organist of the group and his style was not compatible with that of his younger colleagues. (Parmentier Coll.)



church organist and choir director at the time pipe organs were first being promoted for use in theatres. This was about 1910. Mr. White was called upon to dedicate the two-manual, 16-stop Moller organ, Opus 1783, which had been installed in the 925-seat Regent Theatre in Pittsburgh, and obtained a leave of absence from his church to go there.

"Being a Moller, I can state with certainty that it was a straight organ. Moller did not come out with 'unit orchestras' until about 1927, and of the hundreds of pipe organs they built up to that time for theatres, such as those in the Loew's and Fox chains, none had any traps. The only percussions were Harp, Chimes and Orchestra Bells.

"Frank's venture, in the eyes of the management and audience, was a rank failure, because all he could play were preludes and offertories. After a week, he was discharged.

"The following day was Sunday. He sat in a public park, listening to a band concert. When Sousa's "The Stars and Stripes Forever" was played, Frank began to think of the specs

of the Regent organ and the possibility of their imitating the sounds of the band. The next morning he bought a copy of the piece and asked permission of the Regent Theatre's management to work something out. The result was beyond his expectations. With considerable imagination, he was able to approximate the band's orchestration, even to the piccolo obbligato. This becomes more remarkable because of the Moller's limitations, as mentioned above. When he finally came to play a true unit orchestra, he was prepared for it and had more to offer.

"The manager gave Frank a second chance at the Regent and his newly-found theatre style led to much success and acclaim. This was the beginning. He went on to adopt all types of orchestra scores to the new idiom. It led to engagements about the country until a 3/13 Wurlitzer was installed in the Century Theatre in 1912 on upper Broadway in New York. He continued there until the organ was moved to the 1200-seat Montclair (N.J.) Theatre, Frank moving to that house. When the

2137-seat Wellmont Theatre was built in Montclair, the organ was moved a second time and installed in several chambers above the proscenium a la the Byrd in Richmond, Va.

"When Roxy was assembling his personnel in advance of the opening of his New York Roxy Theatre in March 1927, he remembered Frank, and engaged him to be on the five-man organist staff. The others were Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier, Chauncey Haines, Deszo Von D'Antalfy and Emil Velazco. Haines left after six weeks, succeeded by Lew White.

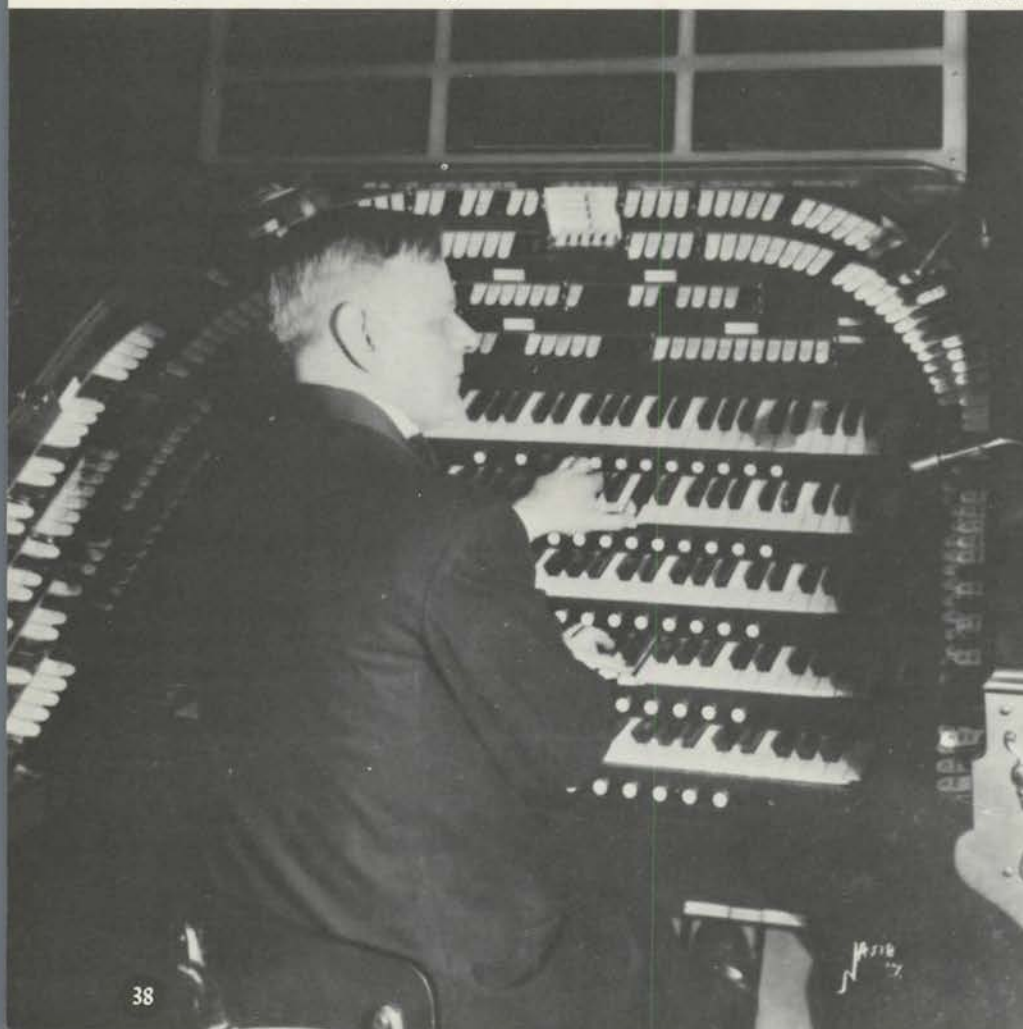
"While Frank's appointment was a great honor, the move proved to be unfortunate for him because his forte was in the field of organ interpretation of orchestral classics, a talent seldom equaled by anyone else. It was much appreciated by audiences in the early days of the theatre organ, because people did not have the opportunity to hear great symphony orchestras. The other members of the Roxy organ staff were younger men with an emerging new style. Frank was assigned to play for hours on end at the rotunda Kimball, with an air-cooling vent blasting on him without mercy. After a few weeks, he resigned and returned to New Jersey.

"Sound movies were an established fact in the early thirties, but the bulk of organists were still active, doing spotlight solos, sing-alongs and radio broadcasts. The Stanley Warner circuit used organists in its larger houses in the Newark, N.J., area, and Frank White was at the 1946-seat Tivoli in Newark where there was a 3/11 Wurlitzer. This organ was situated entirely on one side of the theatre, the solo chamber above the main, thus making it an ideal broadcast instrument, only one microphone required for pickup.

"Frank had a twice-weekly radio program, sponsored by a laundry. He invited me to share the program with him, he playing classical numbers and I the popular songs and ballads. It was during this period that I began to learn something of his long career. We would sit and chat for hours after broadcasts, and he'd always drive me home.

"I can remember the right front car door would not remain closed, and had to be tied shut with a piece of clothesline, and after he tied me

Frank White at the main console of the New York Roxy's Kimball in 1927. He performed for several weeks at the big theatre, mostly at the rotunda organ. (R. Pereda Coll.)



in, off we'd go! He always threatened to get this repaired but his mind was on other things. It was through his influence and encouragement that I went on to serious study, afterwards spending all my life as a church organist, recitalist and choir director.

"Unfortunately, I do not have sufficient material for a full biography of Frank, such as when and where he was born, early musical education etc. Most of the organists of his era have gone on to play in Valhalla. What I do know about his professional career, however, is of interest and should clear away some of the clouds of mystery surrounding him. He was not one to seek publicity and bask in its limelight.

"In 1934, there was a social gathering where a number of organists were present. Frank made a startling announcement, saying he had heard on the best authority that a group was experimenting with an organ which would produce its tones solely by electrical circuits and vacuum tubes. He foresaw a wide use for such an instrument which would provide new opportunities for unemployed theatre organists, and in a wide

range of public places.

"Also, the portability and low price would make it possible for such instruments to be placed in private homes. There was a look of amazement and disbelief on the faces of most, while others laughed heartily. However, it wasn't ten months later that Captain Ranger introduced his Electric Pipeless Organ, followed soon afterward by the introduction of the Hammond. Everything which Frank White foresaw has come to pass — in spades!

"At one time, he was in the organ-building business. His only product of which I know was in the 728-seat Goodwin Theatre in Newark which I never heard. It was a four or five-rank unit with a grand piano altered to serve as a console.

"After the house-cleaning of musicians in the theatres was completed in the late thirties, I lost track of Frank, and the next (and last) time I saw him was during the summer of 1940 at the New York World's Fair, playing a Hammond at the Ford Pavilion. After he finished his stint, I went backstage. He seemed glad to see me and we spent an hour

chatting.

"This is but a fragment of Frank White's story, and it will be the only opportunity I'll have to pay tribute to a very fine gentleman. I am indebted to THEATRE ORGAN for allowing me the chance to give some credit to a man to whom I owe much in this world, Frank R. White." □

## Durst Changes Name

Durst Organ Supply Company, Inc., has recently announced a name change. The company will be known as Organ Supply Industries, Inc.

The change was brought about in order to reflect the company's current position in the organ field. The development of the company since the merger of the two parent companies in 1972, Durst & Company and Organ Supply Corporation, has resulted in an expanded product line and improved customer services. Organ Supply Industries, Inc., better describes the business as it exists today, and it will continue to provide excellent products and services as America's leading pipe organ supply house. □

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