

# Chicago's Career Organist

## MILDRED MAGINN FITZPATRICK

Mildred Maginn FitzPatrick, one of Chicago's best known theatre organists and teachers, began her public picture-playing career at the age of ten. On frequent Saturday afternoons she relieved her mother, the regular piano accompanist at the Ashland Theatre in Chicago's South Side. After studying at the keyboard from the age of three under her mother's tutelage, it speaks well of Mildred's competency that both the management and the audience permitted her sessions at the piano.

Resolved on a professional career in the rapidly burgeoning movie houses, Mildred enrolled as an advanced piano student at Chicago's Conservatory of Music when she was eleven years old. Her teacher, Ernest Fristrom, with inspired foresight, encouraged Mildred's musical ambitions and undertook to teach her pipe organ technique in addition to her regular piano courses. For these lessons and practice sessions, Mildred had to make several street car transfers to an old church in Oak Park, Illinois to play a tracker-action organ. Transferring with her teacher to the Balatka Music College, Mildred graduated at the age of thirteen and received her teaching certificate for piano.

Shortly after graduation, Mildred became the full-time piano accompanist at the small Verdi Theatre. With what time she could spare from her theatre assignment, Mildred continued her classic organ studies and whenever the opportunity arose, she began experimenting at the consoles of the new theatre organs some of the larger theatres recently had installed. Finally, the big break came. The Pastime Theatre installed a new Kimball theatre organ and Mildred applied for the post of organist. Although she was only sixteen at the time, her playing so pleased the Manager that he hired her with the admonition that she would have to wear longer dresses and put up her hair in the grown-up fashion of the day. Her girlhood over, Mildred set out to impress the patronage with her command of the organ. Sensitive to her audience and anxious to be a success, Mildred was acutely aware that her organ playing, although technically beyond reproach, somehow failed to charm her audience. She quickly realized that her task was to complement rather than compete with the picture on the screen. Analyzing the problem carefully, she learned to master the art of keying her selections to the style and mood of the drama unfolding. Discovering the art that differentiated mere competency from the musical in-

**MILDRED FITZPATRICK** concentrating on her registration at the console of Dave Voydanoff's 3-manual Wurlitzer home installation. The Wurlitzer shipment list published in THEATRE ORGAN identifies this instrument as Opus 1193, shipped 10/31/25 and lists it as a Model D. However, the organ is a 3-manual 6-rank as originally installed in the theatre. The organ was obtained from the Lancaster Theatre in River Rouge, Michigan, and presently is installed in Dave's Royal Oak, Michigan home. One of the unusual features of the original installation is that the Tibia is on a separate reservoir. Since obtaining the instrument, Dave has added a Kinura and Marimba, and more recently, added sub and octave couplers on the Great and Solo. Dave now has procured a larger relay assembly and an additional chest and pipes complement which he intends to incorporate in an additional chamber. In the present set-up, only one chamber with horizontal shutters is used. Only the Cathedral Chimes are unenclosed. This picture was taken on Mildred's first visit to Dave's installation which accounts for her close attention to the tab set-up.



sight required of a successful theatre organist, Mildred learned to call upon the resources of her classical repertoire to supplement contemporary musical themes to enhance the film presentation. This was the lesson she impressed upon her students when she later took up a teaching career.

With her position as a full-time theatre organist secure, Mildred now enrolled at Chicago's Musical College to continue her organ studies during her free time from the Pastime console. Two years later she graduated with highest honors and was awarded the diamond medal with her B.A. Degree. With her reputation as an accomplished theatre organist ever on the ascent, Mildred was featured as guest organist and booked for special engagements at many of the newer theatres mushrooming in the Chicago area.

The Musician's Union now began organizing the theatre organists in Chicago, concentrating first on those playing in the Loop area. When the Boston Theatre prepared to open there, Mildred applied for and obtained the position as organist. Under Union

regulations the pay scale was improved and the organist now even had the privilege of a ten minute break for each hour at the console.

Competition for patronage and a growing sophistication on the part of the movie-goer led to the evolution of more elaborate film presentations. Some of the Deluxe houses began to carefully plan their programs to please even the most discriminating clientele. Hollywood began to produce feature attractions at great expense and a New York group with E. Q. Corder as Managing-Director, hired Chicago's Orchestra Hall to exhibit these special films during the summer months. Arthur Dunham and his forty-piece Symphony Orchestra was engaged to provide the special music for the program and Mildred FitzPatrick was 'borrowed' from the Boston Theatre to preside at the console of the Skinner concert organ.

The Orchestra Hall enterprise received immediate critical acclaim and the artistry of Mildred FitzPatrick was singled out for special honors. So

successful was the first Orchestra Hall venture, that the series was repeated every summer for the next decade. For each annual session, Mildred was again borrowed from her regular theatre organ post to work her magic at the console.

Shortly after the first Orchestra Hall event, the 3000 seat Pantheon opened in Chicago, featuring Mildred at the console of the largest and most complete Kimball theatre organ installed to that time. The console was on an elevator controlled by the organist who also could communicate with the projection booth to keep the song slides on cue.

Mildred's next position was with the \$1,000,000 Senate Theatre, equipped with the latest model Kimball. This flagship of the Lubliner and Trinz chain regularly featured large symphony and headliner contemporary orchestras on its bill of fare. It was here that Mildred had the opportunity to share billing with Warde Johnstone's Symphony, Guy Lombardo and his band and many other musical personalities of the era.

While featured at the console of the "Wonder Kilgen Organ" at the Ritz Theatre, Mildred accepted an appointment to the teaching staff of the Sherwood School of Music. For the next sixteen years she was Director of the Faculty in the Theatre and Radio Organ Department at Sherwood. Concurrently, Mildred pursued a full-time career as staff organist at various moving picture theatres and frequently was featured as organist in programs at Orchestra Hall with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and other musical groups in the Chicago area.

Engaged by the Marks Brothers, Mildred alternated between the Granada and Marbro Theatres of their chain. Even after the introduction of sound movies, Mildred continued on the payroll as soloist for the next two years. Mildred's association with the Piccadilly Theatre during this period is of special interest. This \$4,000,000 theatre and apartment hotel complex was built and operated by H. Schoenstadt and Sons and opened on January 23, 1927. It had been at the Ashland Theatre operated by the Schoenstadts that Mildred, as a little girl, had her first experience as a film accompanist when she relieved her mother at the piano. Mildred was commissioned to draw up the specifications for the Kilgen organ to be installed in the Piccadilly. Unfortunately, it was Leo Terry and not Mildred FitzPatrick who dedicated this organ on opening night. A prior contract for a limited engagement of Al Short and his Orchestra from Chicago's Capitol Theatre had been signed for the opening ceremonies. Al Short insisted that his regular organist preside at the console during this event. However, a few weeks later, with Ted Fiorito and his Orchestra from the Edgewater Hotel in the pit, Mildred finally took over at the console of the organ she had designed. The extended engagement she played during her first appearance at the Piccadilly was repeated many times during the

ensuing years.

In the late 1920's, Mildred was featured at the theatre organ by both local and network Radio Stations. This field became an ever more important part of her instructions at Sherwood as the use of organs began to decline in theatres with the introduction of sound movies. Another change in the life of former theatre organists took place when the electronic organ was developed and promoted by the Hammond Electric Clock Company. Mildred introduced this instrument at Sherwood and started the first professional classes for instruction on the electric organ. Mildred foresaw such instruments could furnish employment for organists in locations where it always had been impracticable to install a pipe organ. Mildred herself became a well known exponent of the Hammond playing at the Bismark Hotel and Harding's Restaurant, two of the first locations to install the instruments.

Mildred's last long term engagement playing the theatre organ was at the



**MILDRED FITZPATRICK** during the period when she was playing the Chicago Arena Wurlitzer, where she held forth at the console from 1943 to 1954, when the Arena was sold to CBS for a TV studio. The Arena Wurlitzer was purchased by Herb Shriver when the building was renovated by CBS.

Chicago Arena. Here she played for ice skating from 1943 until the building was sold to CBS for a Television studio in 1954. Now residing at Mill Lake, near Gobles, Michigan, Mildred FitzPatrick is enjoying what must best be described as an 'active' retirement. She teaches regular organ classes in the surrounding communities several days a week and makes frequent concert appearances. Mildred also conducts special organ classes in her home for promising pupils. In addition to the legions of entertainment artists she has taught, Mildred numbers among her former students such luminaries as Irma Glenn, Edna Sellers, Helen Anderson (Mrs. Jesse Crawford), Stewart Russell and Winona Young to name but a few of the better known theatre and radio organ personalities.

## A Visit to the Carl Greer Inn

By Ray Sawyer

Recently, I was privileged to play one of Dick Schrum's "Three loves," the 4/16 just opened in a fashionable lounge-restaurant of the Carl Greer Inn, Sacramento, California. The manager-owner, Carl Greer, had the time, interest plus resources to build a room especially for this delightful Morton, and I found it more than suitable. The job of re-installation was performed by the same lad, Dan Adamson, who removed it from the Seattle Music Hall. He dismantled the enormous box of whistles, left the cables uncut and still attached, and performed a mighty task of transportation to its new home.

The console is recessed into the floor at the apex of a fan-shaped room, dropped a couple of feet below the "buff's bar" which has been built completely surrounding the pit. The room has a seating capacity of perhaps two hundred; the swell shades have been located exactly in the center of the apex, about twenty feet from the organ bench. The pipes themselves, with all traps and sound effect in rattling good condition, are in a cement-lined chamber 16x16x40 directly below the organ, with passages in the wall for the sound to flow from the swell-shades-wall. A try for a made-to-order room that has never thus far been done.

Perhaps the most popular Sacramento organist-entertainer, Clyde Derby, is presiding nightly, and Carl Greer has extended invitations to any and all organ clubs to visit and take over the entire room on a Sunday morning, after attending a "derby-session" the night before.

*Editor's Note - A complete story of this fabulous installation will appear in a future issue.*

### LEONARD MacCLAIN HOSPITALIZED

We understand that the popular Leonard "Melody Mac" MacClain has been hospitalized recently for minor (we hope) surgery on one leg. Leonard, who was our Honorary Member in 1962, and also celebrated his 50th year in the business the same year, has been very active in ATOE having appeared as a feature artist at the last three Annual Meetings as well as playing for local chapters whenever asked. Leonard is certainly a good friend of all of us and we want to take this opportunity to wish him a sincere

GET WELL QUICK.

For those interested in dropping Leonard a card, the address is:

Leonard MacClain  
Melody Hill  
Rees Road  
Devault, Penn.