

It is rarely that this writer-researcher is privileged to spend over four hours with an organist whose reminiscences about scores of his contemporaries from the great era of the theatre organ, can hold us spellbound. Such was our experience when ATOS member Mary Bowles arranged for Dr. C. A. J. Parmentier, the only organist to open the two largest theatres in the United States (Roxy in 1927, Radio City Music Hall in 1932) to meet with us. They were visiting Rochester to hear a concert and to try out the Auditorium Theatre's 4/22 Wurlitzer. Frankly, we were sorry to end our meet, as this amazing man is a concert unto himself.

Not having a portable tape recorder, we were at a disadvantage, and for some time after our meeting, we wondered how we could put Dr. Parmentier's phenomenal memory to the advantage of THEATRE ORGAN readers. Having built a master card index of all the organists (over 890) whose names have appeared in "Nuggets From the Golden Days" since its inception in 1967, we compiled a list of 128 organists who worked in the metropolitan New York area, sent it to the good doctor, and he graciously responded with more than sufficient material for this feature. He enlisted the aid of two of his organist-friends to provide additional information.

This will be, for the most part, a listing of organists remembered by Dr. Parmentier and friends.

"FRANK STEWART ADAMS was a fine organist, most conservative in everything. He gave one the impression of the looks of a mortician, but was a most pleasant fellow. At New York Society of Theatre Organists get-togethers, he was the most amusing and funniest fellow you'd ever meet. He played the Rialto and Rivoli theatres in New York, and served in several offices in the NY, STO. His wife, MARGARET FRENCH, was a fine organist in Loew's houses in New York.

"RUTH BARRETT, and I worked at the Cameo (B.S. Moss) Theatre on 42nd Street, a very small but classy theatre with a fine 3-manual Ernest Skinner organ. Ruth Barrett, who later worked the Colony Theatre in New York, has been for years the organist in the Christian Science Mother Church in Boston. She mar-

ried Lawrence Phelps whom I believe was in insurance, then became an organ architect and consultant, through his connection with the church and with Cassavant.

"OTTO F. BECK played the Boyd Theatre in Philadelphia, Virginia Theatre in Atlantic City, the Rialto in New York and several Washington, D. C. theatres.

"HAL BECKETT I remember as playing the Roxy, Loew's Premier and the Brooklyn Fox 4/37 Wurlitzer.

the aging Harry, as he had to make the rounds of 20 publishers each week, sort the music into groups, purchase it and mail it. Adele helped in most phases of this work.

"When Harry died, Adele carried on, probably with one helper. She was especially fond of organists, having been one herself. She was playing in Loew's Gates Theatre when she met Harry. I do not know how long the club continued as I lost touch when I went into the service. But, I feel a warm glow when I think

Reminiscences of Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier and his friends

As Told To Lloyd E. Klos

"HARRY (Nick) and ADELE BLAIR always were of great help to organists." Doc Parmentier's friend, organist Johnny Winters, recalls the Blairs: "These were two of the nicest and kindest persons it was my good fortune to know. Harry was a song-plugger for Shapiro-Bernstein and when the business petered out, Harry suggested to Bernstein that he retain an office and set up a music service for organists. There were still many organists working throughout the country in the thirties, and, turning out professional copies of new songs was a service publishers were not too eager to perform.

"So, they welcomed Harry's service as did the organists. He called the venture 'The Noon-Day Club,' because local organists and those visiting New York would meet in Harry's office and then go to lunch. Performing this service was tiring for

of the Blairs' Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners which were fabulous."

Dr. Parmentier says that Johnny Winters should be heard by ATOS audiences. "He plays the heavy classics, and has a most interesting style when he plays pop music. He gave a recital in New York's Town Hall a few years ago. The first half of the program was a masterful interpretation of the standard organ works of Bach, Wagner, De Fala and Ravel. The second half was all popular music and novelties. It was absolutely marvelous, believe me!

"GEORGE BLAKE was organist over WJZ, New York, in the early thirties. All these years, I never knew he was an organist, but knew him as Dick Leibert's manager.

"KURT BOEHM played theatres in Philadelphia and the Criterion Theatre in New York.

"CARL BONAWITZ played theatres, in Atlantic City, and the Strand, 69th St. and Germantown theatres in Philadelphia. He did some broadcasting from New York's Waldorf Astoria ballroom (4-manual Moller concert organ) when the hotel first opened. Incidentally, they tried to get Jesse Crawford to play here, but he took one look at the organ and decided it was not his cup of tea.

"Bonawitz eventually wound up with Penny-Owsley, the Hammond organ dealers in Los Angeles, before his death.

"EDYTHE BROOKS played New York's Loew's Victory Theatre. Her husband, ARTHUR SCOTT BROOKS and I worked together at Loew's New York Theatre Roof. He was an organbuilder and was private organist to Bennett Champ Clark, a multi-millionaire. Their daughter, THEODORA BROOKS, played in many theatres, including Loew's Lexington. Their son at one time was in charge of the Convention Hall organs in Atlantic City, where I met him a few years ago.

"J. VAN CLEFT COOPER played at New York's Rivoli Theatre and served in several offices of the N. Y. Society of Theatre Organists. He and I worked together at the old Academy of Music.

"BERNIE COWHAM played the RKO Flushing Theatre. At one time, they dispensed with his services and all the people in the neighborhood boycotted the theatre. So, they had to reengage him. Bernie used to say, 'I play two ways — loud and louder.'

"JESSE CRAWFORD played in many theatres on the Coast, then in Chicago, and finally the New York Paramount in 1926. After leaving theatre work, he got the agency for the Leslie Vibraphone for the eastern United States, and we worked together in promoting the Leslie, and at N.B.C. After World War II, he turned the agency over to Steinway & Sons, and they made him the head of their organ school.

"DESZO VON D'ANTALFFY played the Capitol, the Roxy and later the Radio City Music Hall. He was a fine organist and composer. In 1922, I left a steady job at Loew's 83rd Street Theatre (my partner there was Marsh McCurdy) to play for one week as substitute for D'Antalfy at the Capitol while he took a vacation. It turned out his week's va-

cation was a trip to Rochester to discuss a professorship at the Eastman School of Music. A few weeks later, Deszo left officially, and I got the Capitol job on a more permanent basis.

"ROBERT ELMORE played theatres in Philadelphia and Bethlehem, Pa., and was a fine recitalist and church organist.

"I arranged for GEORGE EPSTEIN to replace me at the Carlton Theatre in Brooklyn and the Roxy where he played for some time.

"JOHN GART played Loew's Metropolitan Theatre (my brother and teacher, Firmin, also played there), Loew's Valencia in Jamaica (organ now Pete Schaeble's). John had an excellent musical background, both in Europe and in America. He studied organ with Herbert Sisson and Clarence Dickinson, and began playing professionally at 16, and became the youngest vaudeville director for Loew's Theatres at 21. He was also a top-flight accordionist and wrote accordion solos and orchestral compositions, and was in the habit of working 22 hours a day, 7 days a week for a long time. John and I have been dear friends ever since we worked together on radio transcriptions. Now living in Florida, he is a wonderful fellow and it was a real pleasure working with him and for him. He does not play in public, but still plays exceedingly well.

"ARCHER GIBSON, an organist on WJZ and WEAJ in New York, was the pet organist of the Rockefeller family, and was the darling of the society women. He was tall, slim and had a great deal of charm. Whenever any organ company installed instruments in these society people's homes and the owners complained about ciphers and other malfunctions, they'd send Archer Gibson over. He'd play noodles around the ciphers and pacify the owners!

"DOLPH GOBEL played the RKO 58th Street Theatre and over NBC in New York.

"KENNETH HALLET and I worked as demonstrators for the Choralcello Organ Co. in 1916. I had been in the United States for only a few months and I still spoke with a slight British accent; Hallet tried to boss me around. In 1923, he was my assistant at the Philadelphia Fox Theatre. He also played the Strand

and Aldine theatres in Philadelphia.

"JOHN F. HAMMOND, who taught at Rochester's Eastman School of Music in the early twenties, was also organist in New York's Piccadilly Theatre. He played the Saenger Theatre in New Orleans, starting in early 1927. Rosa Rio, who was his wife then, played the theatre as 'Betty Hammond.' Later, John managed the Hammond Organ Studios in New York where he did an outstanding job, helping many organists including yours truly.

"ARLO HULTS played the RKO 86th Street Theatre and over NBC in New York. Now on the Coast, he is known as 'Arlo.'

"ERNEST F. JORES (pronounced Joe-Ray) played New York's Audubon and Capitol theatres.

"HENRIETTA KAMERN played Loew's Rio Theatre in 1927. Still a very fine organist, she lives in Florida.

"FREDERICK KINSLEY played the Hippodrome Theatre, and the Riverside Baptist Church, which was the Rockefeller's place of worship.

"SIGMUND KRUMGOLD played the New York Paramount and Criterion theatres. According to my friend, Johnny Winters, Boris Morros was general music director for Paramount Theatres in New York, and when he took Krumgold to Hollywood to be studio organist and to score pictures for Paramount, it was a sad day for patrons of the Paramount Theatre. He was a true master of playing a movie.

"DICK LEIBERT, after his Pittsburgh days, played the Brooklyn Paramount before his long tenure as chief organist at Radio City Music Hall, beginning in December 1932. He and I opened the Music Hall's 4/58 Wurlitzer.

"LEONARD MAC CLAIN, the famous 'Melody Mac,' opened practically every theatre in Philadelphia. He studied organ for 30 years, had his own radio program, did extensive teaching (Dennis James and Keith Chapman were two of his students) and played at Wanamaker's Store.

"ROLLO MAITLAND was one of the finest organists. His home ground was Philadelphia where he played the Aldine, Arcadia, Stanley and Strand theatres. He eventually became blind.

"DR. MELCHIORE MAURO-

COTTONE for years was the featured artist at New York's Capitol Theatre, playing the illuminated Estey console. He also had a stint at the Roxy for awhile.

"MARSH MC CURDY, who played Loew's Lexington Theatre for several years, also played Loew's State and Loew's 83rd Street theatres.

"BILL MEEDER played in New Jersey theatres, taught (one of his students was Rex Koury of *Gun-smoke* fame), played at the RKO Richmond Hill 3-manual Robert Morton. From here, he became staff organist at NBC before free-lancing. One radio program for which he played was *Search For Tomorrow*.

"HENRY B. MURTAGH played the Rivoli and Capitol theatres in New York, as well as other theatres from coast to coast.

"JOHN PFEIFFER played the Loew's New York Theatre and the Hippodrome. We met at the former. When my wife and I were married, we were both under age. So, John acted as guardian at our wedding!

"JOHN PRIEST, besides the Cameo, played the Colony and Rialto in New York. In 1924, when I left the Fox Theatre in Philadelphia, John urged me to work with him at the Colony as his associate. He took ill a few days before I was to become his co-worker, and I took John's place on a Sunday. After the last show, I visited him at the hospital, where he died about midnight.

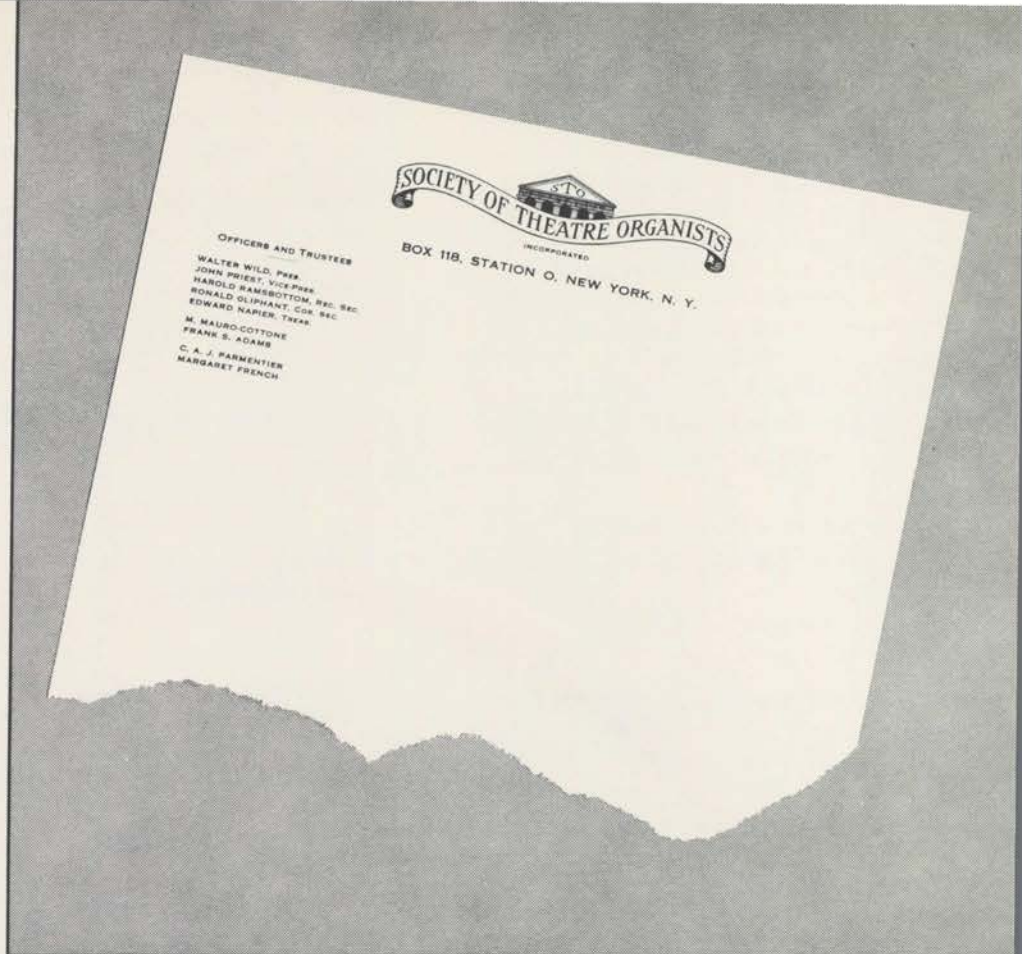
"I insisted that his wife and daughter spend the night with us, instead of going back to their apartment. They were so shaken and helpless that I made the funeral and burial arrangements.

"John Priest was one of the finest organists I ever met. He was to have played the Sesquicentennial in Philadelphia in 1926, and was slated for the Roxy in 1927.

"HAROLD RAMSAY (Ramsbottom) traveled extensively from coast to coast. In New York, he played the Rivoli.

"JOHN STANGO was at the Boyd and 69th Street Theatres in Philadelphia.

"PROF. FIRMIN SWINNEN studied at the Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music in Antwerp, Belgium, about the same time my brother, Firmin, did. Besides the Rivoli and Rialto theatres in New York, he



Letterhead of New York Society of Theatre Organists. Dr. Parmentier knew most of the persons listed.

played the Aldine Theatre in Philadelphia, and the State Theatre in Jersey City. I understand he was private organist for the Du Pont family, and he played a concert every Sunday at the fabulous Du Pont Conservatories in Wilmington, Del., which was open to the public.

"EMIL VELAZCO played mostly in the Midwest, including Chicago. He was slated as one of the Roxy organists in New York, and we even rehearsed together. But, he took ill a few days before the opening in March 1927 and never played the Roxy publicly. Soon after, he opened an organ school in New York, and eventually he went into business, composing, scoring and recording music for commercial films."

When the use of the theatre pipe organ diminished, following advent of the talkies, many organists transferred their talents to the infant medium, radio. Dr. Parmentier's good friend, John Gart now adds a sizeable contribution to this feature, which he calls "Organ in Radio."

"The organist played a very important part in radio. It helped the listener in building a better image and fantasy. Best known was the soap opera, because most of the

sponsors were manufacturers of soaps and detergents (Proctor & Gamble, Colgate, Lever Bros., etc.).

"Besides the impressive openings and closings, the pipe organ (with Hammond entering the picture after 1935 because of low maintenance cost and mobility), set the mood and led into and out of commercials. The organ made an important contribution to radio, and today, the electronic organ is still being widely used on many TV shows. Here is a list of some of the organists and their program credits as I remember them. Some are still active. You will notice several names credited to one show. Most organists subbed during vacations and illness.

PAUL CARSON — *One Man's Family; I Love a Mystery.*

GAYLORD CARTER — *Amos n' Andy, Second Mrs. Burton, Hollywood Hotel; Phantom of the Organ; California Melodies; Bride & Groom; One Man's Family; I Love a Mystery; Breakfast In Hollywood.*

GEORGE CROOK — Played Brooklyn Strand and was a star demonstrator for Hammond while John Hammond was in charge. Played

Park Ave. Synagogue and was on NBC staff.

JOHN GART — *Bright Horizon; True Story Theatre; Superman; House of Mystery; Truth or Consequences; Evelyn Winters; House in the Country* (conductor). TV credits include *Valiant Lady, Love of Life; Whom Do You Trust?; The Guiding Light*.

DOLPH GOBEL — *Ethel & Albert*

ABE GOLDMAN — *Easy Aces; Gangbusters; Grand Slam*

EDDIE HOUSE — *Myrt & Marge*

SKITCH HENDERSON — *Smile Time*

CHESTER KINGSBURY — On CBS staff

ANN LEAF — *Lorenzo Jones; Easy Aces; Vic & Sade; Pretty Kitty Kelly; Ann Leaf at the Organ; Nocturne*.

DICK LEIBERT — *The Second Mrs. Burton; Stella Dallas; When a Girl Marries; Big Sister*.

HERSCHEL LEUCKE — *We Love and Learn; Life Can Be Beautiful*.

WILLIAM MEEDER — *Pepper Young's Family; Right to Happiness; Search for Tomorrow*.

DR. C. A. J. PARMENTIER — On CBS, NBC staffs. From 1936 to 1948, he worked on approximately 40 shows.

CHARLES PAUL — *Young Dr. Malone; Road of Life; This is Nora Drake; The Shadow; As the World Turns*.

ROSA RIO — *Between the Bookends; Second Honeymoon; The Shadow; Cavalcade of America; Court of Missing Heirs; Myrt & Marge; Deadline Drama; Ethel & Albert; Front Page Farrell; Lorenzo Jones; When a Girl Marries; Rosa Rio Rhythms*.

HENRY SULVERN — *Nick Carter; Boston Blackie; Phio Vance*

PAUL TAUBMAN — *Rosemary; Penthouse Club*

ELSIE THOMPSON — *Aunt Jenny; The Shadow*

DOC WHIPPLE — *Ma Perkins; Light of the World*

LEW WHITE — *The Shadow; Young Dr. Malone; The Green Hornet; Ethel & Albert*

JOHNNY WINTERS — *Young Widder Brown; Backstage Wife;*

Myrt & Marge; Mr. Keene; Strange as it Seems; Land of the Lost; Young Dr. Malone; When a Girl Marries; Valiant Lady, Whispering Streets. TV included the *Chubby Jackson Show; Where the Heart Is; Love Is a Many Splendored Thing; Time For Fun; Discovery*. Winters served all three major networks.

ATOS sincerely thanks Dr. Parmentier and his friends, John Gart and Johnny Winters, for their invaluable assistance and cooperation. Without them, this article would not have been possible. □



the letters to the editors

Letters to the Editor concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are encouraged. Send them to the editor concerned. Unless it's stated clearly on the letter "not for publication," the editors feel free to reproduce it, in whole or part.

Address:

George Thompson
Editor
P.O. Box 1314
Salinas, Calif. 93902

Dear Mr. Thompson:

We've just received our copy of the August/September THEATRE ORGAN and have been looking over the section about the Atlanta convention.

I got a chuckle out of Bob Oberlander's piece about the jam sessions where he mentioned my age. Of course I'm not 80 — yet. I sometimes say, "I'm having a hard time convincing people that I'm going to be 85," and then after a short pause I add "some day." Guess Bob didn't hear that part.

To set the record straight let's say

that I will admit to being 60 — plus.

Seriously, I'd like to say that since becoming an ATOS member in 1974, Cathy and I have attended all of the national conventions as well as some of the regional conventions. Where else can we meet such nice people?

Sincerely,
Harry Koenig
Niles, Illinois

Dear Lloyd:

We just want you to know what a superb writing job you did on the Arnold Leverenze article which was in the August/September THEATRE ORGAN. Our magazine came yesterday and we went over to see the Leverenz's tonight.

I only wish you could have seen those thrilled people, to see the expression on Arnold's face! As Marie read aloud to him, he nodded approval several times. Even though it is difficult for him to communicate, he obviously thought the article was very good.

We wanted you to know how much this meant to them, and we all thank you for your fine work.

Sincerely and best wishes,
Homer & Jane McKee Johnson
Portland, Oregon

Dear Editor,

A situation has been transpiring in a number of churches in this nation which is disturbing. Theatre organ enthusiasts who have been involved with theatre organ installations and restorations have set themselves up in business "over night" so to speak to maintain church organs.

The American Institute of Organbuilders, a professional society, had discussed this problem recently at their National Convention in Moorhead, Minnesota. Organbuilders, who have spent a good share of a life time being trained to be organbuilders and who have a business of tuning and repairing church organs, are extremely distressed over this situation. Professional organ maintenance firms are finding that their regular customers are being talked into having hobbyists take over their service contracts in order to make a few bucks on the side and so churches can "save money" on their organ maintenance. In my opinion, this is a deplorable practice! Many fine church organs have been damaged