

HELEN HELLYER

Her First Love Has Lasted a Lifetime!

Helen Hellyer, née Wismer, played for her first movie at the age of seven in 1910. She is still playing silent movie benefits in 1982 at the age of 79.

Taken by her parents to see a silent movie in a country skating rink in central Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Helen was drafted by the manager to accompany the show on an old square piano. She can't recall the picture, but admits knowing only one popular piece which she played throughout the picture — improvising, however, most of the show. This is something she was able to do “from the cradle,” so to speak.

Another tender-age assignment was in store for this talented musician. After childhood piano lessons from an itinerant teacher, Helen fell in love with the organ in her Baptist church in Doylestown. Encouraged by the church organist, Helen was soon at home on this instrument. The church elected her organist at the age of 13. She then studied organ for a short time with the late Dr. Adam Geibel, and later became organist at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Doylestown.

During this part of her career she got back into theatre work by substituting at the organ in the Strand Theatre in Doylestown. Her first full-time theatre assignment was the Hatboro, Pennsylvania, theatre where the “organ” was a piano with “stops”!

In the mid-1920s Helen was named staff organist at the Grove Theatre in Willow Grove, where she played into the early '30s. She remembers this period as most enjoyable. The organ was a 2/4 Wurlitzer — beautiful and “mighty” — a real joy to play. The artist established a first in theatre work (in that area, at least) by accompanying vaudeville on the organ.

In 1928, Helen felt that a change in her billing name would be a good move. She married and became Helen Hellyer. She remained at the Grove, doing features, playing between talkie shows, etc. She recalls with amusement that people would not go to the movies until after the Amos and Andy radio show was over at 7:15 p.m. To overcome this, the theatre amplified the radio show and the organist played along with the theme music. Thus a “captive” audience was on hand for show time.

In the early 1930s Helen and her husband moved to Chester County, Pennsylvania. This brought her theatre work to a close, except for a few guest appearances at the Strand Theatre in Pottstown. At this time Helen gave up full-time assignments and

limited her activity to homemaking and substituting in various Pottstown churches as organist and choir director for a period of about 35 years. Recently, however, she dedicated a new organ installation, dedicated a new organ console, and played special commemorative services in local churches.

At home Helen maintains her talent on an RT3 concert model Hammond. A similar organ is in the Pottstown Area Seniors' Center and in the Owen J. Roberts High School, where she occasionally plays for silent movies, benefits, programs, sing-alongs and concerts.

Most recently the artist played for silent movies at West Chester State College and at the Masonic Home at Elizabethtown. She also played for a

Helen Hellyer at the console of the “U.S. Pipes” organ in the Sunnybrook Ballroom, Pottstown, Pennsylvania.





Helen Hellyer at her Hammond RT3 in her home.

TV promotional tape for the "Save the Warner" Theatre in West Chester.

For six years Helen was the "house" organist in the residence of friends — Roger and Dorothy Bloom — near Downingtown. The Blooms are active in theatre organ circles and have done much to build the popularity of theatre organs. The United States pipe organ from the Lansdale Theatre found a most comfortable home with the Blooms.

When Roger and Dorothy moved to Florida last year their organ needed a new place to show its charms. Helen lost no time in getting word to the owners of the internationally famous Sunnybrook Enterprises in Pottstown. The "U.S. Pipes" now graces the ballroom of this entertainment,

recreational and dining center, owned for fifty years by the Hartenstine family. Helen has been featured at a typical Sunnybrook Saturday night dining, dancing and entertainment extravaganza; a packed-house annual Tri-County Chamber of Commerce banquet; and a Rotary Club annual family night Christmas Party.

The Pottstown area is almost alone in having an active theatre organist of the "silent" days. Helen is credited with bringing back to southeastern Pennsylvania an appreciation of silent movies with live authentic organ accompaniment.

On November 14 Helen is scheduled to accompany a movie on a Hammond RT3. She and husband Bill (William S.) have been married for over fifty years. □

On its way . . .



The beautiful poster, shown in reduced size on the cover of this issue, is but one of several aids prepared for use in the "PIPE UP!" membership drive now going on.

Geoffrey Paterson of Toronto, Associate Editor of THEATRE ORGAN, designed the poster and prepared the finished art work. Actual size is 8-1/2" x 14". It is printed in full four-color process on 10pt coated cover stock. What you see on the cover is exactly what it looks like, except for size. The space at the bottom just above the ATOS name is provided for chapters to add their name and local telephone numbers.

The posters can be ordered in any quantity by chapters *and individuals* from ATOS Back Issues and Binders, 1393 Don Carlos Court, Chula Vista, California 92010. Price is \$1.00 each, which is below cost.

In addition to the poster, the "PIPE UP!"

Committee, led by Thelma Barclay of Puget Sound Chapter, is sending to each chapter a packet containing suggestions for recruiting new members, plus samples of a press release and a folder. Back issues of THEATRE ORGAN to use in the campaign can also be ordered along with the posters.

Read Richard Sklenar's message on page 4 of this issue to get an idea of the importance of this membership drive. The cost of preparing an issue of THEATRE ORGAN for printing is the same, regardless of the number of copies printed. Likewise, much of the administrative costs of the Society are relatively fixed, regardless of membership. Hence, the larger the membership the more funds available to further our goal of preserving the theatre organ as a viable musical instrument (and enjoying the work and the music and the friendships in the process).