

Musical Treasure Finds New Home

by Terry Anne Bergfalk

A musical treasure whose history is linked to some of the great Hollywood theatre organists will become the major attraction in the Special Events Center of Fresno Pacific College, a 4000-seat auditorium that is under construction.

The treasure is a 3/19 Mighty Wurlitzer theatre organ that with its rumbling, trumpeting majesty and its cooing, whimpering intimacy set the musical stage during the golden age of silent films and radio. It has been recently donated to the college by 78-year-old Marguerite Moore, a music teacher and organist, and a member of the ATOS, the AGO and the International Association of Organ Teachers.

According to Dr. Curtis Funk, head of the music department, Fresno Pacific College is likely the only school in the San Joaquin Valley to hold title to a theatre pipe organ.

A theatre unit organ is much more complex than the organs normally used in churches. Indeed, a unit organ is similar to an iceberg, with its ornate console in full view while the largest part — rooms bristling with ranks of pipes — is hidden behind glass or wood shutters. Its sound is complex: one rank a Flute, the next a Violin, another a Trumpet, a Saxophone or a Vox Humana, backed up by a full complement of tuned percussions and traps.

Better known as a theatre organ, it differs from the church organ in that while the church organ has as its foundation stop the Diapason, a theatre organ's foundation stop is the Tibia. The percussions, traps and toys add to its versatility.

It is a one-man orchestra that was born around 1912 when silent pictures were becoming popular as a source of entertainment. Theatre patrons, dissatisfied with the solo piano as background music for their

films, began demanding full orchestras. When the musicians' union became adamant, however, theatre owners seized upon the unit organ as a replacement for pit orchestras. The organ became standard equipment in theatres during the '20s, with valley cities such as Fresno having as many as ten.

The unit organ was developed by an Englishman, Robert Hope-Jones (1859-1914) who came to this country in 1903 and after working with several American builders, opened his own organ company in Elmira, New York. In financial trouble, Hope-Jones sold his patents to the

Rudolph Wurlitzer Company of North Tonawanda, New York, in April, 1910. Wurlitzer, foreseeing the possibilities of Hope-Jones' organ in the theatre, signed a contract with him, and the first "Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra" left the factory on October 14, 1911.

Marguerite Moore decided to make a gift of her Wurlitzer after learning last year that she has terminal cancer. It is important to her that this treasure should live on, not only to be heard but to serve as a teaching tool for much-needed organists.

A native of Ohio, Mrs. Moore moved to Southern California with

Marguerite Moore at the console of her organ, with Richard Cencibaugh on the left and Dr. Curtis Funk on the right. (Bergfalk Photo)



her family at the age of five. After attending local schools she graduated with a major in music from the University of LaVerne. She later received her teaching credential from Pomona College and did post-graduate work at the University of Southern California.

She married Paul Moore, a teacher and rancher, and the couple moved to Wasco in Kern County, where Paul continued his ranching career and Marguerite taught for eleven years in both elementary and high schools. The Moores then moved to Porterville where, in addition to giving private piano and organ lessons, Mrs. Moore taught for eleven more years before retiring. Still active despite her illness, she continues to teach 15 piano and organ students four afternoons a week.

World travelers, she and her husband were among the first Americans to visit mainland China in 1978 at the invitation of the Chinese government. This invitation apparently stemmed from Mr. Moore's work as an agricultural consultant to the United Nations, which took him to many countries working on rehabilitation programs. Prior to that, both worked during the summer months with the International Social Services (later the Peace Corps) in both Europe and South America.

By 1951, Mrs. Moore's expanding interest in the pipe organ had reached the point where she decided to build one for herself. She recalls that following the accidental death of her 17-year-old son, "I knew I had to keep busy while Mr. Moore was away for a year working with the U.N., so I bought my first theatre organ, a two-manual horseshoe console with five ranks. The pipes, nuts, bolts and screws all came in boxes and I had to assemble them.

"My first reaction was to cry 'Help' as I sat in the middle of my living room. I called my friend, noted organ builder Richard Villemin, and he said, 'Whatever fits together, put a screw in it.' That's just what I did, and I was off."

She said it took three days to separate all the nuts, bolts and screws, and a year to finish assembling the instrument. Not satisfied with that, she started releathering, rewiring and enlarging it. "An organ never stops growing," she pointed out. "I wanted a bigger console and finally

found a three-manual classical console, but after its purchase I realized that it did not have the stops I needed for all the traps and toys. So, like a horse-trader, I looked some more."

It was Richard Villemin who heard that the three-manual Wurlitzer console built in the 1920s for the CBS Hollywood Studio organ was at the time in storage in the old Presbyterian Church in Fillmore, California. The CBS organ had been played in its heyday by such famous organists as Gaylord Carter, Eddie Dunderstedter, Dick Aurandt and Ann Leaf. It was used primarily for themes, fills and background music for such radio serials of the '30s, '40s and early '50s as "Amos and Andy" and "Johnny Dollar," and for occasional solo work.

"That organ did not fit the church and it was up for bid on a 24-hour option when Richard called me," Mrs. Moore remembered. "So I traded sight unseen my huge classical console, which was just what the church wanted, for the theatre unit, which was just what I wanted."

Over the past 22 years Mrs. Moore, with Villemin's help, has worked from dawn till dusk, with many a blistered finger, gradually increasing the number of ranks to 19. She enclosed a 14' x 35' patio to serve as a chamber, and added an eight-foot-square room for the 5 hp single-phase blower.

Mrs. Moore has used her Wurlitzer not only as a teaching instrument but as a source of fun and entertainment for herself, her family and her friends. Many a famous organist has detoured to Porterville for a chance to play the instrument.

Marguerite Moore's unusual undertaking became the talk of theatre organ circles throughout the country. In fact, while attending an ATOS convention in New York City in the late '50s, she overheard a group inquiring if anyone knew "that crazy woman from California who is building her own organ." "I piped up," she remarked recently, "and said, 'that's me . . .'" That started many long-term friendships, and over the years these friends have helped her locate more parts and pipes. Five of the ranks were acquired this way from the old Grauman's Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood.

"Last year I finally realized that

with failing health I needed to find a proper home for my organ, where it could continue to live for the enjoyment of people and accommodate future organ students. Organists are badly needed; we have so few around today."

Many showed interest in the instrument after Mrs. Moore announced her intention to part with it, including organists who had played it at CBS, and several organ buffs. But, for a long time, her answer was "no." "I was not going to sell it so it could end up in some pizza parlor."

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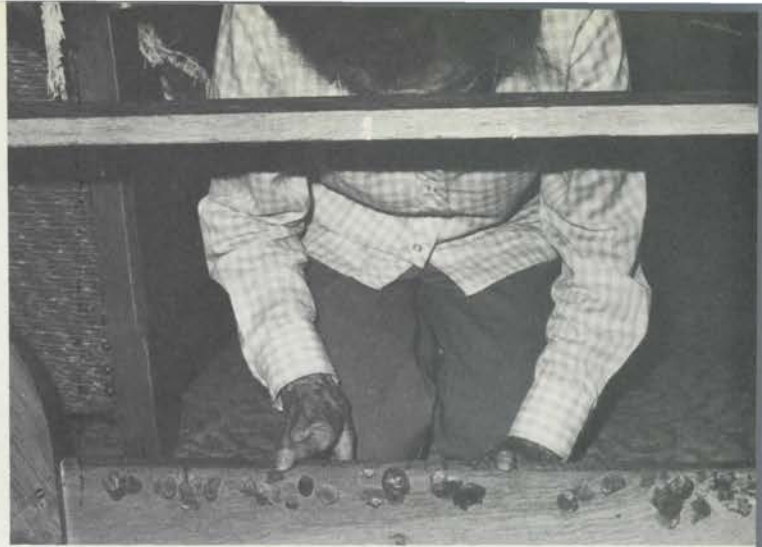
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The CBS plaque on the side of the console.

(Bergfalk Photo)

Wads of gum on the underside of the organ bench, left from the CBS Studio days.
 (Bergfalk Photo)

She offered it to Porterville College and then to the College of the Sequoias in Visalia, but neither school had the money to move it nor the room to accommodate it. Stipulations in the terms of the donation were that the recipient pay for removing the organ from the Moore home, which later amounted to around \$20,000, and that the console and the organ be kept as a unit. A final decision was made last August based on a bid by Fresno Pacific College, an offer by Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Underdown of Fresno to donate the necessary funds, and ultimate approval by the college Board of Trustees. The Underdowns, who are amateur musicians and songwriters, and whose daughter is a graduate of Pacific College, heard about the organ from Dr. Funk.

Under the terms of the contract, Mrs. Moore named to the advisory committee Dr. Funk; Richard Villemin of Porterville; George Wright, noted Los Angeles organist; Richard Cencibaugh of Fresno, a church and concert organist; Richard Purvis, teacher and former organist and choir director of the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco; and Tom Hazleton, organist of the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church.

"When we found out that the organ was available and that we did have a place for it in the new Special Events Center, we really wanted it," stated Dr. Funk. "We viewed the fact that it had a great potential to attract organ students to our campus for a chance to play an authentic pipe organ.

"There is no university or college in the valley that has a pipe organ facility, and this is understandable as there are a lot of churches where stu-

dents can go to practice," he noted, "but we will be the first now to have one, and this will give motivation to students to get first-hand experience on a pipe organ. In addition, the organ will be utilized at other functions such as concerts, conferences, religious services, games, silent movie showings, graduations, college seminars and shows."

"We were empathetic to Mrs. Moore's situation and realized the college's need for such an instrument in teaching organ students," said Ronald Underdown. "Churches today are begging for pipe organists and they are few and far between. The college now has a collector's item valued at about a half-million dollars, to be placed in an ideal facility both in size and acoustics. I foresee many world-famous organists coming here to the Center to record."

The console and the organ, with its more than 1000 pipes, were removed from the Moore home in a five-day operation under the supervision of Don Cover of Riverside, assisted by Dr. Funk, Herbert Kroeker, Richard Cencibaugh and Kelly Spellmeyer. It is now being stored without charge by Frank Caglia, an organ buff and owner of the Warnor Center for the Performing Arts in Fresno. Also as a donation, Herbert Kroeker has refinished the console to match the interior woodwork design of the Center.

The console is being equipped with a miniature solid-state relay designed by Robert Trousdale of Los Angeles. The old relay was too large and took up too much space in the organ chamber. The number of stop tabs is being increased from 67 to 134.

The pipes, chests and blower are also being refurbished and prepared

for installation sometime in early 1982. The organ will be housed in a chamber forty feet wide, eight feet deep and twelve feet high, to be built along one wall. The funds for the chamber construction are being donated by Underdown's younger brother Donald, also of Fresno. The console will be on a platform with casters so that it can be moved anywhere on the Center's floor.

Instead of the hundreds of wires formerly used to connect the pipes to the console, the new unit will operate through a 200-foot cable about the diameter of a finger.

Cencibaugh said that several new ranks are being added, including an English Post Horn and a Brass Trumpet which the organ did not have, to give the instrument more fire and brilliance. The specification will otherwise remain as it was. "We are not transforming this into a classical organ," he said. "It was never conceived that way. It is a theatre organ, and when it is finally turned on it will turn out good entertaining music for games and that type of thing. That's what it does best and that's what it is going to do."

Terry Anne Bergfalk has been a reporter and photographer for the Fresno Bee for the past 13 years. She has won numerous top state and national awards for her photographs and feature stories. Her love of music stems from her secondary career as a dancer and actress, having been featured in many musicals including Kiss Me Kate, South Pacific, Peter Pan, Camelot, Carousel and George M. This is her first encounter with the organ, other than attending church concerts. She is now a dedicated organ buff! □