



The approach is magnificent.

ROBERT MORTON THEATRE ORGAN PROVIDES ATMOSPHERE FOR CALIFORNIA PERIOD DINING ROOM

Walnut Grove, Calif. — It isn't often that one enters a fine restaurant these days and hears live theatre organ music. It's happening nightly at this little town near Sacramento. Organs, pipes, that is, have long been business builders for bars and pizza parlors, but this installation is different. It has an authentic pre-1920s atmosphere because that's when the mansion which houses the restaurant was built. Let's delve into history.

One by one many great historic mansions in Northern California have faded and fallen. An exception is the little known River Mansion located on an island only 3 miles south of the confluence of Steamboat Slough and the Sacramento River at Courland. It is one of the fascinating and interesting places looming up out of the rich black earth of the Sacramento River Delta. Built for a lifetime, of concrete, stucco and tile, it is again becoming a new and different kind of symbol of the past.

Whether driving down the levee of picturesque Steamboat Slough or cruising its waters, one will eventually sight a stately white four-story 58-room mansion. Even from a distance the red Spanish tile roof and the two-story columns in front of the house on the wide veranda create an impressive sight which conjures up pictures of an era of grand and gracious living. Symbolic of the colorful and exciting times

preceding the "Roaring 20's" it is an unexpected and pleasant vista to sight such a building situated in an almost exclusively agricultural area.

A few years ago, the River Mansion was a forelorn and almost forgotten "relic of the past" until it was rediscovered by Mr. and Mrs. R. A. Miller, now owners of the River Mansion. They spied the mansion practically abandoned with an appearance of a deserted, forlorn house, unlit, attended only by cobwebs and unkept yards and grounds. A sad picture. Why? What was the story behind what apparently had once been a palatial home?

In 1912 Louis William Myers was the owner of 865 acres of land on Grand Island. It consisted of a highly developed fruit ranch principally devoted to pears, plums, cherries and asparagus and considered one of the agricultural showplaces of the county. He had ordered his mansion designed by J. W. Dolliver of San Francisco. Plans were drawn as early as 1914 but the construction, commenced in 1918, was not completed until two years later.

In 1922 Myers died suddenly, having enjoyed his huge mansion for only two years—and without realizing the pipe organ he'd planned for. Without its master the house was never the same. His wife, Henrietta, and their eight children moved to other quarters and it wasn't long before deterioration

set in. Many, many years passed before the Millers drove by one day.

The Millers saw possibilities in the decaying ruin and started the ball rolling toward its purchase. That was in 1964. Two years later their show-place opened to a waiting public. It's a palace of rich ornamentation from the past, antique furnishings from other mansions, thick oriental rugs throughout the building, red plush, tall mirrors, sculpture and an aura of nostalgia.

As we enter the Grand Entry Hall, which is 40 feet long, we note the huge mirrored sliding doors at each end, but the intricate gilded grillwork on the wall of the staircase soon grabs our attention. It is a story and a half tall, flanking the upper portions of the stair well. Gold leaf is everywhere. Hand-carved portraits of famous musicians decorate the grillwork. Behind it are swell shutters—and behind the shutters are organ pipes!

Now we must make a choice. There are a number of rooms we can enter—the Gold Room with its imported red Italian marble fireplace and green velvet draperies, the Steamboat Lounge, the Grand Ballroom with its crystal chandeliers, the Walnut Room with its floor to ceiling Walnut panels, the Billiard Room—or the Colonnade Room!

The Colonnade Room is the place—the home of the Robert Morton theatre organ. And there's the console under the middle arch! It's basically a 3-11 with additions.

It's unusual to find a building where the architect designed an organ loft for a theatre pipe organ into a residence. However, such a room is a unique feature of the River Mansion.

The Mansion, which opened recently, puts out a brochure which gives the organ, played by either George Seaver or owner Bob Miller, a good plug in the space devoted to the Colonnade Room.

"As you dine in its new, exciting and different gilded, pillared Colon-



Bob and Evelyn Miller. They saw a future in a deserted, decaying residence on an island.



The Grand Staircase spirals upward from the center of the 40 - foot long Entry Hall. Note the Conn theatre style electronic. It's for foyer music, but not when the pipes are playing from behind the grillwork on the stairway.

THEATRE ORGAN PROVIDES DINING ROOM

ATMOSPHERE FOR CALIFORNIA PERIOD

nade Room perhaps you'll reminisce in a nostalgic atmosphere as the glittering gold and white organ console gives forth with a 'Showtime with Pipes.' Before you dine you may wish to have cocktails in the 'Fox' horseshoe surrounding the pipe organ and perhaps you'll reserve the special cozy little 'First Nighter Box.' This room provides spots of interest here and there, the antique red velvet theatre seats originally from the late lamented Fox Theatre of San Francisco and the Robert Morton pipe organ which had its premier during the era of silent movies at the Fox-Senator Theatre in Sacramento.

Dining in the Colonnade Room includes a spectacular view across the entire island through eight Moorish arches." End of plug.

How did it all come about? One

who has been "in on" the operation from the beginning is Bob Longfield, President of the TOES—that is, Theatre Organ Enthusiasts of Sacramento. His account follows.

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Bob Miller, owner of the River Mansion, has been an organ enthusiast since he was a youngster. He taught himself to play and his first job was at the Imperial Roller Rink, Portland, Oregon, where he played on Saturday afternoons. This was in 1934. About this time he bought his first organ which he removed from the Evergreen Theatre, Portland. To this he added parts from an organ in the Oaks Dance Hall (now the Oaks Roller Rink). This combined organ was moved and partially installed three different times (whenever his family moved) until he finally gave up and sold it.



The Colonnade Room. The Mansion is U-shaped and this was the open courtyard before being roofed over. Note the pipe-work behind the balcony windows and the console beneath the center arch. The restaurant also boasts an Estey horseshoe electronic organ and a square piano.

After moving to Sacramento, Bob played the organ at the Del Paso Theatre in North Sacramento in 1940. This organ and theatre were later destroyed by fire.

After buying the River Mansion in 1964, he was constantly bugged by people who wanted to know when he was going to put a pipe organ in the chamber that had been included in the original plans of the Mansion. Despite the chamber and a beautiful grill, an organ had never been installed. Finally he heard rumors that the Robert Morton located in the International Restaurant in Walnut Creek was not being used, and after negotiations with its owner, Bob Denny, the organ was acquired. Removal of the organ could be made only after business hours and

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Moving in closer we note that the music is being played by none other than the boss — Bob Miller. The theatre seats are from the gone San Francisco Fox.



Bob Longfield (foreground) and Don Zeller make some last minute adjustments before the opening of the restaurant. Vox and Tibia in front, Tuba bass and traps in back.



The River Mansion restored to its remembered elegance.

under difficult circumstances, so it was more or less haphazardly brought to the Mansion. The larger units were hoisted by block and tackle up the outside of the building and through the large double windows of the chamber. Strangely enough, the chamber had been built with windows looking out over the surrounding countryside. The present Colonnade Room was at that time an open court within the "U" shaped mansion. It contained a fountain, wrought-iron balconies, canopies, and statuary. The Millers had this area roofed over and enclosed the open end with a wall of picture windows. The plush interior of today's Colonnade Room was then added and the Robert Morton had a new home.

When I first arrived on the scene to help with installation, four bedrooms and the Ladies Lounge, located on the same floor as the chambers, were loaded with pipes, chests, cables, relays, wind lines and toy-counter parts. The old chamber had been a single room not large enough for the Robert Morton so it was rebuilt to add more space and divided into two chambers. Installation of the organ took approximately three months, since most of the work was done on weekends by Bob Denny, Bob Longfield, Bob Miller, George Seaver and Don

Zeller. With three "Bobs," confusion often reigned.

On a Saturday evening, ten days before the Grand Opening of the Mansion, the wind was turned on and baby "growled." She was cranky, grouchy, and definitely out of tune with life, but to tired installers she sounded beautiful. Drinks on the house were served at the new bar and for two hours we loved every horrible sound coming from the chambers. Needless to say, by opening night the Robert Morton had been tuned to perfection and was truuuuly beautiful.

Actually, there wasn't much that was unusual during installation. Mostly it was just very hot and hard work in tight quarters. The organ was a constant source of amazement and amusement to the large crew of construction workers building and decorating the Colonnade Room.

The organ is maintained by Don Zeller and played by Bob Miller and George Seaver, former organist at the Metropolitan Theatre in Boston.

— Bob Longfield

Thus opens another Mecca for the travelling organ enthusiast. Come on over. The food is fine!



Left to Right, Don Zeller, Bob Miller and Bob Longfield. The organ's first off-key, untuned groans were music to their ears. The organ was once in Bob Denny's home, later in a Walnut Creek restaurant which reportedly went bust — after discontinuing organ music. (No, the two Bobs are not twins. They aren't even related.)



Organist George Seaver plays the Morton when Bob Miller is busy with details of his large operation. Seaver played the Boston "Met" Wurlt some years ago.