

Pipes & Personalities

That Damm Theatre

by Tom L. DeLay

With two national conventions now past, ample chance was allowed to explore some of the classic, rural areas of Indiana. Such was the case in 1984 when a visit was made to my aunt in very rural southeastern Indiana. Less than two blocks from her home in the Ripley County town of Osgood stands what has to be the most unique theatre name in the country. The early '30s marquee proudly proclaims DAMM THEATRE.

Then operated by the late Viola Damm and her son Robert, the 414-seat house has been carefully preserved. In fact, only recently had the organ pit been covered over . . . "since it seemed unlikely they would need their Wurlitzer again . . .!" For those used to the foul, stale smell of popcorn, the Damm regularly fresh-popped corn nightly. Can you imagine? A large box of pop corn and drink to match for 75¢?

The Damm Family emigrated from Schneeburg, Bavaria, in 1868, with son Louis eventually saving enough money to open his own bakery. Late in 1914, he decided to expand his business interests and opened the 123-seat Damm Theatre, complete with a Wurlitzer photoplayer. The theatre, like the bakery, was truly a family business. However, in 1921, competition was to rear its head nearly across Buckeye Street.

Gottlieb Herman and Richard Beer purchased the old Kilian Dopp Livery Stable and fully rebuilt it into the Columbia Theatre. What better way to eliminate the competition than to buy out the competitors. In February 1922, the newly opened Columbia became the new Damm Theatre as it is still known in 1990. While still under the business control of Herman



and Beer, music was provided offstage by Mr. Herman playing his Edison cylinder phonograph. However, when the Damms took over the operation, they purchased a repossessed Wurlitzer Style 135 piano console organ, with roll player. This 2/4 unit was purchased through a dealer in Rising Sun, Indiana, musical instrument and boat dealer. This was none other than Mr. J.W. Whitlock, inventor of the roll controlled, self-playing harp. Howard Wurlitzer saw potential in this instrument with the result Whitlock made roughly 1500 automatic "style A" Harps for Wurlitzer.

The 2/4, style 135 Wurlitzer saw short life in the Damm Theatre. It was also repossessed during the early days of the Depression. At one time, on the floor above the theatre auditorium was a roller skating rink, also with an automatic Wurlitzer orchestration. This, too, was lost in the early Depression period.

The old theatre's auditorium is magnificent. Walls are lined with heavy, crushed red velvet drapes. The auditorium ceiling and proscenium still have the original stencil and color scheme. Classic ceiling fans still churn the air in the now air-conditioned house. It is absolutely a step back in time to enter the Damm. Civic pride is proclaimed in a pair of road signs outside of town, "Osgood — Home of the Damm Theatre." Joe Damm and his wife Viola operated the Damm from 1953 until Joe's death in 1973. Viola continued to operate the house along with her son, Robert, until her death in February 1989. The house has been in use only sporadically since that time.

Time has been good to the Damm. Hopefully, this rural delight will not be lost to the future by neglect. It is a beautifully preserved piece of Americana that at one time was commonplace throughout rural America. The movie palace craze did not, by any imagination, take place in just the big cities. Just around rural southern Indiana, each town of at least 1000 souls had its own local version. Some still exist, like the Liberty Theatre in Lawrenceburg which also sported a 2/4 Wurlitzer. The 1937 Ohio River flood turned the organ into a pile of wet glue and warped poplar. Others have not survived other fates; a fire destroyed the Madison, Indiana, Grand Theatre along with its 2/4 Kilgen. Like the town itself, the Grand was an antebellum delight. However, the Osgood Damm, a little tired from lack of use now, still continues to survive as a beautiful example of a bygone era.



Los Angeles Honors Two

by Wayne Flottman

Ann Leaf and Del Castillo, two of the most outstanding members of the Los Angeles Theatre Organ Society, were honored at the summer membership meeting held in Sexson Auditorium at Pasadena City College on August 19. Both of these veteran performers willingly and ably entertained the members present from the console of the LATOS-owned and maintained 3/27 J. Ross Reed Memorial Wurlitzer. Bob Hill, a past president of LATOS, was master of ceremonies for the festive afternoon. He introduced the honorees with anecdotes from each of their long and illustrious careers.

Ann Leaf, known as "The Mitey Mite of the Wurlitzer," was introduced by Bob telling the audience that, by her seconding his nomination, she was actually responsible for his becoming president of LATOS. Ann is a native of Omaha, Nebraska, where she began piano lessons at age four and by age ten was a soloist with the Omaha Symphony. During her teen years she played at the Million Dollar Theatre in Los Angeles, landing the job after an impressive performance where she accompanied a movie "cold." When Ann was 18 she won a scholarship to Juilliard. She is also known as "Little Organ Annie" (because she is only 4'11" tall). Ms. Leaf moved on to radio after the talkies arrived making the theatre organist obsolete. She had two shows of her own as well as doing back up for other radio shows. Ann Leaf returned to Los Angeles when radio became dependent upon "canned" music and spent a number of years concertizing throughout the United States until she retired many years ago.

Del Castillo began his musical career during World War I when he joined the Army and asked to be assigned to a band. When the director asked him what he played, Del's reply was "What do you need?" He ended up as director of the 302nd Field Artillery Band. After the war Del discovered the theatre organ and was employed as a silent film accompanist. He opened a school to teach film accompaniment but, with the arrival of the talkies, that venture abruptly ended. Del Castillo was director of CBS Radio's "We Deliver the Goods" broadcast from Catalina Island, and he later became a director and organist for CBS. Mr. Castillo is also a writer, having contributed articles to theatre organ publications over the years.

Both of the honorees received plaques and flowers and much warm and well deserved applause for their efforts during the afternoon of entertainment.



Ann Leaf accepts plaque from Donn Linton.

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Del Castillo and Ann Leaf at Pasadena City College.

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Donn Linton presents plaque to Del Castillo.

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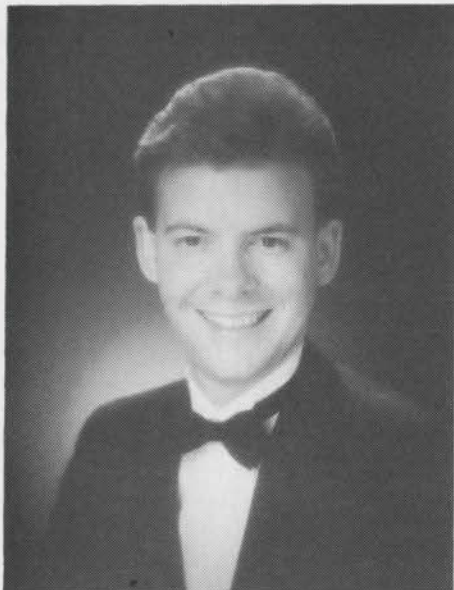


Oakland Paramount Names New Staff Organist

Jim Riggs has been named staff organist for the Oakland Paramount Theatre. The announcement was made to over 1000 patrons at the Paramount's Hollywood Movie Classics presentation of *Dinner At Eight*.

"We're pleased to have Jim with us," stated Paramount General Manager Peter Botto. "The Wurlitzer requires constant attention, and in addition to his knowledge of the organ, I know Jim really cares about this instrument and will help us keep it in top condition." Riggs fills the position left vacant by the death of Jim Roseveare in 1988; Roseveare had been with the Paramount since its reopening in 1973.

A Bay Area native, Riggs is also house organist for the newly restored Stanford Theatre in Palo Alto and was recently voted "Theatre Organist of The Year" for 1990 by the American Theatre Organ Society. He has released three recordings, the latest being "Paramount on Parade" which was recorded on the Paramount's Wurlitzer.



The Detroit Fox Summer Film and Theatre Organ Extravaganza

by Harold Bellamy

A restoration showpiece, Detroit's Fox Theatre continues its highly successful role as a presenter of premiere names in live concert and stage entertainment. Personalities such as Frank Sinatra, Red Skelton, Willie Nelson, and productions such as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *South Pacific* have attracted record attendance at the Fox. The lobby organ, the 3/12 Moller, is regularly used to welcome patrons and to entertain them during their pre-performance socializing. In addition, the 4/36 Wurlitzer is used for special events as considered appropriate.

During the summer, however, there is a considerable change in this routine. Mike Illitch, the owner of the Fox, has decided to dedicate the summer period to the presentation of 70mm classic films and very appropriately by accompanying the films with the Wurlitzer.

Since its opening in 1988 following its restoration, the Fox has presented three films, *Doctor Zhivago*, *West Side Story*, and the recently restored print of *Lawrence of Arabia* which resulted in the nation's largest grossing ever of this film. This summer he added a restored 1959 epic *Ben Hur*. This tale of Christ, 3 hours and 42 minutes in length, won eleven Academy Awards including an Oscar for best picture. The chariot scene, which is best remembered, took three months of filming on one of the largest sets in the history of film-making and entrances the audience for over eleven minutes.

Charlton Heston appeared on opening night to launch *Ben Hur*, and he presented himself as wearing two hats. As a movie star he reflected on the making of *Ben Hur* and other roles he has played. As the chairman of the American Film Institute he complimented the Illitch family for restoring the Fox and strongly stated his view that the showing of classics such as *Ben Hur* are best seen on the big theatre screen as opposed to the limited scale of television.

Under the direction of Greg Bellamy and Harry Skrdla, a group of theatre organists were scheduled to play the Wurlitzer for the showing of these films every day of the week. Midway during the *Dr. Zhivago* run, Mr. Illitch added a matinee to the schedule. Organ talents recruited for these performances were: Father Jim Miller, Father Andrew Rogers, Tony O'Brien, John Lauter, John Steele, Don Haller, Lionel LaMay, Jim Hammann, Scott Foppiano, Steve Schlesing, and Sharron Patterson. Now as the fall season takes over, these organists will continue to play for a new season of special events. Organ restoration work continues with the latest completed task being the re-leathering of the high pressure regulator of the Wurlitzer. By the way, if any qualified theatre organist happens to be in the Detroit area, contact either Greg or Harry. You may, if scheduling permits, find yourself at the console at the fabulous Fox.



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