

EVERETT NOURSE AT THE CONSOLE

by Dr. Edward J. Mullins

Many theatre organ enthusiasts first heard Everett Nourse from recordings made at the San Francisco Fox Theatre over 20 years ago. His music has brought hours of enjoyment to many people, yet very little has ever been written about him. I called him and he reluctantly made an appointment for an interview. He is a very kind and unassuming, soft-spoken gentleman with a warm sense of humor. Here is his story.

Everett Nourse was born in Chico, California, June 8, 1911, and grew up in Oakland. At the age of six he started piano lessons and was composing some of his own music within two years. At 14 he became

fascinated with the pipe organ and studied church organ under Nadine Shepard of Berkeley for two years. He practiced in the Park Boulevard Presbyterian Church, near his home, and soon was playing occasionally for the church. He gave his first public concert at this church when he was 16.

His family frequently attended their neighborhood Parkway Theatre and he fell in love with the sound of the theatre pipe organ. Young Everett would sit in the first row behind the organist, all eyes and ears, enthralled by the Wurlitzer. He enjoyed listening to Eddie Dunstetter network radio broadcasts and Jesse Craw-

ford recordings and was really "hooked" in a short time.

His first break, a chance to play a real Wurlitzer organ, came when his Oakland High School music teacher arranged to have him demonstrate the organ in the Diamond Theatre in Oakland for her music appreciation class. Apparently he did this well because the manager, Mr. Rosenberg, liked his playing and invited him to come in to play whenever he wished. This was the biggest thrill of Nourse's early life. The Diamond had a late model eight-rank Wurlitzer with divided chambers, and young Everett soon began playing occasionally for Saturday afternoon stage shows.

Not long after this, he "discovered" Floyd Wright, who was playing at the Grand Lake Theatre in Oakland. He was greatly inspired by his beautiful music. Floyd would often allow him to play the Grand Lake organ, which was the first three-manual Wurlitzer he played.

Between 1928 and 1934 he was playing occasional programs on a number of East Bay organs, including the three-manual one in the Hotel Leamington, and those in the Fox Campus Theatre, Madison Street Masonic Temple, radio station KFWM, three different churches, and an out-of-town organ dedication for a beautiful new Baptist church in Willows, California.

In 1935, he finally got to play a big downtown theatre, the Fox Oakland, for a New Year's Eve sing-time program. The manager took a liking to him and permitted him to use the organ for practice any time he wanted. This turned out to be Nourse's "organ headquarters" on Saturday and Sunday mornings for many years to come. He recalls, "I loved that instrument; it had a beautiful sound."

In 1929 Nourse enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley and received a Bachelor's degree in Agriculture in 1933. Upon graduation he got a job with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Berkeley. He married his wife Louise in 1936. They moved to Vacaville, California, in 1938 when he accepted a position there. In 1945, he began his long career with the University of California Cooperative Extension Service in Solano County. He took a sabbatical leave in 1957 to earn a Master of Science degree in Agronomy from U.C. Davis. His musical activity has basically been a weekend affair because of his de-

Nourse at the Oakland Paramount's new Wurlitzer in 1984 for Nor-Cal Chapter concert.

(Nourse collection)





In 1937 Nourse was allowed to try out the Oakland Paramount Wurlitzer. This is the original console.

(Nourse collection)

manding full time occupation of agriculture.

Not long after moving to Vacaville, he began hearing fabulous reports about a very talented young organist at Grant Union High School in Sacramento. He was George Wright. Nourse attended Wright's organ dedication concert there and was tremendously impressed and inspired by his genius. Later, after Wright moved to the Bay Area, Nourse frequently listened to him at the San Francisco Fox and was completely overwhelmed by the combination of the brilliant organist and

Young Everett Nourse, age seven, at the Steinway.
(Nourse collection)



the magnificent sound of the 4/36 Fox Wurlitzer.

Late in 1944 when Wright left the Fox to take the organist position at the New York Paramount, Everett's old friend from the Fox Oakland days, C. E. MacDonald, who was now managing the San Francisco Fox, offered him the job there.

MacDonald told him this was the "big time," 5000 seats in the theatre, a big audience. He suggested he come in on a Monday night for a "dry run" before his Saturday show, the weekly "Saturday Night Singtime Jamboree." The Fox Wurlitzer, Opus 2012, was installed in 1929 at a cost of approximately \$65,000, in seven chambers. The console was decorated with ormolu and entirely metal leafed. The console had been painted a glossy white during Wright's tenure. Although this was impressive, the white console reflected light from the screen back into the audience. The console was restored to its original gold after George left.

Everett would entertain the crowds waiting in the Grand Lobby from the mezzanine where a 3/12 Möller Artiste concert pipe organ, Opus 5497, with 864 pipes, was installed. He played softly when the show was in progress.

The Wurlitzer console was located on its own elevator at the center of the orchestra pit. The Saturday night program began about 11:30 p.m., starting out with two or three organ numbers in the spotlight, followed by 10 or 15 minutes of community singing of popular songs of the day. Words were projected on the big screen and the 5000-seat house was often filled to capacity Saturday nights, especially dur-

ing football season when he played team songs, or during a football movie.

The "Up-and-Down" music would reflect the type of show. He had to be well aware of his cue, as the film was on when the console was at basement level of the pit. The pit door had to be closed tightly or the lift would not operate. He'd press the Up button on the elevator and the console would slowly rise as "The End" of the film was on the screen. His title slide, "Everett Nourse at the Organ," would be projected on the movie screen as the traveler curtain was slowly closing and the console rising. The curtain closed when the console reached the top position. The color of the gels for the spotlight would be lined out ahead of time with the booth. At the end of the first solo, Everett would press the signal button and the color changed for the second number. The screen was being adjusted to fit the song slides during the organ solos. The signal was pressed again and the spot color changed for the third solo.

The console would then be dropped to the picture level, the curtain opened with the projected slide such as, "Come On Gang, Let's Sing Some of the Best Songs, the OLD Songs," for the sing-along. The box of song slides had to be exactly in order, the button was pushed to signal slide changes. Nourse used a few parodies and his Crypt-o-Grams, where pictures were substituted for words, were special favorites of the audiences. When he got to the last song slide, he had to anticipate the time it took to come up to the top level to take his bow.

Everett Nourse's style of playing was strongly influenced by several organists: Floyd Wright, whom he worshipped, George Wright, Sidney Torch, Jesse Crawford and Eddie Dunstedter, who was a fantastic technician. Everett strongly feels that tone color is a very important ingredient in good organ music. He has long been known for his skillfull use of organ registration.

When he tries out an organ for the first time he checks out what resources the organ has — what stops it has, how they sound, how they combine, variations of volume of the instrument, and makes substitutions on each organ. "You need the well-balanced 'big sound,' you need good ensemble at lesser volumes, and of course you need good solo combinations. It's great if you can set your own pre-sets, however you can often make good use of some of the existing pre-sets.

"Lush effects, an ensemble of softer stops of 12 ranks, is something you learn over a period of years. On a big organ such as the Fox, with 2580 pipes, you had so much to draw from. Thousands of combinations were used over the years that you almost have an instinct of what to use in a certain phrase. There were 347 stop tablets. Very few theatre organs in the world



Nourse at the four-manual Devtronix organ, (1983).

(Ray Alves photo)

had such grandeur, from the thrilling big full sounds to the rich lush beauty of the softer combinations.

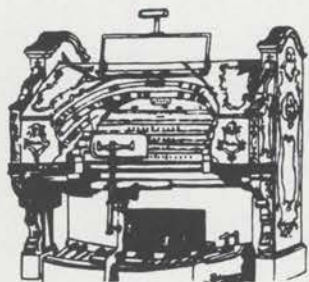
"From time to time the Fox would have World Premiere showings of some of the

big Hollywood productions. On opening nights the organ would be used with a full orchestra of up to 40 musicians, usually under the direction of the famous Walter Roesner. It was a tremendous thrill to play with this big orchestra."

For a short period of time in the late '40s Nourse also conducted a Singtime Jamboree at the Oakland Paramount Theatre on Saturday nights following his appearance at the Fox. They usually had a ten-minute "filler" movie on hand in case he was delayed coming over the bridge. The jamborees at the Fox were discontinued in 1949, but in the following years he continued to play for many occasions, such as premieres, special stage shows, intermission concerts and special events.

There was 32' octave of the Diaphonic Diapason (extension of the foundation Diapason) unenclosed over the proscenium arch which he used sparingly. It would cause the Fox balcony to shake and the balcony elevator would tremble whenever it was used. The audience would suspect an earthquake if it was used too long. A ventil control switch on the console, to disconnect the 32' Diaphone stop tablet, prevented its accidental use and forestalled a panic.

In the '50s Nourse and recording engineer Frank Killinger began experimenting with microphone placement in the Fox auditorium to get a recording that would do the organ justice. The problems were solved and eventually the beautiful sounds of this magnificent instrument were produced on tape, capturing the majesty of



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Everett and Louis Nourse, with cat "Tigger," at home.

(Dr. Ed Mullins photo)

this great 36-rank Wurlitzer.

In 1956, Nourse and the late William McMains were selected as official organists for the Republican National Convention held at the Cow Palace. The G.O.P. proceedings were broadcast nationally from San Francisco.

The final show at the Fox was February 16, 1963. This was a gala stage show with a chorus line and vaudeville acts, and starred a number of Hollywood celebrities. There was a big orchestra in the pit and Nourse played the opening program. The show was sponsored by the Peninsula Volunteers. When Everett finished his 15-minute concert, someone had left the basement lift door open and the lift would not go down. He had to climb off the bench and jump down during the audience's laughter and applause. He suspects it was a trick.

On the following evening a special FM radio broadcast originated from the empty Fox auditorium over station KPEN. Nourse alternated playing with organist friend "Tiny" James. Finally the moment approached when the last beautiful notes were to be heard from this marvellous instrument. It was with a lump in his throat and deep emotion that a misty-eyed Everett performed this sad task by playing "Auld Lang Syne" and Bronislau Kaper's "San Francisco." The organ was purchased and removed by the late Frank Lanterman, who installed it in his La Canada, California, residence. The wreckers moved in shortly, bringing another sorrowful moment in theatre organ history.

Not long after this, Frank Killinger's tapes of Nourse and "Tiny" James were issued on the Fantasy label as three LP recordings labeled "Farewell to the Fox," Volumes 1, 2 and 3. The two organists became widely known because of these recordings. Subsequently, two additional discs were released on Killinger's own Doric label. These consisted of previously unreleased material. The Nourse solo al-

bum, Doric 1404, became a Doric top seller. Killinger also produced another recording in 1966 featuring famous jazz pianist Frank Denke on a Steinway grand piano, with Everett on a Rodgers electronic organ.

The Fox closing enabled Everett to spend more time at home with his wife Louise and daughter Jeanne. He has played a few concerts each year on theatre pipe organ. He retired from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1977. He is organist at the Trinity Baptist Church in Vacaville, where he and his wife are members. They have lived in Vacaville for the past 46 years.

He is a member of the Vacaville Rotary Club and has played at many District Rotary conferences over the years. His Rotary Club purchased an electronic organ a few years ago and he plays for them preceding their weekly meetings at the Nut

Tree Restaurant on Highway 80.

Since his retirement he and Frank Denke have played several times at the annual Home Organ Festival at Asilomar, California. His theatre organ concerts have been at the Oakland Paramount Theatre, Redwood City Capn's Galley, San Francisco's Avenue Theatre, Grant Union High School, and in Sacramento at Cal-Expo and Arden Pipes & Pizza, as well as at the Organ Grinder and Paramount Theatre in Portland, Oregon. His most recent concert was for the Nor-Cal ATOS Chapter at the Oakland Paramount in April 1984.

In 1982, Devtronix Organs, Inc., asked him to make a recording demonstrating the Devtronix electronic organ. An educational and entertaining cassette recording was made in which he explains and demonstrates examples of good theatre organ registration. Dr. Ralph Bell, former editor of THEATRE ORGAN, has commented that Everett's remarks are "worth their weight in gold to the serious musician."

He also plays a program of organ numbers showing off the impressive sound of the instrument, a three-manual with 17 equivalent ranks. The organ recording was done by Frank Killinger in a building with excellent acoustics and has been well-received by organ enthusiasts throughout the country.

At home he has considerably modified his own electronic organ to produce a much more theatrical sound. He still continues to receive many requests to play concerts, fairs, conventions and other events each year. Occasionally he dreams that he is back at the San Francisco Fox talking to friends and the manager about some up-coming show.

THEATRE ORGAN is grateful to Everett Nourse for sharing some of his wonderful memories with us. □

Walter Roesner conducts the San Francisco Fox Theatre orchestra, with Charles "Doc" Wilson at the organ console. Wilson was a staff organist in the '30s when photo was taken. (Nourse collection)

