

THE WURLITZER/HILLGREEN-LANE AT THE NEW MEXICO MILITARY INSTITUTE

by Bill G. Eastham — photos by Joe Mainello

Graduates, cadets, parents and friends of New Mexico Military Institute and their families attending the institute's 91st annual Homecoming will be offered an unprecedented treat on October 27. That is the night well-known theatre organist Lyn Larsen will play the dedication concert on the 3/19 Wurlitzer/Hillgreen-Lane recently refurbished by W. P. Brown of Phoenix, Arizona.

Now installed in NMMI's 1400-seat Pearson Auditorium, the Wurlitzer console and relays have traveled from coast to coast. But the entire organ is in mint condition, thanks to Brown and a dedicated crew of NMMI employees and volunteers from the Roswell Theatre Organ Society.

The console and relays began their musical career in the Strand Theatre in Portland, Maine, in 1925 as a typical Wurlitzer Style 260 Special. Some time after World War II the entire organ was purchased by Durst & Co., Inc. of Erie, Pennsylvania.

There is no record of it being played again until 1974, when it was bought by Preston M. "Sandy" Fleet and installed on his estate near Escondido, California. It was the subject of an article in the August 1974 issue of THEATRE ORGAN. Fleet built a 60' x 25' recording studio for the 16-rank instrument, to which he added a Post Horn in the Percussion Chamber and a Piano.

Fleet put the console and relays up for sale in 1980 and Brown bought them to donate to NMMI, where he was graduated from high school in 1947 and college in 1950. The auditorium already contained a 3/14 Hillgreen-Lane, however, so Brown used the Wurlitzer in his Organ Stop Pizza parlor in Phoenix for a year while the auditorium chambers were being renovated and a new hydraulic scissors lift was being installed to accom-

modate the Wurlitzer components.

The original Hillgreen-Lane was installed in the Sunshine Theatre in Albuquerque in 1923 at a cost of \$13,000. One of the organists who played it was Alva Wilson, now a retired electronics technician living in Roswell, who installed it in the NMMI auditorium in 1941. It was nearly destroyed when the delivery truck overturned while bringing it to Roswell from Albuquerque.

At some time in the early 1960's the console was buried under a remodeled stage. It remained there until 1971, when it was resurrected and restored by Robert C. MacNeur of Oakland, California; Ronald J. Blessing of El Paso, Texas, and Dennis Alley of Roswell, all NMMI cadets, with the help of Wilson and Jesse P. Reed, also of Roswell. It has since been played and maintained under the direction of Wilson and other members of the Roswell TOS.

Considerable remodeling had to be done in the auditorium to accommodate the new organ. The orchestra pit

was enlarged and the chambers were redesigned to accommodate an additional five ranks and a piano. The original Hillgreen-Lane console sat in the orchestra pit on 33-gallon garbage cans slightly above main floor level. But the new lift, controlled at the console, will bring the Wurlitzer all the way up to stage level.

Work on the installation began in February 1982, when Brown brought the relay over from Phoenix. Wilson and his wife, Edna, Merlin Crane and Dick Hilferty of the Roswell TOS spent several weeks soldering transistors and diodes on driver boards for the additional ranks.

In the summer of 1982 Brown and his technicians, Michael Zembsch and Graham Davis, a young Australian-born organ builder who is now on his own, started going through the 1200 pipes in the original Hillgreen-Lane and giving them a thorough cleaning and renovation.

The Wurlitzer console and additional parts, including Wurlitzer chests, regulators and pipes, all fur-

Pearson Auditorium at NMMI.





Dennis James at the original Hillgreen-Lane console.



Alva Wilson tries out the Wurlitzer console.

nished by Brown, were delivered in October 1982. In February of this year Brown and his crew increased the blower horsepower from five to 7-1/2, providing 15 inches of pressure, and put the Solo chamber in playable condition.

Most of the pipework in the Main chamber was completed during another week-long session in June. At this writing Brown was planning to return about September 6 and stay until the installation was complete. On October 24 — three days before the dedication — Brown, Davis and Mr. Larsen will return to give the instrument its final voicing and tuning. Brown es-

Solo chamber.

timates he will have invested about \$65,000 in the installation by the time it is finished. This does not include his own time, motel accommodations donated by the Maloof chain and the piano donated by Sandy Fleet.

New Mexico Military Institute will show its appreciation to Brown on October 28 when a 7000-square foot addition to Pearson Auditorium, completed in August, will be dedi-

cated as the W. P. Brown Music Annex. A bronze plaque honoring others who have given of their time and talent to the installation and contributors to a perpetual organ maintenance fund will be permanently installed in the auditorium during Larsen's concert intermission. At that time Brown will also show slides depicting the history of the original Hillgreen-Lane and the new installation.

WURLITZER/HILLGREEN-LANE 3/19 THEATRE ORGAN

MAIN DIVISION (Left Chamber)

Concert Flute 16'
Viol d'Orchestra 8'
Viol Celeste 8'
Open Diapason 16'
Clarinet 8'
Tibia Clausa 8'
Tuba Horn 16'
Vox Humana 8'
Harp
Sleigh Bells

LOWER CHAMBER

Piano

SOLO DIVISION (Right Chamber)

Kinura 8'
Tibia Clausa (electronic) 32'
Quintadena 8'
Orchestral Oboe 8'
Trumpet 8'
English Post Horn 8'
Gamba 16'
Gamba Celeste 8'
Vox Humana 8'
Xylophone
Glockenspiel
Chimes
Chrysoglott
Toy Counter



Main chamber.

