

# SACRED GOWS AND FOXES

by Billy Nalle

On any day in our lives it is easy to encounter speculations, assumptions and even statements germinated by wishful thinking presenting themselves with straight faces as facts. The more romantic they are, the more quickly they spread and the more likely they are to be believed; don't ask my why! The theatre organ field, like any other, has its full share of fiction trying to cuddle up in our minds as fact. As it is said, "Truth is stranger than fiction." It also is far more interesting. Often misinformation is not harmful, but neither is it history.

One of the most famous fictions which died hard only fairly recently, would have had us believe that the Wurlitzer organ of four manuals and thirty-six ranks was the "Crawford" Special. It took both Crawford himself and Farny Wurlitzer stating repeatedly through the years that such was not so before that venerable story finally went to the cemetery. The only Wurlitzer that could be called a "Crawford Special," as an *unofficial* title, was the 4/20 Publix model for which Crawford had prepared the specification. However, he was so much constricted by the budget allotted this model, that it hardly represented what he felt was adequate.

Since the "Crawford" Special misnomer for the 4/36 finally has been given a merciful death, sure enough, there has begun to appear another slice from the fiction cake to take its place. This now calls it the "Fox" Special. That four of the five built went into Fox theatres apparently is regarded by some as sufficient basis for canonizing this new "handle." You wonder if this may be more to

add luster to the Fox theatres involved than it is to compliment the particular Wurlitzer. Certainly, if there is any need to give this organ model any title other than what Wurlitzer itself did (Wurlitzer 4/36 Special), then there is an unofficial one which satisfies both logic and justice: *Paramount Special*. After all, the 36-ranker was built first for the flagship of the international Paramount chain of theatres, the Paramount that sat on Times Square, New York. As Farny Wurlitzer *himself* said more than once, when the 36-rank model was built, there was no intention at the time to build another. That was the reason this model never was given a Wurlitzer style number. To Wurlitzer, the word Special was enough and meant exactly what the dictionary says it means. To qualify it with manual and rank quantity was sufficient. Farny added that, when William Fox wanted an extra large model for the four largest theatres in his new chain, Wurlitzer decided to duplicate the 36-rank model instead of building on a new "spec," because of the immense success of the first one. Those four went into the Fox theatres in Brooklyn (37 ranks, with the addition of an *Unda Maris* rank), Detroit, St. Louis and San Francisco (36 ranks in these last three). Farny made it clear that this was not regarded by the company as a series, which later history was to confirm. So, when you hear or read now of any so-called "Fox" Special, put your tongue in both cheeks simultaneously and remember that this is *not* an instance of "which came first, the chicken or the egg."

Then, there are other flora and

fauna in the Land of Tremulated Oz. You've heard and read that the largest and most important of William Fox's theatres were those listed previously and the Atlanta Fox, totalling five. Well, it's past time for William Fox to be given more like his proper due. His greatest theatres were not five in number, but . . . are you ready for this? . . . *seven*.

In 1927 he opened the most opulent and the largest theatre in the nation's capital, the Washington Fox. It seated virtually 3500 (3434) and was splendid indeed in terms of silver and gold and cream. Its interior was novel in design: Its mezzanine was at street level and you descended great marble staircases from the lobby to the orchestra level. It held the Fox name for years, even for a while after Fox sold the theatre to the Loew chain. The latter was pleased to benefit from the prestige of the Fox name until the parent firm, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, decreed a change so as to avoid confusion with Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, the firm which succeeded the original Fox organization. Only then did the name become Loew's Capitol.

The seventh theatre in the William Fox chain was not only his largest, it was then, and still holds the record of being, the largest and the most expensive motion picture theatre ever built. Evidence of this has been an "open secret" for years, being noted in several publications, including the late Ben Hall's book, "The Best Remaining Seats." That Fox did not *begin* building it seems to have thrown many off the scent. However, he was so impressed by it that he signed a purchase contract using for a desk a board lying across two sawhorses in the gloom of the unfinished theatre! He could not give the theatre his name because the name by contract already was committed to another. The theatre? None other than the great New York Roxy! You read correctly. Fox bought it, financing its completion with five million dollars and directed its operation until the liquidation of his theatre chain. If anyone thinks the Roxy was not in every sense a Fox theatre, be it known to him that under God and by God *William Fox* thought so! If you'd like to check the gist of the details, find a friend or a library with the Hall book and begin reading on page 76. Ben shared with me much of his source material on this during

preparation of the book, so I can attest to that section being factual. (Ben did make one error; the Roxy Kimball auditorium organ had not 29 ranks but 34.)

Several pieces of literature in recent times have landed on my desk, not any two agreeing on the size and cost of several of the largest movie theatres in the land. Some of the statements have the aroma of wishful thinking, but, again, the truth is far more interesting and fascinating. The final cost of the New York Roxy was *twelve million* dollars, more than the total investment Fox had personally in all his other theatres, studios and film exchanges prior to that time! There was one Roxy ad saying ten million, but that was someone guessing in the public relations office who failed to check before going to the printer. Imagine . . . twelve million dollars and, remember, that was in terms of money value of the *twenties!* A minimum of five times that would be required in dollars of the eighties, meaning sixty million today. Never before, never since, has there been such a theatre of its expense and with all its features and decor. Noting this infers no depreciation of the Music Hall in Rockefeller Center, for the RCMH is a collection of wonders on the same quality level. However, it did cost less and it did, and does, seat less. The Roxy, in the course of its stage history, also ran a greater gamut of variety and presented spectacular stage shows and effects fully the equal of any in the Music Hall.

The New York Roxy seated 6200-*plus* at its opening and for about three years more. Then top balcony seats were rearranged and the total seating then came to slightly over 6100. Next came the Music Hall with 5800, the New York Capitol with 5300, the Detroit Fox 5042, the St. Louis Fox 5035, the San Francisco Fox 4651, the Atlanta Fox 4535 (until new seating in the sixties reduced it to 4464), the Brooklyn Fox 4060 and the Washington Fox with 3434. (New seating for the Atlanta Fox in the near future will restore that magnificent palace to its original capacity, 4535.)

So, whenever you wonder about some latter day romantic declaration, do what you would do before placing a bet at the horse races: Be certain *all* the critturs in harness are horses. As any Southerner can tell you, a mule in horse harness . . . is still a mule. □

# Keep Fit; Keep Playing

by Preston "Sandy" Fleet

For a number of years now I have spent a considerable amount of time sitting at the organ, and while I derive a great deal of pleasure from this experience, I have been aware for some time of a great danger to those of us who enjoy the fruits of this labor. Those who started playing piano or organ at a very young age and have progressed to the ranks of the pro or semi-pro with full- or part-time jobs as performers in the music business should especially take note. We all love you dearly and want you to continue to entertain us for many years to come . . .

Take better care of yourself! Today there is much interest in keeping fit, more so than in the past. Diet is regarded as all-important to good health, and there is plenty of assistance and information available. In my childhood days I remember radio advice: plenty of fresh air, sleep, and exercise, and a well-rounded diet (three squares a day) consisting of a balance of protein, carbohydrates and fats, calories to be balanced with physical activity; more for more, less for less. We have all heard these things before. As we get older we should eat less; the American standard of living is high, and therefore we tend to overdo and overeat. (This is now true for Europeans and the U.K., too.)

Not much has been said about this to musicians, however — organists and piano players in particular. How many artists do we know who let themselves go? Arthritis, stiff joints, varicose veins, hemorrhoids, anemia and an ample-sized rear are all aggravated or caused by *the bench syn-*

*drome.* Sure, I know, there is not enough time to exercise and *everyone* knows hotel and airline food is hardly appetizing, let alone healthfully balanced . . . and fresh air, what's that? Did you ever see an organ outside? (. . . I mean, *other* than San Diego's in Balboa Park.) Enough excuses! I am concerned about you, friend!

Organ technicians generally do all right — they bend and stretch for a living. But how about you? You know the exercises: calisthenics, aerobics, walking, swimming, bicycling, exercycle. Yes, I know exercise can be boring. Watch television or listen to your favorite music on a portable radio or cassette player. Plan your day. Think sweet thoughts. If you have difficulty finding the time, split your exercise routine into two sessions, morning and evening or just before your practice sessions. I know you can find two 10- to 20-minute periods during the day for you and your body. By the way, rhythm is very important in any exercise routine, as it is in your music. It keeps you from tripping over your own feet and entangling your arms *and* it aids breathing — remember to begin your exercises with some deep breaths; you will be surprised what it does for your stamina in *all* situations.

AND you know how to eat properly: watch the fats, the carbohydrates and the salt; include fiber and roughage; alcohol in moderation.

Follow these simple guidelines and, believe me, you will feel better and be more mentally alert. Here's to your good health and many years of organ playing! □