

The Elmira (N.Y.) Theatre Organ Is Given a Second Life

By

Lloyd E. Klos

If there were ever a theater organ restoration project deserving of an accolade, that project is the one which has been going on for over a year in the Elmira Theater in Elmira, New York. Three dedicated ATOE members have spent hundreds of man-hours and thousands of dollars in refurbishing a magnificent instrument which seemed destined for oblivion. However, due to bulldog determination of these men, this organ will again provide entertainment for the public, and concerts for ATOE members of Central New York State.

It is indeed poetic justice for the project to develop in the Queen City on the Chemung River in New York's Southern Tier. For it was in Elmira that the developer of the theater organ, Robert Hope-Jones, located his factory on 700 Madison Avenue. Elmira's Park Church was the recipient of the first Hope-Jones organ, and when it was dedicated in 1907, Mark Twain, America's beloved writer-humorist, and stockholder in the Hope-Jones Company, led a parade of distinguished visitors to the recital including Jervis Langdon, J. Sloat Fassett, and John B. Stanchfield. Twain bore a striking resemblance to Hope-Jones, with long white hair, and other physical attributes.

Hope-Jones, with the help of David Marr, worked out revolutionary ideas for the pipe organ. When Hope-Jones' factory closed, Wurlitzer in North Tonawanda, N.Y. took over the work, and Marr & Colton established their factory in Warsaw, N.Y.

In 1925, a 3/20 Marr & Colton organ was installed in Elmira's 2362-seat Keeney's Theater at a cost of about \$50,000. It was opened on Christmas Eve in 1925, and played by John Stanbaugh. The console was situated on a screwytype lift, thereby providing the audiences with the never-to-be-forgotten thrill of console and organist rising from the pit, bathed in a golden spotlight. The pipes were situated in two chambers above the stage. There was also installed an echo organ above the dome in the center of the auditorium. In addition to the 20 ranks of pipes, the organ had a good-sized toy counter which included a marimba, xylophone, glockenspiel, sleighbells, cymbals, drums, castanets, horns, tambourine,



During restoration of Elmira organ, this sign was placed at front entrance to theatre by enthusiastic management.

triangle, horse hooves, steamboat whistle, bird whistle, harp and piano.

With the effects listed above, one can imagine how the organist at the Keeney was able to accompany such movie favorites as William S. Hart, Gloria Swanson, Milton Sills (who, with Pearl White, made "Perils of Pauline" movies in the Ithaca gorge not far from Elmira), Theda Bara, and Zasu Pitts. The organist most prominently mentioned in connection with the Keeney's Theater is George Carter.

The organ was last used in 1941, so far as is known. Actually, it had not been used regularly for many years prior to 1941, and ATOE member, Dave Teeter recalls trying to get music out of it when he was attending grammar school. Barely a sound could be obtained from it even then.

Thus, for 20 years or more, it fell into disuse. In 1946, the Chemung River overflowed its banks and headed for the theater, now named the Elmira. The flood filled the theater to within three rows of the rear of the auditorium which meant that the Kinetic blower, generator, motor, and the console which had

been lowered to the bottom of the pit, were completely covered by water for three days!

Then came 1961. David L. Teeter, successful Elmira attorney, organist, and ATOE member, noted the various organ restoration projects in Rochester and Buffalo and wondered, "There's that Marr & Colton organ in the Elmira Theater. What can be done to restore it?" Having a large home, Dave tried to buy the instrument, but was unsuccessful. Restoring the organ in the theater then seemed like a good idea, and he began two months of correspondence and negotiations with the Southern Tier Theater Corp., owners of the Elmira, and the 153 Corp. which leases the theater for the Dipson interests in Batavia. Dave proposed to underwrite the whole cost of restoration, and to work whenever his activity did not interfere with the running of the theater. It wasn't easy to convince the theater folks of the earnestness of the undertaking, and all sorts of arguments were advanced to dissuade the undertaking. Luckily, Dave's legal training enabled him to argue his points

successfully. Thus, with a final OK, and the blessing of the theater managers, Tom and Bob Roberts, plus the agreement that the restored instrument could be made available to Dave and his ATOE friends for concerts, the decks were cleared for months of hard labor. The theater people, in spite of their acquiescence, believed the job couldn't be done, and no one was taking the boys seriously. "Give them a month or two, and they'll have enough," was the attitude.

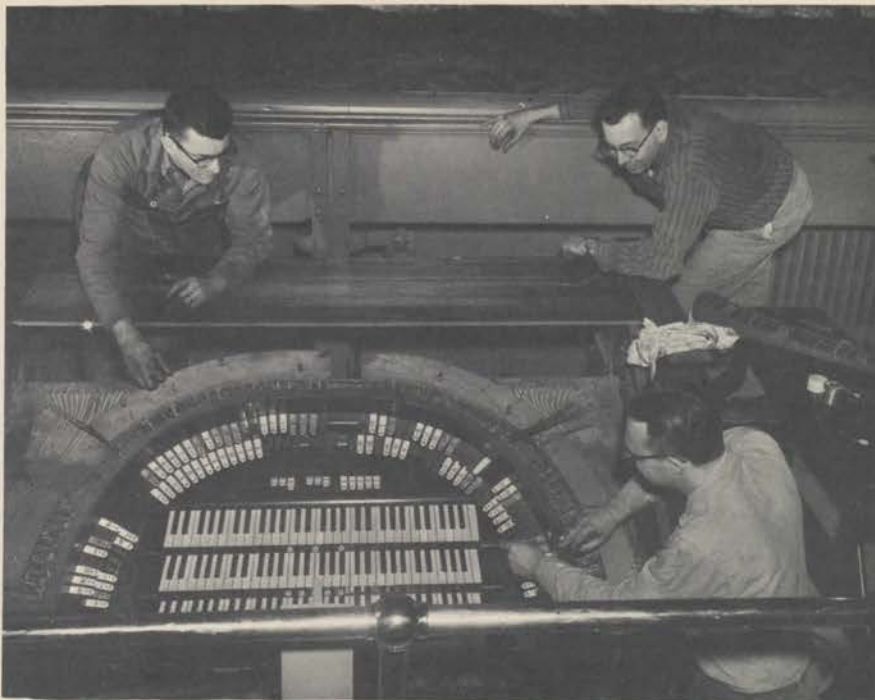
Dave enlisted the aid of two fellow ATOE'rs, Lauren A. Peckham, a Westinghouse technician; and Robert A. Oppenheim, a Westinghouse engineer. Both have theater organs in their homes, so their past experience, plus their all-round electrical know-how, were tremendous assets. The theater people worked out schedules for the men, and they moved in.

The organ was given a tour of inspection, and a sadder sight never greeted the eyes of any enthusiast. The manager had told the boys that the chambers had been plastered over during the redecoration which took place after the flood. However, the chambers had merely been covered with drapes. The console was on its back, loaded with dried mud. At first, the boys thought the flood had caused this odd position, but the cable was intact, indicating that some human (?) being had accomplished the deed. Some ranks of pipes were missing, others broken. Motor and blower were in need of complete rebuilding. Over eighty feet of air duct to one chamber was missing. All this served to make the boys wonder as to the wisdom of undertaking a project which looked well nigh hopeless. "Many times during the first critical months, I cursed myself for ever getting into this thing," says Dave.

The work began in April 1961. The blower was completely dismantled. Every board was scrubbed, and all the debris from the flood which had caked inside was removed. The inside was given a coat of white shellac. All the cleats were loose, and had to be screwed back into place. All the joints were loose because of the water, and had to be reglued. A new top was made, as the old one was warped beyond repair. This involved a great deal of measuring, and running to the wood mill for correct work. The seams were packed with felt, and the outside was painted with three coats of deck enamel.

Next came work on the line starter for the blower. There are literally thousands of metal parts, screws, bolts, nuts, etc., in it. It had to be completely dismantled, and each part and wire brushed to get the mud out. Luckily, some extra help was secured from Westinghouse to do this, but it took five engineers four 5-hour sessions to get it back together and in working order. Then it overheated, and had to be taken down again. All the wiring from the main power supply to the blower room had been removed, and this had

Summer 1963



Three-man crew works on Elmira theatre organ console; Bob Oppenheim, Lauren Peckham, and boss of the job Dave Teeter, lower right. The console, completely immersed in the flood of 1946, now has been practically rebuilt by these enthusiasts.

to be replaced.

By this time, it was summer, 1961. Practically nothing was done in the theater until Labor Day. Meanwhile, Dave worked every night in his home shop. He dismantled all the manuals and replaced all the key buttons, felt, springs, etc. This alone took several weeks, and when it was done, the keys were warped just enough from the flood that it was decided to scrap the keyboards. Dave spent several weeks writing letters and making calls to various organ companies for help, but the advice was: Scrap them! Some keyboards were obtainable in Syracuse and they made a deal for them. However, when the boys arrived in Syracuse, the prospective seller wouldn't even give them the courtesy of talking to them. Coming home empty-handed and heart-broken, they were momentarily stopped. They had to have Marr & Colton keyboards. Here, the cooperative Elmira Theater management was a big help. Learning that the Marr & Colton in the Palace Theater in Jamestown was up for sale, the boys journeyed there, and with the help of the Elmira management's influence, bought the whole organ. This was a tremendous break, as they were able to bring home enough parts, pipes, keyboards and other materials to keep them busy during the winter months.

Also during the summer, Dave antirely rebuilt the pedalboard. The old pedals were completely shot, and all that is left of the old one is the frame.

Next, the combination action was tackled. All of it in the console was ruined. Every action chest was taken apart, every pneumatic recovered, every valve and valve stem replaced. The insides of the chests were so covered with mud that after taking them apart, the garden hose was turned on them. They were terribly warped, and in order to function properly, they had to be air-tight. New end pieces were made which took hours to fit into place. The ends were packed with cork, and varnished to make them air tight.

All of the pneumatics which regulate the stops were recovered and remounted on their boards. Many of the wooden pieces were rotted, which required making whole new pneumatics, and then recovering them.

Came the Labor Day weekend of 1961, and the boys had two most welcome visitors...Harry Radloff and Heino Olandt, who had spent several years on the restoration of the 4/18 Marr & Colton in Buffalo's Roosevelt Theater. As previously stated, all the main duct from the blower room in the basement to the right chamber, a distance of over 80 feet, had been removed by the air-conditioning men. Harry and Heino worked with the boys three days, 15 hours a day, and got up about 35 feet of it. When it came time to put this section through the stage floor, it was discovered that beneath the wood flooring were 12 inches of solid concrete! "We all practically fainted," says Dave, "because apparently the whole stage

was not built that way from our previous investigations. Anyway, Heino suggested hitting the concrete with a sledge hammer, and after an hour of heavy blows, we knocked a hole through, and got the pipe up through the floor."

Shortly afterward, the remaining section of air duct was fabricated. This had to go straight up 40 feet, turn two right angles, go another 10 feet, turn again at right angles, then go through a 24-inch brick fire wall which had to be cut through with hammer and cold chisel. The whole unit had to be fabricated on the stage floor, and then raised in one piece to be put into place. To help in this, an engineer friend, Sam White, climbed 90 feet to the roof and erected a pulley to raise the duct. "It was undoubtedly the worst phase of the whole project," says Dave. "After getting this in place, all the soldering inside the chamber had to be done. There is a branching off inside the chamber into smaller-sized pipe, and soldering had to be done standing on one's head. It was sheer torture."

By this time, it was Christmas. The air was turned on, and there were hundreds of ciphers which couldn't be silenced. All of the large pedal pipes would cipher at once. This brought the decision to clean all the magnets in the right chamber, and this was done evenings by Dave, practically standing on his head. It did no good at all. Everybody was consulted. Everybody had a different idea as to the trouble. Even old Marr & Colton men didn't have a logical explanation. Finally, after weeks of worrying, studying, and drawing diagrams, the cause was identified as residual magnetism and air pressure trouble. So Dave took apart all the chests holding the bigger pipes, and replaced several scores of magnets.

At this time, the boys decided to tear the blower down again, and see if it had sprung a leak between stages. Bad leaks were discovered which had occurred since the first tear-down. The boards were lined with cowhide, the blower reassembled and repainted. As a result, the air pressure improved.

When the project started, 10 ranks of pipes were either destroyed to the point where they were useless, or stolen en masse. All have been replaced, though some treble extensions are needed. Most of the pipe replacements came from the Jamestown organ, but Dave bought some from Kentucky and from a local organ repair man. At off moments, the restorers put a new manual and offset chest into the left chamber for new tibias. Now there is one tibia in each chamber.

As for the echo organ, high above the auditorium, the boys feared that the air-conditioning installation might have affected it. How right they were! The echo chamber was completely dismantled. The chests are still there, but the cable has been cut. The pipes are useless. In the coming months, the cable will be replaced and new pipes installed. When restored, it will be possible to play the echo organ by itself,



"The boss" of the Elmira restoration, Dave Teeter, tries out a tune on the refurbished instrument. Plainly seen are the new woodwork and music rack with light. Organ will eventually have 25 ranks or more.

or in combination with other ranks.

Next came the job on the console. It was gutted completely, and loaded with mud inches thick. The keyboards from the Jamestown organ were installed. All the key contacts, even from that organ, were in bad shape, and required hours of soldering. The stop action had to be adjusted and wired in, taking six weeks by itself. The pedal contacts took two weeks to be replaced. The outside of the console was damaged to the point where practically all of it has been redone with mahogany plywood. A new horseshoe was made from solid wood. Refinishing followed. The music rack was re-installed.

By this time, it was April 1962. Getting the elevator to work took another three weeks. The gear housing was torn down completely, all the gears cleaned, and fresh oil added. A new gear had to be made for the worm. All the limit switches were filled with mud, as was the controller. These all had to be cleaned.

In mid-April, the shutter action was worked on, and the strings in the piano replaced. Someone had stolen over half the bars from the marimba, and with Harry Radloff's help, an old marimba was found. It wasn't the exact size, so it needed considerable fitting to adapt to the organ. The second touch was wired in, the piano tuned, coupler action and combinations were next to be worked on. The console compensator was rebuilt. An intercom system has been installed so that communication can be had between console and chambers, and from chamber to chamber. This will facilitate tuning, and tracking down of troubles peculiar to a pipe organ, as all owners will attest.

On April 21, 1962, the organ con-

sole was raised in its full glory, bathed once more in a golden spotlight. "It was quite a thrill," says Dave. Nothing had been tuned, and there are countless hours of work remaining before it can be formally presented. It has been used a couple of times for the audience, more for kicks than anything else. For example, on May 26, a union meeting was held in the theater. Putting aside his tools for awhile, Dave played the monster before the meeting, and received a well-deserved round of applause.

It is a very sedate instrument, very mellow, and not as "firey" as its big brother in Buffalo's Roosevelt Theater. The addition of a few more reeds, plus additional tuning, probably will do wonders for this organ, in Dave Teeter's opinion. Enough material left over from the Jamestown Theater organ is available for additions.

The work of Teeter, Oppenheim and Peckham has not gone unnoticed in the community. When the work began, a feature article appeared in the Elmira Sunday Telegram. After about a year of work, the same writer, W. Charles Barber, did a follow-up progress report. In front of the theater, the sympathetic management, which once had doubts the project would get off the launching pad, has put a billboard proclaiming "Opening Soon, our Marr & Colton Pipe Organ, Restored by Organ Friends." And wouldn't it be further poetic justice if when the organ is formally rededicated, that Mrs. David Marr, widow of the founder of the Marr & Colton Company, be accorded a seat of honor for the occasion?

So, due to the tenacity, perseverance, and labor of love of three enthusiasts, another theater organ is finding its way back in an era of canned music, rock

'n' roll, and the twist. Hundreds of man hours plus an expense of over \$2,000 have been expended on the project. If the organ is not used for regular theater

programs, it at least will be another instrument for the enthusiasts of Central New York State to hear.

The three-man team deserves the

heartiest commendation of ATOE members everywhere.

SPECIFICATIONS OF ELMIRA THEATER MARR & COLTON ORGAN

3 Manuals, 20 Ranks Installed in 1925 Cost about \$50,000

Information supplied by David L. Teeter

PEDAL

Resultant Bass	32
Diapason Phonon	16
Contra Tibia Clausa	16
Ophicleide	16
Bourdon	16
Contra Viola	16
Tuba Sonora	8
Diapason Phonon	8
Flute	8
Cello	8
Piano	16
Piano	8
Orchestral to Pedal	8
Accompaniment to Pedal	8
Solo to Pedal	8
Shuffle	
Chimes (second touch)	
Bass Drum	
Kettle Drum	
Crash Cymbal	

ACCOMPANIMENT

Contra Viola	16
Diapason Phonon	8
Tibia Clausa	8
Open Diapason	8
Gamba	8
Tibia Clausa	8
Salicional	8
Concert Flute	8
Viol Celeste	8
Viol d'Orchestre	8
Viol d'Orchestre	8
Tuba Sonora	8
Vox Humana	8
Octave Diapason	4
Tibia Clausa	4
Flute	4
Viol Celeste	4
Violin	4
Viol	4
Clarion	4
Piano	16
Piano	8
Piano	4
Mandolin	
Chimes	
Harp	
Marimba	
Xylophone	
Shuffle	
Wood Block	
Tambourine	
Castanets	
Triangle	
Solo to Accompaniment	16
Solo to Accompaniment	8
Solo to Accompaniment	4
Orchestra to Accompaniment	8
Snare Drum (soft)	
Snare Drum	
Tom Tom	

SECOND TOUCH

Orchestra Bells	
Tibia Clausa	8
Tuba Sonora	8
Diapason Phonon	8
Open Diapason	8
Solo to Accompaniment	8

SOLO

Ophicleide	16
Contra Tibia Clausa	16
Bourdon	16
Contra Viola	16
Clarinet (Ten. C)	16
Vox Humana (Ten. C)	16
Diapason Phonon	8
Tibia Clausa	8
Tibia Clausa	8
Viol d'Orchestre	8
Viol Celeste	8
Tuba Sonora	8
Clarinet	8
Vox Humana	8
Saxophone	8
Kinura	8
Quintadena	5-2/5
Tibia Clausa	4
Tibia Clausa	4
Viol Celeste	4
Viol	4
Clarion	4
Kinura	4
Twelfth	2-2/3
Piccolo	2
Tierce	1-3/5
Glockenspiel	
Solo to Solo	4
Orchestral to Solo	8

ORCHESTRAL

Tibia Clausa	8
Gamba	8
Salicional	8
Clarinet	8
Saxophone	8
Orchestral Oboe	8
French Horn	8
Violin	4
Salicional	4
Chimes	
Harp	
Marimba	
Orchestral to Orchestral	4

ECHO

Muted Viol	8
Vox Humana	8
Flauto Dolce	8
Chimes	

Buddy Nolan is shown at the console of the Page Organ which he and Bob Nickerson restored. See story on Page 13.

TREMULANTS

Accompaniment	
Tibia	
Vox Humana	
Solo	
Echo	

SWELL INDICATORS

Accompaniment	
Solo	
Echo	

SWELL SHOES

Accompaniment	
Solo	
Echo	
Crescendo	
Sforzando	

TOE PISTONS

Horses' Hooves	
Sleigh Bells	
Fire Gong	
Train Whistle	
Bird Whistle (2)	
Surf Sound	
Auto Horn	
Door Bell	
Chinese Gong	
Piano, soft	
Piano, loud	

This spec. list will be subject to change as other effects and ranks are added.

