

The Hanging Tuba Caper

by Fred Clapp and David Schutt

It was a cold and rainy morning. The feeble beam of a flashlight swept around the dusty room, picking out here a pile of long-forgotten rubbish, there a bulky form which metamorphosed into an organ blower, finally a vertical iron ladder disappearing into the murky blackness above. The two men converged on the ladder, climbing rung by rung through a trapdoor into the total darkness of the Solo chamber.

After some minutes of fumbling, the burned-out work light bulb was located and replaced. Blinking in the

sudden light the two blanched at the scene which greeted them. The solo chest was shadowed by a 16' Tuba off-chest tilted at 45 degrees from the concrete wall where anchor bolts had let go at one end — a veritable "Sword of Damocles" ready to crash down at the slightest vibration, destroying the very heart of every pipe rank in the Solo chamber.

So began rehabilitation of the Grand Lake Theatre Wurlitzer in Oakland, California, in late 1954. This Style 235 3/11 Unit Orchestra was installed in 1925 and was exten-

sively used during the silent picture era. It spoke into a large house (2175 seats) with excellent acoustics through large unobstructed openings. It had a truly majestic and melodious sound for an instrument of this size.

Attempts to start the blower revealed that the power line from the main power panel on the opposite side of the theatre was shorted. Heroic attempts to pull the wires from the conduit were unsuccessful, leading to the conclusion that the conduit was crushed by settling of the theatre where it ran underneath.

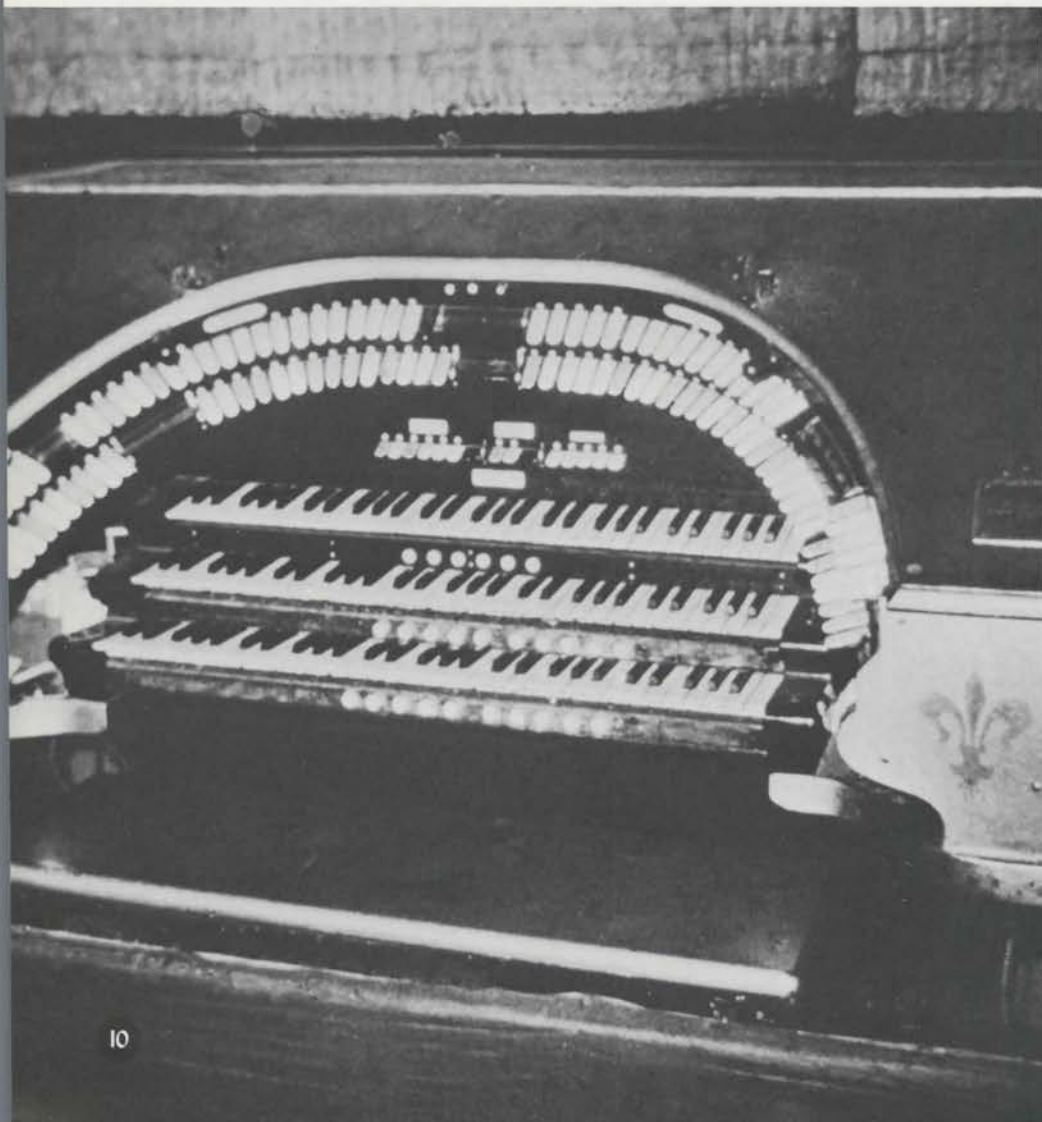
What to do? Pent-up curiosity and eagerness to hear the pipes speak again would not allow us to wait months or years to restore the power line, so the next-best solution was resorted to — you guessed it — an extension cord.

Three-phase extension cords with sufficient capacity for a 7½ hp blower are not available at your neighborhood variety store, so one was made up from a bundle of old radar cables purchased in surplus stores. All 125 feet of it had to be rolled up out of the way when not in use, to avoid lawsuits from persons tripping over it while crossing the stage in the dark. One advantage of this arrangement though — no need to worry about unauthorized use of the organ!

After clearing old rags and newspapers from the blower intake and making sure the shaft was free to turn, the switch was closed. With the voltage drop in the makeshift cable, it took about a half minute for the motor to get up to speed, which it finally did with a melange of air leaks and ciphering pipes only a true organ enthusiast could love. The main windline had a huge leak in the Solo chamber which proved very difficult to close and the solo chest leaked like a colander from every joint. While the Solo chamber had not been flooded,

Console of the Grand Lake Wurlitzer, taken in January 1958.

(Clapp photo)



enough water had come through cracks in the concrete outside wall to keep the humidity very high, swelling the wood. Most of the leather was in very bad shape and had to be replaced.

The Main chamber was a different story. Against an inner wall, this was well preserved and worked with only minor problems. Fortunately the relay and switches were all on this side, and were in pretty good shape although quite worn from heavy use through the years.

Quieting a few airleaks and doing a bit of quick tuning allowed us to sample the tonal delicacies of the seven ranks on this side. And that Diaphone! Its clean foundation was omnipresent from the restrooms to the popcorn stand. No one in the building had to guess if the organ was playing.

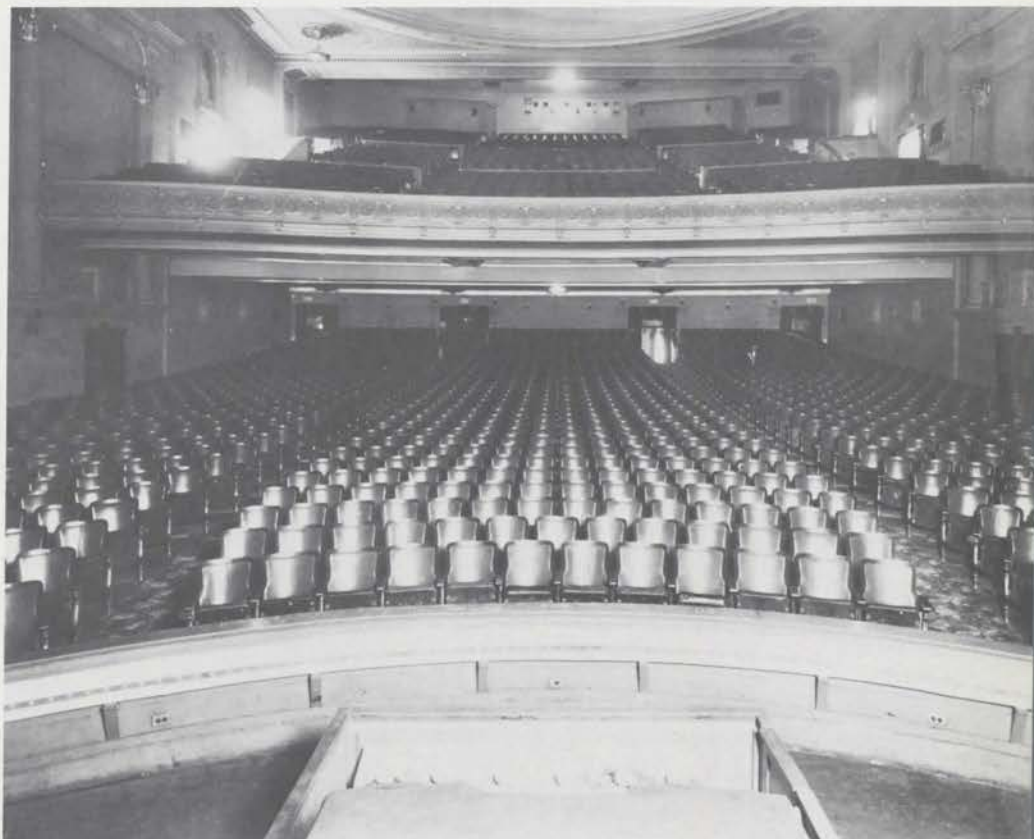
The console was on a lift at center stage and had been sitting at the bottom of the pit covered by a long-forgotten piece of stage curtain for many years. The urchins in the front row had amused themselves through uncounted matinees tossing popsicle sticks, chewing gum and candy wrappers into the console pit before show time. Cleaning out several feet of this — uh — material was probably the most unpleasant task in the entire operation. Freeing pedals and cleaning contacts of this unsavory mess were tasks we would as soon not repeat.

The console lift motor which powered a hydraulic (water) system was found to be operable but the console could not be raised. After one extended period of experimentation water from the lift reservoir could be heard gurgling in the nether regions beneath the theatre and it was decided to make do with the console in the down position. An unexpected bonus resulted from this decision, however. The power line to the lift motor was large enough to carry the main blower and was already installed half-way across the theatre. If it was beyond our resources to restore the lift mechanism, we could at least extend its power line to the blower room and finally do away with our "extension cord" and the 20 minutes or so required to take it in and out each time the organ was played. The theatre manager was sympathetic and responded by hiring an extra "door-man" for a few weeks until the out-of-pocket cost of a professional installation was returned.

Many months of Saturday and Sunday mornings lay ahead. The Solo chamber was a constant nuisance, because of chest leaks which not only were noisy but interfered with proper operation of the tremulants. These were finally patched up by putting in extra screws where needed. The outside wall was caulked from the outside by the not-recommended method of standing on top of a 16-foot step ladder from which the cracks could just be reached with a caulking gun. Fortunately, no disasters occurred and the final glorious sound was worth all the work.

The Grand Lake opened on March 6, 1926. The initial organist was Irma Falvey, a well-known Bay Area organist of the day. Other popular organists played there during its heyday, including Floyd Wright and Iris Vining.

The theatre was designed by the Reid Brothers who designed a great many theatres in the area, especially the smaller, neighborhood houses. With very complete stage facilities the Fanchon & Marco stage shows were popular, and at one time the pit orchestra was conducted by Horace Heidt.



Interior of the Grand Lake Theatre, taken in 1945. Note the covered console in the foreground of the picture above.
(Photo courtesy of Allen Michaan)





Floyd Wright at the Grand Lake console, circa 1930.

(Photo courtesy of Allen Michaan)

As the latest house in Oakland, the theatre enjoyed great popularity for several years until the new downtown Fox Oakland Theatre opened, followed later by the Oakland Paramount.

The standard Style 235 had the following ranks available:

MAIN (left)
 Viol d'Orchestra
 Viol Celeste
 Salicional
 Flute - extends to 16' Bourdon
 Diapason - extends to 16' Diaphone
 Clarinet
 Vox Humana
 SOLO (right)
 Tuba - extends to 16' Ophecleide
 Tibia
 Orchestral Oboe
 Kinura

A piano was located in the orchestra pit near the console. It was arranged to play louder on second touch, giving something of the dynamic "feel" of a real piano. A full complement of traps and toy counter, Harp, Xylophone, Sleigh Bells, Glockenspiel and Chrysoglott com-

pleted the roster. A number of changes had been made in the console wiring over the years, providing a 16' coupler on the Great manual, a 2' and 2½' pitch on the Tibia, along with several intermanual couplers.

The organ was removed from the theatre about 1959 by Dr. Ralph Bell of ATOS, and has recently been installed in the Band Organ Restaurant in Mishawaka, Indiana, not far from South Bend.

Of course a number of other persons besides the authors were involved in the rehabilitation work. In particular, Gordon Walker spent many weekend mornings helping with the relay and other electrical repair work. Famed Bay Area organist Larry Vannucci spent many hours playing beautiful music, making us aware that the efforts we put forth were worth it all. Others too numerous to mention helped in various ways in bringing this beautiful instrument back to life. We thank you all.

Now a new organ is being installed which will fill the auditorium with our favorite music by Convention Time, 1983. □

FROM THE WORK-BENCH

by Allen Miller



The Problem of Stripped Screws

One very common problem encountered in all makes of pipe organs is the stripped, or overturned, screw. It is indeed a sinking feeling one gets when a bung, cover, or bottom board is leaking and you attempt to tighten the screws and find that one or more turn freely and never tighten. There are a number of quick, temporary "fixes," but here I will cover the most acceptable, permanent repairs.

The usual temporary repairs consist of either stuffing foreign material into the screw hole, with or without glue, to give the screw something to grip, or resorting to longer or larger screws. The best hole stuffing method is probably to fill the screw hole with wooden toothpicks dipped in glue. Unfortunately, the amount of wood-to-wood contact between the toothpicks and the torn threaded area of the hole results in a poor bond, and the toothpicks eventually work loose. Totally unacceptable materials to fill the hole include bits of paper, plastic, or pieces of wire. Usually these objects fall out the first time the screw is removed, if, in fact, they ever hold at all.

Replacing the original screws with longer or larger screws usually works to some extent, depending upon how badly damaged the wood threads are. Unfortunately, it is easy to mix up screws when you later remove a cover, and you find yourself in trouble all over again.

The Proper Fix

The best repair is to replace the damaged wood, retaining the original screw. There are three methods of do-