

Closing Chords



BETTY GOULD

Betty Gould, ATOS Hall of Fame Organist, died November 12 in Phoenix, Arizona. Her musical career spanned a period of 70 years.

At age eleven she accompanied vaudeville acts in Midland, Michigan, and at thirteen played silents on the piano in Detroit. Her first theatre organ job was at the Oxford Barton in the twin cities,

where she was tutored by Dan Barton.

After a brief stint at the Broadway-Strand in Detroit, she moved to Chicago where she played the Lakeside, New Harding, Oriental, McVickers, Roosevelt, Tivoli, Uptown, Norshore and Chicago theatres. The International Jazz Congress designated Betty as "All Chicago Organist."

She moved to New York when her husband, choreographer Dave Gould, accepted a Broadway job. She was quickly hired by Fox and assigned to the Fox 14th Street Theatre. In early 1929 she was asked to assist in opening the new St. Louis Fox, where she played morning recitals on the auditorium Wurlitzer and through the day on the lobby Möller. Upon her return to New York she was promoted to the Brooklyn Fox.

In 1930 Betty teamed with Priscilla Holbrook for a long run as a twin-console duo at the Stapleton Paramount on Staten Island.

S.L. "Roxy" Rothafel hired Betty and Alex Richardson in late 1932 to open the

new RKO Roxy Theatre (the name was soon changed to Center Theatre) in the Rockefeller Radio City Complex. During her years at the Center she began broadcasting on NBC from the theatre, and soon had her own morning show on WMCA, where she was christened "Radio's Princess of the Console."

In the late 1930s she began demonstrating Hammond, and this led to a series of hotel jobs in New York City, Connecticut and Atlantic City. In 1949 she moved West where she played in Albuquerque, Tucson and Phoenix.

Betty returned to pipes in 1975 when she was hired by Bill Brown to help staff his Organ Stop Pizza restaurants in Phoenix and Mesa. That same year she was elected to the ATOS Hall of Fame, and she continued to play on a regular schedule until her retirement in 1984.

During the 1985 ATOS Phoenix regional convention Betty fascinated her audience by sharing stories from her long career as a theatre organist.

Karl R. Warner

RICHARD S. VILLEMEN

An era in organbuilding came to an end October 10 with the passing of **Richard S. Villemén**. He recently completed 50 years as an organ serviceman. Although he had been a lifelong booster of the pipe organ, the theatre organ was his first love.

Villemén's Porterville, California, home boasted what had once been a pint-size 2/4 style B Wurlitzer which he helped blossom into a beautiful, Crawford-like studio 4/14. He was so stricken with the early sounds of Jesse Crawford that he had his home instrument equipped with a style R player with a large selection of Crawford rolls. Richard once lovingly accused the Poet of recording some of his vintage 78 Victor records from the rolls as the timing and registration matched so perfectly. A somewhat bemused Crawford replied, "I most certainly did not!" Years later, Richard remarked, "Can you imagine the nerve of a young punk kid asking a person the stature of Mr. Crawford a question such as that?" Villemén's love of the early Crawford sound culminated years later in a fine, two-record release by Doric Records. Richard brought his 4/14 to a state of tonal perfection for the recording session which was under the direction of the late Frank Killinger.

In WWII Villemén served as a radio operator on many raids into enemy territory on the fabled B-17 bombers. Strangely, one of the very planes on

which he served is on permanent display at the Tulare, California, airport, less than 20 miles from his home. While serving in the Army, he was able to sample many of the theatre organs (and cathedral organs) around the British countryside. He learned a great deal during his off-duty time by working with Wurlitzer personnel in the Isles. One with whom he worked was Tommy Perkins of the Wurlitzer staff. He once said that "it was quite an experience to be sitting holding keys for the tuner. You would hear a bomb whistle towards the earth — then there would be silence while you waited and wondered where the explosion would be. Meanwhile, the tuner was way up in the walls of the theatre, completely undaunted by any of this. Suddenly you realized he was bellowing 'NEXT! NEXT! G-D-IT, NEXT!'" Although he never cared to be known as an organist, he could play up a storm in what he called "the poor man's Paul Carson style." He had a vast repertoire of memorized music. Word of the serviceman's ability spread, resulting in a stint at the 3c/8 Wurlitzer in the Granada Bedford. However, playing the various pipe organs of Great Britain was really very much in the background. In the U.S. Army 8th Air Force, he served his country on dozens of secret bombing raids over Germany. He was involved in the Normandy invasion and was awarded the Middle Eastern Ribbon with seven bronze stars, the Distinguished Unit Badge and the American Defense Service Medal. He served the 8th Air

Force as chapel organist.

Villemén owned and operated Villemén Pipe Organs, specializing in rebuilding and re-leathering existing instruments. He was also a long-time sales and service representative for M.P. Möller. One memorable project was the removal and reinstallation of the San Francisco Fox 4/36 Wurlitzer. The large Wurlitzer in the San Sylmar Museum of J.B. Nethercutt was fully restored and installed by Richard and his crew. He was the only person at that time who was interested in taking on such a phenomenal restoration project. This was NOT just a re-leathering or rebuilding job — it was a FULL restoration: polished switchstack buss bars, new, cotton-covered cable, the entire organ refinished to look like new. It would not be an understatement to say that the demands he exacted on this job provided interest in instruments that not only sound good, but are also craftsmanship-like works of art as well. Pride, quality and art are all part of the qualities he demanded in a rebuild/restoration. Without these attitudes, you did not work for or with Richard Villemén.

During the fifties and sixties, he was the major organ studio serviceman and tuner for famed Los Angeles area studios. He preferred this type of "field work" to voicing and tonal matters. However, he could tune an organ like no one else — all from experience with the Wurlitzer people in Great Britain during WWII. His studio cards read like a *Who's Who* from the early days of the theatre organ's re-

birth: Whitney, Cole, Kearns, Vaughn and Wright. At the peak of his activity, he serviced about 300 organs throughout the western United States.

Villemin was a charter member of ATOS and the newly established Sequoia Chapter, based in Fresno. Two chapters have been most fortunate to have him work on their chapter-owned Wurlitzers, Nor-Cal's 4/32 and the 2/9 Wurlitzer for the Sequoia Club.

Richard was a true professional in every sense of the word. He never had an unkind word for others in the profession. However, he could pop out with a gem every once in a while. There was, on occasion, a lost organ soul that could rub a blister. On one such event, he verbally clobbered the individual with "False teeth, false hair, false personality — what else is left?" Those present nearly fell over because such events were, for him, so rare and very funny. We could all learn from his professional example.

With Richard's passing, there is not only a major void that cannot be filled, there is also a link to the people of the first era of theatre organ. He knew personally people such as Pope, Hirschmann, Rogers, Davey, Maas and Bolton.

We offer our sympathy to his sister, Ruth V. Dresser, and his brother, Phillip Villemin.
Tom DeLay

A REMEMBRANCE of Richard S. Villemin

by David Schutt

I remember meeting Richard about 1949 when he was getting further into the pipe organ maintenance business on a part-time basis. He and Bill Saylor had maintenance contracts on many of the church organs in California's San Joaquin Valley. Fred Perkins in Fresno had the rest of them. Dick had a five-rank Wurlitzer installed in his home. After seeing it and hearing Dick play in his style of infectious good humor, I knew that I had been seriously bitten by the theatre organ bug. There are probably hundreds of people who can trace their interest in organ music and organbuilding directly to Dick Villemin's influence. His enthusiastic and unselfish approach to the organ fascinated those of us who came in contact with him.

Dick came from a musical family of California pioneers. Dick, along with his younger brother and sister, were very precocious children. They all skipped grades in school and completed high school early.

Although the silent movie era was essentially over, as a youngster Dick was playing and fixing organs in all the nearby theatres. He probably sent more time

at theatres than he did in school. In fact, his sister Ruth remembers her teacher was very distressed because she fell asleep in class because she had been up all night holding notes while Richard was tuning an organ in a theatre. This was when she was twelve years old.

Richard was on the mailing list and an enthusiastic contributor to the original "round robin" letter that was circulated among theatre organ enthusiasts — before the days of the founding of the ATOE and ATOS. One of Richard's favorite theatre organs is the 4/14 Robert-Morton in Fresno's Warnors Theatre. He protected that organ from time, rodents (both two and four-legged), and water. When anything needed to be done to that organ, Richard was always available. He got it sounding better than ever when George Wright played a concert there for the local chapter of the A.G.O. back in 1958.

Richard loved to tell organ stories. Recently, he expressed astonishment that a very, very old lady spoke to him in the grocery store and asked, "Didn't you play the organ in the Monache Theatre?" First of all, he was amazed that anyone remembered it at all. Second, "How could she recognize me after over fifty years?" And most surprising of all, he didn't think that anyone could possibly still be alive who was a grownup when he was a cute little boy at the huge theatre organ console.

Well, I'm not surprised. At that time the Monache Theatre in Porterville was the center of cultural and social life for that rural area of the southern San Joaquin Valley. Richard had tons of musical talent and could play anything by ear. People for miles around must have been thrilled by the sounds he got out of that 2/10 Smith organ.

The Monache Theatre was Richard's "home away from home." Because it had no Tibia Clausa, he saved his money and ordered one from Organ Supply, complete with chest. He also added a third manual and a Chrysoglott to the organ. When he came back to Porterville after serving in WWII, the Monache organ didn't play very well. The Smith pneumatics were covered with rubber cloth that had hardened because of the years of disuse and the intense summer heat of the San Joaquin Valley. The first thing he did was to re-leather all the pneumatics and restore the organ to perfect playing condition. When the theatre was torn down and the organ removed,

continued on next page ...



Richard S. Villemin and the console of his 4/14. The console was something of an inside joke — it was loaded with dummy stops. It was the sound that mattered. The sound is pure early Jesse Crawford. We have lost a true friend.
Pete Sweeney Photo

Richard Villemin cont.

Dick installed a new console and moved it to a church in Porterville. He kept the Tibia Clausa for his home organ. The Tibia can be heard on the Doric record of Jesse Crawford's rolls. Richard recently donated the original Smith console to the Porterville Historical Museum.

This story illustrates Dick's dedication to preserving the organ. He was always a soft touch to any church, theatre, individual, museum, etc., that would keep any kind of organ from being scrapped or broken up for parts. He genuinely appreciated the love and hard work that goes into the creation of any pipe organ. Furthermore, he would spare no effort to restore a pile of parts to perfect playing condition. There are thousands of ranks of pipes world-wide that owe their lives to his career in the organ business.

Richard did not want public recognition for his achievements. He preferred to work behind the scenes. Consequently, his expertise was largely confined to an inner circle of friends of the organ. His reputation for quality work was a "word-of-mouth" sort of thing. A list of his work on important church and theatre organs would have lots of interesting surprises. His biggest theatre job was the removal and reinstallation of the Wurlitzer organ from the Fox Theatre in San Francisco. This 4/36 giant (including 32' Diaphones) was moved to the Frank Lanterman residence in La Canada, California. His largest church project was the complete re-leathering of the famed Harvard Memorial Church 4/100 Aeolian-Skinner, now being installed in Bakersfield, California.

Although we have lost another one of the great old-style organbuilders in the James Nuttall, Frank Rogers, Louis Maas, Henry Pope tradition, we are fortunate that Richard Villemin shared his knowledge so freely with those of us who are interested in the organ and its preservation. His present business consists primarily of performing shop work for other organ restorers. Dick Villemin trained Joe and Martin Lamborena in the pipe organ arts since childhood. These fine young men are continuing the business with the quality that clients of the Villemin Pipe Organ Company are accustomed to receiving. If you have a Wurlitzer, Estey, Murray M. Harris or some other make pipe organ chest, regulator or relay, you can count on an exemplary restoration job.

Richard Villemin will certainly be missed by the organ world. How I wish I could hear him play "Tip Toe Thru the Tulips," "While Strolling in the Park One Day," or "Sonny Boy" one more time. However, those of us who knew him as a friend, musician, confidant, advisor, and dramaticist have many fond memories to guide us. ■



IAN DALGLIESH

In 1928, the start of the cinema organ boom in Britain, Mr. Spurden-Rutt designed several models of his New Electric Organestra. Builders were given to inventing names like Kinestra (Compton), but unlike Compton, Rutt didn't catch on despite obviously high standard work. Two organs were made in 1928, a 2/6 for the Palace Cinema Slough, Buckinghamshire, and a similar model for the Super Cinema Oxford. Despite much advertising in the trade press, with the usual praise from famous organists, I can only find one other unit organ opened on September 23, 1935, in the rebuilt Regal Cinema Highams Park in east London. This was a 3/6 model with the coupler manual in the middle instead of the usual top position. It had an illuminated console surround, as did virtually every cinema organ in the 1930s. There were one or two organ club concerts on this organ, and the tone was pleasant as I recall. The palace Slough organ went into a church, and the Oxford Super Cinema lay hidden and forgotten under a wide screen. The Highams Park Regal went to Bingo, and its console was covered by a rostrum.

Charles Davidson, a friend of mine who collects unusual pipe organs, discovered the Higham organ about 17 years ago and tried to coax the owners into selling it, but no luck. Eventually they gave in, but not before Charles discovered that some idiot had walked over the soundboards and destroyed quite a few pipes. Putting the organ in store, he was subsequently offered the Palace Slough Rutt by the church, and he bought it, despite its having been altered, for pipework and parts. At the time, Charles had seven pipe organs in store! He approached Bill Walker of the St. Albans Organ Museum to see if they would be keen to add it to their collection (they have a 3/10 Wurlitzer), and they said that they would!

Dennis James came over here to play concerts in May, and performed a brilliant re-opening concert on the Highams Park Regal at St. Albans. So the saga has a happy ending. The organ is on long-loan, and Mr. Davidson has also given them his Möller Artiste Player unit to be connected to the Rutt so that the public touring the museum will be able to hear this lovely organ when no organist is there.

CINEMA ORGAN NEWS

FROM GREAT BRITAIN

One is so terribly accustomed to write and read about Comptons and Wurlitzers and Christie organs in the U.K. that it gives me some pleasure to tell you about the rebirth of one of our lesser-known builder's forays into the realm of theatre organ. Robert Spurden-Rutt, after years of the usual training, commenced in his own business in Leyton, east London, in 1899, and carried on a successful business building church organs until his death in the 1950s when the business was taken over by Walkers.

Mr. Spurden-Rutt was quite a character who lived in his factory. His living room doubled as a board room and to give the impression that he employed more staff, when customers came to tour the works, he got staff to run round, remove coats, etc., and appear in other rooms! He was in awe of Jimmy Compton and Jimmy Taylor, the latter being a director of Rutt's firm. It is known that they also carried out some contract work for Compton.

Some fine American organists have entertained us this year: Rex Koury, Ron Rhode, Dennis James, Walt Strony and a first time visit by Tom Hazleton. Few organists, however, have had such an exhausting schedule of concerts and played such a wide variety of organs as Hazleton. His tour ranged from classic Southwark Cathedral London to The Plough (a pub in Great Munden Hertfordshire) which contains a superb Compton. Tom played the beautiful 3/11 Wurlitzer in the New Victoria Centre, Howden-le-Wear near Durham, and a concert on the four-manual Hope-Jones organ in Battersea Town Hall in south London. Derelict for some years, this fine organ with stop key console is being brought back to life by the COS members in London. Tom played the Walthamstow Granada 3/12 Christie in concert with Douglas Reeve and Les Rawle, which didn't give us much time to hear his talent, but the next concert certainly did! A truly brilliant performance on the largest and, in my opinion, the finest Wurlitzer in Europe, the COS London organ at the Borough Polytechnic Edric Hall, where Tom brought out the hallmark of Wurlitzer tone in a well-chosen program. Tom performed the opening concert on the beautiful home installation of our own superb organist, David Shepherd. David's home houses a splendid, mostly Compton 3/9 organ, expertly installed and voiced — nothing but praise has been lavished on this installation.

(The false rumours of the removal of the world famous Compton from the Odeon Leicester Square London were scotched by Odeon Theatres. In fact, the world famous cinema may add several more screens by building over its dressing room block which will not affect the main auditorium which is still intact. The organ celebrates its 50th birthday this year, an a fantastic organ it remains!)

Well, that's all from me — keep those Tibias throbbing!