

# NIAGARA FRONTIER REBUILDS ORGAN

by Irving J. Toner

When Buffalo Theatre Magnate Michael Shea decided to erect a new downtown movie palace, the theatre world sat up and took notice.

Highly successful in his own operation of a chain of theatres, an impresario in the entertainment world and beloved by stars of stage and screen who played his circuit, Shea wasn't a man who did things half way.

Shea's Buffalo Theatre, when it opened in 1926, was certainly no disappointment. The largest and most beautiful theatre in the state, outside New York City, had just about everything — or seemed to! Its giant stage was equipped for every conceivable type of presentation. Its huge orchestra pit, which could hold an entire symphony orchestra, rose slowly and majestically to stage level at the touch of a button. Nearly all the greats of stage and screen of the "Golden era" trod the stage and rode the elevator which ascended to six floors of dressing rooms.

The organ Michael Shea chose for his newest and finest theatre was, of course, a WurliTzer, built in the WurliTzer plant in North Tonawanda, scarcely 15 miles from downtown Buffalo. Immediately billed as "The World's Mightiest WurliTzer," it came close to being just that.

Larger WurliTzers had been built and installed prior to this one, but the Buffalo WurliTzer had something very special about it.

The only really large instrument ever installed close to the factory, it received special attention from some of WurliTzer's best voicers. In the huge interior of the new theatre there was room for WurliTzer experts to bring out the best in the instrument.

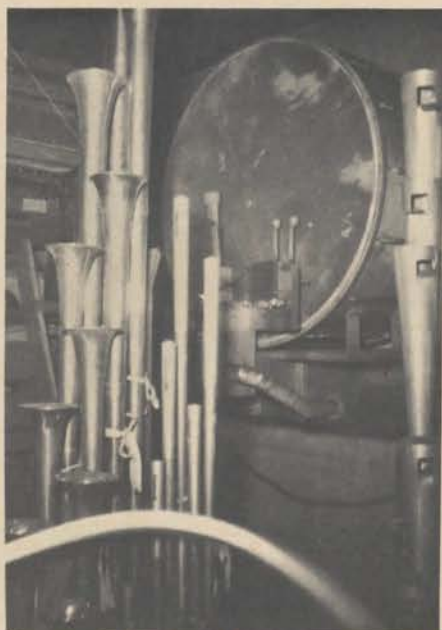
The sound was BIG!

The sound was FABULOUS!

It still has much of that gorgeous "Big Sound" today, after a lengthy and tortuous restoration program carried on by members of Niagara Frontier Chapter.

The organ was used for intermissions, sound newsreel accompaniment, and to augment the 60-piece orchestra up until the mid-thirties. (During sound newsreels an alert projectionist would cut off the sound on titles and on certain scenes and the organist would play these parts; sound would be allowed to come through only for action and speaking parts of the news.) Even after stage shows and the pit orchestra disappeared, the organ continued to be used for opening and closing the theatre, and intermission solo work.

Sometime during the early war years the organ fell silent and we are able to determine it was unattended and unplayed until about 1946. At that time the new management decided to rehabilitate the instrument. An extensive re-leathering



Fanfare Equipment

program was undertaken by a former WurliTzer maintenance man and some of the work of re-leathering was actually done at the WurliTzer factory. Brown leather was used throughout in the apparent belief that it was superior to zephyr skin.

This program of restoration came to a sudden halt before it was completed due to another change in management. Again the instrument sat unplayed and unattended until about 1959 when Niagara Frontier Chapter members became interested in its possibilities. The pizz action had been removed from the theatre and various phases of the restoration were found just as they had apparently been left the day the project was dropped.

Unfortunately, a heavy grade of brown leather had been used for some of the primary pneumatics. Over the years the leather shrank, requiring extensive readjustment of primary valves but worse still, as the leather shrank, it became stiff. Consequently, it has become necessary to replace a great many of the primary pneumatics, even though the leather is otherwise in excellent condition and would be good for many years.

Water damage in the brass and solo chambers and in the relay room further complicated the progress of restoration. It has been necessary to do some of the work a second time. In desperation, Niagara Frontier Chapter finally undertook and successfully completed a major roof repair over that section of the theatre in order to insure that no further water could get into the organ.

The four manual rather plain majogany console, mounted on a lift, is located at the extreme right side of the orchestra pit. The solo and brass chambers are

found slightly back from the stage on the right side, with the brass above the solo. The foundation is above the main in a similar location on the left side. On each side the lower chambers can be entered through doors directly from the balcony, but each upper chamber is reached only by climbing a ladder.

Mounting the big 32-foot Diaphones, which are usually placed above the proscenium arch or back stage in most theatres, was no problem at all in the Buffalo — the height of the structure is such that they could stand on the floor of the balcony, six on each side, just outside the door to the lower chambers. Only slight mitring was required to set them in place.

Possibly this extremely high ceiling accounts for some of the different sound of the organ, for sound different it does — it is quite unlike any other WurliTzer ever heard.

The stop tablet layout on the console is somewhat different from the standard 285 WurliTzer keydesk. The organ contains a total of 28 ranks plus the usual toy counter, percussions, and effects. Solo String, Clarinet and English Horn — voiced on 25 inches of wind —

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Irving  
J.  
Toner

No newcomer to the columns of Theatre Organ, Irving Toner is well known for his activities in behalf of Niagara Frontier Chapter. He is a past president of the unit and now directs its organ restoration projects.

Electronics has been his basic interest since the early days of radio, with music always a close second. In the former field he has owned and operated an independent sales and service business, both before and following World War II. Irv has served as local, state and national president of the Television Service Trade Association (NATESA).

In service he was a signal corps officer attached to MacArthur's staff and specialized in overseas radio communications. Following the war he worked three years at the WurliTzer factory in North Tonawanda in connection with development and production of the company's first electronic organ.

Musically, Irv started by pounding the piano in a two-bit silent movie during his high school years, graduating a few years later to roller skating rink organ work. He has been featured several times in concerts at the console of the Buffalo WurliTzer, and is official convention organist for the New York State Lions clubs.

## Maclean Award Given Secretary

Honoring several years of service to Niagara Frontier Chapter, Laura Thomas, who is known nationally as Editor of the Silent News Reel, official publication of the New York unit, was named recipient of the first annual Quentin Maclean Award. Presented by Chapter President Grant Whitcomb at the regular board meeting last January 8th, the award was made on the basis of outstanding work in furthering the Chapter aims and objectives; the board of directors determine who the recipient will be. The plaque was designed and made by Director Harry Picken.

The award reads: "With Pleasure and Respect the Niagara Frontier Chapter of American Theatre Organ Enthusiasts Hereby Name Laura Thomas as the recipient of The Quentin Maclean Award for the year 1963.

"This award named in honour of the late Quentin Maclean, famed British theatre organist, is awarded annually by the board of directors to a member of the chapter, who in their opinion, has done outstanding work by way of furthering its aims and objectives.

"Laura Thomas, in her capacity as secretary of the Niagara Frontier Chapter, has carried out the duties of this office with grace, enthusiasm, and distinction, and it is therefore with great pleasure that the directors name her as the first recipient of this Annual Award. December \*\*\* 1963."

Secretary-Editor Thomas noted that the honor is shared with "the members who worked along with me." She named Clealan Blakely, Rita Becker, Grant Whitcomb, Robert Sieben, Dick Britton, Don Hyde, Phyllis Maute, Millie and Al Jerge, Terry Perrone and Irv Toner and



Shea's 32-ft. Diaphones

acknowledged their excellent assistance.

Joe Thomas, who happens to be the WurliTzer widower, was cited for silent suffering and putting up with the typewriter noise at late hours, plus the fact that "shirts, socks, etc., are just about out." "How fortunate that he is a true T.O. Enthusiast," explained the chapter scribe.

### Plays Morton In Hawaii

National ATOE Director Gordon Kibbee and Dick Simonton spent the better part of a month in Hawaii at the beginning of this year and were the guests of Theatre Organist John DeMello and other Island organ buffs for inspection and playing sessions in the two theatres where pipe organs are still installed. The two houses, Princess and Waikiki Theatres, both have Robert Mortons. Kibbee had several sessions at the consoles of each instrument.

## Flicker Fingers Going East

Flicker Fingers - the theatre organ and the silent screen - leaves Southern California during April and May to travel north and east with two films scored by ATOE Organist Gaylord Carter, for presentation in Fresno, San Francisco, Rockford and Joliet, Illinois, and St. Louis, Missouri.

On April 15th, at the Warner Theatre, Fresno, Carter will accompany "The Mark of Zorro," a Douglas Fairbanks classic, at 8 p.m. Next stop for the organ-film firm will be San Francisco's big Orpheum Theatre, on Market Street. Film fare for this midnight show, April 18th, will be another Fairbanks' giant - "The Thief of Bagdad." Both theatres boast having the "best" Robert Morton pipe organs. Price range for the shows is between \$2 and \$3.50.

For a short breather before going east, Carter returns to Los Angeles and on April 28th at the console of the 4m/37r Kimball organ in the Stanley Warner Wilerna Theatre will play the score for Colleen Moore's great silent

epic, "Ella Cinders." The show is slated for 8:30 p.m.

On May 6th "The Mark of Zorro" puts the big "Z" on Rockford, Illinois. The theatre and type of organ was not learned at press time. Next day, May 7th, Carter presides at the keydesk of the great four manual Barton in the Rialto Theatre at Joliet, Illinois, with the same film. Crowning his tour, Carter then travels to St. Louis and on May 8th plays the score for the film on the great 4m/36r Crawford Special in the cavernous Fox Theatre.

Flicker Fingers was organized by Carter and partner Jim Day several years ago. The duo have been presenting silent films with organ (sometimes electronic) accompaniment in and around the Metropolitan Los Angeles area. Prior to its razing, the concern presented a performance at the beautiful San Francisco Fox Theatre. Depending on the success of the coming tour, Flicker Fingers plans call for a similar tour later this year throughout the eastern states.

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extend to the 16-foot pitch. The Tuba Mirabilis is another rank in this category, and is voiced on 25 inches wind pressure; the bottom of this rank has wooden resonators and is a real "earth shaker,"

English Post Horn brilliance makes this rank stand out well above the entire organ.

In addition to the standard WurliTzer Vox, there is also a solo Vox Humana of larger scale. The organ also contains a Solo Tibia Clausa, a standard Tibia Clausa and a Tibia Plena. Both 15 and 25-inch wind pressures are supplied by the 30-horsepower, 25-cycle blower in successive stages.

Many of the famous theatre organists of the day appeared at one time or another at the console of Shea's Buffalo WurliTzer. Jesse Crawford and Ann Leaf were probably two of the most prominently known to national theatre audiences. Eddie Weaver played a four month engagement, and Herbie Koch presided at the console for a slightly longer period. The late Maurice Nicholson was staff organist at the theatre during most of the years the organ was used for regular performances.

Other famous organists played the theatre at one time or another, including the legendary C. Sharpe Minor, Albert Hay Malotte, Carl Coleman and Niagara Frontier Chapter's own Art Melgier.

The late Henry Murtaugh is probably the organist most remembered by Buffalo audiences of yesterday - his song slide novelty presentations, plus his outstanding performances with Shea's Buffalo Symphony Orchestra was enough to make people sit through a mediocre movie a second time just to hear him.

Since 1945 the organ has not been played publicly, but nowadays it gets a workout before showtime once or twice a week by various Niagara Frontier members, and has figured in several highly successful Chapter concerts.

### Restored Organ Heard By Chapter

SYRACUSE, NEW YORK -- March roared in like the proverbial WurliTzerized lion when Dean Robinson was presented at the console of the 4m/20r WurliTzer on Loew's State Theatre by Niagara Frontier Chapter ATOE. Attendance at the March 1st musical fete was about 2,000. The organ, almost a twin to the Rochester RKO Palace WurliTzer, has been restored by Harris Cooper, Tom Anderson, Dick Neidich, Danny and Oline Schultz and Dick Croft.

This instrument, which will be one of the instruments heard during the coming ATOE convention in the Rochester area, will be featured in a future issue of THEATRE ORGAN.

### WE HAVE THE FOLLOWING BACK ISSUES LEFT IN STOCK:

1959 - Volume I, No. 2 . . . . . \$1.00 ea.  
1962 - Volume IV, No. 3 & 4 . . \$1.00 ea.  
1963 - Volume V, No. 1, 2, 3 . \$1.25 ea.