

The Men Behind the Dowager Empress

The true highlights of a remarkable protege, Daniel L. Papp, who first installed the 'Dowager Empress' Wurlitzer organ in the Paramount Theatre of New York City, in 1926, then maintained it thereafter, and in particular of his mentor Heinrich Hosszer the man responsible for his initial direction in life.

by Paulus Elm-Selig

Grandpa Heinrich Hosszer was always one for appearance and personal dignity. With our tools and a clean set of work clothes in appropriate travel bags, we arrived at the Flagg Estate, Staten Island, New York, dressed in our Sunday best as was the case with every job. Work contracted for: general repairs and tuning. I was only 17 at the time. The year 1933. The butler escorted us to the impressive ballroom which housed the organ, Grandpa thanked him, and he left us with our task. The organ complex, quite often multiple floor or platform levels of organ pipes not in public view, does provide adequate privacy for a change to work clothes. So in a few minutes we stood before the organ console ready to go. As usual the first order came from Grandpa with definite sureness. "Remove the panel on the right first, then the left one next", was the quiet but firm instruction. This was the finely polished wooden paneling located just above the console. I proceeded to do what was expected of me while Grandpa started elsewhere in the complex behind.

Carefully I eased out the panel and set it aside, turned back to my simple chore, and there laying before me on something like a 2 x 4 beam, were what seemed to be several gleaming gold coins! I gasped, "why, it's money — looks like gold coins!" Grandpa responded to my completely unexpected exclamation, took one hard look and sternly commanded, "don't touch them!" "Find the butler and ask



Dan Papp, Wurlitzer maintenance expert, Paramount Theatre, Times Square, N.Y.C., June 27, 1956. — (Photo by H.C. Blakely, Picton, Ont.)

him to remove the money". I soon located the butler and gave him the message. When I returned to the ballroom Grandpa and I started on the next step of work to be done. This was shortly accomplished and we came down and around to the organ face again. The gold coins were still there. So off I had to go again after the butler, then back to the organ work. Half an hour later, we again stood before the organ console, and there as before the money stared at us. This was the final straw for Grandpa. With obvious irritation off he went after the butler, who must have been close by this time, because I could plainly overhear Grandpa telling him to remove the gold coins or for someone of

the Flagg household to do so, "or else we're packing our tools and leaving". Well, we were standing before the organ face for perhaps about 5 minutes when a man entered the ballroom and approached us. He was well groomed, of slight ruddy complexion, wearing a soft gray tweed suit, his hair in the early stages of turning white, and he greeted Grandpa softly in a friendly voice. They shook hands, and with polite introductions we now knew we were talking to the elder Mr. Flagg himself. He apologized for the difficulty the discovered money had caused, scooped up the coins, and said with evident warmth, "It's all right Mr. Hosszer, you can proceed, nobody will disturb or interfere with your work".

Now alone with our work, and a bit puzzled by all this, I asked, "Grandpa, what's all the mystery about?", "we could have removed the coins, set them aside, and gone ahead with our work... I don't get the reason for your point of insistence". He replied slowly with heavy emphasis, "just look at all that fine layer of dust in there; everything is covered with dust", "the gold coins were FREE of dust, and they were deliberately placed behind that panel before our arrival to test our honesty". "As strangers, we had to prove our trustworthiness to work inside this luxurious house with costly items around and about easy to steal and carry off". In stunned silence the realization of his words sank in. Supposing I had taken a coin for a souvenir? I shuddered at the thought! Grandpa continued, "the alternative

was to have someone watch over us at our work, an unpleasant measure which neither the owner nor I would have liked", "he saw fit, by means of a simple test, to learn quickly what manner of men we are, and as disagreeable as we find being subjected to such a test, it is best to presume that Mr. Flagg must have had a sad experience in life, hence his justifiable caution". "Of course there is an objectionable side to this too, and the implication of blanket dishonesty until proven honest, is certainly not welcome, so once the purpose of the test was determined I wanted the obstacle of "planted money" removed by the testor before taking any further step with our work." "The gain here is mutual respect and understanding".

Mantle of Maturity. Grandpa sensed my quasi-shock absorption of the startling experience and so he poured it on. "You will come to know", he went on, "that in the progress of longevity in life a human being takes in and holds, in varying degree of retention, experiences and impressions which make for a unique wisdom NOT found in books". "This wisdom emerges from errors, mistakes, failures, and even humiliations, to name a few, and all contribute special teaching values to the learning process". "Each passing year forward of physical aging reaps gainful corresponding mental maturity and sharper know-how". Grandpa paused, reached into his pocket for the familiar thin Between-the-Acts cigar box, fondly lit one, took a few slow easy puffs, then added with deliberate stress, "it is an indisputable fact with very remote exceptions that wisdom and knowledge is imparted and conveyed by the elder to youth AND NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND". "Heed well the lessons of life, use your ever growing experiences to sound advantage; temper it with humility and heart". Needless to say, as we proceeded with our work from day to day, I reflected time and time again, and indeed through the years, on Grandpa's words and the wisdom behind his comprehension. How well he must have learned life's lessons and how lucky I, the family, and many other apprentices were to gain a keener perspective.

Struggle and Reward. When Grandpa was a young man in Hungary learning his trade as master-mechanic

for pipe organ building and installation, it was during the proud Royal era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I. In spite of exacting discipline and a riches-poverty status quo as the accepted and resigned way of life, the bedfellow to this then prevailing condition was the relentless demand for perfection. The fact of the matter, devoid of pros and cons, is that the system produced exceptionally highly skilled professionals and Grandpa was such a product. In the passage of time he finally made the decision, well before WW I, to travel to America. It was, to be sure, a painful decision, because at this point of life he was both a husband and a father. The burden of responsibility was never greater. Away from familiar surroundings, the severely disturbing and discouraging language barrier in a new environment totally foreign proved to be a temporary hindrance. Even during the rough language transition period Grandpa had no problem securing steady employment. One look at the excellent quality of his work was enough to bring a fast "You're hired!" from ANY employer. Eventually he acquired sufficient mastery of English and it was then that his reputation slowly grew ultimately leading to service with the Aeolian Company where he became their seemingly infallible man. No assignment was too tough or impossible. The thorough and finely honed master-mechanic training in the Old Country brought success in a new land.

During the period between 1914 and 1940 history records and directly links Grandpa with famed families who list among their prized pos-

sessions a magnificent pipe organ masterpiece. The "Greats" of yesteryear, Ryrie, Woolworth, McVay, Pratt, Mershan, Tiffany, Billings, Vanderbilt, Harriman, Pulitzer, Oelrichs, Eastman, Hearn, Rockefeller, Carnegie, Schwab, and Belmont have come to own, and undoubtedly still own, a custom-made majestically toned organ built and installed by Heinrich Hosszer and crew. Many years before retirement in 1940, Grandpa found America very generous, and so he gratefully adopted the New World as his home and became a naturalized citizen.

Behind The Scene. Prior to the introduction and impact of "Talkie-movies" in the U.S.A., the organ industry held great potential for any young man willing to learn. I and my brother Bill had the advantage of being grandsons to one of the best teachers around in those days, so as a start, basic piano study was a must for acquaintance with musical tones and the keyboard. Although Grandpa was obliged to take along a Company mechanic and an apprentice, depending on the assignment and scope of work involved, he aided and trained his family at every opportunity. His son Henry learned rapidly under his fathers' guidance, but it was Uncle Dan who absorbed well the standards and techniques of the pipe organ industry from Grandpa, and he went on to become a giant in the trade in his own right. Uncle Dan's significant career began with the Wurlitzer Company in 1925 and the association endured for a major part of his life. Ben Hall refers to "Pop" Dan Papp as he of Paramount Wurlitzer fame and of his "priceless knowledge". When one speaks of the Dowager Empress of all Wurlitzer organs, three names come to mind: the Paramount Theatre, Jesse Crawford, and Dan Papp. For TV, radio, recordings, etc., performing artists Messrs. Foort, Baker, Wright, Mack, Floyd, Feibel, Liebert, and others, preferred the reassuring standby presence of Dan Papp because of his perfect-pitch ear and mechanical genius. Uncle Dan was indeed that rare man who could give to that optimum perfectionist and artist, Jesse Crawford, the exacting tonal qualities and responsiveness which he demanded. "How could anyone forget Dan Papp?" "He will be remembered as long as Wurlitzers will play!", so says Ben Hall. Truly a deserving testimonial for a remarkable protegee. Yes, Grand-

moving?



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pa always said to me, "your Uncle Dan has the making of a far better than average mechanic". His words were prophetic. Uncle Dan, (Daniel L. Papp), retired in 1964 and his untimely last curtain call came in 1969. He is survived by his wife Thersea, who along with other honorary guests, on December 9, 1972, witnessed the sentimental and formal dedication ceremony of the Dowager Empress in Wichita's (Kansas) Century II Exhibition Hall, its' permanent new home, before an emotional and enthusiastic house attendance of 3,000. Fate and destiny, in the form of a visionary and determined Michael C. Coup and the Wichita Theatre Organ Inc. organization, set the pattern and momentum of events and circumstances which ultimately secured the acquisition and preservation of the mighty Wurlitzer along with its' planned projection into a new era of modern concert activity. Also, of unquestionable value and perception stands the shadow of Dan Papp and his many past years of personal care and association with the Paramount Theatre Wurlitzer organ, and if an expression of the heart can be accepted, his spiritual support and endorsement of the future years for his charge as well.

The reign and fall of the Dowager Empress is past history, and the extraordinary artisans and famed artists long associated with her are long gone. Her rebirth and new home in Wichita brings her in contact with a new breed of creative men, Mike Coup and his associates, which assures her a new exciting life and future history to be made. Today, it is not without sentimental attachment that I dreamily return with Grandpa to the Flagg Estate of yesteryear to vividly recall and to re-live as a young man once again that isolated experience which went far beyond the application of tools and blueprints in value which I related earlier in this true story. History records, that grand old man Grandpa Heinrich Hosszer, master mechanic plus, and his celebrated protege Uncle Dan Papp, were indeed 'the men behind the Dowager Empress'. Many ingredients made these men great in their own right, and Uncle Dan revealed one important aspect when he said, "NEVER be satisfied with 'good enough' for right then and there it is an admission of LESS than your best". □

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