

PROFESSOR CRAWFORD

by Dr. Edward J. Mullins

In 1911 the Kennedy Block was erected at 120 North 27th Street in downtown Billings, Montana. In February 1913 the Kennedy Theater, a vaudeville house located in the building, closed for repairs. It was remodeled and re-opened as a first class picture house, the Gem Theater. One of the best features was a newly installed \$4000 pipe organ and a \$1000 player piano, enabling continuous musical programs.

In the early days of silent movies and vaudeville, the "Professor" was the musician who accompanied the films or led the orchestra. Opening night, February 22, 1913, the organ was under the able care of Professor Roscoe Kernern of Spokane, Washington, who was considered one of the best musicians in Spokane. On opening day the Gem management gave each lady present a beautiful carnation.

The instrument, reportedly a two-manual, seven-rank Kimball with tubular pneumatic action, was the first pipe organ in Eastern Montana. The quotations which will follow are from microfilmed copies of the 1913 issues of *The Billings Gazette* which are on file at the Billings public library.

February 23, 1913: "With capacity houses,

The Billings Gazette, February 25, 1913, advertisement announces new organist, 18-year-old Professor Charles Crawford.

the Gem motion picture theater in the Kennedy Block opened its season last evening. The show house, which is one of the largest and perhaps the most handsomely appointed amusement place of its kind in Montana has just been remodeled and a \$4000 pipe organ installed, which is a decided innovation in the moving picture field in Billings . . ."

A new organist began his first full-time organ position at the Gem on February 24, 1913 — Professor Charles Crawford.

February 25, 1913: "The show at the Gem Theater Beautiful, Kennedy Block, tonight, will be an exceptionally strong one and well worth seeing. The theater film, 'A Shadow of the Past,' in two reels, is one of the best western pictures ever produced, showing life in the early days on the plains, with its trials and perils, in vivid colors. The comedy picture, 'Tom, Dick and Harry,' is made to drive the blues away — a continuous laugh. The big pipe organ, one of the finest of its kind in the state, as played by that able musician Prof. Chero (sic) Crawford, is always a treat. Donald Macgregor, Scotland (sic) favorite baritone, will sing that popular ballad, 'I'd Love to Live in Loveland.'"

On February 26 the *Gazette* reported: ". . . Ches Crawford, who handles the organ to point of perfection, will have something unusual for this stirring drama. The management has received a number of compliments on Mr. Crawford's excellent playing and on the beautiful tones of the immense pipe organ. Entire change of photo play every day. Special children's admission, 5 cents, adults, 10 cents."

March 1: ". . . Mr. Charles Crawford will render appropriate music of the large pipe organ for the drama subjects. . . ." On March 2 the advertisement read "Prof. Chas. Crawford" but notice read ". . . Mr. Chess Crawford will render appropriate music on the large pipe organ."

March 4 and 5 read: ". . . Mr. Jess Crawford will render appropriate music on the large pipe organ. Matinee every day at 2. Evening Performance at 7." March 5 was the last advertisement listing "Prof. Chas. Crawford."

March 8: ". . . Excellent music will be provided at the beautiful pipe organ by that talented musician, Professor Charles Crawford, and the vocal music by Donald McGregor, Scotland's favorite Baritone." March 9: ". . . Jess Crawford will have something appropriate for those excellent photo plays on the large pipe organ. To those that have not heard the pipe organ music with the pictures, it will be one of the treats for music lovers as

well as making the photo plays much better . . ."

The ads ran for one week without Crawford's name. Then on March 12, 1913, his name appeared for the first time as "Jess."

March 13: ". . . Mr. Jess Crawford will render appropriate music on the large pipe organ. Don't forget the recital coming up some time in the near future. Matinee every day at 2; evening performance at 7." March 15: ". . . Jess Crawford will render appropriate music on the large pipe organ. This is the only pipe organ in Billings and the management should be congratulated in fitting up the theater in such splendid style."

March 19: ". . . Jess Crawford will play appropriate music on the large pipe organ. The management wishes to announce that on Easter Sunday, March 23rd, an organ recital will be given during the afternoon. The program as yet has not been decided upon but the music lovers are sure to be given a treat that is only heard in the largest cities. The program will be announced some time this week and will consist of mostly classical music."

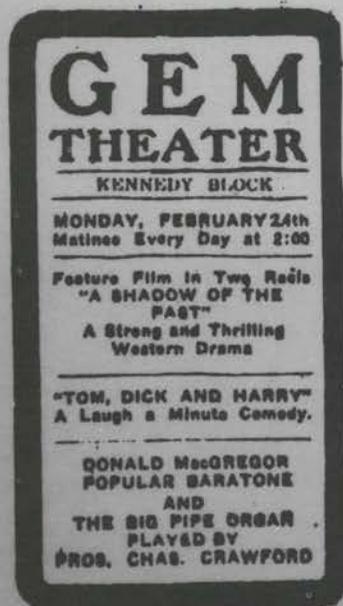
March 20: ". . . Jess Crawford will have something new for the large pipe organ. On Easter Sunday afternoon the management will give an organ recital. Mr. Crawford has some especially selected numbers ready for this recital and all those who are especially fond of the symphony will do well to visit the Gem that afternoon."

Crawford gave his first organ recital on Easter Sunday 1913, an event he would continue later in his career. March 23: "Special Matinee at the Gem." "Special pipe organ matinee at the beautiful Gem theater Easter Sunday afternoon at 3 o'clock will give the music lovers one of the best entertainments that have been given in Billings. Mr. Jess Crawford, organist, will have an extra strong program.

Selection, "Ill Travatore" (sic) Verdi Intermezzo, "Cavalleria

Rusticana" Mascagni
 March, "Tannhauser" Wagner
 Solo, "The Holy City" Mr. Knowlton
 "Love's Dream After the Ball" Czibulka
 "Hungarian Dance" Brahms
 Selection, improvised Crawford
 The management wishes to make the announcement that at another time in the near future another pipe organ recital will be given for the benefit of the patrons. Photo plays started this afternoon at 2; recital promptly at 3."

The next recital was Sunday, April 13, 1913, with Mr. Crawford, organ; Mrs. Clapper, piano; Mr. Steck, violin; and Mr. Knowl-



G E M
THEATER

KENNEDY BLOCK

SMILING DAN,
Kay Bee Drama.

THE ROMANCE,
American Drama.

CLOSE SHAVE,
Punch Comedy.

DONALD M'GREGOR,
Soloist.

JESS CRAWFORD,
Organist.

The Billings Gazette, March 12, 1913, "Jess" appears in advertisement for the first time.

ton, tenor. A. J. Knowlton was also the theatre manager. A large ad on Friday, April 25, promoted "The Star of Bethlehem" in three reels. "A Sublime Masterpiece with Professor Crawford playing the big Pipe Organ. Amateur Night."

Another recital was given Sunday, May 11, and the reporter alludes to the fact that Crawford was eighteen. He was born December 2, 1895, in Woodland, California. "This afternoon at the Gem will be one of the best organ recitals Professor Crawford has offered. It is wonderful when you stop to think of the mas-

The Billings Gazette, May 9, 1913

G E M Theater
Kennedy Block

The Lure of the Violin
3-Reel-3 Broncho Feature
Special Matinee Sunday

With Pipe Organ Recital. Show at 2:00; Recital at 3:00.
JESS CRAWFORD, Organist. A. J. KNOWLTON, Soloist.
Children 5c. Adults 10c.

The Billings Gazette, March 23, 1913, Easter Sunday, Jess Crawford presented his very first Sunday organ recital.

terful way in which he handles this most difficult instrument and only a boy not yet 19 years of age. He has certainly become a great favorite with the music lovers of Billings. . . ." On May 11 the Gem advertisement for the very first time announces "Mr. Jesse Crawford" in a pipe organ recital. A name that would remain for his entire professional career.

On May 18 the following prophesy appears: "This afternoon Professor Crawford will offer another of those more than pleasing pipe organ recitals which have pleased hun-

dreds of Billings music lovers in the past. He is becoming a master of this large instrument and will without a doubt in a few years be one of the headliners in the music world which is saying a great deal but nevertheless is very true. . . ."

May 25 promoted another Sunday recital. "Organ Recital at the Gem. The organ recital to be given by Professor Crawford Sunday afternoon will be well worth your time and your dime, as this accomplished young musician never fails to please with his perfect control of this wonderful 'Pipe Organ with the

The Billings Gazette, May 11, 1913, advertises "Mr. Jesse Crawford" for the first time, a name used for the remainder of his life. Crawford died May 27, 1962, in Sherman Oaks, California.

GEM THEATER
TONIGHT

Prof. Crawford playing the big Pipe Organ with Three reels of the best moving pictures.

A. J. Knowlton in song; Amateurs, the best ever; big Pie Eating Contest. Don't miss the time of your life.

Continuous performance from 2 P. M. to 5 P. M.; 7 P. M. to 11 P. M.

Adults 10c, Children 5c—Always a dime's worth.

G E M
THEATER
SUNDAY
AFTERNOON

PIPE ORGAN RECITAL
By
MR. JESSE CRAWFORD

Assisted by
MISS FRANCES GILSDORF

Singing
I Hear You Calling Me
A. J. KNOWLTON
Rendering
The Message of the Violets
3 Good Reels of Pictures
All for a Dime

Human Voice.' The program includes 'The Spanish Dance' by Moszkowski, and 'Melody in F,' which has been generally requested for this event. The well-known number, 'Oh Promise Me' from the light opera, 'Robin Hood,' has been requested by many admirers of Mr. Knowlton, our popular tenor."

The last feature film Crawford played at the Gem was "From the Manger to the Cross," a five-reel Kalem Biblical masterpiece, on July 29-30. The ad states "Hear the Pipe Organ play to this great production; attend the matinee to avoid the crowd at night."

The Gem was sold shortly thereafter. The August 5 paper mentions that one of the new owners, Bert L. Thomas, ". . . is a Billings boy, just arrived from the coast, where he has been an organist for three years." Thomas replaced Crawford. Jesse's next position was at the Alaska Theatre in Seattle, Washington.

In September the Gem exhibited a talking picture using the Electrophone process. A new organist was hired in October, with the improbable name of George E. Perfect, from the Broadway Theater in New York and Thomas was relegated to singing solos.

The 1913 Billings City Directory lists Jessie (sic) Crawford boarding at 213 North 30th Street; a travel agency is now located at that address.

The Gem was renamed the American in 1917 and became West's 27th Street Theatre in 1922. The Kennedy Block went up in flames March 10, 1950. The old Gem, known as the Empire at the time of the fire, was destroyed. The pipe organ had been removed earlier and might still be in a church today.

The above evidence suggests that Crawford's given name could have been Charles and that Jesse became his established professional name in 1913 in Billings, Montana. Charles, Chas., Chess, Jess or Jesse set the style for theatre organ playing in the heyday of the movie palaces. His phonograph recordings were widely distributed. His many recordings were very popular and his style of playing was much copied by other organists.

Other theatre organists made the same sounds, within the capabilities of their talents, and the "Crawford Style" became "locked in" for many years. Crawford was judicious in his registrations and didn't use any unnecessary stops. He played a clean melody line, used certain stops for accentuation, and mastered the art of second touch. Whatever he did appeared to be the right thing. Obviously, Jesse Crawford was a genius in his art, born with a God-given talent that manifested itself at an early age.

An 18-year-old organist with the title of "Professor" may seem a bit grandiose, but it was the custom in its day. A professor is a "professional," as opposed to an "amateur," one who professes skill in some art, a teacher of the highest rank who holds a "chair" in an institution of higher learning.

While Professor Crawford never held a "chair," I think that no ATOS member will disagree with the fact that he certainly was of the highest rank when it came to occupying a "bench" (or a Howard seat). □

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