

PORTRAIT OF DEAN FOSSLER

Hall of Fame Organist

Transcribed by Lloyd E. Klos

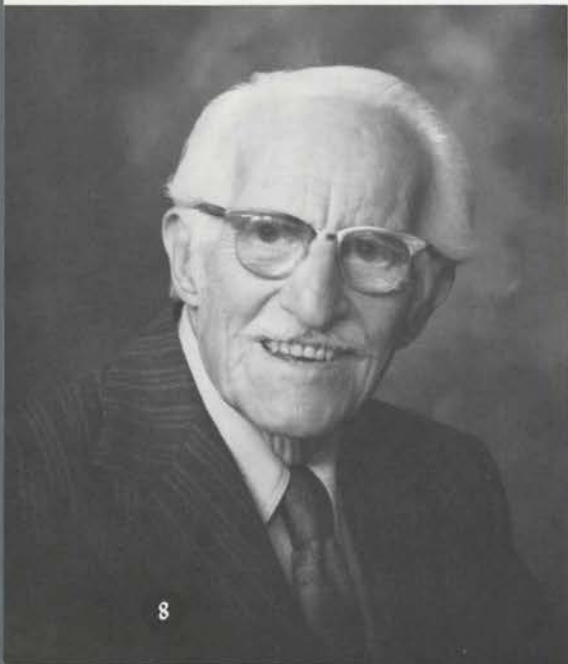
For a number of years, we've been hearing of the musical artistry of a theatre and radio organist, Dean Fossler. Obtaining his address, we contacted him. Considerable time elapsed because Mr. Fossler is an extremely modest fellow, not prone to blowing his own horn, as it were.

However, following his induction into the Theatre Organists Hall of Fame in 1979, he came through with sufficient material for us to formulate a story.

Dean L. Fossler was born in Chicago in 1895. "My musical career began with piano lessons at six. Music came to me rather easily, for at about ten I was accompanying my elder brother who played cornet and sang quite well.

"I was graduated from high school at 16, having skipped two grades along the way. After one year of college, I decided that my ability to play piano could be a means of earning a living. Seeing a booking agent, he sent

Dean Fossler in 1980, still active as a musician.
(Fossler collection)



me to a small theatre on Chicago's south side. The management was pleased with my work, and I was off to a flying start.

"I played piano there for several months, learning more about accompanying the pictures. As time progressed, I was offered other positions, each better than the preceding one.

"By then, I was studying the pipe organ, having a desire to play one in a theatre. An increasing number of Chicago theatres had installed organs by that time, many of them two-manual, six-stop Kimballs. (The Kimball factory was located in Chicago.) The only theatres in Chicago having Wurlitzers were the Cort (Opus 2) and the Vox (Opus 14). All these instruments were far cries from the later ones built by Wurlitzer and Robert-Morton.

"I subsequently landed my first job at a theatre organ, though I don't recall the theatre's name. But it was there that I really became adept in movie accompaniment. I then went to the 800-seat Vista Theatre on 47th Street where I played several years.

"However, my theatrical career was interrupted in 1917 when America entered World War I. To avoid the draft, I enlisted in the Navy, along with a large number of Chicago musicians. I was placed in the Band Department and compelled to learn a band instrument. Besides that work, I had experience in dance bands, shows, etc.

"When the great influenza epidemic came in 1918, I was one of the first to contract it, and came close to dying because the doctors knew very little about treating the disease. After weathering that crisis, I was mustered out in 1918 and returned to Chicago and the Vista Theatre.

"In 1920, Balaban & Katz, the largest theatre chain in Chicago, opened

their first palatial motion picture theatre, the Tivoli. I went to its opening and was simply enthralled by the playing of Jesse Crawford, who had been brought from California to play the first big Wurlitzer in Chicago, a 3/17. I just had to have an organ like that to play!

"In 1921, the great Chicago Theatre opened with Jesse Crawford at the console of the 4/29 Wurlitzer, and Milton Charles, also from California, succeeding Jesse at the Tivoli.

"Though I was still playing at a very nice, but small theatre, I was itching to get my hands on one of the large Wurlitzers. I went to see Jesse at the Chicago, who arranged to hear me play one night after the show. Though I approached the large console with some trepidation, I somehow managed to play it to his satisfaction.

"A few days later, he attended the matinee at the Vista and told me to

Dean at the Amos 'n Andy theme song Wurlitzer at WMAQ, Chicago, about 1934. (Fossler collection)



give my notice to the management. He placed me at the Tivoli as assistant to Milton Charles, and this, I believe, was the biggest thrill of my life.

"The management thought a great deal of my picture accompaniment, and a few months later, moved me to the Roosevelt Theatre on State Street downtown, to play its 3/20 Kimball, a beautiful instrument. I also did some work at the Chicago, just a block away, also on State.

"At this time, Balaban & Katz ordered a duplicate console for the Chicago so that Jesse and his wife, Helen (also a fine organist), could perform as a team. She had previously been at the Roosevelt.

"I was then moved to the Chicago as assistant organist, playing Sunday noon concerts as well as a daily program from the theatre over WMAQ which had a large following. The Gunn School of Music hired me to teach theatre organ in my off-hours. From time to time, I was sent to other B & K theatres: Uptown, Tivoli, Paradise, etc.

"In 1926, they sent me to Detroit where I opened the 4000-seat Michigan Theatre, playing a beautiful 5/28 Wurlitzer. The organ had been installed at the same time the builders of the theatre were working on construction. This resulted in an abnormal amount of sawdust, plaster dust, etc., being in the air and some of it settled in the pipe valves and magnets.

"For my opening solo, I wanted to show off the organ, and had prepared a flashy introduction. In the middle of it, a cipher developed in the Bombarde! As you know, the Bombarde is a very loud organ stop. It sounded for the remainder of the solo, and it did nothing to calm my nerves!

"Another disquieting thing occurred there during my second week. I began my solo, with the console at low level, rising into the spotlight to solo level. But, the elevator didn't stop there — it kept rising! There was a loud crunch as it tore into the stage apron and started to wobble.

"Needless to say, it scared me and I jumped off the organ seat to the stairs at the side, while the console rose to about a foot above stage level and swayed dangerously. I suppose the audience thought I was trying to do an acrobatic stunt! There was no solo!

"Even though I was treated with great regard in Detroit, I did not care for the city, and asked to be returned to Chicago. I refused a position in St.

Louis, but finally was reinstalled in my old position at the Chicago Theatre where I was very happy.

"Talkies came in during the late twenties and though work decreased for the organists, I was kept by B & K until 1932. The day after my departure from the chain, their manager of music called me, suggesting I go to WMAQ for an audition. I had no idea for what, but found out that it was to do the 'Amos 'n Andy' theme, 'The Perfect Song' (from the 1915 picture *Birth of a Nation*). Until that time, the theme had been played for the show by a small combo.

"I auditioned all afternoon while the advertising people for Pepsodent toothpaste listened by remote control in their offices. At 4 p.m. I was informed that they would try it with me once that evening.

"Well, that one night became the first of five straight years, until Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll moved the show to California. I played the Amos 'n Andy show in Chicago from June 1932 until September 1937.

"My association with Gosden and Correll was a most pleasant one. After they moved to the coast, I didn't see them again until 1940 when I moved to California. I was called to play a two-manual Estey for a party at the mansion of Earl C. Anthony, the Packard dealer in Los Angeles. Charley Correll and Freeman Gosden attended, and we had a renewal of friendships.

"The show's announcer, Bill Hay, and I were very good friends. He and his wife invited Mrs. Fossler and me to their beautiful Palm Springs home, and we had a delightful visit with them.

"While doing A & A, I also played for 'The Goldbergs' and 'Lum & Abner,' which were handled by the same agency. I didn't lose any time with the change of the A & A show to California, for I was immediately offered a staff position on NBC in Chicago.

"While working in Chicago, a friend took me to see a relative, Laurens Hammond of the Hammond Clock Co., who was experimenting with an electric organ. He asked me to try the working model and give my opinion. Previously, he had a celebrated church organist try it, who said that it had no future.

"Even though the instrument was in a very primitive stage, I was able to

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Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, the Amos 'n Andy duo, shown in Chicago in 1931. (Klos collection)



Dean Fossler at the Chicago Theatre Wurlitzer about 1925. (Fossler collection)

get a lot of music out of it and could see its great possibilities. Mr. Hammond was thrilled with what I did with it, and told my friend that I had stimulated more than ever his desire to go on with its development.

"The Hammond came on the market in 1935 and was a sensation. I was one of the first buyers and have had two other models since. I am intrigued by all makes of electronic organs, but of course, I have my favorites.

"In 1939, I decided I needed a new start — a new outlook. After giving my notice to NBC, I took off for California in April, and never went back. I served as staff organist on all the radio networks in Los Angeles, playing for such shows as 'I Love a Mystery,' 'The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,' 'The Billie Burke Show' and 'The Guiding Light' (when it originated in Los Angeles), to name a few.

"I had a pleasant association with

Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, who played Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, respectively. Well acquainted with Billie Burke during the run of her show, I found her a delightful and charming lady who loved to hear me play the old songs which were featured in the Ziegfeld Follies. (She was formerly married to Florenz Ziegfeld.)

"I was staff organist for NBC, CBS and ABC, the last being the Red Network of NBC then. I had to jump in and play a program at a moment's notice, whenever the scheduled artist failed to show or something happened to the cross-country lines. It was necessary to keep a sizeable list of musical numbers on file for clearance in just such emergencies.

"In 1951, I had serious surgery and was unable to work for a year. Becoming well again, I was hired by Penny Owsley Music Co. of Los Angeles to demonstrate and sell Hammond organs. Jesse Crawford also

worked for P.O. after his moving to California. Baldwin and Allen were other firms for whom I worked, selling organs, and demonstrating for prospective buyers.

"Though I retired in 1964, I was pressured into accepting a position in a lovely church where I played over 11 years and which I enjoyed very much. I have attempted to retire completely, but I guess that's impossible, for I get calls to substitute in churches and I enjoy this. This will probably occur for the rest of my days.

"At age 85 (in 1980), I'm still going strong. I have so much for which to be thankful, a wonderful vocation and never without work, except when I want to be. I have a lovely daughter, a fine son-in-law and four grandchildren. My wife and I had 55 years of happiness together when she was taken from me.

"My life as a musician has been a very joyful and rewarding one." □

Chicago NBC studios, left the Civic Opera, and right the Merchandise Mart, where Dean Fossler played the Amos and Andy theme while the show originated in Chicago.

