

Restoration Of The Wenatchee Wurlitzer

by Thelma R. Smith

From 1919 until 1932, the Liberty Theatre (Wenatchee, Wash.) was the big attraction in town. It was also in the lives of Bill Starkey and Dave Gellatly. Organist Kenny Warner, who played "Stardust" during intermissions those many years ago, could not have known that these two eager youngsters, would, years later, be revitalizing the same organ so that others might enjoy it.

Joining them in this project is Harvey Rossiter. Like many others around the country, they are doing this in their spare time, as a labor of love. It is expected that within a few months the rewiring of the console, and the tuning of the 11 ranks of pipes will be complete and it should be in good shape. As Bill Starkey said, "Thank goodness, we won't have to tune the bass and snare drums."

The Liberty's 2/11 Wurlitzer is one of the few theatre organs in the area still in its original location. Homer C. McDonald accompanied the musical comedy, *Chin Chin*, on opening night at the Liberty. As Dave Gellatly fondly remembers, "Theatres in the olden days had

class. The managers wore tuxedos every night. And who can forget the good-looking usherettes in uniform at the head of each aisle, checking your ticket by flashlight." Dave also remembers that they put perfume in the fan room, so that the theatre smelled good, instead of like stale popcorn.

This particular organ is a Wurlitzer Style 185. It originally had seven ranks, plus Chimes, Glockenspiel, Xylophone, Chrysoglott and tuned Sleigh Bells along with traps and toy counter.

In 1930, Sandy Balcom, of Balcom and Vaughan, added four ranks, playable only at 8' pitch from the solo manual in another chamber on the other side of the theatre. These were a Trumpet, Dulciana, Open Diapason and Vox, all with the tops cut off, which gives a sound something like a loud Kinura. He also removed the original Diapason and on its chests put a Tibia from a Style D Wurlitzer that was then in the Rialto Theatre here. He cross-wired the Tibia to the Flute spreader on the switch stack, so that all the Flute unification works on the Tibias, too.

The renovating is being done, with Dave working on the console, Bill concentrating on rewiring and Harvey toiling over the pedals. It is a combined and sincere effort on the part of these three men.

The console has been worked over and only needs refinishing. All the pneumatics for the combination and stops have been recovered, and there are new key and pedal contact blocks under the manual and pedal. They have also refelted and re-bushed the keys and pedal boards. New contacts have been installed and wiring has been done on the swell pedal. The relay system is being worked on, and the slow and tedious job of replacing the contact wires is being accomplished. Most of the pneumatics seem to be good even though they are still covered in the original zephyr skin, now 61 years old. The chests, which have a few dead notes, have yet to be opened.

Until Evergreen Theatres gave up their lease on the theatre, about 15 years ago, the organ was fairly well maintained. After that, it fell into disrepair. Several accompaniment manual keys have been played so much that the ivory has been worn clear through the wood.

While this may not be the biggest restoration on record, it may be an inspiration to others. As a project, it is a challenge, and is certain to be a job well done. Someday, soon, the Puget Sound Chapter will make the jaunt back over the hill (sic: the Cascade Mountains) for a visit to Wenatchee to see and hear the "rebirth" of another Mighty Wurlitzer that can be enjoyed by new and upcoming generations for years to come. □

Several of the keys on the accompaniment manual (left) of the Liberty Theatre Wurlitzer were worn down to the wood through years of use. Renovation of this in-theatre installation is being carried on by Puget Sound members. (Dave Gellatly Photo)

