

# CRAWFORD

## At The Clemmer Kimball

by George L. Lufkin

Jesse Crawford, coming to the Clemmer theatre in Spokane from the Alaska in Seattle, began playing the 4/32 Kimball as head organist on October 10, 1915, replacing L.C. Yeamans.

Jesse Crawford was no stranger in Spokane's entertainment scene in 1915. He had been pianist at the Arcade theatre in 1911, the Arcade being, according to the newspaper account, a mixture of penny slot machines, motion pictures, vaudeville, photograph gallery, bowling alley, shooting gallery, chop suey and noodle cafe, and automatic musical devices. A year later he was pianist at the Lyric, a small, respectable theatre, showing first-rate motion pictures at the time Crawford played. The Lyric always had only a piano to accompany films.

A Spokane newspaper had an article about Crawford and a picture of him at the Kimball console shortly after he began playing at the Clemmer. The article stated: "Jesse J. Crawford, organist at the Clemmer theatre, is shown at the keyboard of the big four-manual pipe organ of the Sprague Avenue photoplay house, over which he presides regularly. Mr. Crawford's manipulation of the instrument is being favorably commented upon by patrons of the Paramount service. He has been playing at the Clemmer three weeks.

"While he calls Spokane his home Mr. Crawford has done his chief picture playing in Montana and Seattle theatres, where he played before coming to Spokane. He has made a special study of picture playing and is adept at extemporizing and improvising. He never has a sheet of music in front of him, playing entirely 'by ear.'

"When playing for pictures Mr. Crawford follows the action on the screen and fits his playing to the theme and action. His ability to improvise stands him in good stead in this work and he is able to secure realistic effects that many organists miss. He has demonstrated unique 'showman' ability in the arrangement of his programs, and his rendition of the popular Sousa marches during the intermissions has proved a happy thought.

"Mr. Crawford is one of the youngest pipe organists in the northwest, being but 21 years old. Also he is one of the best paid."



Jesse Crawford at the 4/32 Kimball pipe organ, Clemmer Theatre, Spokane, Washington, October 1915.  
Photo: Spokane Public Library Collection

That Crawford had developed an acceptable style of playing is evidenced in several newspaper articles of motion pictures being reviewed. The reviewer of the feature film *The Gentleman from Indiana* stated: "The Pallas photography is a revelation and the electrical storm is vivid, accompanied by special house lighting effects in the theatre and unusually telling organ accompaniment by Jesse Crawford."

The reviewer of the film *Civilization* commented: "Jesse Crawford plays the complete Victor Schertzinger score, written expressly for the production, and the organ is augmented by a stringed trio and drums. A chorus of eight young women in costume sing the incidental music back of the screen, and a soloist appears in the more formal numbers outside the mulberry hangings."

*Continued ...*



# Jesse Crawford . . . *THE theatre organist of the 1920s.*

For the feature film *The Battle Cry of Peace*, the reviewer wrote: "In keeping with its strong military flavor, 100 members of the National Guard will be the guests tonight of Dr. H.S. Clemmer, manager, in addition to the officers of the United States regular forces, stationed at Fort Wright, and their wives. A special musical accompaniment by Jesse Crawford, Clemmer organist, will be a feature of each presentation of *The Battle Cry of Peace*."

On Saturday, October 7, 1916, Jesse Crawford celebrated his first anniversary as Clemmer organist by having a musicale following the last showing of the feature film from 10:45 to 12:15. He was assisted by Miss Hattie Kirchner, violinist; Betty Brown, vocalist; and Miss Alta Wadsworth, pianist.

The morning newspaper commented about the coming event: "The affair is in honor of Mr. Crawford's first anniversary as organist at the Clemmer. He has presided at the big pipe organ since October 10, 1915. This will be his first recital, although he has played organ solos occasionally during the intermissions between picture programs."

The anniversary program included the following organ solos by Jesse Crawford: "Overture" from *William Tell*, "Berceuse" from *Jocelyn*, "Missouri Waltz," "Orpheus in the Underworld," "Moonlight Waltz," and "At the End of a Perfect Day." Miss Kirchner played violin solos and Miss Brown sang, both accompanied by Mr. Crawford at the organ and Miss Wadsworth at the piano. The three instrumentalists gave a surprise selection, a medley of the year's most popular songs: "Yaka Hula Hickey Dula," "When You're Away," and "Siam."

The Clemmer's Sunday edition ads almost invariably mentioned Jesse Crawford, a few examples being: "Special Music — Crawford at the Organ;" "Special Organ Solos by Jesse Crawford;" "Intermission Solo by JESSE CRAWFORD;" "Special Organ Solo by JESSE CRAWFORD;" and "Accompanied by CRAWFORD upon the sweetest toned Pipe Organ in the whole northwest."

When the Clemmer celebrated its second anniversary, February 22, 1917, the following comment about its organists was made in a local newspaper: "The Clemmer has had but two organists, L.C. Yeamans of Chicago and Jesse J. Crawford, who will officiate this week."

On March 25, 1917, Crawford began a series of popular Sunday noon concerts. For that Sunday, he played "Light

Cavalry Overture," "Destiny Waltz," "When You're Away," "The Glow Worm," and "Humoresque."

For April 1, the program consisted of "Traumerei" and "Romance" by Schumann, "Soldiers' Chorus" from *Faust*, "Nights of Gladness," "There's a Long, Long, Trail," and a selection from *Woodland* by Luders.

On April 8, he played "Stars and Stripes Forever," "Intermezzo" by Mascagni, "At the End of a Perfect Day," and "Poet and Peasant Overture."

The April 29 concert included "Overture" *Martha*, "Visions of Salome," "The Rosary," and "Minuet in G."

The Clemmer ad for July 25, 1917, must have come as a complete, but disappointing, surprise to Crawford's hundreds of Clemmer fans with this announcement: "Crawford's Farewell Concert Saturday Midnight."

On July 28, 1917, the morning newspaper carried this interesting article: "Jesse J. Crawford, organist at the Clemmer, who played his first movie in 1911 in the old Arcade, will close his engagement at 11 o'clock. The program will be popular, along the lines of his first anniversary concert. He will be assisted by Miss Lillian Frederick, violinist; Robert Robinson, cellist; and Will McCall, vocalist."

"Mr. Crawford has been with the theatre almost two years, coming here in October 1915, and has been popular with Spokane audiences. He is leaving for San Francisco and Los Angeles and has had offers from both places."

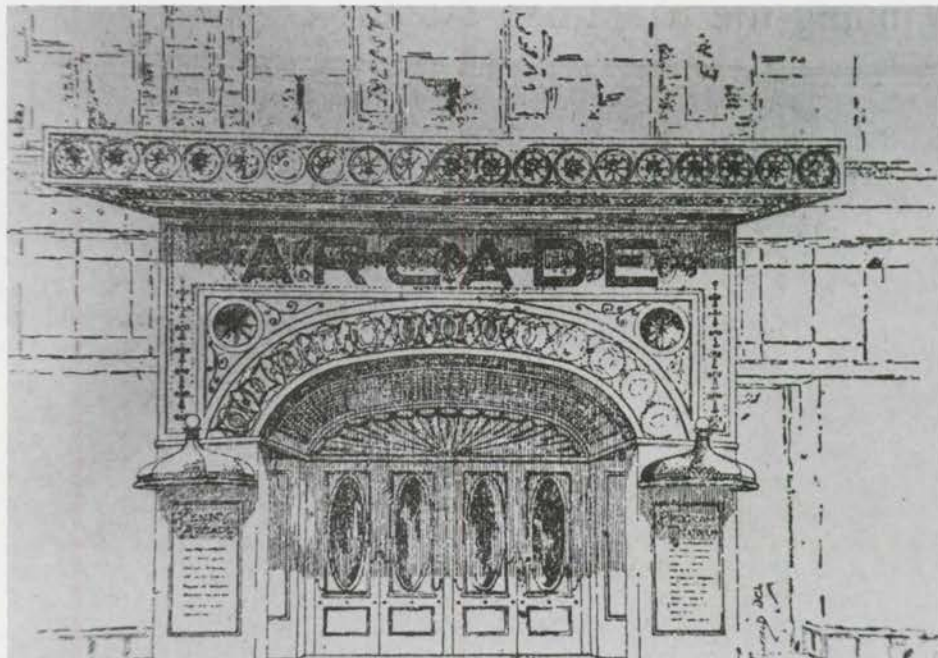
The last Clemmer ad that named Crawford was on July 28, 1917: "Tonight Midnight Concert Crawford's Farewell Concert Secure your tickets at the box office."

Jesse Crawford was succeeded by William E. MacClymont, who came from the Vitagraph Theatre, New York. After about two and one-half months, he was succeeded by Charles W. Hawley, Jr., the first announcement being in the November 15, 1917 Clemmer ad, which billed him as a "symphony organist."

While comparatively little has been written about Jesse Crawford before he became famous in the metropolitan cities of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, it is well to keep in mind that Billings, Montana, Seattle, and Spokane theatres were his proving grounds. In those cities he enjoyably and endlessly experimented to develop the Crawford style which led him to national fame as *the* theatre organist of the 1920s.

Although the Clemmer Kimball was a concert organ, it was the largest that Crawford had played, and, with its thirty-two ranks of pipes and four manuals, he must have used them to their fullest tonal effects. With the main pipes being in the proscenium and the echo pipes behind the balcony back wall, the patron seemed to be surrounded with organ music in the small, 900-seat theatre. It does not take much imagination to see Crawford at the console enjoying every minute, and, quite possibly, dreaming of some day playing large, theatre type instruments in large auditoriums, a dream that came true in the 1920s.

(All quotations are from the Spokane, Washington, *Spokesman-Review*.)



Artists drawing of the Arcade Theatre, Spokane, which opened November 18, 1908. Jesse Crawford was the pianist in 1911.

Spokane Public Library Collection

THEATRE ORGAN