

There is definitely more in Yuma, Arizona than hot air and sand!

The newly chartered Yuma Chapter not only has about 15 members, it also has an organ and is busily working to restore the instrument and install it in the Yuma Theatre.

Once this happens, Yuma will have the distinction of having the only working theatre pipe organ in Arizona.

The project and idea of forming a chapter began back in 1988 when Johnson's Mortuary relocated into a new building and offered to give their 62-year-old Kilgen 2/5 theatre organ to anybody who could make it play and find a suitable home.

Gene Mignery and Jim Harland had attended a fundraising recital which featured Walt Strony. Harold Applin, now a member of Valley of the Sun Chapter, Phoenix, started the project when he lived in Yuma, but was unable to acquire the "new home." Gene and Jim later contacted the mortuary, expressed their interest in the organ and proceeded to talk with Yuma Theatre Committee which is a branch of the Cultural Council of Yuma. Council and Committee gave permission for the organ to be installed in the Yuma Theatre during the summer of 1988.

Used for over 35 years for services in the Mortuary, the organ was purchased by O.C. Johnson from the Ebell Theatre in Long Beach, California, at the recommendation of Gene Savage. He had formerly played a theatre organ in Long Beach during the late 20s, but had moved to Yuma after the '29 Crash to work on Imperial Dam for the Works Progress Administration.

A classical trained musician in piano and organ, Savage graduated from Colby College in Maine and attended Juilliard in New York City to study organ. He played the piano for services at the Johnson Mortuary and taught lessons in Yuma.

Convincing Johnson that the organ was an excellent buy, Savage then hired a crew to move it to Yuma by railroad. With a few helpers, Savage installed the Kilgen in a chamber room atop the mortuary. The console was located in a small music room off the chapel and the sound came down through a swell chamber and curved plaster tunnel into the ceiling of the music room. Savage not only played the Kilgen for years, but maintained it with the assistance of Ed Hansberger, Jr. Savage died in 1967, and the organ



Gene Mignery (right) and volunteer repairing Melodia chest.

was used very little and fell into a state of disrepair. Ed still resides in Yuma and is working with the chapter on restoration of the Kilgen.

Mignery and Harland began removing the organ from the mortuary in January 1989, initially by themselves. They spent Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons cutting and labeling wires, removing pipes, chests and other components and hauling everything to a storeroom behind the theatre in their pickups and cars. They were soon joined by a few more helpers and the moving process continued into March '89.

Yuma Kiwanis Club, of which Harland is a member, joined in and made the organ moving and restoration a Community Service project of the club. They also generously donated \$1,000 to get the project rolling. Several members assisted on Saturdays with muscle power and vehicles until the organ was completely removed and stored during mid-March.

Since then Harland, Mignery, Harland's

wife Barb, and about five other members and interested persons have worked on the organ. Thus far, the console has been refinished and is now being rebuilt; all pipes have been cleaned, the wooden ones refinished and most of the chests have been repaired. The main coupler chest is still in need of a considerable amount of work, and there is a myriad of re-wiring that remains to be done. Recently, the City issued a building permit for construction of the organ chamber.

Originally there was a Sullivan pipe organ in the theatre in the early 1900s. It was lost during a fire that gutted the theatre building. Two more fires almost destroyed the theatre prior to 1920. Rebuilt in the 20s and remodeled in the 30s, it was Yuma's main theatre and operated until 1970. The building was donated by the owner to the City of Yuma approximately four years ago and is now operated by the Cultural Council.

Chamber work is expected to take up most of the spring season and hopefully



Jim Harland (left) and Gene Mignery refinishing Pedal Flute pipes.

be completed before the hot summer arrives. Once this work is finished, installation of the Kilgen will start — one section at a time. A local architect, Keck and Associates, donated services for drawing chamber plans which permitted the issuance of the building permit.

Fundraising efforts for the project have been effective. Organ club members have presented programs about the organ to service clubs in Yuma and have received numerous donations from the organizations and individual members as well.

A local elementary school has also agreed to help. Their school, named after O.C. Johnson, mortuary founder who brought the Kilgen to Yuma in 1933, is presenting information to students in social studies and music classes. The student council has taken on this project to help raise money and inform students about the instrument and organ music. They recently had a field trip to St. Paul's Church in Yuma to look at and listen to a Casavant pipe organ. On Tuesday, May 1, about 90 students toured the theatre and viewed the organ's restoration progress and talked with members of Yuma Theatre Organ Society.

Local news media was on hand for television and newspaper coverage. The students are also sponsoring a raffle featuring merchandise donated by local merchants and will donate the proceeds to the organ restoration project.

Biggest boost to the effort occurred January 7 of this year when Walt Strony returned to Yuma for a repeat fundraising recital to help Yuma Chapter with the restoration work. John Crum of Arizona Organ Associates (Arizona Allen Dealer) provided the new large model electronic organ for the concert. The stage was filled with speakers and Walt filled the old theatre — which has beautiful acoustics — with the finest theatre organ music ever heard in Yuma. Over 650 listeners packed the auditorium and are still ask-

ing, "When are we going to do that again?"

Strony's program also included a sing-along using his slides, plus a 12-minute silent film which he accompanied after rushing through a one-time rehearsal. His artistry came off as though he had played the picture many times. A profit of \$2,400 was realized for the chapter. Strony also donated \$75 from his record and tape sales!

On the day prior to the concert/show, he gave a church organist's workshop using a two-manual Allen Church model. It was attended by about 25 local enthusiasts and church organists, most of whom were members of Yuma-Imperial Chapter of the American Guild of Organists.

Overtures have been made to Strony to return for another concert — hopefully next winter. There were some sceptics regarding the success of having a concert, but chapter members worked hard and produced an excellent publicity program. We proved to the community there is definitely a market here for good theatre organ music.

Upon completion of restoration and installation work of the Kilgen, there will still be things left to do. When the organ was moved from Long Beach all theatre components — percussions, toy counter, etc — were removed and subse-

quently lost or sold over the 60 years prior to Yuma Chapter acquiring the instrument. These items need to be replaced and that is the major effort for the next few months. Members are seeking additional pipework, percussions, stops, toy counter items and chests to have a complete theatre instrument.

Sources in California and Colorado are being contacted, and Valley of the Sun Chapter in Phoenix is assisting in locating suitable additions. Ray Danforth and Harold Applin have maintained great interest in the project and continually offer support.

Gene Mignery and Ken Tillotson, members of Yuma and Colorado Springs Chapters, have researched a Kilgen Opus listing and found detailed information about the Yuma instrument. It was originally installed in Radio Station WAMD, Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1927. It was shipped from the factory as a 2/5, Style V013, opus 3814.

The original stop list included:

16' Flute	Xylophone
Pedal Bourdon	Chimes
25-97 Melodia Scale	Tambourine
8' String	Castanets
8' Tuba	Tom Tom
8' Vox Humana	Siren
8' Tibia Clausa	Birds
Marimba	Sleigh Bells
Second Touch on Accompaniment	



Members of Yuma Chapter with Walt Strony following his concert.



Audience at Strony concert in Yuma Theatre.