

Profiles of Organists-Jack Thomas

AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD BOY sitting in the First Presbyterian Church of Taylorville, Illinois, many years ago was spellbound as his eyes feasted on the gilded array of display pipes fronting the first pipe organ he had ever heard or seen. In a moment, the mighty pedal notes of the diapason and bourdon joined the manuals in the mighty paen to God, "Holy, Holy, Holy," and the die was cast once and for ever. His determination, born some forty years ago, has strengthened and his love for the organ is today stronger than ever. John R. Thomas was that boy.

His first teacher was T. L. Rickaby, now deceased, a gentle, patient teacher, for many years Organ Editor of the *Etude* and for some thirty years organist of that Presbyterian Church. Rickaby was patient, but insistent on a good technique and a solid grounding in theory and harmony. Several years work with "T. L." was only the beginning.

A sign across the front of the Capitol Theatre read—"A NEW \$25,000.00 MIGHTY WURLITZER PIPE ORGAN NOW BEING INSTALLED IN THIS THEATRE." There was much excitement about the new theatre and the new organ and the new organist, a very important man from St. Louis. His name was Walter Parker and the organ was a mighty nice little 2m/8rs Wurlitzer: 5 ranks, and xylophone, chimes, Glock, and traps in the Solo organ; 3 ranks, and Chrysiglott Harp in the Main organ; five pistons on the Solo, 5 pistons on the accompaniment, and 3 pedal pistons; two balanced swell pedals and all the bird calls, surf, thunder, train, et cetera on the toe studs. It was all wonderful and new to Thomas who immediately started studying with Walt

Parker. It involved doing some janitor work, organ repair work; then, as studies progressed, work as relief organist and later at this same house as feature organist.

When Parker left this house he took Thomas with him as assistant first to E. St. Louis, then St. Louis, and to Gary, Indiana. Parker left Gary to go back to St. Louis and Thomas went to Chicago—the Marshall Square, Schoenstadts Piccadilly, the Marboro. On to Detroit—the Astor, the Dexter, the Fenkell, Frank Wetzman's Avalon, the Oriole (now "Prophet Jones" negro church), the Great Lakes, and the Fisher, then came those little blue slips in the pay envelope—"The company exercises its option to terminate your contract with two weeks notice . . ." "Tawkies" were here.

1931—show business was dead. Show business? . . . all business. Thomas was working as a clerk for the Peabody Coal Company and playing again in the little Presbyterian church at Taylorville. One morning he went down to the theatre and talked to George Montray, Fox Midwest manager. Montray gruffly gave permission to work on the organ and to use it for practice. Wasn't going to spend any money, though, didn't mind burning a little juice. In two weeks the little Wurlitzer was singing sweetly and Thomas was signed up to do organ solos and community sings. Division manager McCarthy became interested and a contract was the result calling for a series of guest spots throughout the Fox Midwest circuit. Again it was "JACK THOMAS AT THE MIGHTY WURLITZER . . . THE SILVER-THROATED KILGEN . . . THE MAGNIFICENT MARR AND COLTON." The Kansas City Star station, Loew's Midland, The Fox St. Louis, The Fox Lincoln, The Fox Capitol, WTAX Springfield, WCBS. As Mark Twain said "and others too humorous to mention." One of these was the tiny three-rank Wicks at Nokomis, Illinois, where they stoked the furnace all afternoon to get the house warm enough to open and promptly at the end of the first show the local boys would go tearing out the two rear exit doors bringing an abrupt 30- to 40-degree drop in temperature. Part of one winter was enough. Also the chore of playing the lovely little 3m/10r M&C from WJR and WXYZ in Detroit to the accompaniment of about 200 cages of "Hartz Mountain Roller Canaries" (the sponsor sold the canaries by the trainload). Thomas still can't stand canaries. In fact, he just tolerates daughter Carole's parakeet. His special pets are his English Bull dog and Schnappsie, a pedigreed Dachshund.

His last theatre work was at the 4m/20r Wurlitzer at the Palace in Dallas, on which organ he still records for transcription. He teaches, (daughter Carole being one of his pupils) and tries to spend as much time as possible with his family: wife Lela, an amateur organist who enjoys her studies and two other daughters besides fifteen-year-old Carole, Jo Anne, 11 and Becky 5. Oh yes!—His hobby? playing the organ!



"Jack Thomas at the Mighty Wurlitzer!"