

## "HOW WE TOOK OUT AN EIGHT RANK MORTON IN 20-HOURS"

IT WAS two years ago that Wilby-Kinsey Theatre Corporation decided to update its Durham, North Carolina operations by building a new, plush film house in a neighborhood shopping center, at the same time doing away with the downtown Center Theatre, but it wasn't until three days before the wreckers were scheduled to start work, that the disposition of the two manual, eight rank Robert Morton organ was settled. The new movie house would be smaller, more compact and easier to maintain than the 1938 "Deluxe Moderne" edifice downtown which in recent years had become an increasing problem because of age, overhead and location. There was still another difference about the new Center; there would be no Robert Morton organ.

The Center management declined to accept cash offers for the instrument from several ATOE members, insisting instead upon donating it to a charitable or public-service organization which would be willing to stand the costs of re-

by Frank Netherland  
and Don Hall

moval, storage, reconditioning and installation of the 45 year-old organ. Now the time remaining before the start of the demolition could be measured in hours and still there were no recipients, but there would be no sale.

Don Hall, the "Keeper of the Organ" for the past four years, had acted as liaison between the theatre and ATOE and was at that hour the only man alive who could arrange to save the organ from oblivion. Some members of the Piedmont Chapter were prepared to purchase the organ at a moment's notice and a third of the chapter membership was anxiously awaiting the call to screw-drivers. That call went out on Friday evening, December 9, when it was agreed that Campbell College a small liberal arts school in Buies Creek, North Carolina, would accept the organ for its chapel-auditorium. The college would provide the transportation and some manpower; Piedmont ATOE would do the rest.

Frank Netherland headed up the work crew assisted by Jim and Jane Sparks, Don Hall, Marion Martin, Paul Abernathy, George Anthony, Neil Ludlam and Mike Earp. Since time was short, all had agreed not to branch out on their own but to follow Frank's suggestions. After he looked the organ over to see if it could be removed by reversing the installation process, Frank arrived at a plan of action.

The Center had been built strictly as

"Happy Days" were these again. . . . Not it's "Just a Memory."

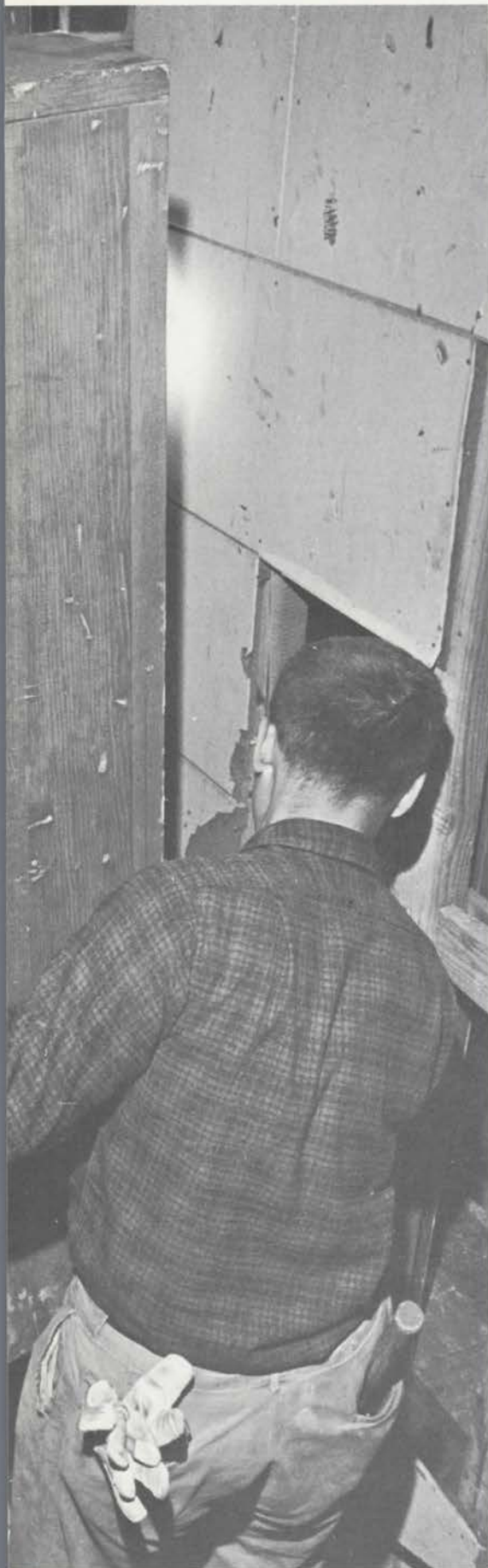


Ole Betsy goes down the hatch.



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All it took was 20-hours



a film house and had only a simple, shallow stage designed to accommodate no more than the mechanical necessities for the deluxe presentation of the best of Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, Marlene Dietrich and other stars of the day. Also, from 1938 filmhouse standards, it would have quite an anachronism, a theatre pipe organ. Legend has it that the only reason that a pipe organ was to be installed in such a futuristic environment was to compete with the Wurlitzer organ installed in Page Auditorium at nearby Duke University. The Center's organ was built in 1922 and had been first installed in the National Theatre in Greenboro. (The story of its restoration was fully described in the Winter 1964-65 issue of *THEATRE ORGAN*.)

The console of the Morton sat at stage right at floor level. The two pipe chambers were reached through 24-inch square trap doors on either side of the theatre. The left chamber contained the relay, part of the switches, three ranks of pipes and the chrysoglott. On the next floor above this chamber were the blower and generator. The right chamber contained the other five ranks plus the rest of the percussions and traps. Each triangular chamber was separated from the trap doors and access ladders by a temporary wall of insulation board and two by fours.

Campbell College expects to install the Robert Morton, complete with all percussions and toys, in existing organ chambers in the chapel-auditorium this summer. The steps that the Netherland crew followed to get the organ out may be of benefit to others who will be engaging in similar work.

The pipes came first and a speedy but careful day was spent removing, wrapping and crating them. The top 12 pipes from each rank were removed and wrapped together in a long strip of newsprint, putting in a pipe, giving a turn of paper adding another pipe and

Paul Abernathy and Frank Netherland contemplate the wrapping job.



This was the location of the right chamber.

so on until an octave was done. This technique was used until the pipes got big enough to have ears, then they had to be individually wrapped. The medium size pipes were taken down to the stage floor to be packaged while the large ones were heavy enough not to require any further attention.

A couple of casket shipping crates were borrowed from a local funeral director to pack the pipes in. These boxes are made of thick pine with heavy duty hardware and lids with thumbscrews. The big pipes were placed in the bottom, covered over with paper, excelsior and cardboard then the medium and small pipes were carefully placed on top. Both boxes were filled to half capacity, being careful not to load them down so heavily that six people couldn't lift them. All of the pipes were on the truck in about six hours.

While this work was going on the console was being disconnected. In the Center instrument the lower manual and pedals played direct while the upper manual played through a relay. The main cable was taken loose from the console by unfastening the spreader strips, bending them back until the solder joints snapped then fastening all the spreaders into a bundle. The contact rail was removed from the pedal board and at about the same time as all the pipes were ready to go, so was the console. It was the first thing on the truck and it was a good thing too, because if it had been the last, it never would have made it. Even with eight men lifting it, it was unbelievably heavy.

The wind conductors were next, a determined attack with screwdrivers produced a giant pile of conductor pipe and two shoe boxes of screws. This operation was completed in about an hour and a half.



Marion Martin demonstrates the fine art of cable removal.

After dispatching one load to the college, the crew broke for supper and a well deserved rest. At about 9 p.m. the work was resumed and carried forth into the wee hours. During this time most of the remaining large pieces were dismantled and holes were knocked in the temporary walls to facilitate their removal. Most of the organ went out through the "tuner holes" and it appeared for a while that the whole works might exit that way. The item that made it obvious that this was not going to be the case was the bass drum. A 30" drum will not go through a 24" hole. A 16' Diaphone might and so may the separate chests, percussions and small regulators, but a 30" drum won't. Finally with some additional holes in the walls between the chambers and backstage, the problem was solved.

The support frames came down in another two hours and by this time the chambers were empty. Swell shutters and their actions came next. The action was taken loose electrically then unscrewed from the frame itself.

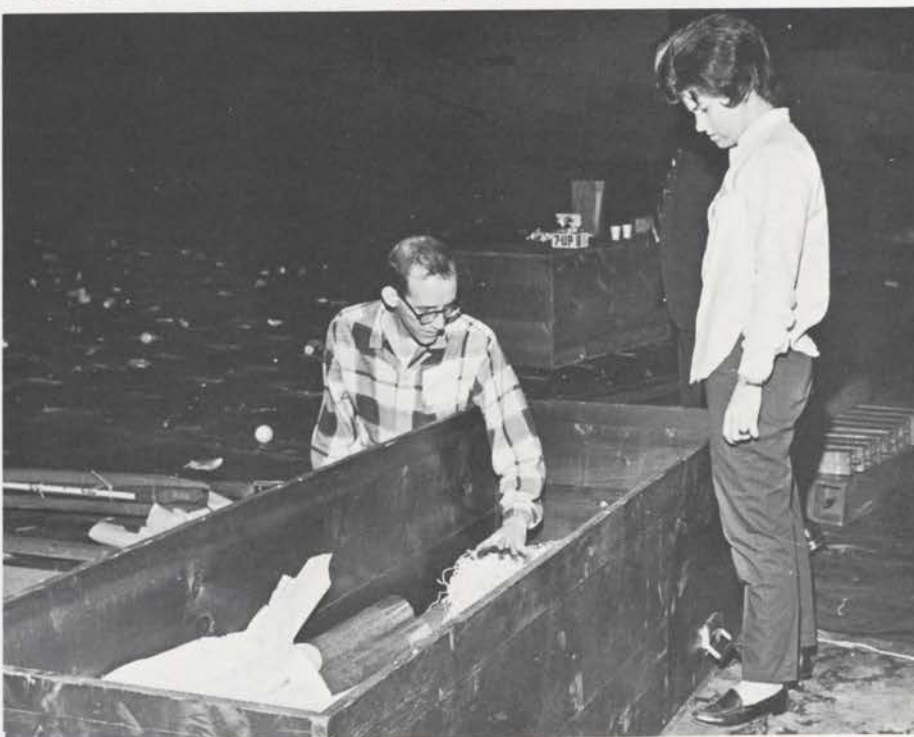
Unthreading the cable from the building was a relatively short job but seemed to require the talents of a mid-gut contortionist. The crew started with the right chamber and fed the terminal strips back through a slightly enlarged hole in the wall, across the top of the auditorium ceiling and down into the left chamber. This wire case coiled while the lines to the console were pulled up to the same place. The relay and upper manual switches were connected by about two feet of cable so both of the units and the miles of accompanying wire were lowered to the stage floor through a hole in the construction tile wall.

The only parts left now were the blower, generator and main wind lines to the chambers and console.

According to the final accounting, Piedmont ATOE supplied 125 man hours during the 20 hour work period. Campbell College supplied another 75 man hours. It is well worth noting that the crew performed flawlessly except for a scratched finger and a couple of bumped heads; they were done, dead tired and dirty, but the organ had been saved—and not a moment too soon.



Marion Martin, Piedmont Chapt. Chairman, left; a representative of Campbell College; and Frank Netherland, removal crew chief; take a final look inside the console. Pictured below is Don Hall and Jane Sparks laying the pipes gently to rest.



...over there was the console, (L to R) Don, Marion and Frank view the Center Theatre, April 16, 1967.

