

An Organ Alone

By Sam Dickerson

The number of theatre organs damaged by water is not astronomical, but widespread enough to establish the calamitous fact as something that is expected rather than being placed in the "unusual" category. But a theatre organ that has undergone two separate tidal waves and come through with only the loss of console and blower places the instrument in the "Believe-It-Or-Not" book of theatre organ wonders. Such is the story of the 3m/7r Robert Morton Pipe Organ, number 2507, presently located in the Hilo Theatre, Hilo, Hawaii.

First installed in the Palace Theatre, Hilo, the organ was used for silent films. During 1931-32 Alice Blue was the organist, and in May of the latter year, John DeMello took over presiding at the console.

In April, 1940, both John and Robert Morton were moved to the new Hilo Theatre where DeMello was musical director for stage shows and provided organ music before shows and during intermissions. He also played the organ for broadcasts six times weekly over Radio Station KHBC in Hilo. The programs were first aired from the Palace in May, 1936, and then from the Hilo after the organ had been moved.

December, 1941, changed the lives of many — the Robert Morton organ in the Hilo Theatre was no exception. Regular organ programs were discontinued, and John DeMello moved to Honolulu, where he now is a theatre manager and still plays occasionally at the Princess and Waikiki Theatres. The Hilo organ was heard on special occasions during the war years with Bernice Ah Nin or Anahea Brown at the console. These two ladies still live in Hilo.

The first tidal wave hit the Hilo Theatre in April, 1946, and the three manual console received severe water damage. The organ chambers, located high alongside the stage, completely escaped damage. Removed and sent to Honolulu for repairs by Leo Schoenstein, organ man for Consolidated Amusement Company, the console was not re-installed in the theatre until approximately two years later.

In its refurbished condition the key-desk remained in the theatre until May, 1960 — when the second tidal wave picked it up and moved it out of the theatre — in many pieces. The console was destroyed completely; one of the manuals was found much later outside the theatre in the parking lot.

Located along the waterfront in Hilo, the theatre is quite susceptible to the results of these freaks of nature. The 1960 tidal wave smashed into the theatre through a double door in the back of the

stage, tore through the silver screen, uprooted the organ console, (located in a fixed position in the center of the pit) demolished most of the seats, and left 10 feet of water on the floor. This all happened at one o'clock in the morning while the theatre was empty.

Once again the organ itself was spared damage. When inspected last December 3rd, the chambers appeared to be in excellent condition.

Located in two chambers along the sides of the stage, the organ is arranged as follows:

The theatre has not been repaired since the 1960 tidal wave and today it stands alone along the Hilo waterfront with the tropical foliage grown up about the walls, and the interior of the theatre standing dark and deserted with most of the seats removed.

LEFT CHAMBER

Vox Humana
Post Horn
Tibia
Principal
Bass Drum, Snare Drum
Tom Tom, Wood Block
Tambourine, Castanets
Zylophone
Chrysoglott

RIGHT CHAMBER

Kinura
Viole d'Orchestra
Flute
Chimes
Harp

BILL THOMSON PLAYS CONCERT AT RIALTO

Bill Thomson, popular young recording organist, played a concert to a capacity audience last April 6th at the Rialto Theatre, South Pasadena, Calif. The event, presented by Pipe Organ Attractions, started at 8:30 p.m. and did not conclude until 11. Thomson played popular tunes of the day and light classical numbers. The Rialto's 216 Wurlitzer performed flawlessly throughout the evening. This is the instrument that was twice damaged by rain and rebuilt by John Curry.

A feature of the Thomson concert was the sale of a recording of the selections played during the evening. The first record made on this instrument, sale of the platter was reported heavy.

HILO MORTON

EDITOR'S NOTE: Since the following article was written, the Robert Morton Pipe Organ in the Hilo Theatre has been sold to Organ Buff Roger Angell, of Honolulu. "I have just purchased the organ, which was originally a 3m/7r instrument, and it has required one week to remove and pack. Installation is already underway — the chambers were built beforehand. Will send a story on it when the installation is completed," he has advised Theatre Organ.



The Hilo Theatre, Hilo, Hawaii, as it appeared in 1940 before tidal waves washed through the house from rear to front doors and carried organ console and blower into oblivion. Rear stage door is less than 100 yards from ocean.

—From the DeMello Collection