

## The Inside Story . . .

# SYRACUSE'S ORGAN TRANSPLANT

by Lloyd E. Klos

On February 20, 1983, as part of the monthly theatre organ program at the New York State Fairgrounds near Syracuse, New York, Charles Schubert, former Director of Restoration and Maintenance for ESTMIM, presented a slide show, showing how the ex-RKO Keith's 3/11 Wurlitzer was transplanted from its original home to the fairgrounds. Following is a synopsis of that story.

In 1962, a group of organ buffs were working to restore the 4/20 Wurlitzer in Loew's State Theatre in Syracuse. It was in reasonably good condition, but an enthusiast, Paul

Fleming, reasoned that Syracuse could use a second organ for public concerts. He and Frank Plante talked to Dave Levin, manager of Keith's, and secured permission to look at the organ there. They were told to "look, but not tinker."

After thoroughly appraising the instrument's condition, they determined that even though it needed plenty of work, it was worth the effort to get it playing again. Returning to Mr. Levin with his proposal, Paul secured permission through RKO District Manager Jay Golden in Rochester to proceed with the project. They

worked on it, off and on, for the next couple of years until a shocking event occurred during 1964 which changed everything.

The Loew's State Wurlitzer was suddenly sold, practically overnight, to a California organ broker and hastily removed from the building. Those who had so faithfully worked to restore it were not even told of this development in advance, hence no effort could be initiated to keep the organ in Syracuse. (It was re-sold to a pizza parlor owner and has been in storage ever since. Asking price at last report was \$85,000.)

The departure of the Loew's organ left Keith's with the only theatre organ in a public place in the Salt City. This showed the wisdom of Paul Fleming's thinking earlier. While most of the Loew's restoration crew were incensed and bitter to the point of not wanting any part of theatre organs again, a few joined the Keith's restoration crew.

In the fall of 1964, Paul Fleming, upon learning that Charlie Schubert was repairing pump organs and was interested in player pianos, asked him to help at Keith's. Busy at the time, he was forced to decline. Came March 1965 and Charlie learned of the concert to be sponsored by the newly-formed Syracuse Theatre Organ Society on March 28 with the 74-year-old local theatre organist, Luella Wickham.

Never having attended a theatre organ concert, Charlie went. A total of 2000 almost filled the house. "The atmosphere was electrifying," he said. "The organ, though not fully operational, sounded great. Right there, I became forever hooked on that beautiful sound we all know so well!" In June 1965, there was another concert, featuring Dean Robinson. Several concerts were held in the coming months, though no major repairs were done — just enough work to keep the organ playable. Still too busy, I just lacked the time to help."

In January 1966, Paul Fleming's world crumbled! Up to this point, he (and so many of the enthusiasts) thought RKO Keith's and its Wurlitzer would go on indefinitely. He had returned from a concert at Rochester's RKO Palace where he learned from Jay Golden that Syracuse's Keith's Theatre was part of the site of an urban renewal project and was

Console of the ESTMIM 3/11 Wurlitzer in the Art & Home Center, State Fairgrounds, Syracuse, New York. Now on the stage, the console has been restored to its original mahogany finish. (Tom Anderson photo)





Charlie Schubert at work in 1967.

scheduled to be razed in 1967. Paul panicked. He told Charlie Schubert he just had to save the last theatre organ in the city for future generations. "Asking me to help, I told him I would in whatever little ways I could. Having not even seen the workings of the organ, I didn't know what I'd be getting into later!"

"During one of Karl Cole's practice sessions, Paul took me through the chambers. He impressed me with his technical knowledge. I also was overwhelmed by the organ's complexity."

Over the next several months, Paul Fleming continued to look for a new home for the Wurlitzer. In the meantime, several Sunday morning con-

certs helped raise money necessary for purchase, removal and reinstallation. In the spring of 1966, Ed Patrick, of the State Fair Committee of the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, told Paul of the committee's proposal to have year-round activities at the Fairgrounds, and thought that the organ might fit into the Harriet May Mills Building, designated as the Art & Home Center.

Paul looked the place over, engaged Charlie Schubert to make layouts to ascertain if the instrument would fit. It would! After that, things started to move fast. The museum idea was born. Paul elected to head the public relations aspect, involving fund-raising, workers and media publicity.

Charlie was given the task of removal, rebuilding and reinstallation. "Paul told me that he didn't know anything about moving an organ, and wouldn't know where to start. He said I was the logical choice since I was in the player-piano, pump-organ rebuilding hobby. And I always thought he was the expert and knew everything! He told me that I would learn as I went along. To put it mildly, this put me into a state of shock!"

"I really wanted to save the organ

as much as he did, but this was such a large project, I wasn't sure I could handle it. I talked it over with my wife, who knew how I felt about saving the last theatre organ in Syracuse, and she said it was OK with her if it was really what I wanted to do. Paul was ecstatic when he learned of my affirmative decision."

On June 14, 1966, a huge money-raising program was held, entitled "Glimpse of the Past." The theatre was sold out and \$1000 was realized. That month, the Museum was chartered by the New York State Board of Regents. The RKO office set the organ's price at \$6000. Secretly, the dismantling began in July because of fear that after the sale, only a couple of weeks would be allowed for the organ's removal.

The enthusiasts worked until November when they ran out of room in the chambers where the parts were being stored. Also, the settlement was held up because the theatre's owners and the urban renewal officials couldn't agree on the price for the theatre.

Arrangements for a loan to complete the organ's purchase were made through the Metropolitan Bank, after museum trustees co-signed for \$1000

The Art & Home Center which houses the ex'Keith's 3/11 Wurlitzer.

(Tom Anderson photo)





Paul Fleming working on the organ in 1967.

each to cover the loan in case of default. During Christmas week, final papers were signed and the Museum owned the organ. The theatre gave the group until January 20 to remove the instrument. Charlie Schubert's hunch was correct.

Part of the deal was that the organ had to be playing by Fair Week 1967, a dubious prospect, to say the least. Paul secured a truck and crew, and on two Saturdays, five loads of Wurlitzer were moved. Sorting followed, and work schedules were set up for four days or nights a week. After falling behind, the schedule was enlarged until by the end of July, the organ was in and playing. About 5000 man-hours were expended, with some workers putting in seven days a week in the final push.

On August 13, 1967, the organ was dedicated and, shortly after, it made a big hit during Fair Week. It has been featured every year at Fair time since, with name stars at the console. The first concert season began in March 1968, after two months of console rebuilding. There have been ten-concert seasons ever since.

On a plaque in the rear of the auditorium are the names of 13 dedicated faithful who rebuilt and installed the organ: Charlie Schubert, Chief, Tom Anderson, Arnold Briggs, Mary Caverlero, Paul Fleming, Dick Johnson, Ren Johnson, Ron Johnson, Frank Plante, Charlie Rich, Lloyd Stevens, Bob Vanderhoek and Charlie Wainwright. □

# Concert Bureau Started

by Ralph Beaudry

"Good idea!" — Mike Ohman, ATOS Vice President.

"The Concert Bureau is a very good idea; it's something that has been needed for a long time." — Lee Erwin.

"It will help all of us, producers and artists alike." — Gordon Madison, owner, Capitol Theatre (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania).

After years of debating about whether or not it might work, Tom B'hend, Editor of *The Console* and Ralph Beaudry, Contributing Editor, decided to do something about it!

In September, letters and questionnaires were mailed to almost 200 organists and nearly 100 ATOS chapters and concert-producing locations. The remarks quoted above are a few of the very positive statements coming in indicating the time has come to issue a directory of concert artists and locations which produce theatre organ programs.

Along with the directory a complete calendar of where the artists are playing during 1984 will be available. Both the directory and calendar will be periodically updated (at intervals yet to be determined).

Briefly, the artist directory will be INclusive, not EXclusive! The criteria for who should be listed is simple — anyone who performs in public! No representations will be made as to quality; you, the concert-going public, decide by your attendance and requests for return engagements.

While we have combed our files, ATOS chapter newsletters, THEATRE ORGAN and *The Console*, we know we have accidentally missed some artists. In fact, we have about 50 names for whom we have no addresses. If you think you should be included, or know of an artist who has not as yet been contacted, please send the name and address to "Console Concert Bureau," 12931 Haynes Street, North Hollywood, California 91606.

The artist directory will include artist's addresses and, where available, telephone numbers, as well as information about recordings or audition

tapes available, photos and publicity material, if they play silent movies and if they will play electronic instruments if that is what is available, and information about willingness to travel.

It must be emphasized that nothing about fees will appear, nor will the Bureau attempt to engage in negotiations between an artist and a concert-producing organization. The fee is, of course, a major concern for the artist and that is one of the important reasons the Bureau has been established. An East Coast artist must charge a high fee to play a single date on the West Coast. But if other West Coast chapters know an artist will be in their area at a certain time of the year it is then possible to spread the travel expense over several performances, thus reducing the cost to the local producers and also giving the artist an opportunity to increase his income.

Concert producers will be listed so artists will be able to set up their own "concert circuit" once they know whom to contact. This listing will give the Program Director's name, address and telephone, as well as information about auditorium size, the instrument and ticket pricing policy. We are not overlooking the fact that many concert locations do not have pipe organs but rely on electronic organs. Any reader who knows of electronic organ concert producers in their area please write to the address given above.

The cost of setting up and operating the Bureau is being paid by several anonymous donors who believe the future of theatre organ depends, in large part, on a more professional approach to concert production. We wish to thank Rex Koury, ATOS President, for his encouragement and assistance and for the excellent "Concert Producing Letters" his ATOS committee has been sending to the chapters.

THEATRE ORGAN will publish the Concert Bureau directory in a forthcoming issue to help give it the widest possible distribution. □