

THE CAVERNOUS ST. LOUIS FOX BY TERRY CLARK, JR



Drawing of the facade from the original souvenir program (Courtesy of George Swett).

The Fox Theatre circuit, perhaps the most prodigious builder of cinema palaces in an era of extravagant motion picture theatre construction, poured its resources into five great Fox Theatres at Detroit (September 1928), Saint Louis (January 1929), San Francisco (February 1929), and Philadelphia, and Newark (September 1929).

The Saint Louis Fox, a midwestern theatre landmark, was lavishly decorated under the personal supervision of Mrs. William Fox. A Moorish motif was carried out through the use of expensive objects d'art imported from the Far East. The vast majority of motion picture theatres of that era could have been housed comfortably in the grand Lobby and Foyer of the Saint Louis Fox.

On January 31, 1929, the theatre opened with Frank Borzage's "Street Angel", starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. The program souvenir noted "Fox Movietone symphonic accompaniment".



Stan Kann, resident organist at the Fox since 1950.

Thus, a great movie palace, conceived and partially constructed in the silent era, opened in a new age - an age its builders had not foreseen, even with the ominous forebodings of "sound".

During the eight months preceding the opening of the house, work went forward on the \$75,000 4/36 Wurlitzer, one of the four great Crawford Specials built during the last days of the theatre organ construction. So much of rather conflicting nature has been written concerning these instruments, that this writing shall be confined to the physical aspects of the instrument. That the Paramount Wurlitzer was the "mother" instrument and that similar, if not identical instruments went into Detroit, San Francisco, and Saint Louis, cannot be argued.

In the Saint Louis Fox, the blower and relay rooms and the seven chambers cover a vertical height equal to a five-story building. The chambers, five with expression shutters, are partially served by an automatic elevator. They speak directly into the cavernous 6,000-seat auditorium through appropriately placed marble columns around the perimeter of the theatre some 35 feet above the orchestra floor. The chambers contain 2,268 pipes, none smallest only five-eighths of an inch in height in contrast to the gigantic 32-footers.

There is an approximate two-second delay from the time a key is depressed on the ornate, gold-leaf console until the sound reaches the organist's ear. This is handily explained when it is realized that the projection booth is 300 feet from the console at stage center in the pit. A regulation football field could be laid out between the console and the spotlight which plays on the console. Blower and relay rooms are in the basement of the theatre. A slave console adorns the backstage wall of the Fox, some 15 feet above stage level. A beautiful 3 manual, self-playing Moller organ was originally installed in the theatre lobby (to soothe those involved in long waits for seats!) but has long since been removed to an Illinois church.

The late Tom Terry was the only official resident organist until the great Wurlitzer was silenced in 1935, although it is recalled by some that other organists presided at the console. If such is the fact, there is no record to indicate who may have played the great instrument. After 1935, the organ was not played again

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ST. LOUIS (continued)



The Fox 4/36 Wurlitzer with the elevator at stage level.

until Stan Kann became resident organist in 1950. Amazingly, after 15 years of complete silence, no major repairs were necessary. To Stan Kann, however, must go the gratitude of theatre organ lovers everywhere for bringing back to daily use one of the great theatre instruments of the world.

If this seems to indicate that Stan had no problems, in 1950, it is misleading. Stan, John West, ATOers Gus Brummer and Mike Marion, all lent themselves to

the task of minor, but time-consuming repairs necessary to get the organ into playing condition. In the early 1960's ATOer Bill Hansen devoted much time to the instrument to keep it in playing condition.

In early 1964, the Saint Louis ATOE chapter undertook rehabilitation looking toward a May concert by Gaylord Carter. Work crews toiled on Saturdays and on week nights into the small hours of the morning at times when the Fox was empty. Only then could blowers be turned on and the vast instrument checked and given proper attention. This culminated in the Gaylord Carter concert at which he also accompanied Douglas Fairbanks in "The Mark of Zorro". Gaylord did his usual magnificent job. His penalty was that the almost 1500 people who turned out for the midnight show refused to let him go until almost three o'clock in the morn-

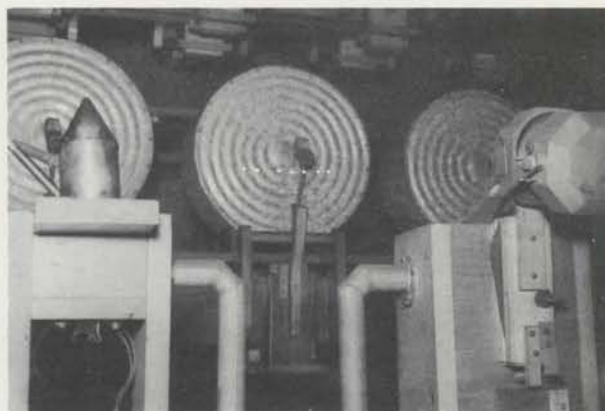
Stan Kann, Dale Zieger, and Art Edinger, all Saint Louis Chapter ATOers, play the great Crawford Special daily. Theatre organ enthusiasts in search of a real thrill need only to visit the Saint Louis Fox and see that great console rise slowly from the pit, its gold-leaf glistening in the spotlight, and hear the mighty Wurlitzer speak out as it was meant to speak.



A photo showing a small portion of the pipework.



Dale Zieger, assistant organist, St. Louis Fox.



A view of the Tympani.



A view of the huge Fox auditorium.



A picture showing the lavish decor of the Fox. (All photos this page courtesy of Terry Clark).