

# The Melody Lingers On

by  
Ted Crampton



Jim Crampton's home is the former miller's house, on the left. On the second floor of the water mill is a concert room containing the Wurlitzer and Compton theatre organs.  
*(John D. Sharp Photo)*

The Wurlitzer organ, Opus 1840, now in Jim Crampton's water mill in Oxnead, in North Norfolk, England.  
*(John D. Sharp Photo)*



At the turn of the century, the hills around the town of Thomas, West Virginia, were covered with thick forests. This was soon to be changed by the "timber barons" who sent in gangs of timbermen to fell all the noble trees. Toiling alongside these timbermen were men from the small mining camps. Money flowed as if just invented.

In 1905, Hiram Cottrill arrived in Thomas from Pennsylvania and built what he grandly called Cottrill's Opera House. The building bears that name to this day. John C. Thompson, an employee of Cottrill's between 1910 and 1942, provided this author with the history of the building.

In its early years, the opera house played host to road shows doing one-night stands. Mr. Cottrill was the owner-operator of a saloon occupying the ground floor of the opera house. With the coming of prohibition, he sold everything, including the theatre, and bought a farm elsewhere in the state.

The new owners operated the theatre, and entertainment ran from one-night stands through a variety of plays, finally turning to movies. The movies, with piano accompaniment and live shows added at times, soon became the prime attraction. In time the theatre again changed hands, going to a Mr. Sutton who renamed it Sutton's Theatre.

The new manager always procured the best equipment, and his shows were a real treat. The original investment in a Photoplayer, a player piano with a small organ attachment, was later replaced by a much larger Photoplayer with two organ attachments complete with traps. Early in 1928, a 4-rank Wurlitzer organ, Opus 1840, Model B, was installed in the theatre. Alas, its stay was short for the following year the introduction of talking pictures

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Wurlitzer Opus 1840 was installed in Cottrill's Opera House (above), Thomas, West Virginia, in 1928, when it was known as Sutton's Theatre. Three years later the organ had been shipped to England and was playing in the Regal Theatre, Colchester. This advertisement (right) appeared in the *Essex County Standard* on February 21, 1931.

made musical accompaniment obsolete.

However, across the Atlantic, in England, the arrival of "talkies" coincided with an intense rivalry among theatres to provide more lavish entertainment programs, using the theatre organ to augment the orchestra, to accompany stage acts and to provide solo interludes. This resulted in the installation of over 500 unit organs in Great Britain.

After its removal from Sutton's Theatre, the little Wurlitzer was returned to the factory for the addition of a Tibia and Chrysoglott/Vibra- phone. Then it was once more crated up and transported across the ocean to England where it was installed in the Regal Theatre in Colchester, a military garrison town in the county of Essex. A theatre of some substance, the Regal offered daily programs that included a movie, a news feature, on-stage entertainment and selections by the Regal Orchestra. When the theatre was newly-opened in February, 1931, Max Bruce was the organist. Several months later, upon his departure to the Bijou Theatre in Johannesburg, South Africa, the bench was taken over by Tom Walker who remained at that post until 1963 when the organ was removed due to modernization of the theatre.

The organ was purchased by airline executive Jim Crampton, a lover of theatre organ since boyhood. He had purchased the water mill at Oxnead, in North Norfolk, and modernized the miller's house alongside where he now lives with his wife, Barbara. The four-story water mill was built a hundred years ago and its waterwheel is still there but no longer in use. With imagination and good taste, Jim has now converted the second floor into a roomy, comfortable concert room seating about 100. At one end stands the console of a British Compton theatre organ, presently being installed. At the other end is the lofty chamber containing the five ranks, tonal and nontonal percussions and effects of the Wurlitzer organ. The swell shutters are hidden by wall-to-wall curtaining which can be opened to reveal a movie screen.

The Wurlitzer console has been immaculately restored to its beautiful mahogany finish, and the stop-keys, manuals and pedalboard have all been renovated. That the organ is in frequent use is a tribute not only to the Wurlitzer craftsmen of yesteryear, but also to today's craftsmen who have brought back to mint condition something that would have decayed and faded away years ago.

To go back to the beginning of the story, what has become of Cottrill's

Opera House? Over the years, decay and neglect have taken their toll, but the opera house with its ornate Italianate interior still stands. Help for its restoration is at hand, for the present owner, Mrs. Betty Stewart, last year donated the theatre to the Alpine Festival Association of Tucker County, who, with assistance from the Arts and Humanities Division of the Department of Culture and History of the State of West Virginia, is planning to reopen the theatre after its restoration. This writer is sending recordings of the organ to them so that the voice of the Wurlitzer may once more be heard in the theatre where it first sang out over 50 years ago.

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