

PORTRAIT OF DR. JOHN W. LANDON

by Lloyd E. Klos

For some time, the theatre organ renaissance has needed someone to compile lengthy treatises on the instrument and some of the greats who played it. A few years ago, a gifted writer, Dr. John W. Landon, burst upon the scene. His book on the life of Jesse Crawford is a remarkable biography, and with the release of John's book on theatre organ history, another excellent volume can be added to enthusiasts' shelves.

A busy man, this Dr. Landon! He is a minister, sociologist, teacher, lecturer, organist, researcher and

writer. When he isn't occupied in one of the foregoing endeavors, he travels extensively. So, the theatre organ movement has been considerably enriched by having him as one of its members; a fellow who, though extremely busy, still finds time to devote many hours to chronicling the history of the instrument.

Dr. John William Landon was born on March 24, 1937 in Marlette, Michigan, youngest of four children of Norman and Merle Landon. His father was a farmer; his mother, a home economics teacher. It was a

very devout, religious family, a factor which was to figure prominently in John's later life. Indeed, the church was the fulcrum upon which the family's social life revolved.

John's first music instruction was on the piano at age five. From his mother who taught a few pupils, he first learned to play hymns. The family often gathered around the parlor piano to sing during the cold Michigan winters.

Near the piano was another musical instrument of the time, a hand-wound phonograph. "When very small, I stood upon a little red stool to crank it and play the records. Ben Hall stated in his book, *The Best Remaining Seats*, that it had to be a very austere Victrola which did not house one or two organ records. Our collection included two — Jesse Crawford's 'The Prisoner's Song'/'After I Say I'm Sorry,' and Lew White's 'Honolulu Moon'/'Blue Skies.'

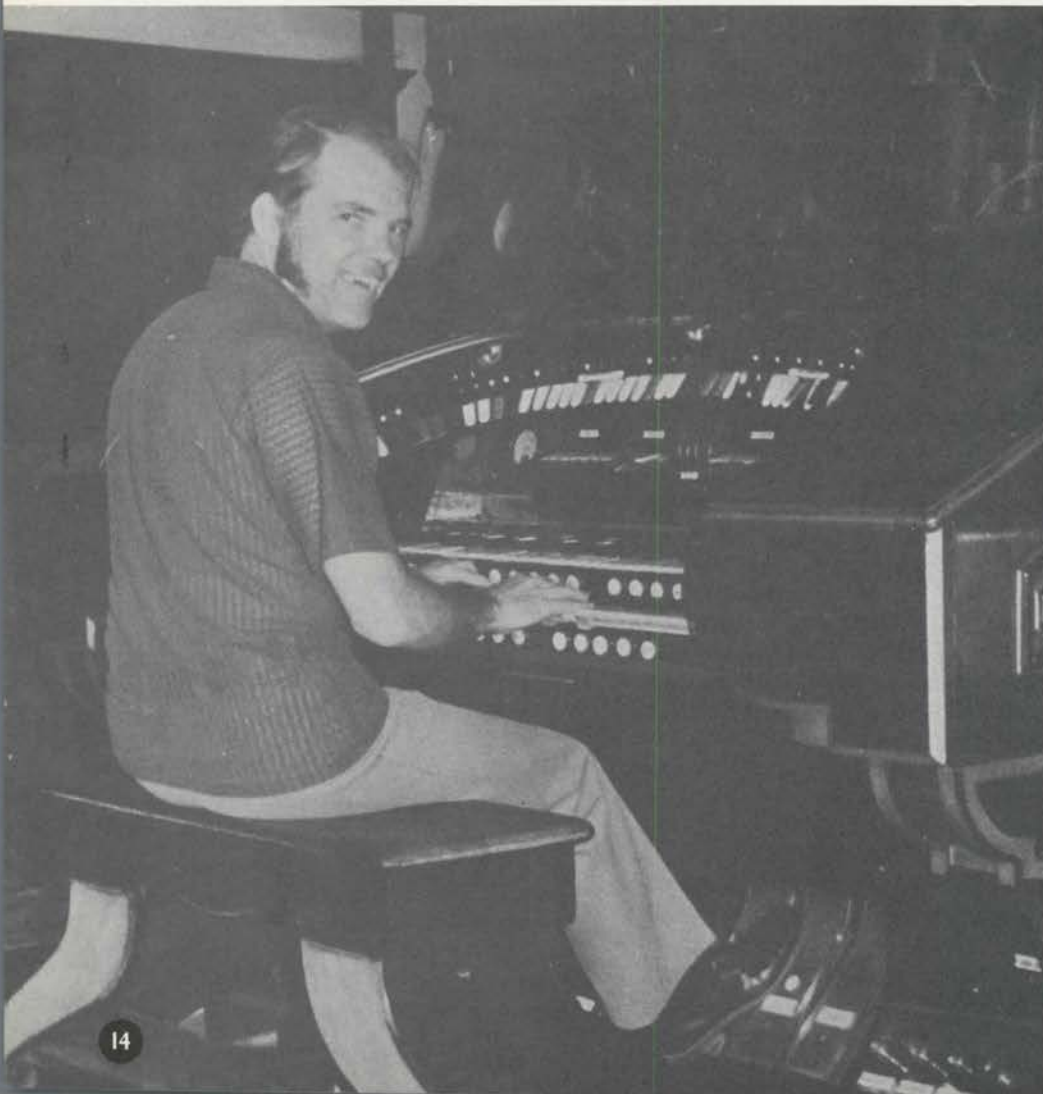
"I was fascinated with the sound of a pipe organ, being particularly drawn to the music of Jesse Crawford. Later, I begged 78 rpm's from neighbors and friends who were only too glad to get rid of them. Especially desired were pipe organ records."

After a year of his mother's piano instruction, John began advanced study with the wife of the Presbyterian minister, who had studied in Heidelberg and Vienna, and was the best in the area. Mrs. Howat was a stern taskmaster and she'd rap knuckles with a ruler if her charges didn't curve their fingers properly when playing.

John took piano through grade school and into high school until his senior year. With a sister's wedding in the offing, she asked that he supply the music, but on the organ, not the piano. Apparently, she believed that anyone who studied piano could automatically play the organ.

John plays the 2/10 Christie in the Village Hospital Recreation Hall, Bangour, Scotland, near Edinburgh.

(Landon Collection)



"Up to this time, the only organ I had ever touched was the elaborately carved Kimball reed instrument with green plush-carpeted pedals in my aunt's parlor. Marlette, a town of only 1500, did not have a pipe organ. My home church, the First Methodist, had experienced a fire which burned the interior, including the old tracker instrument.

"A Hammond was installed and it was on this electronic that I began instruction from our church organist, Mrs. Arlene Thompson. Although I found playing the piano not a difficult chore, learning the organ came much slower. However, when I mastered my first selection, 'Sweet and Low,' which had only four pedal notes, I was as proud as if I had mastered all of Bach's toccatas and fugues!

"I had always detested practicing the piano. Now I was so eager to learn the organ that I practiced in the unheated building until my fingers wouldn't respond. After a period of warming up, I'd go back to work some more. Somehow, I got through the wedding!"

A few years earlier, when John was 7 or 8, his uncle, an electrical engineer for Oldsmobile, took him to a Christmas program for employees and their families. It was held in Lansing's Michigan Theatre, an early John Ebersson house, and featured music on a 3/12 Barton pipe organ. "Even today, I find it difficult to describe the thrill which I experienced when I saw that console rise into the spotlight, and heard live theatre organ music for the first time. I walked around for days, reliving that experience!"

As this was the period when theatre organ music was still broadcast, John Landon absorbed even more of it through this medium. "I listened to Billy Geyer who broadcast every weekday on the 3/11 Barton in Flint's Capitol Theatre over KDKF. Wednesday mornings, I occasionally missed the school bus to hear Detroit's Don Miller. His program, on the 4/34 Fisher Theatre Wurlitzer, was 'Organ Footnotes,' broadcast directly from 'WJR, the goodwill station, with towers atop the Fisher Building in Detroit.' Wednesday evenings, I listened to 'DSCA Organ Melodies' with Aneuyrin Bodycombe at Pittsburgh's KDKA 3-manual Special Wurlitzer."

(DSCA stood for "Dairymen's Co-operative Sales Association.")

Desiring to retain some of these programs for his collection, John acquired a disc recorder which made crude phonograph records from radio broadcasts, and he made as many of these as possible. This was long before the development of wire or tape recorders.

After high school, wishing to become a clergyman, John selected Taylor University in Upland, Indiana, a Methodist-related institution. He took some of his choicest 78-rpm organ records with him when enrolling in 1955.

Taylor had a 3-manual Tellers-Kent pipe organ, installed in 1928 and theatrical in tone. "Soon, I was playing for chapel services three times a week and for other activities. A good friend, David Kemp, active in campus theatre groups, decided to produce Dickens' 'Christmas Carol.' Between us, we prepared an organ accompaniment (rather like a soap opera accompaniment), and presented the play to an overflow crowd. The audience loved it, and we staged it again the following year.

"The Methodist church in Upland had an old Barkhoff tracker organ with marvelous tone. I obtained permission to practice on it, and soon discovered that organ playing (on some instruments, at least) can be strenuous work. When all stops are drawn, it required all the strength I

could muster to play it. The regular organist, a little old lady, didn't seem to have trouble, as each Sunday she hunched over the manuals as if she were attempting to tame a wild beast she had by the tail."

During his first two college years, John Landon was organist of a small Episcopal Church which had an old 2-manual reed organ. It had been electrified, using a vacuum cleaner for a blower, and "it made a frightful noise! Occasionally, it would start to give out, necessitating my pedal-pumping furiously to keep it going, the perspiration cascading down my back. Between the behavior of the organ, and the unpredictable behavior of the priest who sometimes arrived for the service slightly intoxicated, the congregation had frequent incidents of amusement."

While in his sophomore year, John was re-introduced to the theatre organ, and as a result, became more deeply involved with it. "I met a pipe organ technician who told me of an instrument, still intact, in the Anderson (Ind.) Paramount Theatre, 40 miles away. The next weekend, I located the theatre, and the friendly manager escorted me to the console, helped uncover it, and encouraged me to play it. Thus began a love affair with a sweet-sounding 3/7 Page which continues to this day. The ranks are Flute, String, Vox Humana, Sousaphone, Kinura (actually

In the 5000-seat Edinburgh Playhouse, John plays the 3/43 Hilsdon. The theatre was built in the '20s.

(Landon Collection)





Prof. Landon, the indefatigable researcher, shows some of his voluminous files of material.
(Landon Collection)

a Krumet), Tuba and Tibia. There are also a toy counter and complete percussions. Page organs are perhaps the most highly unified of any builder.

"My first attempts that day in 1956 sounded pretty awful, as low G on the pedal ciphered continuously, but here was a real theatre organ in a beautiful 1700-seat John Eberson-designed house, available for my use any time. I almost failed my classes that semester as studying was kept to a minimum and every free moment was spent in the theatre."

In his last two years at Taylor, John was organist at a Methodist church with a nice sounding 4-rank Moller of 1928 vintage, highly unified and a joy to play. "An understanding pastor permitted me to practice any kind of music, and passers-by were apt to hear the sprightly strains of 'Charley, My Boy' as well as hymns. It was my first attempt with the 'something-for-everyone' philosophy."

After graduation, John left for theological seminary instruction, the graduate department of religion in Northwestern University at Evanston, Illinois, enrolling in 1959. "About this time, I met the late theatre organologist, Ben Hall, in a roundabout way. I had visited a music store and saw a theatre organ record for sale, which was a rare item in those days. Purchasing it, I took it home and greatly enjoyed 'Leibert Takes Richmond.' With the record was a several-page booklet by Ben Hall, 'The Mighty Wurlitzer Rises Again.'

"I wrote my first testimonial letter to Westminster Recording Sales Corp., explaining how much I enjoyed the disc. The letter was forwarded to Ben who replied, and that

contact was the start of a friendship which continued until his death in 1970. He told me of the ATOE which I immediately joined, and upon receiving the early issues of *Tibia Magazine* and its successor, THEATRE ORGAN, their content convinced me that there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, who shared with me the love of the theatre pipe organ."

During his seminary years, John investigated theatre organ activity in the Chicago-Evanston area. The Varsity Theatre in Evanston had a 3/26 Geneva, and though a number of Chicago houses still had their instruments, most were unavailable to enthusiasts. The ATOE wasn't a major factor in the theatre organ's early renaissance days then.

At Northwestern, there was a pipe organ, designed by the noted Dr. William H. Barnes, and comprised largely of hand-picked ranks from several instruments, removed from churches. Reuter assembled the pipes, added others, and wired the instrument. The result was very pleasing and antedated the baroque invasion.

Before completing his seminary training, John had selected social work as his chosen field. Upon graduation and ordination as a Methodist minister in 1962, he moved to northeastern Iowa, became a caseworker for the local department of social welfare, and took over the pastorate of a small church.

"I scouted around for theatre organs immediately, and found that Waterloo and Cedar Rapids, each about 70 miles away, had some organs remaining in theatres. The distance, coupled with my church duties and extensive work load, precluded frequent visits to those cities. However, I located a Wurlitzer church organ in a nearby town and played it frequently.

"After two years, I returned to Indiana in 1964, to attain a Masters Degree in social work at Indiana University. To make the cheese more binding, I heard that the Community Church in Noblesville, Indiana was looking for a pastor. Noblesville was only 25 miles from Indiana University and *best of all*, only 14 miles away from my beloved Anderson Paramount Theatre's Page! Needless to say, I jumped at this opportunity!"

The week before John returned to Indiana, he purchased one of the first Conn theatre organs played in Madison, Wisconsin. He had heard Don Baker perform and promptly bought the organ on which Don had given his concert.

Upon returning to the Anderson area, John discovered that two young men had begun full restoration of the Page. Lewis Hodson, a teacher, and Rex Hoppes, an electrical engineer, invited John into the group. Before long, the organ was working well enough for the enthusiastic theatre management to inaugurate weekend 20-minute organ intermissions before the feature film.

"Frequently, I arrived at church on Sunday morning, exhausted from long hours of intermission playing and practice the night before. I had said practically nothing to members of the congregation about it as I wasn't sure how they'd react. One Sunday, while greeting parishoners after the service, one member said, 'I'm tired, Reverend. You kept me up late last night.' Then, he winked. Somehow, he heard about my theatre playing and had come over and sat in the darkened rear of the house for several hours. I had found an ally!"

As the Page's restoration neared completion, John conceived the idea of cutting a record on it. Page organs were rarities, and the only records produced on them up to then were by the late Chicago theatre and radio station organist, Al Carney, using the WHT studio instrument in 1928. "Buddy Nolan, unknown to me, was preparing to record the beautiful Fort Wayne (Indiana) Embassy Theatre's Page."

However, John embarked on the record project, and in 1965, a 12-inch, long-playing stereo record was privately produced and marketed by Professional Books Co. of Indianapolis. It contained 19 selections from the twenties and thirties. "During the taping session the theatre was closed, but some friends and theatre staff members were present. On the seventh take for 'Mood Indigo,' I was becoming more tense. Everything was going well until the last few bars when someone kicked over a coke bottle! The recording engineer said it could be spliced out. They tried to eliminate the spot, but

there is still enough 'clink' remaining that, everytime I hear it, I have to smile."

Since John is an organ hobbyist rather than a professional theatre organist, he had misgivings as to the disc's success. However, the reviews were most favorable, and sales exceeded fondest expectations. Copies were ordered from all over the United States, and from England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

About this time, he helped a handful of enthusiasts form the Central Indiana Chapter of ATOS.

After two years, he received his Masters Degree in Social Work, and as a condition of his scholarship, returned to Iowa in 1966 to join the State Department of Social Welfare. Fort Dodge was his home as he became a regional supervisor, embracing an 11-county area. He also became assistant pastor of Somers-Farnhamville Methodist churches. Neither had pipe organs.

"I frequently saw in theatre organ publications the name of George Rice in connection with activities in the Omaha area. Contacting him, I received an invitation to see, hear and try the lovely 3/13 Wurlitzer in Omaha's Orpheum Theatre. The crew had this organ playing beautifully, and the 200-mile round trip I occasionally made to Omaha was no obstacle. The Orpheum is still a magnificent house in the grand movie palace tradition.

"My territory included Iowa State University at Ames. Walking through the Student Union Building one day, I heard the unmistakable sound of a theatre pipe organ and my ears led me to a large auditorium. A rolltop horseshoe console was on a movable platform backstage, and the student playing said that it was being restored. By whom I never found out, nor did I learn the make as all name plates were gone and my knowledge of makes and their characteristics was deficient. However, the sound was good and I arranged my schedule to visit Ames frequently to play it."

John Landon wrote his first book, *From These Men* while in Iowa. It included biographies of several men, such as Billy Sunday, who changed the face of religion in America, and it was used as a text for Methodist men's groups in Iowa. The author discovered that while writing a book

is not easy, the research involved, plus getting the facts and ideas on paper were most rewarding.

In August 1967, John returned again to Indiana to become acting chairman of the Department of Sociology at Marion College where he established the school's first program in Social Work Education. He also returned to his former church position in Noblesville where he played for weddings and occasional programs of sacred music. He took a more active interest in the American Guild of Organists, of which he had been a member for several years, and dedicated new organs. Being but a few miles from his favorite theatre organ, the Page in Anderson, he again played intermissions. How sweet it was!

Following two years at Marion College, he began work on his Ph.D. He took a position in 1969 on the faculty of Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, while continuing his church work. However, when the Alliance Amusement Co. sold its theatres, the new ownership of the Anderson Paramount discontinued use of the organ.

Turning his attention to sacred music for a time, he recorded another stereo long-play album, this one featuring religious music, done

on the Reuter in the seminary chapel in Northwestern University. He did play a number of fine residents theatre organs during his period, however.

"I continued to enlarge my record collection and began receiving requests from people throughout the world for tapes of out-of-print recordings, particularly pipe organ discs. Ben Hall and I swapped records for years, each vying for complete collections of theatre organ discs and those of Ruth Etting, our favorite vocalist of the twenties and thirties. I also supplied rare recordings of Rudy Vallee, Gene Austin and the Hartz Mountain Canaries, for several radio broadcasts in Indiana and Iowa.

"The time had come for me to select my dissertation topic for completion of my Doctor's degree, which was in the social sciences, my particular areas of study being sociology, anthropology and American history. The study of popular culture was becoming more common, and one day while driving to the university, I remembered the words of my friend and mentor, Dr. Warren Vander Hill. He said that biographical writing demands one of the most meticulous forms of historical research. (Amen, says this writer!).

At the Granada Tooting 4/14 Wurlitzer, Dr. Landon plays one of the famous English theatre organs.

(Landon Collection)





Dr. Landon poses at the 3/7 Page console in the Anderson (Indiana) Paramount. (Landon Collection)

“Like a flash, I thought: ‘Why not a biography of Jesse Crawford?’ I had nearly all his records, and my appreciation for his musicianship had grown through the years. Hesitantly, I approached my professor, explaining that to my knowledge, no full-length biography of Crawford existed. His reaction was both enthusiastic and encouraging.

“I enlisted the aid of a blue-ribbon faculty committee, including department heads of sociology, anthropology and Dr. Vander Hill and Dr. Dwight Hoover in American history. Both are experienced researchers and authors, and their ideas in guiding my research were invaluable. Furthermore, I was researching a topic which grew more interesting as I progressed, which was in contrast to many students who picked a subject which didn’t interest them and became more boring as they continued.”

From 1969 to 1974, John Landon was engaged in his off-duty hours in research and writing of the Crawford dissertation. He hired secretarial help and literally wrote thousands of letters. He combed major libraries for material, including the Library of Congress where he spent weeks, taking reams of notes and photocopying hundreds of pages of material. He interviewed Crawford’s friends, relatives, acquaintances, some prominent people in the theatre organ movement, even detractors, in order to get an objective point of view. He visited nearly every theatre in which Crawford played and by the time his research and traveling the country from coast to coast were finished, he had heard and played some

of the most notable theatre organ installations in the country, and acquired much information on Crawford in particular and theatre organs in general.

“I also made several trips to England and Scotland, visiting all the major installations, and interviewing many organists. I found the enthusiasts there to be the warmest, kindest and most helpful in the whole world.”

In 1971, John moved from Indiana to Lexington, Kentucky to join the faculty in the graduate school of social work in the University of Kentucky. Except for a year while finishing his dissertation, he continued his pastoral duties at the Community Church in Noblesville, Indiana. “The 614-page dissertation, the longest in the history of the university, was accepted, and I received my Ph.D. in 1972. Then, I began revising and rewriting it into suitable form for publication. The resulting 372-page book was released by Vestal Press on October 1, 1974.

“Originally, I had wanted to use Crawford’s theme song for a title: *Forgotten Melody — The Story of Jesse Crawford*. However, wiser heads prevailed and a more positive one was selected: *Jesse Crawford: The Poet of the Organ; Wizard of the Mighty Wurlitzer*. Thousands of copies have been sold.”

As an adjunct to his book, John prepared a slide/sound presentation on Crawford’s life. This included rare pictures, many never published, and recordings of the organist’s work, including transcriptions of his radio broadcasts. Professor Landon unveiled this show before the Cinema Organ Society of London, England, and it received much acclaim. In 1974, it was featured at a session of the American Theatre Organ Society’s National Convention in Detroit. A standing ovation attested to the overwhelming reception of this production. Since then, it has been shown before other clubs and groups, and plans are in the works to take it on tour across the country. This writer has seen it, and highly recommends it. Your theatre organ education is not complete until you have viewed it — at least once.

At the time of completing this biography (June, 1976), Dr. Landon was busily engaged in the writing of a manuscript for his next book, *The History of the Theatre Pipe Organ*, a

most ambitious undertaking, simply because the subject is so vast with so many ramifications. Much more research was needed, many more letters written, and more interviews conducted. His efforts, of necessity, are on a much grander and broader scale. It is his intent to produce the most complete source book on the theatre pipe organ which will ever have been written, albeit the definitive work on the subject.

The future for this young man holds much promise, both in his chosen profession, and in his avocation. Following the theatre pipe organ book, will be his volume on *The Development of Social Welfare in the United States*.

He traveled to Hawaii during his Christmas vacation in 1975, seeing and playing three Robert-Mortons; two in theatres and one in a home. In time, he plans to visit Australia and New Zealand to see the theatre organs there. There are none in the Soviet Union or Israel where he has also visited, but there was one installed in Czechoslovakia. Knowing John’s restless pursuit of facts, he’ll learn of its disposition!

“I continue to enlarge my collection of theatre organ memorabilia, as well as my collection of over 8,000 records. I recently hired a library science student to prepare a cross-index file on my 78’s, but she got discouraged and quit after finishing the letter ‘A’. I am also installing a 2/4 Marr & Colton from an Ohio theatre in my home. It has been augmented with bits and pieces by Wurlitzer and other makes.”

When new management again took over the operation of the Anderson Paramount, the Page was restored a second time. Lewis Hodson again spearheaded a crew composed of Carlton Smith and Bob Dunn. In November, 1974, it was rededicated. John resumed weekend organ intermissions, and is planning another stereo record on it, believing the little instrument deserves wider recognition.

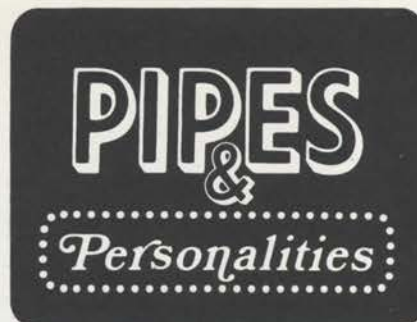
The University of Kentucky Information Service recently completed a special radio broadcast on its “organ-playing professor,” featuring the Paramount’s Page in the background. This was distributed to forty stations around the country. They are now planning a film and video tape of John’s home installation for use later.

Honors which Dr. John W. Landon has received include listing in *Who's Who In the South*, *International Who's Who In Social Service*, and *Community Leaders and Noteworthy Americans*. He believes his greatest honor was his listing in *Outstanding Educators of America* in 1972. He is a member of the National Association of Social Workers, American Sociological Association, American Academy of Certified Social Workers, Council of Social Work Education, American Guild of Organists, and the American The-

atre Organ Society.

"You ask me when I'm going to settle down and raise a family? Lord! When would I find the time?" Good question!

Editor's Update: This article has been awaiting publication since 1976. In late 1981, organ intermissions at the Anderson Paramount were discontinued by the new operator. Dr. Landon, because of a new university affiliation, is now (January, 1982) a resident of Cincinnati. □



Tenth Anniversary of Wurlitzer Pops in Wichita

The final concert for the 1981-1982 season celebrating the tenth anniversary of Wurlitzer Pops in Wichita will be a gala evening of musical excitement featuring the Wichita Wurlitzer and Billy Nalle.

The program format will be that made world famous at the organ's original home, the New York Paramount Theatre. Joining Billy and the Wurlitzer will be the conductor/percussionist once with the Stan Kenton Orchestra and now with the Wichita Symphony, J.C. Combs. Combs will head one of the most celebrated of campus orchestras, the WSU Faculty Big Band. Two other professional solo groups from WSU also will appear to provide a full theatre bill. The theme for the evening will be "New York Paramount Revisited."

The box office reports half the hall's seats sold as of February 1 for the concert scheduled for Saturday, May 22. Information and tickets (\$7.50) are obtainable from Central Ticket Agency at Century II Center, Wichita, Kansas 67202. Telephone orders via bank credit cards also are accepted: (316) 263-4717.

BILLY NALLE

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Organ Power vs. Super Bowl 16

In New York City Channel 5 (WNEW-TV), the flagship station of Metromedia, decided that anything they put on the air opposite the Super Bowl would possibly not attract the audience they wanted. As a special attraction they presented twelve hours of films which premiered at the Radio City Music Hall. *Little Women*, *Mr. Roberts*, *Ninotchka*, and *Mrs. Miniver* were shown on Super Bowl Sunday. These films were introduced by Ginger Rogers, Peter Allen, Ray Bolger and Hermi-

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