

DOLPH GOEBEL

from Vienna to Dagmar

by
Lloyd E. Klos

While doing research for this magazine's "Nuggets" columns, we have frequently seen the name of Adolph (Dolph) Goebel, who presided at organ consoles in eastern seaboard theatres from Massachusetts to Georgia, and in Omaha and Wisconsin.

Through the graciousness of Mr. Goebel's widow, his voluminous scrapbook was made available to the writer in 1977, and in the following we shall attempt to trace a very active career.

He was born in Regensburg, Germany on February 19, 1899, his parents being Teresa Kagler and Adolph Goebel, Sr. "Starting piano lessons at six with his sister," according to Mrs. Goebel, "he gave his first recital at ten in a school auditorium in Regensburg. For a while, brother and sister enjoyed performing together. However, the sister, five years older, broke up the act by leaving for an out-of-town girls' school.

"He loved music, but other studies came first. In deference to his parents' wishes, he studied pharmacy, received his diploma, and worked in this profession for a while, though not happy in it." His advanced education was in the University of Bavaria in Munich, and he later continued his music studies in Austria under Engel Hardt at the "Kirchenmusikschule" until 1923, when he emigrated to the United States.

As a pharmacist, he would have to earn a diploma here. This he did not care to do, a young man of 23 and on his own. He was a staff musician for



When Dolph worked for Music Corp. of America in 1950, this publicity photo was distributed. (Goebel collection)

a New York production, *The Miracle*, for a time. Having heard an organist play for silent pictures, he was intrigued at the possibility of learning to master a theatre pipe organ.

Soon, he was an avid student at the Wurlitzer Co. on 42nd Street, his teacher being a Mr. McDonald. After three months of study, Dolph became organist for silent movies at the Meserole Theatre in Green Point, New York. The 725-seat house was a unit of Small's Queens Theatre Circuit, and had a 3-manual Moller. L. Lew Reed was the manager. Besides overtures, the Meserole orchestra, led by Louis Schneider, "rendered specially selected musical programs, interpretive of the action on the screen." Dolph followed this with a

stint at the Commodore Theatre in Brooklyn.

In 1924, he had a short engagement at a theatre in Johnstown, New York, as orchestra leader. It was here that the theatre manager approached Dolph to help him burn down the house for the insurance, because it wasn't making any money. The manager said, "You can figure a way by shorting out a wire in the organ somewhere." The organist returned to the theatre, picked up his music and left for good, not desirous of being a part of this nefarious scheme.

Following were engagements at the 1472-seat Savoy (2/10 Wurlitzer) and the 2966-seat Branford in Newark, New Jersey. He also broadcast over WOR, which was owned by L.



Dolph at Loew's Yonkers Robert Morton in 1928.

(Goebel collection)

Bamberger & Co.

From 1925 to 1927, Dolph Goebel was in Wisconsin. He played the 2/6 Wurlitzer in the 1000-seat Rex in Sheboygan for over a year, and in 1927, accepted a position at the Avelyn M. Kerr School of the Organ in Milwaukee. A publicity release read as follows:

"The Avelyn M. Kerr School of the Organ announces with great pride and pleasure the services of Adolph Goebel. He received his early training from masters of the old school of organists, and on entering the United States, took up the study of theatre organ under one of the best-known instructors in this country.

"The knowledge of concert as well as theatre organ playing makes him one of the most desirable instructors in this section of the United States. His time will be devoted to the teaching of foundation and concert playing, with a limited amount of time devoted to theatre organ playing."

While in Milwaukee, Dolph had a half-hour pre-noon recital of request numbers over WSOE, which was operated by a school of engineering. He also performed over WISN, Milwaukee, and on WHT in Chicago.

In January 1928, he opened the 2119-seat Loew's Avalon in Brooklyn. The opening bill included the silent film *London After Midnight* with Lon Chaney, Marceline Day, and Conrad Nagel, plus a Charlie Chase comedy.

Dolph was at the Avalon but a

short time when on February 2, he was engaged to open the sumptuous Loew's Yonkers, which resulted in an extended engagement of 132 weeks. The house had a 3/13 Robert Morton.

In September 1928, Dolph was engaged to open the 3/14 Robert Morton in Loew's Fairmount in the Bronx. This was a 2500-seat house on East Tremont Avenue.

Dolph returned to Yonkers after the opening. Mrs. Goebel tells us that the Fairmount organ was known to be too big for the house.

She further offers this anecdote concerning her husband, which occurred in 1928. "That was the year I

met my beloved Adolph. I was in the audience one afternoon, and the time had arrived for his solo. The musicians were already taking their places in the pit. The trailer came out on the screen: 'It's Adolph! Let's Sing!' The spotlight shone on the console, but no Adolph. The men in the booth grumbled and started calling, 'Where's Adolph?'

"The musicians had to fill for the coming attractions which were spotted before the overture. Suddenly, there was Adolph, which precipitated an ovation, the like he hadn't expected. The theatre manager was so pleased he forgot how angry he was at his organist's lateness. 'Adolph, you're a hit!,' said he. To which my husband replied, 'Don't you want to know where I was?' The manager answered that he didn't care, but to 'please be on time in the future.' Dolph was having a soda around the corner and wondered if he should try it again!"

Mrs. Goebel again provides a cute anecdote to our narrative. "In 1929, I gave Dolph a whippet as a gift. The dog was so well liked by the orchestra musicians that several made offers to buy it, but Dolph was of no mind to part with his canine companion. The dog took to Dolph like a duck to water; they were inseparable. Everywhere his master went, so did the dog, whose name was Paavo Nurmi, for the famed Olympic runner, the Flying Finn.

"One day, master and dog were out walking when Dolph realized he

Another view of the Loew's Yonkers console, showing decorative design on the console lift. (A. L. Kern Photo)





Dolph decorated the Loew's Yonkers console in 1929 for the Christmas program. Note the ancient carbon microphone, used for broadcasts over WCOH, Yonkers. (Goebel collection)

was shortly due back at the theatre. He hurriedly tied the dog to a chair in the green room. (Every theatre had a green room, used by artists to relax.) While playing his solo, the audience broke into laughter and Dolph wondered if he forgot to zip his trousers! Looking up, there was Paavo, pulling the chair onto the stage! The audience, thinking it was part of the act, gave a big ovation to the maestro. The manager asked that the act be kept in as part of his performance, but Dolph replied that 'Paavo does not belong to my union!' After that, the dog was locked in the dressing room."

In April 1930, our subject began broadcasting again, according to press clippings:

"Starting Tuesday morning, April 15 at 11:30, Adolph Goebel, organist of Loew's, will broadcast a half-hour program over Yonkers' own radio station, WCOH, direct from the console in the theatre. This first broadcast will start a series of organ recitals to be given by Mr. Goebel on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. His programs will include song hits from the current screen attractions and also request numbers, sent in to the station by listeners. Tune in to station WCOH, 1210 kilocycles (248 meters) to hear Mr. Goebel play the numbers you like best."

Mrs. Goebel tells us that one day, the organist thought he had a cipher. However, his dog was standing on a pedal!

In July 1930, the *Exhibitor's Herald World* announced:

"Adolph Goebel is another of the New York organists who are being

sent away from the metropolitan area by Paramount-Publix to ace houses elsewhere. For three years, he has been featured organist in a number of deluxe houses throughout the east, and for some time, has been chief demonstrator for the Robert Morton Organ Co. His opening of three deluxe theatres for the Loew Corp. in the past three years speaks highly of his ability. He not only has proved himself an asset to every house in which he has played, but also has made a big name for himself with his organ novelties which he broadcast from the last theatre in which he appeared."

So, our subject's next stop was the Paramount in Atlanta, a 2476-seat house with a 3/15 Wurlitzer. Lou Forbes directed the stage band, and Dolph featured spotlight solos and sing-alongs.

During 1930, a three-day musicians' strike occurred. The disagreement arose because of the musicians' demand for a 52-week contract. This meant that the theatres would have had to commit themselves to a musical policy at a time when the New York offices maintained that business conditions generally, and theatre business particularly, did not permit them to enter a definite contract for so long a period. Canned music was used during the strike, and Mrs. Goebel says that Dolph and the Paramount's assistant manager flew to Mississippi and played golf in the latter's home town.

In August 1930, he played a concert over WSB, Atlanta, which greatly added to his popularity. This occurred during his fourth week at the

Paramount and it inaugurated regular "relay service" between the station and the theatre. For his initial broadcast, Dolph arranged a brilliant program, combining the works of modern composers with those of classicists.

On February 11, 1931, Dolph was married in Yonkers. "I was introduced to him by a friend's boy friend who was the assistant manager of Loew's Yonkers in 1928," says Mrs. Goebel. "After that, we were going steady and I'd come down front to talk to him. There was a draped railing around the pit, and Adolph took advantage of this by reaching under it and taking my shoe, making off with it until he came out again to play the newsreel. He made sure that I'd be there when he returned! This used to annoy me as there were times I had to leave soon after the show. I even offered one of the musicians a couple dollars to get my shoe back, but when he asked me who had it, he refused. 'Oh, him. I don't want to mess around with him. No sir!'"

In 1931, his southern engagement over, he opened a 26-week stint at the Springfield, Massachusetts, Paramount, managed by Ben Greenberg. This was an 1852-seater, having a 3/11 Wurlitzer. He succeeded Bob Hamilton at the console, and ads in the newspapers listed songs Dolph composed: "Let's Go to a Movie," "My Old Pal," and "What a Won-

Dolph opened the Robert Morton in Loew's Fairmount in 1929, when he was a demonstrator for the Morton Co. John Gart played here later on.

(Goebel collection)



derful Day." The publicity included pictures of Dolph at the Atlanta Fox console, rather than at the Paramount. This was during the depression, and theatre expenses were being held to a minimum.

While at Springfield, there occurred another cute dog incident, though not funny at the time. According to Mrs. Goebel, "we had a Scottish terrier, trained to answer nature's call on paper. One day, we stopped the car to buy a copy of Liszt's 'Hungarian Rhapsody,' and threw the music onto the car's back seat. In time, a vile odor permeated the vehicle. Sure enough, nature's call was answered! Dolph scolded the dog, saying 'You stinker; why did you have to change it to 'Hungarian Goulash?'' Naturally, we had to buy another piece of music. The dog was sold afterwards!"

In February 1931, it was announced that the Springfield Paramount organ would be broadcast thrice weekly on WBZ. With the announcement was a description and sketch of the broadcasting facilities. It was admitted that true reproduction of organ music over the air had always been a problem because the organist could not properly hear the rendition of the music he was playing, and therefore, the reception never was of true tone color. For the WBZ broadcasts, the Paramount's console was raised to stage level. In a room in the basement was engineer Vernon Trigger, who operated a microphone mixing panel and an amplifier. On the console were a volume indicator and two loud-

speakers, while hanging from the balcony rail was a microphone for the pickup. This method of broadcasting, which was Dolph's idea, was used for programs over the Westinghouse stations WBZ, WBZA and IXA2. However, on May 1, 1931, organ music at the Paramount was dropped, as the management was cutting expenses.

Late in May 1931, our subject was at Loew's Pitkin in Brooklyn, where he served as guest organist for several weeks. This house was a 2817-seater. This was followed by eight weeks at Loew's Valencia in Jamaica, Long Island, a sumptuous atmospheric house of 4,000 seats, with a 4/23 "Wonder" Morton.

The newlyweds then decided to take a trip to Europe. Dolph hadn't seen his mother in ten years, and the couple made it a honeymoon venture. While in France, an offer came from the New York headquarters for a job in a New York movie palace. Dolph turned that down in deference to the Paramount in Atlanta.

Following that stint, Dolph went into the Palace Theatre in Stamford, Connecticut, and played a 3/9 Kilgen in the 1950-seat house for 14 weeks. He also played again over WBZ, Springfield.

Late in 1931, in the height of the depression, Dolph was at the Paramount studio in New York, auditioning for Boris Morros. Morros asked the organist to play something. "He obliged with a few numbers," says Mrs. Goebel, "when Morros asked if he could sing. Dolph's reply was to the effect that he was not a singer, but would give it a try. After the rendition, Morros said, 'Good, good. A singer you're not, but you have an accent.' Dolph replied: 'Yes, but so have you.' They both laughed and Dolph got the next job which was in Omaha."

On December 12, 1931, he began a twelve-week run at Omaha's 3000-seat Paramount, playing a 4/26 Wurlitzer. His specialties were song slides and spotlight solos. In those days, organists had to have novel ideas to keep their popularity high. They spent much time in perfecting their solo presentations, using gimmicks to put the act over.

During the screening of *Hell Divers*, an aviation film with Wallace Beery and Clark Gable, Dolph devised a clever idea. For the

opening show, two wires were strung from the projection booth to the orchestra pit, and a model airplane rode the wires to a simulated crash.

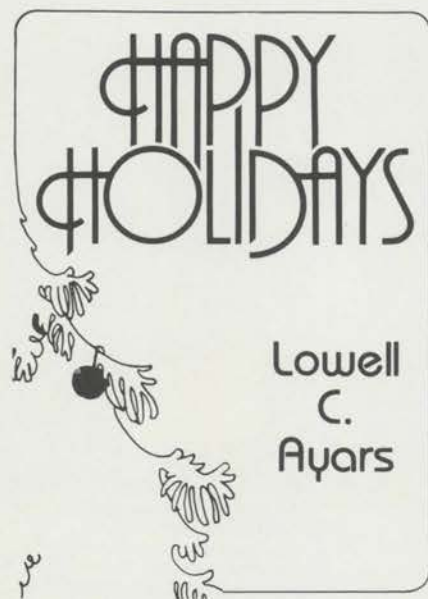
Dolph also designed personal cards for Christmas patrons. At other times, he distributed clever cards to patrons for writing their request numbers.

When the *Omaha Bee News* promoted its "Free Shoe Fund," Dolph wrote a song "I See by the Paper" and dedicated it to the newspaper. The theatre got five complaints because he included a plea for the fund during his organ stint. While in Omaha, he broadcast over KOIL.

In 1932 he returned east to Loew's Yonkers, where he played the organ and conducted for vaudeville. This was followed by his opening of the 2/5 Wurlitzer in Dobbs Ferry's 975-seat Embassy Theatre. The organ had been in a studio and was installed in the theatre shortly before Dolph's arrival.

The Peekskill, New York, Paramount was Dolph's next port of call in 1933, and he spent twelve weeks there as guest organist, playing a 3-manual Wurlitzer. Then came a 26-week stint at RKO Proctor's 86th Street Theatre in New York, with broadcasts over WMCA.

Dolph Goebel joined some select company who were placed in theatres at that time: Mrs. Helen Crawford, New York Paramount; Betty Lee Taylor, Loew's State in Syracuse; Bob West, Loew's Stanley in Baltimore; Ted Crawford, Loew's Norfolk; and Al Curtis, New York's Academy of Music.



In March 1934, Dolph Goebel began a 25-week run at Richmond's 1500-seat Colonial Theatre, playing a 2-manual Moller. A fellow organist who was playing at Loew's Theatre was Bill Dalton. Dolph also broadcast over WMBG. While here, he ran a parody contest under the sponsorship of the Adam Hat Store, and also served as "The Answer Man" for the *Richmond Movie News*, answering questions on motion pictures and music. The answer he gave one questioner on ability to play large organs rather than small ones, and the differences in pipe organs, bears mention:

"Contrary to general belief, any competent organist will verify the statement that it is easier to play a large organ than a small instrument. The number of manuals is merely an added simplification for the sole convenience of the organist to enable quick changes in registration. The only important factor in regards to the size of an organ is the number of speaking instruments (sets of pipes).

"A theatre organ is considered an offspring of the more conservative concert or church organ, and sometimes doesn't really deserve to be called as such. A theatre organ and a concert or church organ are so vastly different, not only from a musical standpoint, but also from the viewpoint of the builders. Main characteristics are: the theatre organ is a musical contraption on the principle of the concert organ, with pipes acoustically voiced in such a manner to imitate the instruments of an orchestra and supplied with heavier wind pressure. Added are percussion traps. Original concert or church organs consist of several types of organ tones such as Flutes, Diapasons and soft reeds, mostly on low wind pressure and not enclosed in a chamber. Techniques of playing both instruments are as different as pianos and reed organs. The theatre organist is usually called a 'one-leg pedaler,' as the right foot has control of expression. A two-touch system is on theatre organs."

Following his Richmond engagement, Dolph went to the 1500-seat Plymouth Theatre in Worcester, Massachusetts, for a short engagement.

With the use of organs in theatres at a minimum by this time, our subject branched into other areas of en-

tertainment, relying on the Hammond which had come on the scene in 1935. Here are a few of his endeavors from 1937 on:

1937-1941. Musical Director of WWRL, Woodside, New York. He became interested in playing the musical saw. On one program, he took three encores, but cut his thumb, necessitating five stitches.

July 1942. Dolph began a series of Sunday afternoon appearances on a Hammond at Forest Park in Forest Hill, Long Island, for the U.S. Treasury Department. He played for community singing during rallies for selling war bonds and stamps.

October 1943. Second edition of *Fashions of the N.Y. Times* at New York Times Hall. "Cass Parmentier had become ill, and called Dolph to take over the show. He made out so well that he was asked to do others, thanks to his friend, Cass," says Mrs. Goebel.

February 1944. "War Bond Frolics" at Brooklyn's Academy of Music. Cast included Peter Lind Hayes, George "Superman" Reeves, Joe Bushkin, Edmond O'Brien, Red Buttons, Jerry Adler (from *Winged Victory* cast), Dorothy Kirsten, Mack Harrell, Whispering Jack Smith, Phil Baker, Fannie Hurst, Milo Boulton, and Dave Elman.

There were scores of events, benefits, and programs which utilized the artistry of Dolph Goebel, and space limitations preclude our listing most of them. Dolph also got into radio more deeply. For example, in 1945 he performed on *Betty Moore's Triangle Club* over WJZ in New York. Other programs included: *Alma Kitchell Show*, *Appointment With Life*, *Chamber Music Society of Lower Basin Street*, with Paul Lavalle, *Creeps by Night*, with Peter Lorre, *Dark Destiny*, *Ethel and Albert*, with Peg Lynch and Richard Widmark, *It's Murder*, *Johnny Thompson Show*, *Margaret Whiting Show*, *Paul Whiteman Show*, *Strike It Rich*, with Warren Hull, *Teen-Age Time*, with Elizabeth Woodward, *The Gospel Singer*, with Edward McHugh, *The March of Time*, with Westbrook VanVoorhis, *The Mystery Chef* (Dolph once gave his recipe for stuffed cabbage.), and *The O'Neills*.

February 1946. Dolph returned to Atlanta to the Erlanger Theatre for a four-day show, *Fashionata*, a pre-

sentation of Rich's Department Store. Narration and songs were by Irene Wicker, "The Singing Lady." Dolph did the show the following year, expanded to a six-day event.

In May 1946, he was staff organist on WJZ. By then, he had become interested in building electronic equipment as a hobby, and was the inventor of the Gobelton Speaker for Hammond organs.

After four years as staff organist at ABC, he resigned in 1947 to become musical director of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Happy Birthday*, starring Helen Hayes. While going over the music with arranger Robert Russell Bennett one day backstage half an hour before the opening of the show, his portable organ's 60-lb. packing case fell off a shelf, skimming Dolph's head. Fortunately, a doctor in the house administered the three stitches required.

In the late forties, Dolph organized and directed the "Dolph Goebel Trio," which played engagements in the metropolitan New York area. He also organized "The Three Cavaliers" — guitar, accordion, and organ — which was similar to "The Three Suns." This group had gigs all over New York and New Jersey in

In 1930, Mr. Goebel had an engagement at the Paramount in Atlanta. Here he poses at the 3/15 Wurlitzer console. (Goebel collection)





While in Atlanta, Dolph had the opportunity to play the 4/42 Moller in the Fox Theatre. Here he is at the console. (Goebel collection)

the fifties and made quite a name for itself.

When Dolph was featured at Hatt's Restaurant in the Elmira, New York, area, he was interviewed by the local press. The following excerpts give insights into the man's character and philosophy of life:

"From Vienna to Clara Bow. From the "It" girl to Dagmar. From the TV eye-fu to Howard Hatt's rendezvous on the Lake Road. That's the highway Dolph Goebel has followed for 28 years, with many stops enroute. His map has been one of music and his transportation has been provided by an outstanding talent at the manuals of an organ.

"Hitting the high spots: One day in 1930, a newspaper in Atlanta carried this headline on its amusement

page: 'Organist Goebel and Clara Bow Open Here Tonight' . . . Dolph remembers the "It" girl as 'a beautiful woman — according to the standards of that time.'

"Many of the radio jingles which explode over the air waves were written by Goebel. 'I wrote 'em for soap, coffee, potato chips and even for an Ohio Savings Bank. I don't like the jingles any more than you do, but I like the money.'

"During the run of *Happy Birthday* in Boston, Dolph became good friends with Richard Rodgers. One day backstage, Oscar Hammerstein gave his partner a few lyrics. It took Rodgers less than 10 minutes to dash off the music for 'So Far,' one of the hit tunes of *Allegro*.

"One of Goebel's most pleasant memories goes back to World War I when he toured the vaudeville stages as organist for Lt. Gitz-Rice and his 'Royal Canadian Mounted,' a choral group. During the war, Gitz-Rice composed one of that period's most popular tunes, and Dolph recalls the song stopped the show every day. It was 'Dear Old Pal of Mine.'

"Dolph's most difficult musical assignment came in the early 1920's when he was hired to accompany the Royal Siamese Temple Dancers at New York's Hippodrome. 'It took me six hours to get the music down on paper as there was no manuscript available. Their rhythm was so odd, it was a horrible job to tackle.'

"As for Dagmar, the star of Jerry Lester's *Open House*: 'The first time I worked a TV show with her appear-

ing, I was a half minute late starting to play. I was looking at her instead of the music!'

"Dolph credits a portion of his success to some advice given him by the late Guy Lombardo. 'I played for Guy at his club in Freeport, Long Island, and he told me to forget all about bebop, boogie woogie and other oddities such as 'Come Ona My House.' He said that 99% of the people want melody with good harmonic embellishment. I've followed that advice. After all, Lombardo had been a headliner for over 20 years. He knew what he was talking about.'

"Dolph compares himself to a chef: 'We musicians must know what kind of music goes with a dinner, just as a chef must know what kind of seasoning to use. The other night, a gentleman asked for 'St. Louis Blues.' I told him I'd wait until he finished dinner. You see, I didn't want to spoil his digestion.'

"My music here at Hatt's place is piped into loud speakers to the highway. The other night, a woman phoned from Grand Central Avenue, three blocks away, requesting 'Stardust.' Said she was sitting on her front porch, listening to me play.'

"As for his wooing technique: 'I used it only once. I was playing in a theatre when I spotted this lovely girl in the front row. She had her shoes off, so I climbed over the pit rail and took them. And I didn't give them back until she promised to go out with me after the show. I used this trick but once, for that girl became my wife.'

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Equally adept at electronics as well as pipes, Dolph poses at his Hammond at home in 1945. (Goebel collection)

In 1952, Dolph quit the club-hotel-and-resort circuit, and worked closer to home. In 1954, he did some WABC-TV shows on *Clownland Carnival*, a 15-minute, five-a-week program for 13 weeks. Two years later, though he didn't care to do it, he worked for the Jim Handy organization for Chevrolet shows. This was in Texas for a month, Dolph serving as an orchestra leader.

That year, he was approached by Andy Sanella, who introduced him to Harry Belock who had an electronics business in College Point, New York. Dolph could speak German, French, Latin, Turkish, and English, and was studying Italian so as to converse with foreign "ham" radio operators. Belock talked Dolph into working for him as a field service engineer, and sent him to C. Plath in Hamburg, Germany, for instruction.

As Dolph loved challenges, he embarked on the new venture with enthusiasm. He learned repair and calibration of electronic test equipment and calibration of gyroscopic servo mechanisms. He worked as coordinator in the manufacture of the new

gyrocompass with automatic transistorized speed latitude control. The motive for having Dolph learn this was for him to conduct the training school for all RCA marine service personnel who were to be stationed at ports around the country.

Harry Belock had a yacht in Hamburg, and it was Dolph's job also to see that the proper electronic equipment was installed. Eventually, the yacht came to the United States.

Later, Belock gave up the Marine Division and went into the recording business in Bayside, New York. He wanted Dolph to make some records in 1962, but by that time Dolph's hip was giving him trouble. The cartilage was wearing away, and his heart could not stand an operation.

Dolph left Belock for Shaw Walker, the office furniture firm, to work in research and development. He worked out of his home, at his leisure, up until a year before he died in August, 1970, at the Manhasset, New York, Medical Center.

The writer hopes that through the appearance of this story in THEATRE ORGAN, a portion of the public will be able to achieve an insight into the life of a very talented and versatile personality. To Mrs. Goebel, alone, goes our thanks for providing us with the material, pictures, and answers to our questions which were so necessary in the compilation of this epic. □

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