

A Zest for Living-

HAZEL JONES SPENCE VAIL

as told to John D. Everest

Hazel was only ten years old when she left Port Jefferson, N.Y., with her parents to live in Waterbury, Conn. There she entered the Kimball Conservatory of Music and was taught to be an accompanist. At age thirteen, she lost her father, and she and her mother moved to Brooklyn to live with her grandparents, Capt. and Mrs. William Mather Jones. She continued her studies with Madame Marchardt, and later with Dr. R. Huntington Woodman. Hazel began to play concerts while attending Public School No. 3, where both her father and her Aunt Margaret had attended before her. At sixteen, she became an accompanist in a vocal studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In 1909, she married Charles Davis Spence, Jr.

After having four children, Hazel played the piano for her first theatre job in 1917 at the "Millionaire Colony" in Southampton, N.Y. The following year, war broke out and the family moved to Flatbush, Brooklyn. While her husband worked in New Jersey during the week building DeHaviland fighting planes and coming home on weekends, she played at the Midwout Theatre. She recalls a terrible flu epidemic during this time.

Hazel then worked at the Antionette Theatre in Flatbush playing a two-manual organ which was a combination of organ and piano with glass cases on each side housing the mechanical instruments. The theatre was long with two aisles and exit doors on each side of the organ. One day while she was playing, the theatre caught fire. No panicking, Hazel played the then popular song "Mickey" while the children sang and filed out of the theatre calmly. During this time, she also played a large two-manual organ during the supper hour in a new theatre that was just completed on the same side of the

street, by a man named Mr. Swartz. The orchestra leader had a fight with the owner because he hired a woman. However, Hazel won out and kept the job because of her talent, and the fact that she did not socialize with the men as other women had done in the past. Hazel's trick was to eat garlic which kept the fresh young men in their place. During this time, she was approached by Ambrose Reiff, almost 90 years of age, and the oldest delegate of the old Local 310, A.F. of M. She joined their union for

\$2.00 down. Soon after this a fight ensued to replace 310 with the new Local 802.

During this period, she heard a Wurlitzer organ being played on the radio. Not liking the way the organist played it, Hazel went to see Mr. Huenneke, head of Wurlitzer. He told her that as the highest paid woman organist in New York, she would be crazy to give up the live theatre and applause to play on the radio. However, he took her to see the Wurlitzer, which was in a bleak

Hazel Jones Spence Vail poses on the rose-bedecked Wurlitzer console in the Oxford Theatre, Brooklyn, N.Y., circa 1927.



studio all draped in black to help muffle the sound, and she realized he was right, and left.

Every two weeks Hazel journeyed to Times Square to the Irving Berlin office on Broadway and several publishers to get new orchestrations. One day, passing by Loew's Old New York Theatre, she walked into the office of a man named Mr. Lutz, who was in charge of the Loew's Circuit Theatres in the U.S. Hazel asked for a job. Hearing of her experience, he took her to the building that housed the music. This building was a former night club where she and her husband had heard Madame Emma Tretina sing. It was now filled with small cubby holes, each filled with music, and ladders were required to reach all the music. This music was sent to Loew's Theatres all over the country with the films, whenever and wherever it was needed. He took her in a small elevator to the roof where the Arabian Nights Theatre was located. This theatre was used for previewing new films for theatre owners and managers. The roof theatre also had a fine two-manual Moller organ. After she played a Waldau-feul Waltz on the Moller, he arranged for H. T. Frommel, the second organist from the N. Y. Capitol Theatre (the first full time theatre for movies) to coach her to improve her technique. She worked in the Loew's circuit for a year, including six months at the Bijou Theatre in

Brooklyn, and substituted at the block-long Metropolitan Theatre in Brooklyn. However, having to travel alone at night to the various theatres was a hardship and she finally had to stop.

While traveling to look at the Merrick Theatre in Jamaica, she saw the Fox Vaudeville Theatre. She went in to look for someone to inquire about a job and walked all through the theatre. Finding no one, Hazel went downstairs and recalls seeing a barking seal in a tank. Not liking the looks of the theatre she left. Hazel then went to the Rialto Theatre opposite Kings Park in Jamaica, Queens, where she left her name and address. They needed an organist in the Garden Theatre in Richmond Hill. Muller and Swartz were owners of the Garden as well as the Woodhaven Theatre, Woodhaven, and the Alhambra Vaudeville Theatre, Brooklyn. Acquiring the job as organist in the Garden, she played at a two-manual Kimball organ with a full orchestra for four years. The theatre had a balcony all around it with two theatre boxes on each side. She recalls young boys throwing scent bombs at the orchestra leader. If he stepped on them, the whole orchestra would soon leave because of the odor, and she would have to finish the show alone. Hazel remembers one of the acts on the stage was the original Buster Brown and his dog, and that the Kimball

organ was a beautiful soft-stringed instrument.

Hazel left the Garden Theatre to have her fifth child. The manager of the theatre was furious with her for using such a ridiculous excuse for leaving, as she did not look like she was expecting. After she had the baby, she wheeled the newborn infant into the theatre to show them.

In 1926, she was sent for by the Queens Rialto Theatre organist, a friend of hers, who was going on vacation. Her friend never returned, and the job became hers. The organ was a three-manual Midmer-Losh. Then Muller and Swartz asked her to return to play their new organ, a two-manual Wurlitzer, at the Oxford Theatre, State Street and Flatbush Avenue, near the Brooklyn Long Island Railroad Station. This organ had twelve buttons for feet, birds singing, bass, snare, tympani and castinettes. Between the two manuals were four second touch stops, two for the swell and two for the great manuals. One stop would be pushed half way down for one sound and all the way down for another. The challenge was to pick out sounds to match what was on the screen. Hazel played the night shift from 6-11 p.m. alone, including all vaudeville and specialties.

Her sixth child was born in 1929 during the end of the silent movie era. She was offered the opportunity to stay at half price in the event the sound was not perfected, but she refused.

In 1930, Hazel and her family moved to Setauket and then to Port Jefferson, N.Y. In the next ten years, she was semi-retired, having had her seventh child in 1931. Her husband took ill and was in St. Lukes Hospital, Bronx, where she moved in 1936 for one year. During her stay she was the St. Simeons Church organist at 1020 Carrol Place in the Bronx, playing a new Moller church organ.

Following her husband's death in 1941, she began a new career... formed a Girl Scout Troop, joined the American Women's Volunteer Service (AWVS), sold war bonds and stamps, was an air-raid warden, worked for the local newspaper for six years and played the organ in many churches.

A lawyer, George Darling, was looking for a memorial for his family and had installed the Midmer-Losh

Hazel accompanied films and vaudeville at the two-manual Wurlitzer in the Oxford Theatre, State Street and Flatbush Avenue, near the Brooklyn Long Island Railroad Station.



organ, that Hazel played in the Rialto Theatre in 1925, in the Methodist Church in Port Jefferson. He also installed a Riggs Jeffers Amplifier which was connected to the belfry of the church and permitted her to play concerts that could be heard all over the town. In addition to her church work, she played the piano for fifteen consecutive years on the Port Jefferson Ferry, *The Park City*, to Bridgeport, Conn. Many times, she had her own orchestra with her on the ferry, as well as in local night clubs throughout Long Island.

Hazel went to the Suffolk Home in Yaphank in 1950 to do volunteer piano and organ playing for the people living there. She remained there for seventeen years as entertainment director. While there, she played the largest Hammond organ then made. Hazel married William F. Vail, from Riverhead, in 1964, where she moved until his death in 1968. At that time Hazel retired from the Suffolk Home and moved to Mt. Sinai, N.Y. However, she continued to play at nursing homes, weddings and whenever called upon.

When asked to recall some of her memories of other organists, Hazel feels that her teacher, Dr. Woodman, composer and organist from the First Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn Heights for sixty years, was considered one of the finest organists of his time. She also recalls meeting Dr. Cartone, from Italy, and H.C. Fommel, famous organists of their time. She remembers being a member of the Theatre Guild of Organists and meeting in an unused loft in New York.

Hazel recalls three fires while playing; one in Southampton; one in the Antionette; and the one in the Rialto Theatre. The Rialto had twelve-hundred seats on one floor, and when she saw smoke in the ceiling, she realized the organ's blower was on fire. She shut off the switches while the orchestra continued to play, got someone to put it out and the audience never knew what happened. Hazel remembers a cat that would walk across the stage and climb onto the organ; she would have to hold the cat in one hand and play with the other.

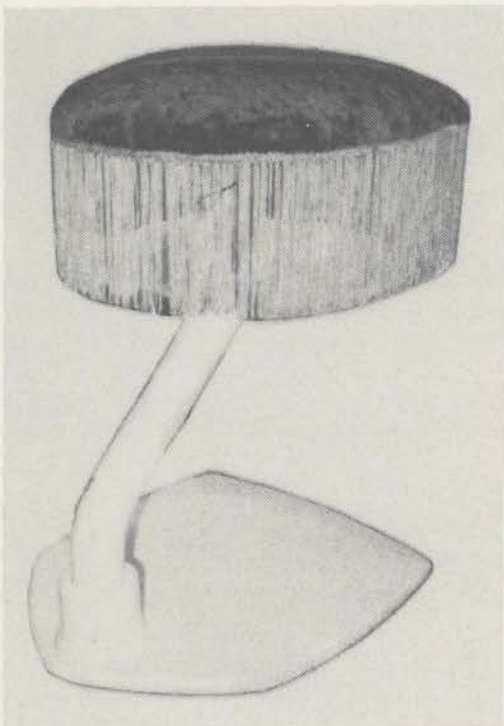
One fond remembrance was the

children in the theatre eating peanuts and then jumping up and down on the shells making so much noise that she could not hear her own music. She would get off the organ bench and grab the culprits by the neck and make them sit down and be quiet.

Hazel celebrated her 90th birthday in February 1980. She is presently living with her youngest daughter and family in Port Jefferson, but has had her own home all this time. She now has twenty-five grandchildren, seventeen great-grandchildren and one more on the way. Her second youngest daughter, Mrs. Jane Erland, served for forty years as organist of Christ Episcopal Church in Port Jefferson. Mrs. Erland teaches organ, too. Although her sight is poor, Hazel Spence Vail still plays the piano, has a fantastic memory, and a great zest for life.

This, of course, is only the professional side of Hazel's life. Although she loves music and was, and still is, a true artist and professional, her first love has and always will be her family. But that's another story. □

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