

THEATRE AND ORGAN REUNITED

At high noon, Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 1929, the doors to the Saenger Theatre in Hattiesburg, Mississippi opened to the public for the first time.

The Saenger was one of the last of the luxury movie palaces to be built in the South. The pangs of the depression were already being felt.

Seated at the console of the 2/6 Robert Morton organ was a skinny, freckle-faced youth, the first chief of staff and organist for the Saenger, by the name of Bob McRaney. Also on the staff of the Saenger was Tom Hartman, assistant manager, and J.V. McRaney, head usher.

Later Bob McRaney was sent on tour of the Saenger chain as guest organist, along with Frank "Slim" Suttle, and they were billed as an usher act, "The Publix Pals."

As an employee of the Saenger chain, McRaney had assisted organ mechanic Roy Gimpel in removing the Robert Morton from the old Strand Theatre, to be restored and installed in the new Saenger.

During the thirties McRaney did remote broadcasts at the Saenger organ over WPFB, the only local station at the time. During this time, an occasional stage attraction was brought in, and the theatre was used for some public events.

In 1968, a visit to the Saenger, which was still operating as a movie house, found the organ in deplorable shape, and inoperable. The console was a shambles, having been spray-painted white. The painter missed nothing, stop tabs, keyboards, the works. The organ chambers were visited and found to be heavily water

damaged. McRaney took photos of the organ, perhaps the last made.

In the seventies the theatre went dark. Like many other cities, the public deserted the downtown area when indoor, air-conditioned shopping centers opened in the outer edges of the city, with acres of parking and twin theatres.

In 1972, the Robert Morton organ in the Saenger was purchased by an electronics expert, Frank Evans of Meridian, Miss., who installed the organ in his home and had it playing for a while. He then decided to move, and, rather than add new space in his new home for the organ, pondered the question of what to do with the organ. He stored it in his large workshop, spending some time in restoring the console, enlarging the keydesk to three manuals, adding over 40 stop tabs and an 8' Clarinet and 8' Concert Flute. He had planned to electrify the action, switches and relays, along with a rectifier to modernize the organ and bypass all the necessary restoration and reworking of the original electro-pneumatic system. Much of the wiring was done with this in mind.

In 1974, ABC Interstate Theatres, successors to the Saenger chain, donated the Saenger to the City of Hattiesburg.

Bobby Chain, a successful businessman, was persuaded to run for mayor to fill an unexpired term and when elected, sparks began to fly. He was a no-nonsense, energetic and progressive type whose first thought was to do something to save the downtown business area and make Hattiesburg the business and cultural center for southern Mississippi.

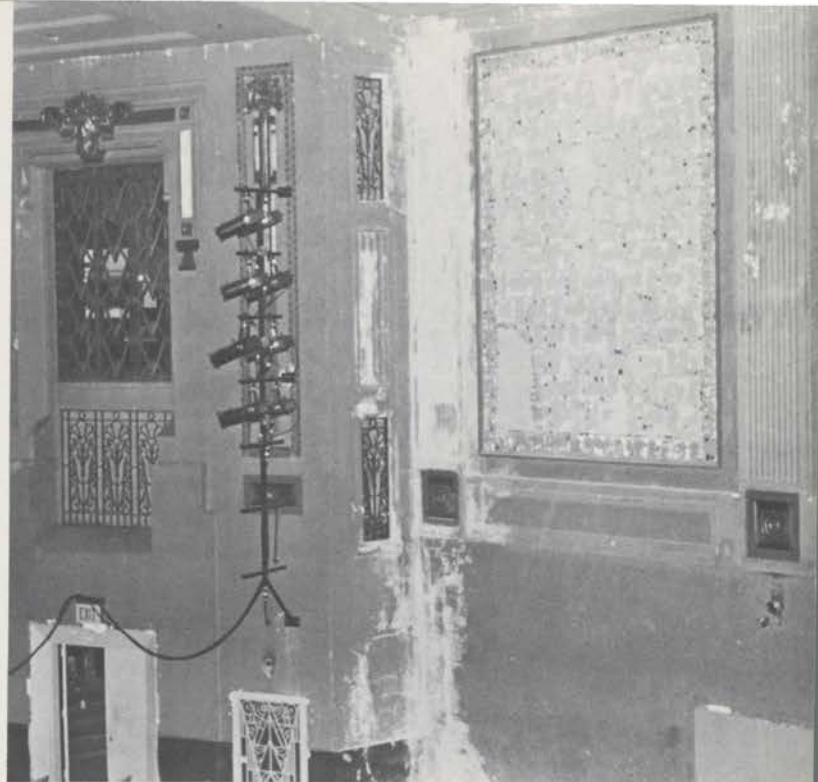
Mayor Chain turned the theatre project over to a young group of civic-minded people, who called themselves Friends of the Saenger. Their goal was to utilize the Saenger as a Cultural Center. The city set

Bob McRaney (left), first organist at the Saenger Theatre, with Henry Smith, program director and emcee for Radio Station WPFB during a remote broadcast from the theatre in 1932.





Robert Jenkins (left) and Frank Evans position the console of the 3/8 Robert Morton organ on display in the restored lobby. (The Meridian Star Photo)



Interior of the Saenger Theatre before restoration. Doorway under organ chamber will be widened for the console to slide out when being played. (The Meridian Star Photo)

aside a small fund each year to restore the theatre by degrees. The group also received support from the Civic Light Opera group, the Downtown Business Development District and others.

On the 50th anniversary of the opening of the theatre, the Saenger Cultural Center Committee, with Web Heidelberg, local attorney as chairman and also president of Friends of the Saenger, Inc., along with representatives of the State Department of Archives and History, and others, held a brief ceremony by installing a bronze plaque, proclaiming the fact that the Saenger had been listed on the National Register of Historic places by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

In the meantime, Mayor Chain, the city commissioners and others in city government, passed a bond issue in the amount of almost a million dollars, to be used in restoring not only the Saenger, but also the City Hall, located across the street from the Saenger, and the Community Center, a former U.S.O. club, given to the city by the federal government following World War II, just down the street. All are listed on the National Register of Historic places.

To show his intense interest in the overall restoration projects and the eventual redevelopment of the entire downtown area, Mayor Chain refused to accept his \$25,000 salary as mayor, preferring to add this to the

funds to complete the restoration work.

Web Heidelberg, of Friends of the Saenger and the Saenger Cultural Center Committee, began plans to completely restore the interior and exterior of the theatre. This is to include location of any original equipment, such as the Robert Morton organ, grilles, signs, light fixtures, stage equipment and numerous artifacts.

Mrs. Lorene Conner remembered that McRaney had been associated with the Saenger from its beginning, and thus the City of Hattiesburg requested him to act as consultant and advisor to locate the organ and negotiate the purchase, restoration and installation. The search was successful and a deal was made with the organ's owner, Frank Evans, to purchase and deliver the organ, completely restored and install it in the

Jumbled mass of organ parts destined for the Saenger Theatre.

(The Meridian Star Photo)





Bob and Helen McRaney with the 3/8 Robert Morton, while still at Frank Evan's workshop in Meridian, Mississippi.

Frank Evans shows a Diapason pipe to Hon. Bobby Chain, Mayor of Hattiesburg, and W.U. Sigler, City Commissioner.



theatre. The organ project is well underway and scheduled for completion by late October, 1981. A dedication program is planned for the 53rd anniversary of the theatre, perhaps Thanksgiving Day, 1981.

On December 3rd, 1980, the console was delivered to the Saenger and a press conference was called, with all media represented, to a "Welcome Home" ceremony. The project has received wide area publicity.

Frank Evans is one of the founders of the Magnolia Chapter in Meridian, and this group has restored the three manual Robert Morton in the Temple Theatre, only to have it damaged by the air conditioning system, and a second restoration is planned.

In the meantime, members of the Magnolia Chapter are assisting Frank Evans in the restoration of the balance of the instrument, still in his shop in Meridian.

It is heartbreaking to know that many landmark movie theatres and the romantic theatre organs are falling victims to the wrecking ball to make room for parking area, high rise office buildings, etc. In the meantime, the citizens of Hattiesburg, through a bond issue, have all become a part of the overall rebirth of the downtown area, including the Saenger Theatre, all of which leaves to posterity the rich cultural background of the glamorous days of the movies. □

"Myrtle" Replaced by Video Games

Wurlitzer Style D, Opus 909, until recently, was featured at the Pizza Machine, Modesto, California. It has been replaced by video games, a juke box, and a projection video screen.

Opus 909 is not just another Style "D." It started out as a standard six-ranker in the Hill Opera House, Petaluma, California, during 1924.

After removal and more than one owner, it became the property of ex-theatre organist, Joe Chadbourne. By this time the instrument had acquired several additional ranks, including a beautiful Musette, a snarling Posthorn and a lovely French Horn. The organ had been affectionately dubbed "Myrtle" and was carefully installed in Joe's barn near Fairfield, California.

After Mr. Chadbourne's death, "Myrtle" was sold to the Pizza Machine.

It should be noted that "Myrtle" was the only organ featured at the first ATOS (then ATOE) National Meeting in 1958.

At press time the future of "Myrtle" is not known.

The foregoing information was furnished to THEATRE ORGAN by ATOS member Katie Wyatt of Modesto. □

**Let's
All
Go
To
Seattle!**

**26th Annual ATOS
National Convention
July 1-5, 1981**