

Started Playing Silents In Pigtails



Esther Higgins pictured above when she was playing one of the two manual Wurlitzers in the Camden, N.J., area during the silent film era.

by Esther Higgins

One of my earliest recollections of our neighborhood movie house in Camden, New Jersey is of three wide-eyed girls sitting in the second row of seats, during the third showing of a Wallie Reid - Wanda Hawley auto racing classic, while our mother walked up and down the aisles looking for her three children out long past their bed-time, and due for a reprimand.

When my parents bought a piano I was just five years old. I began playing it "by ear" from then on until my mother enrolled me with a piano teacher at the age of ten. After nearly five years of Czerny, Cramer, Duvenoy and Sonatinas, the organist of the Colonial Theatre in Camden (now the site of the City Hall) heard me play and decided I could fill in after school at the organ. This was February 1919.

After four lessons on the two-manual Kimball, I started as assistant organist at \$4.00 a week. Though only 15 years old I still remember the first show I played. It was "Mickey" with Mabel Normand. Everytime Mabel Normand appeared on the screen I played the song "Mickey." My repertoire would have been more limited though, had it not been that I played many of my numbers by "ear."

The truant officer practically camped on our door step, but by that time I was "hooked," and was advised by the theatre manager to put up my long pig-tails which I did by winding two plaits around my head. Sophistication! I managed to stall off the truant officer by attending school as sketchily as possible, until I quit for good. I had chosen my life's work, or so I thought.

I remained at the Colonial for nine months, then went to the Grand Theatre as assistant organist. The Grand was then Camden's top house. Here I played a Pilcher church organ. Of course this required my becoming a full-fledged member of Local A.F. of M., Philadelphia. After about a year at the Grand, I became regular organist at the Princess Theatre, in Camden (now a juvenile dress shop). Here I played a two-manual Wurlitzer for quite some time then returned to the Grand and the Pilcher as main organist.

The larger instruments were still in Philadelphia, where I was relief organist frequently. I took lessons on three of these large organs - in the Arcadia, the Karlton and the Victoria Theatres, studying under the late Irving Cahan, and Viola Klaiss, who is now living in Florida. These houses in both Camden and Philadelphia were owned by the Stanley Company - later the Stanley-Warner chain. I also played relief organ at the Family and Capitol Theatres in Philadelphia. These houses were called "shooting galleries" - they were long and narrow with an aisle down the center.

When the Stanley Theatre was built in Camden, it topped the Grand in both size and elegance, had a large orchestra and employed the late Lew White at the 3m/21r Wurlitzer. This organ is now in the home of ATOE members, my dear friends, Edythe and John Riedel of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. They have added 10 or more ranks, but that is a story in itself.

My scrap book, which I kept from February 1919 till September 1921 lists 292 "features" for which I played. All but 14 of these listings have at least one accompanying picture of members of the cast. This makes a total of 333 treasured pictures. Also listed are 67 comedies I accompanied with several pictures of well known stars of that period. Plenty of nostalgia here in this scrap book!

For many years I saved a large number of cue sheets from the pictures. Real collector's items! Among them were sheets from such shows as "The Gold Rush," Cecil De Mille's "Male and Female," etc. Several years ago I sold these to the late Ted Huff, who was then working at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. I do not know

what became of them.

After "talkies" came in, I remained at the Grand as head organist for two years, playing for short comedies, between shows, and during film breakdowns, which were frequent at that time. Many times the needle would jump and the talking would be out of "sync." Some hilarious results would ensue and it was my job to amble out and fill in with loud organ music to quiet down the disturbed customers.

In the meantime, I'd sit in a small enclosed cubby-hole under the organ pipes spending my time eating, sewing, reading and for a while, I even cultivated a pet mouse. This was too good to last however, and finally the "talkies" were perfected and all organists were "OUT." Some turned to hairdressing, others to insurance, etc. Me - I got married!

In 1935, Doris Havens, who was an organist at WCAU radio station, an affiliate of Columbia Broadcasting System in Philadelphia, sent for me; two organists were needed in the studio at all times. Not only did we play the organ but on our "off" times, acted as hostesses and pulled relief on the telephone switchboard. This was glamorous work where we met all of the radio stars. Many I cannot remember, but I do recall vividly the late Lawrence Tibbett, Kate Smith, Bob Hope, Frank Parker, Redfern Hollingshed, Deanna Durbin and Eddie Cantor - to name a few.

At that time Kitty Kallen was a dear little girl singing her heart out on the Horn and Hardart "Children's Hour," where many stars got their start under Esther and Stan Lee Broza, now retired. The Broza's son, Elliott Lawrence, the orchestra director was just a youngster then who loved to tease us and "get in our hair."

During this period I remember doing a fill-in on Sunday afternoons between Father Coughlin's broadcast and the New York Philharmonic program. For two and a half years every week night I played the theme, "Memories" for the full-network Philco Radio Show, with the late Boake Carter.

It was my privilege also to be able to assist the late Ivan Eremeff, the Russian inventor with his electronic organ "The Photona" which is now on display in the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. This organ was built on the photo-electric cell principle. Mr. Eremeff died during his experimental period and the work ended there.

The organ used in the auditorium at WCAU was a small two-manual Wurlitzer, taken from a theatre in Wilmington, Delaware. On this I made some organ originations which were pumped to the Dixie Networks.

From the listeners of the Dixie Network, I received a nice batch of fan mail,

theatre organ

much of it from a 14-year old boy, Tommy Burroughs III, of McMinnville, Tennessee. I met Mr. Burroughs at an AGO meeting 22 years later in Philadelphia, and again at an ATOE meeting at the Paramount Theatre in New York City. He is a commercial artist in New York and we meet frequently at the ATOE gatherings and have wonderful talks about the organ and our mutual affection for it. What a fine group of people these ATOE members are and what an exciting world of music has opened up for me again!

To go back a bit, after WCAU, there was a long lay-off. Then when my husband was sent to the Pacific I took a job playing an organ in a funeral chapel. My friends said, "My word, has she come to that?" But "that" kept my hand in, and I really enjoyed playing the organ which was a two-manual Moeller with a fine vox and lovely chimes.

In early 1958 my husband, Harold R. Higgins, a broadcast engineer, died of a stroke. After a period of mourning for one year, I returned to music in a very unusual way - or so it seems to me.

It was nearing Christmas and I was feeling very sorry for myself as I looked at the gay shop windows and the happy shoppers on the streets of our town of Collingswood, N.J. Suddenly I heard an amplifier playing carols, and there in a shop window was a lovely Christmas tree and a little Gulbransen spinet played by an attractive red-head in a purple dress, obviously enjoying her task. I was enchanted!

I thought the whole idea was a stroke of showmanship and I wanted to meet the dealer who had staged this inspired scene. So I wrote to the Gulbransen dealer in Collingswood, Mr. John McMahon, a keen business man and fine organist. I expressed my opinion of his original idea and asked him to put my name on his professional list, in case he needed another organist. Though I am no red-head I had a spurt of ambition to be back in the musical picture.

The letter went promptly into his waste-basket. But, a heavy snowfall set in, and luckily no trash was collected that week. The week before Christmas the local bank asked for an organ and organist to play carols. Mr. McMahon went on a wild hunt through all the trash in the can and providentially found my letter. He sent for me for an audition and I have been working for him ever since. I have just completed my fifth year of playing Christmas carols and Christmas music at the bank. Now I teach, demonstrate, play fashion shows, wedding receptions, at restaurants, and occasionally tape an FM show for radio station WKDN. In the past five years I have joined four organ clubs and usually play at three of them.

I've composed more than 15 numbers for church organ, published by the Lorenz Co. of Dayton, Ohio. Hansen has published two of my books. The first one is called "Introductions, Fill-ins, Breaks and Endings" and the second is "More Introductions, Fill-ins, Breaks and Endings." These are numbers 18 and 40

Spring '64

respectively of Hansen's "All Organ Series." My pupils use these books, and evidently many others since the royalties are coming in quite regularly.

I have a musical setting for "The Lord's Prayer" coming out in 1964 by Lorenz, which I hope will be used by many choirs. I do quite a bit of arranging and only wish there were more hours in the day to finish all I'd like to do.

In the earlier days of movie playing only piano music and church organ music was available in printed form. Consequently we had to transpose, arrange and improvise extemporaneously for screen accompaniment. This was marvelous experience, I now realize and I learned immeasurably from it.

On October 20, 1963 Mr. Lowell Ayars and I were featured in a pioneer effort (for this area) - a Sunday afternoon concert of standard and "pop" music at the Broadway Theatre in Pitman, New Jersey. This was sponsored by a local service organization. To everyone's amazement, 625 tickets were sold and the enthusiastic response of the audience testified to its thorough enjoyment of the presentation. Mr. Ayars, an ATOE member, is an accomplished musician with whom it was a real joy to work. The beautiful 3/8

Kimball performed nobly and happens to be one of my favorite instruments anywhere.

The Lansdowne Theatre in Pennsylvania also boasts a little jewel of a Kimball organ which I have played before and between shows recently. Three young ATOE members have restored this organ to perfection in both sound and operation.

Each year I look forward eagerly to our local ATOE chapter's trek to the Surf City Hotel in New Jersey where we play the big WurliTzer which Leroy Lewis made famous.

My one unfulfilled desire is to have a record out and if fortune keeps smiling on me the way she has, maybe this dream too will come true.

If I could have one wish for 1964, it would be that we could have a regular circuit of theatre organs working throughout the country, with a roster of fine artists - Ann Leaf, Don Baker, Dr. Milton Page, Ethel Smith, Leonard MacClain, Gaylord Carter, Dick Scott, Eddie Sheen and all the other notables, too numerous to mention filling the theatres to capacity at least one night a week.



A recent photo of Organist Higgins at the Console of the Richard Loderhose WurliTzer.

IN THE NEW BIG WIDE SOUND

The artistry of **CARL SIMONE**
at the Whitney Pipe Organ
"It's a Big, Wide, Wonderful World"

Now Available by Mail Order
STEREO - \$4.25 • MONAURAL - \$3.25

Silver Streak Records
1617 EL CENTRO AVE.
HOLLYWOOD 28, CALIF.