

Her Name Is **Eloise**



The name Eloise Rowan was well known in professional circles during the great age of the theatre organ, but being a somewhat shy person she never beat the drum to promote her talents. She still doesn't but her accomplishments and assignments are impressive. Here is a significant part of her story in her own words.

My family lived in Fargo, North Dakota. I was musical for as far back as I can remember and decided early in life on a musical career. I have never regretted it. There were the usual childhood music lessons but my musical ambitions took a huge leap when I enrolled in Northwestern University School of Music in the mid-'20s. I studied piano with Prof. Beecher. Theatre organ had never entered my mind at that time.

Part way through college, my family moved from Fargo to Minneapolis, so I transferred to the Music School of the University of Minnesota as a Music Major, and added classic organ to my studies. My organ teacher was Prof. George Fainclough and I was working toward the Fontainebleau scholarship. Then it happened.

I attended a performance at the State Theatre in Minneapolis. I don't recall the name of the movie, because something far more important crowded out every other memory of that evening; I heard the organ in the State, played by a young man named Eddie Dunstedter. The impact was enormous. What an inspiration he was! From that day, pursuit of a career as a theatre organist became my number one goal. The thrill and glamour of rising on the console for a spotlight solo, or to present a sing-along, or to accompany a stage show or silent movie, these were paramount ambitions, and even that

◀ "Look sexy," commanded the photographer at the Minnesota Theatre and the result was Eloise's only 'Glamor picture.' The year was 1929.

name would later figure in.

I was still attending university classes, but I just had to learn about the theatre organ. With much trepidation I approached Eddie Dunstedter, then in the opening stages of a career which would bring him into the national spotlight. Even then he was something of a "grump." He had no time for other than very promising pupils, and he made that quite clear. A girl whose musical experience had been in classical piano and organ, didn't look too promising to the dynamic future star. Yet, one factor was in my favor; I was a girl. Eddie's most prominent students, in retrospect, were female in gender, e.g. Elsie Thompson and Ramona Gerhard. So he finally accepted me as a pupil.

To bolster my understanding of the instrument, I got a job playing silents in a neighborhood house while studying with Eddie. Keeping up with my college studies made for a very full schedule, but to me the important thing was theatre organ. I must have progressed satisfactorily in Eddie's view because when a "relief" spot at the State opened, Eddie recommended me. The State was then Minneapolis' posh house. To play there was a privilege, even though my stint was between 5:00 and 7:00 p.m., Eddie's dinner break. I also played the last show of the day, accompanying the film which started around 11:00 p.m. I had arrived! Well — almost.

That was the era of ever larger and more ornate movie palaces and Minneapolis was prone to the trend. The zenith was reached in the Minnesota Theatre, a huge house equipped for elaborate stage presentations as well as movies. The organ was a large Wurlitzer. Eddie Dunstedter left the State Theatre to star at the Minnesota, and I was promoted to solo organist at the State. Shortly thereafter I graduated from college. I was on my own.

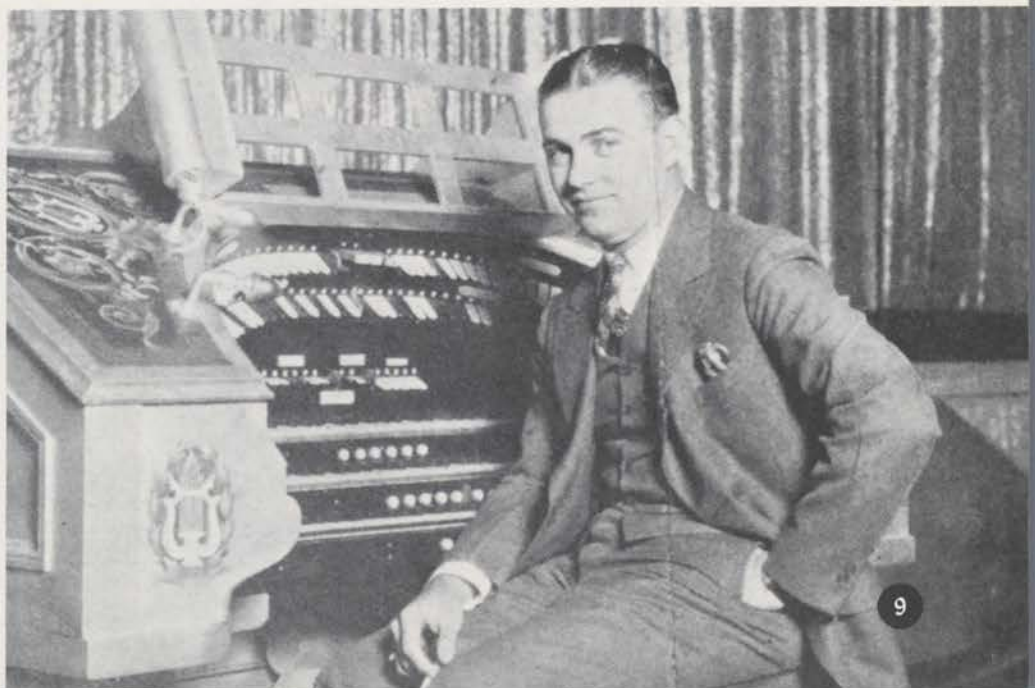
In 1929, General Mills hired Eddie to star in a full network, twice a week prime time radio show over CBS, the fondly remembered *Fast Freight*, so named for its introductory steam train arrival sounds. Eddie needed help at the theatre and he invited me over to the Minnesota. True, I would be second organist but second to Eddie Dunstedter wasn't at all bad. I played overtures with the pit orches-

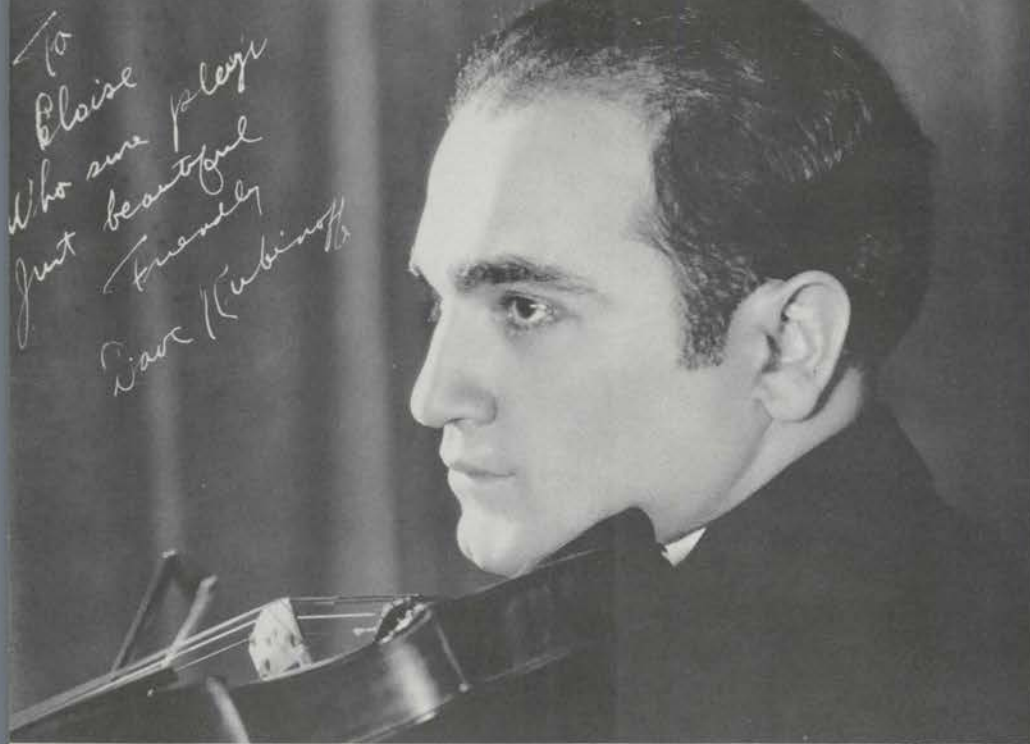


To
my friend & pupil
Eloise —
with lots of good
best wishes.
Eddie Dunstedter
SUSMAN
1930

Her mentor and teacher was Minneapolis' most prominent theatre organist, Eddie Dunstedter. His inscription says, "To my friend and pupil, Eloise, with lots of good luck and best wishes."

Dunstedter held forth at the Minneapolis State Theatre until the Minnesota Theatre was built. Both houses were equipped with medium-large Wurlitzers of between 15 and 20 ranks of pipes. The WCCO radio station had a very special Style 260, meaning that it was Eddie's specification.





To
Eloise
who sure plays
just beautiful
bravely
Dave Rubinoff

At the Minnesota Theatre, Eloise recalls her most embarrassing moment, when the pit orchestra was rehearsing an overture and conductor Dave Rubinoff tapped her on the head with his violin bow when she was one fourth beat late for an entry. Rubinoff later became famous as a radio conductor for *The Eddie Cantor Show*.

tra, spotlight solos and to give the orchestra a break on Saturdays and Sundays I accompanied the vaudeville acts on the organ during the 5:00-7:00 p.m. supper shows. And I was introduced to broadcasting. While Eddie tended to his CBS *Fast Freight* program, using the 3/14 Wurlitzer in the WCCO studio, I broadcast from the Minnesota Theatre for an hour after midnight one night a week. At that hour the WCCO signal really got out; we received requests from California, Alaska, Hawaii, Texas and many other areas far from Minneapolis. The sound of the Minneapolis Wurlitzer became known on the airwaves far and wide, and so did I.

In August 1930, I had a visitor from New York. The Paramount-Publix theatre chain's musical director, Boris Morros, came to town with a new idea in organ presentations. The chain was about to open a new Paramount theatre in Denver. He asked me to be half of a two-organist duo, to appear at twin consoles for spotlight presentations and to participate in stage shows. I didn't like to leave Minneapolis but this offer promised new adventure and I accepted.

When I arrived in Denver I met my

During a rehearsal at the Denver Paramount, "Jean" (left) and "Jackie" are conducted by orchestra leader Fred Schmidt, "a sincere and talented man" recalls Eloise.



Eloise accompanied many showbiz greats during her Minnesota theatre days. She recalls that the really big names were easiest to work with. During the '30s, Joe Penner was one of the big stars of vaudeville and radio.

"other half," Katherine Kaderly, who had come from New York. The show architects decided that a team named "Eloise and Katherine" didn't have the right sound so they renamed us "Jackie and Jean." I was Jean.

We had no trouble synchronizing our playing at the two consoles. We were a good team and had a happy and satisfying year playing at the Denver Paramount. There was lots of hard work involved but appreciative audiences made it all worthwhile. Yet I missed Minneapolis, and for a very good reason, a man named Charlie Dilling. We had met while I was playing in Minneapolis but it took the separation to drive home how attached we had become. Charlie was spending far too much on phone calls to Denver, so in 1931 I returned to Minneapolis, partly because I missed the town and also to give Charlie an opportunity to press his suit — which he did, with ardor. But I still wasn't quite ready for marriage.

The first objective was a job. I landed a playing spot at the NBC radio affiliate, KSTP, which had a large Robert Morton organ in their studio. It was a large and important station and I supplied the music for programs with budgets which didn't include orchestral music, including soap operas. During this period I was flattered by invitations to play for events in the Minneapolis Auditorium, a huge arena equipped with a five-manual Kimball organ. It must have had at least 125 ranks of pipes. A second four-manual console controlled only the theatrical voices. This had to be the largest instrument I have played.

There is a date I'll never forget — June 11, 1932. The day started out



normally; I appeared on a 7:00 a.m. commercial broadcast plugging toothpaste. I was the singing, playing "Little Colonel," a show which also required speaking on my part. Next on the agenda was a morning wedding at the Minneapolis Basilica. This required no singing or playing on my part, but I did have a few lines, such as "I do." Thus I became Mrs. Charles Dilling. After 48 years, Charlie is still my husband, and my best audience.

I continued playing at KSTP, and occasionally WCCO, at the auditorium Kimball for such varied events as bike races, sportsman shows and revival meetings (Aimee Semple McPherson). The birth of a son (1936) and a daughter (1939) took me away from the console briefly but I accompanied the transcription (recorded) shows packaged by Smilin' Ed McConnell for national distribution. The sponsor was Buster Brown shoes.

As World War II loomed there were war bond rallies in the auditorium with such stars as Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Dennis Morgan and others. The bigger the name the easier they were to work with.

To be near my husband, stationed in Chicago, I found work at WBBM accompanying Ed McConnell's live Saturday morning kiddies' radio show on their studio Wurlitzer. While at WBBM (NBC) I supplied music for numerous soap operas and even subbed once for Irma Glen on the *Quiz Kids* broadcast.

In 1945, with the war over, came our last big move, and a glorious one, to San Francisco. We settled on the Peninsula. I found employment at the NBC station (then KGO), playing for both local and network shows. I was the accompanist for Stan Noonan, did background music for *This is Your Home*, played organ with Albert White's *Masters of Music* for the Morris Plan, supplied thematic music for *Live Like a Millionaire*, for Red Skelton's San Francisco-originated shows and for Don McNeil's *Breakfast Club* visits to the Bay Area.

Then TV reared its sweeping eye. The first days were hectic. Among the pioneer stations were KPO-TV and KPIX-TV. I was there at the B-3; lots of exposure but very little money. Many of the early programs



Back in Minneapolis, Eloise was "The Little Colonel" on a morning radio show sponsored by Pebecco toothpaste over the NBC affiliate, KSTP. The studio organ in 1932 was a Robert Morton. It was during the run of this program that Eloise was married to her college sweetheart, Charles Dilling.

After a postwar move to San Francisco, Eloise played organ for NBC Network shows from 1948 to 1951, many of them on the studio's very hybrid theatre organ. This is her studio publicity shot. (Romaine Photo)





During her San Francisco days, the electronic organ came into its own. Here she is seen rehearsing as part of an organ quartet for a show presented at the Geary Theatre as a promo for Wurlitzer electronic organs. Shown with Eloise (front) are Richard Purvis (left), an unidentified girl organist and Floyd Wright (right).

were "sustaining," meaning un-sponsored.

When the advertisers were convinced that TV had come to stay, the money got better. And it was even more hectic in the studios. I recalled the relaxed days of yore in the theatre and on radio with more than a little nostalgia, but this TV was a whole new challenge, an exciting new medium.

Meanwhile, a new interest in the theatre organ was evolving. So many people remembered the instrument from its first era of grandeur that clubs started up with the aim of preserving the beloved instrument. Or-

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Eloise today. She lives with husband Chuck ("my best audience") in a southern California town.

(Stufoto)



gans were being restored in theatres for concert use. Some were being moved to safer harbors. And it was happening all over the country and in lands far from the USA. Wherever the entertainment pipe organ had gained a foothold in its first life, an effort was being made to preserve its sound and music. The continued contribution of the American Theatre Organ Society is indicative of the fervor the instrument inspires.

Many of the great organists of yesteryear have been rediscovered, and as their ranks thin, there is a whole new generation of youthful organists ready to take over. And they are good! There is little danger that the theatre organ will ever reach extinction. It has been a wonderful era in which to be alive and I would not trade the as yet unfinished compass of my lifetime for any other period.

Eloise Rowan Dilling lives with husband Charlie in Rancho Mirage, Calif. Her chief activity is teaching organ. □