



BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF THEATRE ORGANISTS

by Dr. John W. Landon

BERRY, MARGARITE

Organist of the Majestic Theatre in Portland, Oregon in 1923.

BERRY, RAMON

(Real name, Charles Raymond Berry)

Born in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, January 9, 1906. Parents, Jessie A. and Charles L. Berry. Ramon Berry attended Sioux Falls High School. He began piano study at age five under Claude Gondierre in Sioux Falls. He gave his first recital at age ten. He began his pipe organ study at age 13, and became organist of the First Presbyterian Church in Sioux Falls, a post which he held from 1919 to 1924. He was also organist at various theatres in Sioux Falls and in the summers of 1922 and 1923 he studied concert organ in St. Paul, Minnesota, under Professor G. H. Fairclough. He was organist of the Princess Theatre in St. Paul in 1923. He studied theatre organ under Claude B. Ball in Chicago in 1925.

He was solo organist of the Irving Theatre in Chicago from 1925 to 1926. Opened the Fargo Theatre in Fargo, North Dakota, March 15, 1926, as solo organist, served as solo organist at the Alamo Theatre in Chicago from 1926 to 1928. He was President of the Chicago Society of Theatre Organists in 1929. Later he was guest organist for the Lynch Circuit in Chicago, and appeared in concert in Sioux Falls, Fargo, St. Paul and Chicago. He served as instructor at the Ball Theatre Organ School in Chicago.

BETTS, WILLARD (Dick)

Organist of Loew's Coney Island Theatre in New York City in 1927. Organist of Loew's Rochester Theatre in Rochester, New York, in 1930.

BICKFORD, GEORGE

Born in Washington, Iowa. Began piano

Willard "Dick" Betts at the Piccadilly Theatre, Rochester, New York. Miniature slave console in the foreground.



lessons at age eight with a local teacher. Took some organ instruction in later years from Helen Crawford. He organized a five-piece band and toured the country for three years after graduating from high school. He started playing the organ for silent pictures at the Fox Theatre in Washington, Iowa. During the next several years he played at the Rialto Theatre in Boone, Iowa; the Strand Theatre in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and the Englert Theatre in Iowa City, Iowa. In 1928 he moved to Davenport, Iowa, and was engaged to play organ at the Garden and Capitol Theatres there, as well as at the Fort Theatre in Rock Island, Illinois. His last theatre organ assignments were at the Des Moines and Paramount Theatres in Des Moines, Iowa. In later years, he managed the Davenport Club, a private luncheon and dinner club in Davenport. The club had a Hammond organ which he played occasionally.

BIEBEL, FATHER WILLIAM

Father William Biebel, a native of Erie, Pennsylvania, has the enjoyment of several simultaneous careers, those of clergyman, educator and organist. Following studies at Gannon University, St. Bonaventure and Catholic University, he was ordained to the Catholic priesthood in May of 1962. Since then he has been assigned to his high school alma mater, Cathedral Preparatory School, as instructor in English, theology, German and music. Since 1969 he has served as Assistant Headmaster in charge of academic affairs and earned his Master's degree in religious studies from Marquette University in 1970.

Biebel's interest in music was inspired and promoted by his family. He did formal study at the Erie Conservatory of Music and graduate work at Catholic University in liturgical music, chant and composition. He served as Dean of the Erie Chapter of the American Guild of Organists and plays occasional programs of sacred music and does some liturgical composition.

Like most theatre organists, Father Biebel was fascinated by the special sounds of pipes at an early age. On his return to Erie in 1962, he began first-hand experimentation with the 3/13 Wurlitzer formerly in Erie's Warner Theatre and soon moved to almost weekly programs on the 3/31 Wurlitzer formerly in the Stuart Gee residence.

Since the mid-1960s, Biebel has played many local programs and was chosen to open the theatre organ at Gannon University, a Tellers instrument saved from the now demolished Shea's Theatre in Erie. He has performed most often on the 4/28 Wurlitzer located in the Maryland home of Richard F. Kline, an instrument associated with recordings and concerts by Lee Erwin and more recently an album by Lyn Larsen. His concerts there included those for the Potomac Valley Chapter of ATOS, the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society, the Washington Chapter of AGO, a special concert for the Association of Anglican Church Musicians in 1976 and a concert for the national convention of the American Institute of Organ-builders in 1982.



Father William E. Biebel

“Father Bill,” as many call him, has been a featured artist for many chapters of the ATOS — Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Detroit (Motor City), South Florida and Eastern Massachusetts. He has been featured three times at the Kimball of the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society in Wilmington, as well as the Detroit Theater Organ Club, the Rochester Theater Organ Society and the Niagara Frontier group at North Tonawanda. Additional programs have included concerts for the Bluegrass Chapter on Dr. John Landon’s restored instrument in Lexington, Kentucky; a concert at the Clemens Center, Elmira, New York; and one on the organ of the Macomb Theatre in Mt. Clemens, Michigan.

BIECK, ELMER

Theatre organist in the California area. Recorded a number of 78 rpm recordings on the Hollywood Rhythms label, approximately 1950. It is not known what organ was used for these recordings.

BIENNE, MARCEL

Theatre organist in the Seattle, Washington, area in the 1920s. Organist of the Ridgmont Theatre in Seattle in April 1926. In November 1926, organist of the Embassy Theatre there, a post which he was to hold for several years.

BIGGS, ARTHUR H.

Theatre organist in the Seattle, Washington, area. Organist of the Woodland Theatre in Seattle as of January of 1927, organist of the Ridgmont Theatre in Seattle as of June of 1927.

BILGER, BILLY

Organist of the Uptown Theatre in Seattle, Washington, in 1927.

BILLINGS, ROBERT

Born in Macon, Missouri, April 5, 1900. Attended the West Division High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Was recording organist for the Q.R.S. Music Roll Company for one year, and six years with the U.S. Music Roll Company. He recorded hand played rolls covering the musical spectrum from classical to fox trots. There are many musicians in his family. His father was an inventor of improvements on musical instruments. Billings also studied voice extensively.

BIRCHALL, HERBERT

Organist of Regent Theatre, Dunkirk, New York, in 1923.

BIRDSONG, MABEL GRAY

Organist of the Washington Theatre in Dallas, Texas, in 1914 (2/11 Hillgreen-Lane organ), and at the same time organist of Christ Episcopal Church, Dallas.

Birdsong studied with George Perfect, dean of Dallas theatre organists. She had planned to become a concert pianist and studied under Isabel Hutchinson at Bush Temple Conservatory, Dallas. Her plans changed when she married Lawrence Birdsong, Sr., and moved to Longview, Texas, where she became organist of the First Baptist Church in 1919. For a short time she played at the Rembert Theatre, Longview, but finally settled for the church job exclusively. In 1945 she studied with Roy Perry of Kilgore, Texas. She was honored in 1970 for her 50 years as organist of Longview’s First Baptist Church.

BLADES, EARL

A native of Benton, Wisconsin, Blades studied organ under Frank Van Dusen in Chicago. He held church organist positions in the Chicago area, but turned most of his energies to playing the organ in Chicago theatres. For several years he was organist of the Gumbiner Deluxe Theatre, Chicago. A graduate of the American Conservatory of Music, Chicago.



Earl Blades

BLAIR, ADELE (Mrs.)

Wife of Harry Blair, well known song plugger for Shapiro-Berstein, who ran a music service for theatre organists. Adele Blair played the Loew’s Gates Theatre in New York City in 1927, at the time that Harry Blair met and married her.

BLAKE, GEORGE

Theatre organist who was heard over radio station WJZ, New York in 1930. Broadcast as a substitute for Lew White from the RKO Center Theatre, Rockefeller Center, New York City. Blake was announced as Lew White’s protégé. He later became an organist in a church in South Orange, New Jersey.

BLAKELY, ARTHUR

Broadcast over radio station KHJ, Los Angeles, in the mid-1920s.

BLANCHARD, WILLIAM G. (Dr.)

Theatre organist in the Indianapolis, Indiana, area in the silent picture days. Among the posts he held was that of organist of the Indiana Theatre, Indianapolis.

Blanchard was born September 5, 1905, in Greencastle, Indiana. He studied music at DePauw University, the University of Michigan, Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University. He did considerable radio and theatre work before becoming superintendent of music at a high school in Sidney, Ohio. Six years thereafter he moved to Claremont, California, where he became Professor of Organ at Pomona College and organist of the Garrison Theatre. He served as organist of The Claremont Colleges, Claremont Graduate School, and in 1938 he began a long tenure as organist of the Claremont United Church of Christ.

Blanchard retired in 1971 and later suffered a stroke from which he never fully recovered. He died December 19, 1978. □

**HOLIDAY
GREETINGS
FROM**

CATOE

**HEALTH
AND
HAPPINESS
IN 1986**