



Tom Ewer photo

# The Elsinore Theatre's Mighty Wurlitzer

by Rick Parks

On May 28, 1926, the Elsinore Theatre in Salem, Oregon, opened to the public with Cecil B. DeMille's *The Volga Boatman*, starring William Boyd. Percy Burraston accompanied the film on the Mighty Wurlitzer.

The Elsinore was built by George Guthrie in 1925-1926. He had, since 1912, owned and operated the Oregon Theatre, which stood across the street. Mr. Guthrie felt that Salem was growing and was ready to support a larger theatre. His new theatre would seat 1,400. It would be equipped with a large stage so that vaudeville acts could be performed, in addition to showing movies.

The architectural firm of Lawrence, Holford, Bean and Allyn of Portland designed the structure. The exterior was designed by Mr. Lawrence, and the plans for the interior were completed by Mr. Allyn.

The theatre is Tudor Gothic in architecture. Since the Shakespearean era coincided with this particular architectural period, it was appropriate that the main theme would be of Elsinore Castle in Denmark, the scene of Shakespeare's great drama, "Hamlet."

Above the entrance doors, the beautiful stained glass windows portray Prince Hamlet greeting visitors to Elsinore. Two large murals in the lobby depict characters from other Shakespeare plays.

For many years, Fanchon & Marco stage reviews were weekly events. They were produced for San Francisco and Los Angeles theatres and were able to play at the Elsinore enroute to larger West Coast houses. The stage shows included actors who later became famous, such as ventriloquist Edgar Bergen with Charlie McCarthy.

*The original organ, Wurlitzer opus 1257, was actually made into a 3/13 instrument using Wurlitzer components that were added to the transplanted Wurlitzer style 185 special (opus 241) from the Oregon Theatre.*

The Wurlitzer Company supplied a three-manual, double bolster console, Post Horn, Krumet, Orchestral Oboe, Gamba, Solo String, Solo Tibia (to 16'), chests and percussions, including a Piano.

The organ was installed over the proscenium in four rooms: Percussion, Solo, Main, and Relay room. A tone chute was used to direct the sound down into the auditorium. The blower was placed in the basement in its own room. The console was situated in the middle of the orchestra pit and never had an elevator. The organ's Piano prominently sat to the right of the console.

The organ was first played by Percy Burraston, who performed daily concerts and played for the shows. He was assisted by Salem organist Mary Barton. For many years she played the organ during weekly radio broadcasts originating at the theatre, prior to the removal of the organ in July 1962.

The original owner's son had the organ removed and eventually installed it in his Portland home. He later sold the organ to a man in Washington state, where it remains today.



## The Present Installation

Clayton Parks, Salem organ buff, acquired a four-rank Wurlitzer (opus 244) in 1966. Three years later he purchased Wurlitzer opus 1070, a six-rank organ. The two organs were combined and were installed in his home. Duplicate ranks were replaced with a Tibia, Tuba, and Kinura. A Clarinet was eventually added which brought the organ up to eleven ranks.

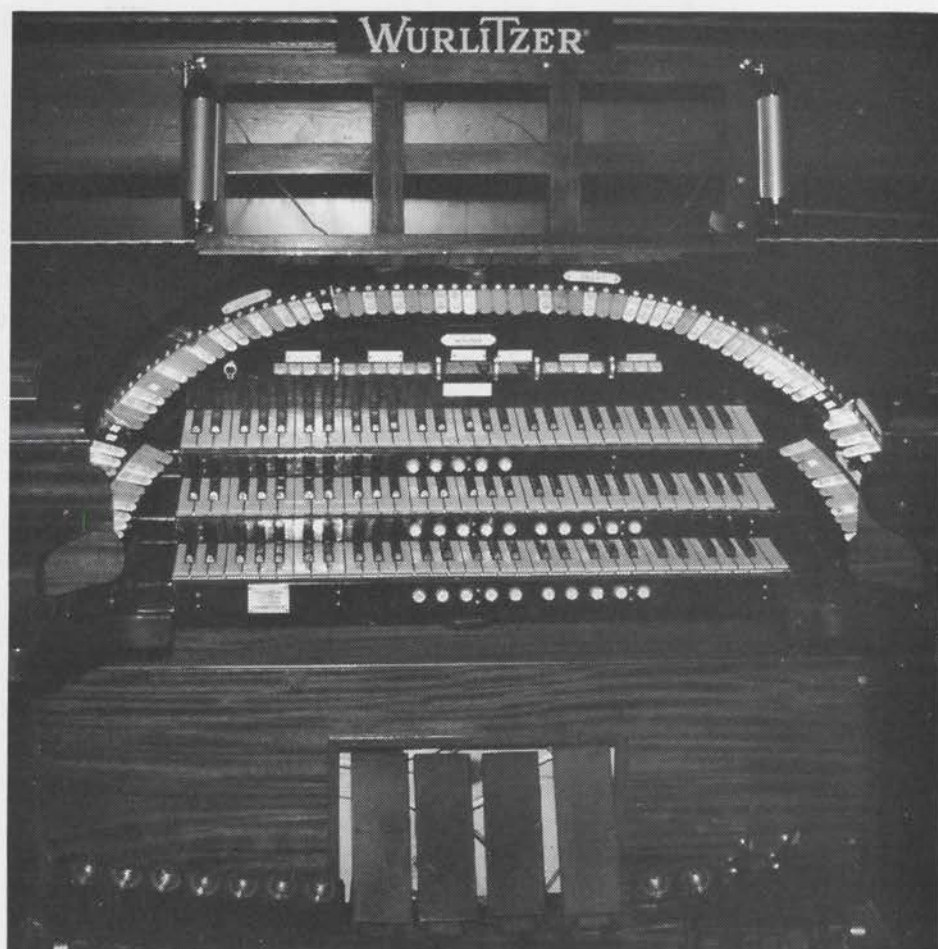
Clayton's son, Rick, soon became interested in theatre pipe organs. He was offered, by his father, the ownership of the organ if he would learn to play it. Rick, then 11 years old, started taking organ lessons and became the owner of a Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ.

Over the years, many ranks and other components were purchased and it was apparent that there was no more space in the chamber to contain them. A large building would be the ideal place for the organ, in particular, a theatre, where the public could hear it.

The search began at the Grand Theatre, Salem's performing arts center, which seats 550. At one time it had been home to a 2/4 Robert-Morton. The manager was contacted and plans were made to inspect the chamber space. The chambers were found to be inadequate to hold the planned organ. However, Bill Smith, President of the Salem Theatre of the Performing Arts, had keys to the Elsinore Theatre and invited the Parks to look over the empty organ chambers there. It was determined that the Elsinore would be ideal for the organ. The original windline from the blower to the chambers was left intact. The cedar-lined chambers, rare in organ installations, were found to be in excellent shape, and they could easily hold an organ of 18 ranks.

In September of 1986, negotiations were made with then owner Tom Moyer, of Luxury Theatres, to install the organ in the Elsinore Theatre. Mr. Moyer was enthusiastic about having an organ in the theatre. He recommended that, before the installation was started, the building should be inspected by a structural engineer.

Arrangements were made with a structural engineer to make a study of the chamber supports and trusses. In his inspection he found a serious dry-rot problem in one of the wood trusses, caused by leaks in a roof drain. The organ installation could not begin until the truss was repaired.



Top: Lobby of Elsinore Theatre  
At right: Wurlitzer console.

Iro Ewen photo  
C. Park photo





## The Installation

During the six month wait while the truss was being repaired, the blower was rebuilt and was placed in its room in the basement of the theatre. Originally equipped with a 7½ h.p. D.C. motor, the Spencer blower rated at 1,300 c.f.m. at 15", now is like a new blower. A new 3 phase 7½ h.p. motor (1750 rpm), inboard and outboard bearings, bearing mounts, motor coupling and shaft were included in the rebuild.

After the truss was repaired, shutters were mounted. It was not possible to find 8' shutters as were previously installed in the Solo and Main, so several sets were cut down to size, with these two chambers having shutters double-stacked.

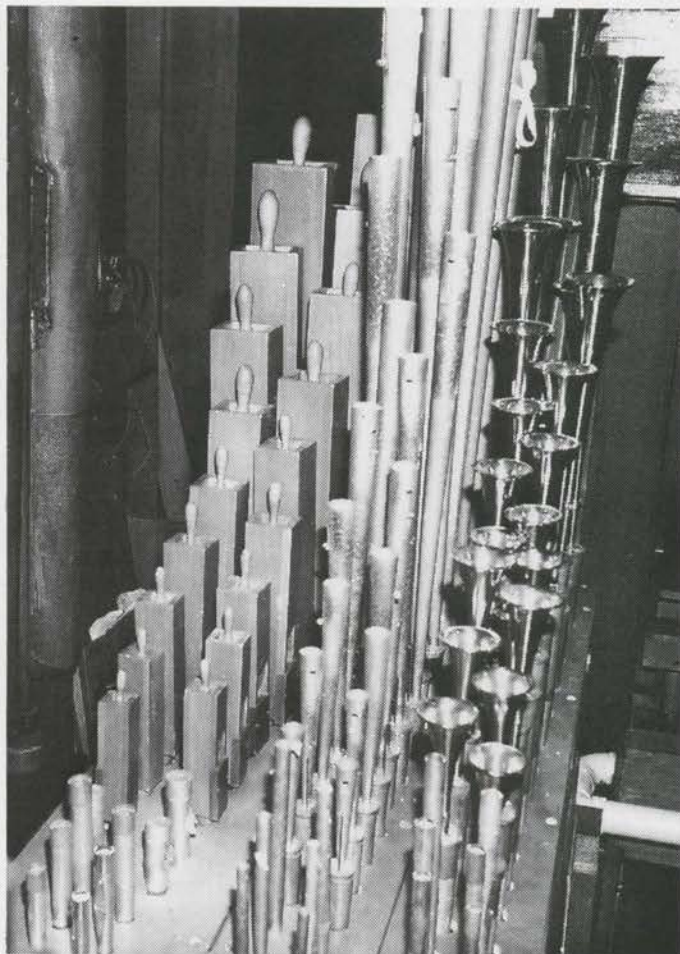
All pipes, percussions, chests, and relays were hoisted from stage level. They were put in place by Clayton, Rick, Rick's two brothers, and occasionally some friends.

Installation costs were kept to a minimum by obtaining surplus cable from U.S. West Communications. The other costs were electrical work and PVC wind conductors and miscellaneous items. Total installation costs amounted to less than \$2,500.

*At left: Percussion chamber, 16' Tibia and Chimes. C. Parks photo*

*Bottom left: Main Chamber: Open Diapason, Salicional, Oboe Horn, Concert Flute, Clarinet. C Parks photo*

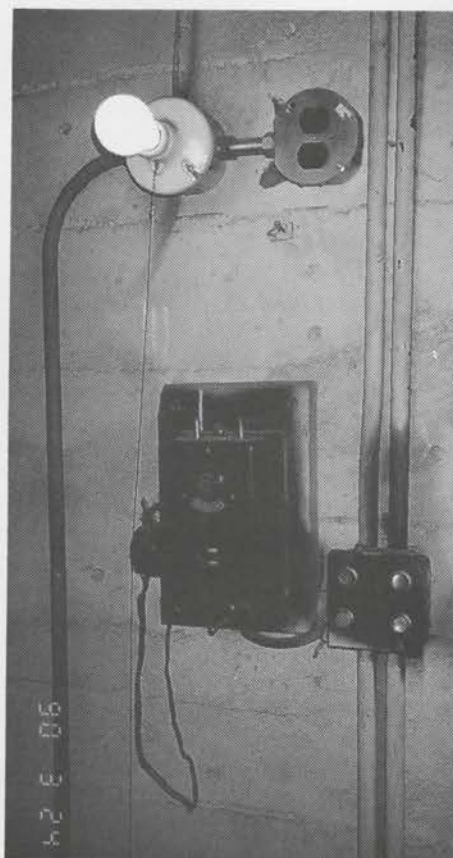
*Bottom right: Solo Chamber: Wurlitzer Tibia, Morton Oboe, Wurlitzer Saxophone. C. Parks photo*







Elsinore stage house. C. Parks photo



Original backstage phone. Irv Ewen photo

About 90% of the chest secondaries were releathered at the Parks' home, prior to taking them to the theatre. Most of the chests and regulators were refinished and some of the regulators were rebuilt.

Several choice ranks are included in the organ, such as: 15" Post Horn (Kimball Oboe converted by Trivo), Wurlitzer Sax, Morton Orchestral Oboe, 16' Moller String, Wurlitzer 10" Tibia, and Gottfried solo scale Tibia.

At present, 15 ranks are playing and it is planned to add three more ranks. Regulation of the instrument by a professional will be done in the near future.

The three-manual console now being used is temporary. It was built from a two-manual Wurlitzer console by Lorin Whitney, who used it for his residence organ. A larger, three-manual Wurlitzer console will be purchased so that there can be more unification available and all planned-for ranks can be controlled.

## The Future

The future looks good for the Elsinore and its organ. The new owners, Act III Communications, who bought the Luxury Theatres chain in May 1989, are excited about using the organ for matinees, concerts, and silent movies. They continue to operate the theatre for first-run movies every day of the week. Occasionally, there

are stage performances which the owners promote, allowing patrons to sample what audiences came to see when the theatre was built.



Portia



Lady MacBeth

Many thanks go to the Elsinore's Manager, Gerry Proctor, without whose help this installation would not have been possible. His cooperation and enthusiasm ensures Salem the opportunity to hear a Wurlitzer pipe organ in the environment that it was intended.



Rick Parks in Main Chamber. C. Parks photo