

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!