

An Organ Enthusiast on Vacation... E. M. Reeve

One of the joys of getting around the country is to meet organ personalities and to check interesting organ installations. The author, a sergeant of the police force at Minot, North Dakota, planned just such a trip for his vacation, and this is his account of the results.

THE PURPOSE OF MY VACATION was to visit some of the organs I have read about and to meet organists and organ enthusiasts with whom I have been in correspondence.

My first stop was Minneapolis where I was met at the depot by that great organ enthusiast, Mr. S. H. Cargill of Excelsior, Minnesota. First, we visited the WCCO CBS Radio Studio which is the home of the famous 3m/12r Wurlitzer which Eddie Dunstedter recorded years ago for Brunswick Records. The console, known as a "Waterfall Variety" and painted bright blue, is in a niche by itself at one end of the studio, reminiscent of the Music Hall and Center Theatre consoles at Rockefeller Center, N. Y. City. The two chambers of the WCCO organ are at the opposite end of the studio, and the swell shades have been covered with soundproofing material to harmonize with the rest of the studio. This covering has no effect on the sound and the organ really speaks out, especially the Post Horn. We inspected the chambers and found all in fine shape with the exception of one pipe which had been bent.

Our next stop was the residence of Al Miller, Managing Editor of the *Kinura*. Unfortunately, Al was not home, but I enjoyed meeting his wife and two children. His "Rock and Roll" blond, 3-manual plain-style console is in the living room on a dolly. Al is to be complimented on doing a fine job of refinishing the console and it is well filled with a fine variety of stop-keys. The swell shades are across the room from the console and speak directly into the room to the back of the organist. The chambers, Mrs. Miller informed us, were two ground-floor bedrooms with the floors removed so the chambers could extend from the basement to the roof. The organ is not functioning at present and much work remains to be done. It is to be hoped that Al will soon complete the job and it will be a credit to his years of patience and planning.

Thanking Mrs. Miller for the courtesy of showing us around, we visited the Powder Horn Baptist Church to take a look at the fine, 13-rank Robert Morton theatre organ originally housed in the Annex of the Riviera Theatre in Detroit, Michigan. That veteran organ builder of Minneapolis, Mr. Ray Steffans, is installing this organ. While the installation is not yet complete, the organ sounds wonderful. The console, a 3-manual horseshoe type with stop-keys typical of the Wurlitzer, is cream colored and still has some of the ornamental figures characteristic of theatre organ consoles. The organ retains the toy counter including xylophones, marimbas, auto horns, and so on.

Having observed this installation to our satisfaction, we were invited to Ray Steffans' home to hear the

2m/12 or 13r Robert Morton that he purchased from the Pantages Theatre. Ray had completely refinished the console. His workshop gives the impression, and correctly so, that he is capable of taking on just about any phase of organ re-building except the pipes. These are sent elsewhere for servicing. Favoring us with a couple of selections, Mr. Cargill and I agreed that the organ sounded very good indeed. The console is in the hall section of the house below the staircase and a chamber speaks into the living room through an area of approximately 18 square feet.

Mr. Cargill then drove Mr. Steffans and me to his residence, a beautiful, modern home overlooking Lake Minnetonka. As you enter the front door you see the 3-manual Wurlitzer console. Mr. Cargill has an ambitious program here and contemplates approximately 24 ranks plus an electronic device that is controlled from the console. The organ came from the Lyceum Theatre in Duluth, Minnesota. Originally a 2-manual job, Mr. Cargill has added an extra bolster of stop-keys, making room for another manual. The two chambers are in the basement and speak through small grills along the living room lakeside windows. After listening to his high fidelity equipment and discussing organs while enjoying an excellent picnic lunch, we called it a day. The time was at hand to leave for Chicago.

The first stop in the Windy City the next morning was the "House of Organs" to meet Kay McAbee. He proved to be a likeable fellow and a terrific organist. He played several of the bigger Allen organs and it was amazing how closely he could imitate the sound of a pipe organ, even to the use of the electronic percussions and the harp. The latter was practically the counterpart of a real string harp. Altogether it was an enlightening experience. We spent most of the day discussing organs and organists (there's no end to this sort of thing!). In the evening we listened to some tapes of the Wick residence organ and of the Wurlitzer in the Paramount Theatre in Aurora, Illinois.

This was it for Monday and it was time to retire to a hotel and try to arrange a meeting with Venida Jones. Her organ broadcasts over CBS- KMOX, St. Louis, thrilled me some years ago. A meeting date was set and I had only then to dream of what was in store for the following afternoon.

According to schedule, Venida Jones was on hand to meet me in the lobby of the Congress Hotel and we spent several hours together. This was a real pleasure, indeed, for I had received some fine letters from Venida during the days when I was in service and writing her about her

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wonderful organ programs. She is an attractive blond with a charming personality and is now doing free-lance work on commercials and playing background music for TV and radio shows. We strolled down Wabash Avenue to the Baldwin Piano Company and had the good fortune to meeting Reginald Foort who gave a good account of the Baldwin electronic organ. We asked Mr. Foort, famous as an organist in England and now inactive musically except doing a little arranging, about various organists there, including Sidney Torch who was to my mind, one of the great organists in England and a unique stylist. He agreed that Mr. Torch was an outstanding artist and told us that Sidney has retired to a farm now and then. Mr. Foort indicated he had tried to get Sidney Torch to come to America, but he seemed to prefer to stay in Merrie England.

It was an interesting session with Mr. Foort but the time was late. After taking leave of Venida Jones, it was time to return to the House of Organs for another session with Kay McAbee.

Through a mistake in timing, Kay had left early, but he had made arrangements for me to meet him at Aurora to hear the big Wurlitzer at the Paramount. At the conclusion of the movie, we took a look at the modernistic-looking sunburst-and-waterfall console. It is located at the left end of the pit and the chambers speak from both sides above the exit doors. The relay room is in the basement with the blower. There is a trick in acoustics here for if the organ is not played too loudly you can hear the individual chambers speak out, but if you are sitting halfway up the aisle and full organ is played, the sound comes out of the two chambers and seems to rise to a dome-like section of the roof and then come down at you in a real burst of sound; in other words, the stereophonic sound of the two chambers disappears. A friend of Kay's, who runs Winsor's Recording Studio, has done a fine job of recording this organ and the results will soon be released.

On the way to Kay's home, we visited the Rialto Theatre in Joliet. Mr. Lyons was organist until recently when, I understand, he succumbed to a heart attack. The organ is a 4-manual Barton. The next morning, we visited Kay's recording studio which was amply provided with the best of professional recording equipment. He kindly played some tapes he had made in the Aurora Paramount and several by Mildred Fitzpatrick on the Chicago Arena Organ. The latter is a 3-manual Wurlitzer which is now installed in the home of Herb Shriner. Kay mentioned that Mildred Fitzpatrick opened more of the big Chicago organs than any other playing organist today and has an immense scrapbook to prove it.

Returning to Chicago I spent the rest of the morning checking old *Diapasons* in the Chicago Library. Some of the older issues carried interesting stories and photos of some of the old theatre organs: Roxy's three consoles, the famous DeLuxe Moller in the Metropolitan in Philadelphia, and the old Capitol Estey. One issue carried the program of Eddie Dunstedter when he dedicated the organ in the Minneapolis Auditorium.

It was my intention to drop down to St. Louis, but there was still so much that I had not seen in Chicago as yet that I decided to forego St. Louis for another trip. Instead, I chose to visit Venida Jones again, this time in her beautiful apartment with a picture window overlooking Michigan Boulevard, the Tribune Tower, and the Wrigley Building. Her collection of envelopes from letters received

from servicemen during her reign at KMOX during the war was educational and informative. Posing in her room on a mantle is a model of the KMOX Kilgen console. She reminisced about her experiences at this station and at WKY, Oklahoma City, where she took over while Ken Wright was in the service. Her scrapbooks were full of interesting pictures, including groups of servicemen whom Venida used to entertain in the organ studios. Incidentally Venida won her title "Queen of the Console" in a contest produced over all the networks and she has citations from the Army commending her for her work with the troops during the war.

Particularly enjoyable was listening to some of the tapes she had made of the KMOX and WKY organs and also illustrative of her piano work during jam sessions with servicemen in the studio. Her organ style is reminiscent of Eddie Dunstedter. It was a grand evening and one that I shall remember for many years to come.

The next day was devoted to checking the record shops again and purchasing a tape recorder. During the course of the day it was my pleasure to meet John Shanahan and another organ enthusiast, Jay Burns. The three of us drove over to the Elm Rink where John and a friend had installed a 4-manual Geneva-Wurlitzer. Tony Tahlman was the organist and while we were there, he did a satire of *Quiet Village*, George Wright style. Tony is very tall (about 6'5"), on the slender side, and studious looking. The organ console is perched on top of a shelf overlooking the rink which is to the organist's left. Similarly, the two chambers are perched over the rink and have swell shades on all sides. There is one problem here and that is keeping the wind supply up so that the organ can be properly heard. The wind has to travel a long way from the blower to the chambers, at least half the length of the rink itself which is not a small building by any means. Mr. Burns informed us that the Wurlitzer in the Trianon Ballroom has been locked up and cannot be seen. Unfortunately, the Wurlitzer in the Aragon Ballroom was inactive this particular day as was the mighty Stadium Barton.

Our last visit was to the Hub Rink where Leon Berry officiates. The rink is quite large and the organ is on one side of the rink opposite the console. The chambers are decorated in red, green, blue, etc., and the percussion instruments are located outside the chambers in plain view. I can assure you that this toy counter gets a real workout each evening. At the conclusion of each selection, Leon uses the auto horn. The console is a 3-manual job taken from the Bailey Theater in Buffalo, New York. The original 2-manual console is still in the balcony, but pretty much dismantled.

At 11 p.m. Leon's work was concluded and he very graciously invited us to his home to hear the "Beast." The organ is beautifully installed in the basement. The 8' pipes are located on racks on the wall and have springs holding them into their respective holes in the chests. It was interesting to look through his scrapbooks which contained some rare photos of the Roxy organ together with a booklet on this theater's beginning, as well as photos of many organists whom he has known. Originally from Alabama, Leon is a quiet, unassuming fellow who really knows organs. He has a very lovely wife and daughter. Leon's distinctive style of playing has made him a popular favorite with the people who came over to praise his playing. Prior to coming to the rink, he played at the Aragon Ballroom and other places in Chicago.

The next afternoon I boarded a train for Winona and spent the day with Mel Doner and his family. We talked, and talked, and talked, and spent hours listening to some of our favorite organists, and in this way brought to a close an exciting and interesting vacation.