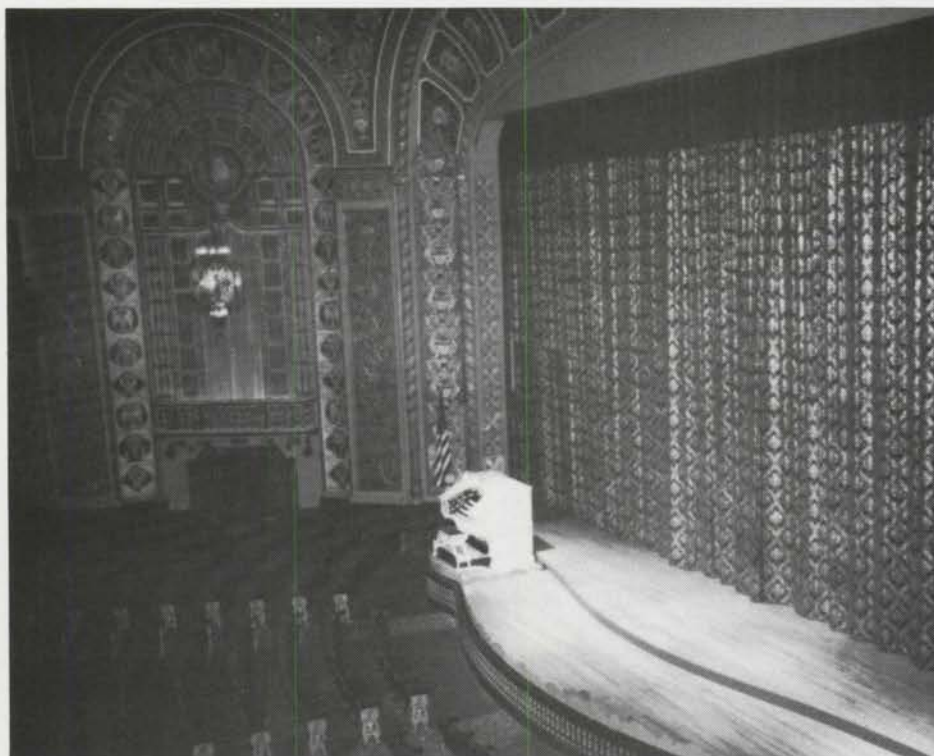


One Page in the Embassy's Story

by Robert J. Ort
Photos by Ray Soughan



The Embassy Theatre in Fort Wayne, Indiana, has the good fortune to possess a 4/15 Page theatre pipe organ built in Lima, Ohio, and installed in the magnificent 2800-seat theatre when it opened as a new movie palace/vaudeville house on May 14, 1928, with its original name of Emboyd Theatre. The theatre's building included a seven story hotel and a variety of street-level shops. But good fortune is nothing new to the Embassy Page since she first filled that auditorium with music more than sixty years ago.



Her first good luck occurred in 1947 when the late organist Buddy Nolan moved to Fort Wayne after his army stint in World War II. He immediately fell in love with the Page, a romance that continued until his death in 1986. In the interim he became the city's premier organist, performing at most of the area's finest supper clubs and cocktail lounges. Soon after his discovery of the Page, Buddy began to devote his own money and time to tuning and improving the organ for his own use. By 1952 when the Alliance Theatre chain assumed operation of the facility and changed the theatre's name to Embassy, they named Buddy as their house organist to play four shows daily. Later in the fifties, the lure of California drew him away from Fort Wayne to entertain in West Coast clubs, but he missed the Embassy Page enough to return periodically to play his favorite instrument. While he lived in California, he often visited Santa Catalina Island to play a similar Page in the Avalon Theatre there.

Finally, in the fall of 1962, Buddy returned to stay in Indiana and resume his duties as Embassy staff organist. At about that same time, local organ buff and electronics technician Bob Nickerson helped Buddy make some major adjustments to the Page's tremulants which dramatically enriched the instrument's sound. Shortly thereafter, Nolan instituted a series of very successful programs at the Page called "Theatre Organ at Midnight." These programs rapidly attracted large audiences of not only local organ enthusiasts but also Buddy's fans from Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan. In one instance, for example, in order to attend one of the midnight performances, a large number of fans from the Detroit area chartered a private railroad car and had it transported to and from Fort Wayne by the "Wabash Cannonball." Such interest in these shows gave Buddy the incentive to release several recordings of the Page, thus attracting an even larger audience of theatre organ fans nationally and internationally. Suddenly the Embassy Page was becoming known around the globe.

By the early seventies the management of the theatre had changed hands again, and their building as well as their method of operation began to show signs of neglect. The theatre was closed and the management firm filed for bankruptcy. It looked as if the Embassy was doomed when plans were announced to convert the hotel to housing for the elderly and raze the theatre to provide sixty-five parking spaces. Nolan and some organ buffs who gathered every Saturday morning in the cold, dismal theatre provided the next good fortune to benefit the Page.

Using the organ as their rallying cry, they incorporated as the Embassy Theatre Foundation, elected Bob Goldstine as their first leader, and with massive community support raised over \$250,000 which enabled them to save the theatre and hotel from demolition. Nolan contributed a performance in May 1975 that filled the Embassy's auditorium to capacity and raised thousands of dollars at a very crucial time in the fund-raising drive. Fund-raising efforts over the next decade and hundreds of volunteers helped to begin restoration and renovation of the building while repair of the organ waited for benefactors.

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"The commitment to the Embassy's restoration played an important role in the rebirth of downtown Fort Wayne in the early 1980s".

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raised important capital funds for major improvements to the Embassy in recent years, and when they pledged some of their 1987 festival proceeds toward the complete rebuilding of the Page's console, it was evident that good things were in store for the old, tired instrument. Her ailing console was already beginning to spoil some organists' performances.

Realizing that restoration funds would be forthcoming, an organ committee chaired by Byron Fogt met over a period of several months to carefully plan the organ's renovation, focusing on the problems with the console. After several lengthy meetings, they chose the J.K. Aikman Organ Company's Carlton B. Smith, a well-known organ builder and Page organ specialist, to restore the console. The console was shipped to Indianapolis in late May of 1988.

Plans had already been made to close the theatre for the summer months while the original stage floor was replaced and the new stage lighting installed. While the organ was out of the building, volunteers rebuilt the Chrysoglott and re-felted and adjusted its mutes. They also completely re-leathered and re-wired the Solo String/Clarinet chest, replacing the Perflex with leather as originally done by Page. In addition, they procured a Page wind chest and placed it in the Main chamber to accommodate a new Trumpet rank soon to be added. Incorporation of the trumpet rank, the Embassy Page's only tonal modification in sixty years, has already been made in the rebuilt console.

The renovated console was returned to the theatre on September 26, 1988. The re-wiring was completed and the blower switched on by October 19. Tuning was then done to ready the organ for its first day back on the job, two Halloween performances on October 29 when Chicago organist Jeff Weiler accompanied the silent-movie classic *The Phantom of the Opera*.



1988 Festival of Trees.

An ongoing good fortune for the Page has been the dedicated group of volunteer organists and organ technicians, several of whom were in the original Nolan group, who sparked the drive to save Indiana's largest historic theatre from demolition and have kept the instrument in tune and in use since 1975.

The use of the Embassy Page has been important to the varied events staged regularly in the large auditorium since its rescue. It has been played in concert by many of the touring artists including Gaylord Carter, Dennis James, Lyn Larsen, Hector Olivera, and Walt Strony. The Page has also been used by the Fort Wayne Philharmonic Orchestra, now based in the Embassy Theatre. Staff organists also play short organ programs for films, travelogues, and tours of the facility conducted by Embassy volunteers.

The commitment to the Embassy's restoration played an important role in the rebirth of downtown Fort Wayne in the early 1980s. When the Downtown Redevelopment Commission chose the site for its new "Grand Wayne" convention/civic center in 1982, they selected the block immediately north of the the-

atre so they could utilize the spacious Embassy auditorium. A pedestrian skywalk/stairwell now connects the Grand Wayne center to the Embassy's foyer. The next year the Foellinger-Freimann Botanical Conservatory, one of the newest botanical complexes in the Midwest and the only downtown botanical conservatory and park in the nation, was constructed next to the theatre.

In 1987, a year after Buddy's death, good fortune smiled again on the Page. First, Buddy's popularity with the Fort Wayne Woman's Club prompted them to stage fund-raisers to build a trust fund to benefit the Page organ's maintenance as a memorial to Buddy for being the Page's champion in the massive campaign to save the organ in its home. Second, the Wilson Foundation also contributed funds for an organ project. Finally, a support group of special Embassy volunteers calling themselves "Embassadors" indicated that they, too, wanted to provide funds for the organ's maintenance or perhaps to hasten the overhaul that the organ so desperately needed. The Embassadors' annual holiday fund-raiser "Festival of Trees" had



Volunteers Bill Zabel (left), Byron Fogt (right).

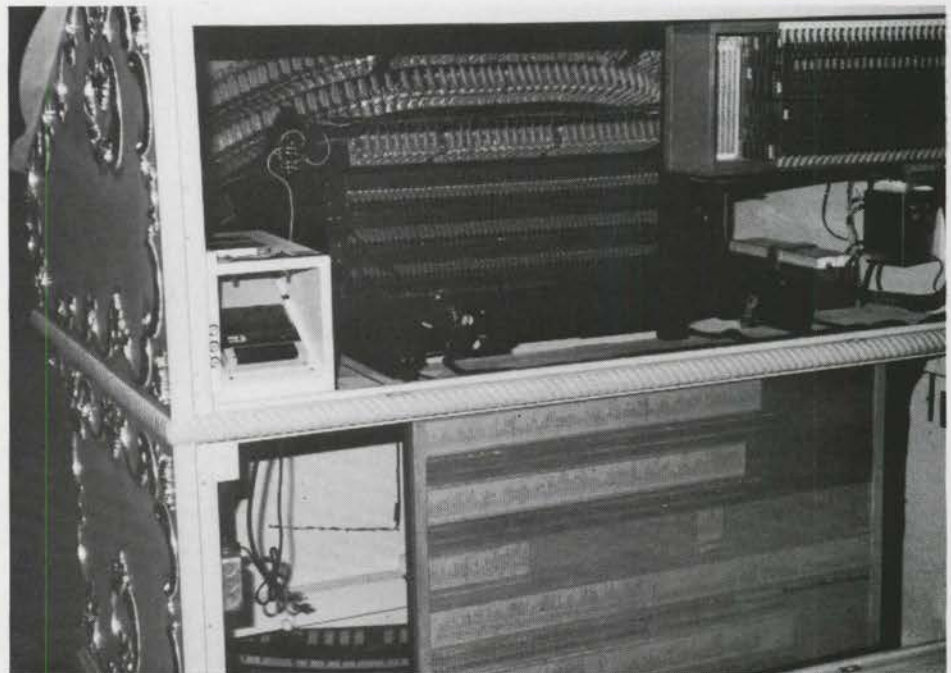
A List of Improvements to the Console Follows:

- Console renovation including removal of all coats of paint, repair and strengthening of the cabinet, refinishing of the console in an antique cream white, addition of gold leaf trim to the raised scroll work designs and some edging, airbrush shading around gold leaf scroll work
- Construction of new organ bench
- Construction of new removable Plexiglas 3" deep music rack with lights on both sides
- Additional console and pedal lights
- New pedal board conforming to A.G.O. specs (second touch feature retained)
- Alignment of new swell shoes and crescendo pedal to meet A.G.O. standards
- Modification to and addition of toe studs
- Modification to all four manuals including key action and re-tension to A.G.O. specs, new key bushings and new key tops where necessary, replacement of contact rails
- Cleaning of all stop tabs, engraving new stop tabs on original Page blanks
- Addition of special effects buttons to left keyboard cheekblocks
- Addition of note transposer
- Replacement of original pistons with Syndyne units with double action mechanism providing added reliability and flexibility.
- Respecification of second touch unification to improve its musical utility
- Addition of tremulant control tabs for individual tremulant control
- Installation of switches for sforzando on/off, tremulant defeat/enable control, great sustain foot switch enable/disable
- Addition of visual displays for reversibles, swell shades, crescendo, main power, console lift, and transposer
- Addition of key-operated power switch and new lift control
- Installation of new Trousdale solid state combination action with 8 memories and cassette tape memory storage interfaced with existing Z-Tronics switching system, manufactured by Fort Wayne's Bill Zabel
- Replacement of Perflex covered pneumatic stopkey actions with new Peterson electric actions

The console's restoration is the most recent in a series of improvements which began with a thorough house-cleaning when the Foundation assumed control in late 1975 and continues the theatre's restoration to its original magnificence and elegance.



Newly refurbished Page console.



Newly-installed console equipment.

The amazing part of this theatre's renaissance lies in the contribution of over 300 volunteers whose services since 1973 otherwise would easily have cost the Foundation in excess of several million dollars or perhaps the theatre's existence. The planning, the organization, and successful execution of so many diverse projects by volunteers and a limited professional staff working with contractors is truly phenomenal. Facilities Committee Chairman Eugene Witte and Foundation Contracting Officer T. Parker Ellsworth, both volunteers, have coordinated much of the restoration effort.

One of the Embassy brochures proclaims, "The magnificent Embassy is

loved by performers and patrons alike." Indeed, the volunteers assisting the staff in the theatre's daily operations must love her even more. To her many volunteers, the Embassy's grandeur is thanks enough for their labor of love. She stands today as an inspiration for those hoping to breathe new life into an abandoned palace.

Lyn Larsen will play the dedication program for the refurbished Page organ on May 19 at 8:00 p.m. For more information, contact the theatre:

EMBASSY THEATRE FOUNDATION
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