

# EDWARD SWAN

## Theatre Organist

by Lloyd E. Klos

*Ed. note: We are indebted for this story to Lonnie C. Roach, whose parents winter in Florida near the home of the subject, and to Mabel Roach, who secured the pertinent information.*

Born at the turn of the century, Edward Swan is a native of Livingston, Montana. He also lived in Anaconda and Butte, and it was in the latter place where the youngster began piano lessons at age nine. Later on, he played in dance bands in the Butte area.

Still a young man, Ed was invited to play piano in the 900-seat American Theatre in Butte. It was one of his great lifetime thrills when he sat in with this group of professional musicians of the theatre's concert orchestra whom he had heard and admired since boyhood. He was especially adept at sight-reading, being able to read and play any piece of music given him.

The matinees at the American were from two to five, and the evening performances from seven to midnight. The orchestra played almost constantly with a ten-minute break every hour. Occasionally, the director would see a preview of a new film so that he could select and arrange the proper music for the picture's screening, but more often the band had to improvise as the plot unfolded.

In March 1917, the theatre's management purchased a 3/7 Wurlitzer Opus 126. The owner, Frank Baily, wanted to send Ed to a music academy to learn to play an organ. The musician was always sorry afterward that he didn't seize this opportunity. Baily had helped other young people in their quest for higher learning.

As it turned out, Ed Swan was mostly self-taught as an organist. Basic principles were learned from Henry Francis Parks, who was the theatre's concert organist. Management wanted Swan to take Parks' job but he refused, simply because he didn't care to take the job from someone else. This custom of replacing older musicians with newly trained organists was done quite often, according to Swan. The newcomers' salaries were smaller!

Ed's next job was at the 3000-seat Rialto Theatre in Butte. The organ was a large four-manual White organ, with echo and open di-

visions, a good selection of traps, and three 32' pipes, probably costing around \$50,000.

The Rialto also had a pit orchestra. Ed played the feature movie, and the orchestra did the two-reel comedy and the newsreel. It was here where our subject really learned how to improvise. Such great pictures as *Ben Hur* were featured during this period. In one of the battles of the classic, he remembers that he really played up a storm! He employed a sheet metal attachment, and when he put his foot on low C# it shook the building! He had to stop using this at management's insistence. He says that he seldom used the open division of the organ, as he had no control of the sound.

While he and his family were in Butte, he

also furnished piano accompaniment at the Ansonia Theatre, a narrow building a block long. He also played piano at the Orpheum Theatre, a ten-cent house. Playing in those theatres meant long hours of work.

Ed Swan's next engagement was in the American Theatre in Salt Lake City in 1923. As a child, he had visited relatives in the city and had been to the American to hear a concert played by a 50-piece orchestra. The American had a three-manual hybrid organ, a combination of Möller, Kimball and Robert-Morton. The theatre brought in Orpheum Circuit vaudeville, with live acts featured on the bill with movies. Ed played for the movies and a small orchestra accompanied the vaudeville.

Ed Swan poses at the 4/26 Robert-Morton console in the Balboa Theatre, San Diego, in 1925. He feels that this instrument was the finest theatre organ he ever played. An echo division was installed over the balcony. (Swan Collection)



The house had a large lobby with a beautiful glass stairway leading to a "Dansant," a large dance hall over the lobby. Those who attended the evening show could dance afterwards.

In 1925, the Swan family moved to Los Angeles where he became affiliated with Fox West Coast Theatres. He was first employed at the 1600-seat Balboa Theatre in San Diego. The organ was a 4/26 Robert-Morton, which he says was the finest he ever played. It had an echo organ over the balcony.

The Balboa was affiliated with the Orpheum Circuit, and Ed played the features, while the small orchestra did the vaudeville segments. Sometimes Ed also played the organ or piano with the orchestra, and his playing time lengthened to ten or 12 hours a day. Unable to use a cushion on the bench, he has memories of the hardness of the wooden benches! He was always dressed in a tuxedo in those days.

When radio was growing in popularity, he played a daily noon concert at one of San Diego's radio stations.

In 1927, he returned to Los Angeles where he played for two years at the 1454-seat Rosemary Theatre in Ocean Park. The organ was a 2/9 Wurlitzer, installed in 1925. There was no orchestra, so Ed provided all the music.

Next came an assignment at the 1200-seat Criterion Theatre in Santa Monica. It had a 2/9 Wurlitzer, later augmented with three ranks. Again, Ed was the sole music-maker.

Ed Swan's connection with the Fox organization continued, but he now ventured into a new field. He became employed at Fox Studios where in 1928, they had purchased a three-manual special Wurlitzer. Ed did a goodly number of recordings for the movies, and he is of the opinion that some of these are still there in storage.

Occasionally, he would sit in on a screening of a newly released film, and then make arrangements. He was sent to several theatres to accompany the film. It was a good paying job and he remembers being sent to the Egyptian and Chinese theatres (3/15 Wurlitzers) in Hollywood, and the Metropolitan (4/32 Wurlitzer) in Los Angeles.

The Metropolitan's organ, he said, was the most difficult to play. The console, which was in the pit, would be elevated while he played. It was difficult to hear his own sound!

He also earned a little pocket money by serving as an extra in some movies, and he has some stills to confirm this.

His final theatre engagement was in 1930 at the Carthay Circle in Los Angeles, playing a 3/11 Wurlitzer, while big pictures such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Hell's Angels* were shown. In 1931, the theatre was closed and the silent movie era was over for him and many of the organists. However, the Carthay's owner wanted to retain his lease, and in order to do so had to reopen, providing entertainment every day.

Ed Swan was engaged to play an hour's concert, starting at noon, which he did for several months. He also played with several orchestras, such as those of Carl Elonar, Abe Lyman and George Stollberg (later Georgie

Stoll). He also filled in for Evangelist Aimee Semple MacPherson's organist.

It is interesting to note that when Ed Swan played in Montana theatres, his salary ranged from \$35 to \$50 a week. When he concluded his theatre organ career, he was earning \$250 a week, which was considered an astronomical sum during the early days of the Great Depression.

Having played a theatre organ and being a member of the Los Angeles Theatre Organ Club had opened many doors for him and his wife to meet some fine people. He was organ-

ist for the annual International Air Stream rallies for many years.

Following his career as a professional musician, Ed joined the Los Angeles Police Department, which he thoroughly enjoyed for 30 years.

Now living in retirement in Homestead, Florida, he has a Hammond in his mobile home, and continues to play for his own enjoyment. He has watched with interest the progress and popularity of electronic organs through the years. Now in his eighties (1981), he is living a happy and useful life. □

## ATOS Archives Catalog Is Published

Vern Bickel, Curator of the ATOS Archives/Library, has completed the lengthy task of cataloging all items in the archives collection. A new and complete Archives Catalog is now available to members. If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the new catalog, send a check in the amount of \$15.00, made payable to ATOS Archives, to Vernon P. Bickel, Curator, 1393 Don Carlos Court, Chula Vista, California 92010.

A number of members have contributed items to the archives collection this year. A special "Thank You" is expressed to the following persons:

Bill Alexander  
Charles and Betty Baas  
Tom B'hend  
William Fearnley  
Esther Higgins  
Harry J. Jenkins  
Russell Joseph  
Dr. John W. Landon  
Timothy S. Needler

Claude V. Neuffer  
Miles J. Rudisill, Jr.  
Karl C. Saunders  
Alfred Turnbull  
Lorin J. Whitney

Because of the generosity of these individuals, the Archives/Library has continued to grow. However, our collection is far from complete. We need your help. Donations of items related to theatre pipe organs, organists and theatres, plus music, recordings and memorabilia are urgently needed. Please send such items to the Curator of the ATOS Archives. Remember, all contributions are tax deductible.

During 1985, Preston M. "Sandy" Fleet donated 100 sets of the McMains Theatre Pipe Organ Tapes to the archives, to be used for fund raising. We express our sincere appreciation to "Sandy" for his support. At this writing, a few sets of the McMains Tapes are still available. If you want a set of these tapes, order them soon. This may be your last chance to obtain them. □

## RAMADA® HOTEL

HOTEL AND CONVENTION CENTER  
Albuquerque, New Mexico



HOME OF THE FORMER NEW YORK ROXY  
KIMBALL ORGAN CONSOLE

Organ restoration by Hockmuth-Stankey Organs, Inc., New Lenox, Illinois

### RAMADA HOTEL

6815 Menaul NE • Albuquerque, New Mexico 87110  
(505) 881-0000      Reservations: 1-800-528-1234

Five Manual Kimball Roxy Theatre Console with 28 ranks now owned by Phil Maloof.