

# THE DELAWARE VALLEY CHAPTER LANDS ITS MOLLER

by ROY H. CARUTH  
Photos by Robert B. Little

The recent death of one of organology's greats, Leonard MacClain, makes this story a poignant tribute to the man. Written months before his passing, it is a much more telling tribute to "Melody Mac" than any eulogy we could write.—W.S.G.

The Delaware Valley Chapter of ATOE met on Sunday, Feb. 26, 1967, at the Sedgewick Theatre in Philadelphia, Pa., for a farewell salute to the shuttered theatre and to hear the 3-19 Moller played for the last time in its original home.

The meeting was called to order by our lovely president, Dottie MacClain. With words of welcome to the group and "thanks" to the organ repair crew, she "presented" the organ to the meeting.

First called to sit and play at the organ bench was Violet Egger. Violet was the



"THANKS FOR COMING"—Dottie MacClain's warm greeting took the edge off the winter chill.

last staff organist at the Sedgewick Theatre. Ending her tenure at the bench in 1932, she became the theatre's cashier while continuing to practice on the Moller before show time. No doubt, this helped keep the organ alive to those who came before the show.

Leonard MacClain was next to play. Despite the bitter cold (no heat in the building) and his recent illness, "Melody Mac" made the 19 ranks of pipes "purr and coo." All too soon he was playing "Auld Lang Syne."

Next called to the organ was Barbara Fesmire. Barbara was also "at home" because she had been house organist from 1964 on. Her organ interludes between shows in those days kept most of the movie patrons in their seats. It was always a pleasant respite, and it was once

again, despite the cold that prevailed in the auditorium that day.

Various members took their turns, despite numb fingers and tightly buttoned overcoats.

Wayne Zimmerman, as a boy, used to come to this theatre and wonder what was hidden under those covers in the pit. He was too young to have heard theatre



Barbara Fesmire

organists in their "golden days." Wayne did a beautiful job at the console, just a neighborhood boy who got to know "what was under those covers" in the pit.

How was this made possible? How did it all come about?

In February 1962, a group from the Delaware Valley chapter went to see if the Sedgewick Theatre organ could be re-



Violet Egger, the Sedgewick's last regular organist (to 1932), took a job as theatre cashier to be near her beloved instrument. She fondles it as skillfully today as she did "back when."

stored. The blower motor was turned on but there was only silence; the wind trunk had been damaged. It was decided to have this repaired and then determine whether restoration was possible. In June of that year, the chapter met at the theatre to see and hear a few ranks in the Solo chamber. By June 1963, the first concert was held there with Leonard MacClain at the console. All pipes and traps were by then in working condition and sounding wonderful. In November 1965, Lowell Ayars presented the Moller in concert. Shortly afterward the theatre was closed, the heat turned off and the building reverted to its owners. A few months ago, the building (with all furnishings, including the organ) was offered at auction. The Delaware Valley

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AN OLD FRIEND—Leonard MacClain, in one of his last public appearances, makes the Moller come alive with the beauty of his music. Wife Dottie plays a heat lamp on his hands.





**BRRRRRR!** Warmly wrapped organist and audience enjoy the 3-19 Moller during one of its final concerts in its original setting.

chapter bid for and purchased the organ. Mr. Lester Crossman bought the theatre, to convert the building for other uses. Mr. Crossman offered free use of the building to the chapter and this cleared the way for another concert, a farewell concert played by Lowell Ayars on April 2 at 4:00 p.m.

After that day the organ removal was started because the building was soon to undergo alteration. Mr. Crossman, although not an "organ bug," has indeed been a good friend to the chapter.

The Moller was removed and placed in storage until a new home can be found for it.

But let's turn the clock back to the "golden era" of the '20s.

Back in 1927 Leonard MacClain was demonstrating Moller theatre pipe organs, sitting at the console in a "store window" set up, enabling all people and traffic to view him at work. The Tourisin Bros. (builders of theatres) came to arrange for the purchase of organs for two Philadelphia theatres, the "Met" on Broad Street (the building opened as the Metropolitan Opera House, but it is now used as a church) and the Sedgewick Theatre on Germantown Avenue. The price was lower if more than one organ was purchased. "Melody Mac" made a few suggestions regarding the design of the two proposed organs, and his demonstrations at the studio Moller helped clinch the deal.

Existing records show that the Tourisin Bros. bought the instrument through an "agreement of sale" with the Moller Company dated 3/15/28, the organ for the "Met" to cost \$50,000, and the organ for the Sedgewick to cost \$17,000—\$17,000 was the down payment, with \$1,700 more to be paid upon delivery of the organs, and the balance within 36 months after acceptance.

Soon relay boards, chests and shutters started to arrive. A quick appraisal by

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## Closing Chord

"Melody Mac" is dead. Leonard MacClain, one of the organ greats from the early days of silent movies, died on September 5 after a long bout with the cumulative inroads of diabetes and heart disease. He would have been 68 on September 8, the day set for his funeral at the Chambers-Wylie United Presbyterian Church—where he had played for many, many years.



Leonard MacClain (Melody Mac)

It's probably impossible to name a major theatre, past or present, in the Philadelphia area where "Mac" hadn't at one time supplied the music; he knew them all—the Kimballs, Wurlitzers and Mollers. It was during the '30s, while playing on radio, that he was dubbed "Melody Mac." It was a telephone request program and Leonard played it with a blank music rack; he knew every tune which had ever been popular, plus "a lot of dogs that never got anywhere," as Mac put it.

While playing in a cocktail lounge just 15 years ago, Leonard was struck by the beauty of a girl who came to hear him play. He was then in his early '50s but he was smitten hard and pursued Dottie relentlessly. Dottie tells it: "Leonard said, I'm much too old for you and I'm overweight and my heart is acting up—but marry me and you'll never regret it." He was right, of course. I never did regret it." Those close to the MacClains confirm the continuing love affair which lasted to the end of Leonard's life.

One friend, Roy Caruth, summed up the thoughts of many who knew Leonard: "Leonard was part of an era of movie palaces, magnificent pipe organs and organists who gave to it their per-

## A GIANT STEP FORWARD...

At the suggestion of famed organist Searle Wright, A.G.O., industrialist Edwin Link, famous for theatre organs and the Link Trainer for aviation, has acquired one of his best instruments for renovation and donation to the new Roberson Cultural Center in Binghamton, N. Y.

The instrument, three manuals and some 15 ranks, will have additional ranks of various heritages added, and installation is now under way. The dedication concert will be performed by Mr. Wright, and the first concert of the season next fall will be played by ATOE charter member Billy Nalle.

Mr. Link, Mr. Wright and Mr. Keith Martin of the Roberson Center are due the highest degree of commendation for initiating such a showplace for the advancement of the theatre pipe organ, in the first modern installation of its kind. Kudos also to Billy Nalle for being selected to represent us and the organ world at large in the season's opening concert. Full details will be announced in the next issue of *Theatre Organ Bombarde*.

**... A NEW TREND FOR ATOE?**

sonalities. And Leonard MacClain left his mark wherever he was heard. One always had to stop and listen when 'Melody Mac' was at the console, whether he was playing an eight-ranker or the giant Wanamaker pipe organ. It is my hope that when the Sedgewick pipe organ is erected in a new home, it will be dedicated to the memory of its designer, Leonard MacClain."

MacClain's career has been documented in these pages a number of times, including this issue. More effective than any eulogy regarding his influence is the story about how the Delaware Valley ATOE Chapter found, repaired and secured the 19-rank Moller recently removed from the Sedgewick Theatre in Germantown, Pa. Read the story and then just try to visualize it without the presence, direct and indirect, of Leonard MacClain.

One more thing. The last words Dorothy heard Leonard utter were typical—"... I love you, Dottie."

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## LETTERS, contd.

Best of luck in the future.

Yours sincerely  
JOHN B. POTTER

3 Page Street  
Madison, N. J. 07940  
September 9, 1967

My Dear Miss Lake,

I'd like to say that it was a terrible shame that you, one of the greatest organists of our time, could not give one of your very distinguished (for one reason or another) performances at the recent Detroit ATOE convention. You were the hit (POW) of the banquet at Portland last year, and I know several people who were very disappointed to hear that you got left home in Squalor Hollow.

I have conferred with a pipe organ owning friend of mine concerning the possibility of an addition to your 3/9 T.O. which I designed for you last March. He agrees that the perfect addition to make it a 3/10 should be a VOX IN-HUMANA. This can be used in solo work with the Tibia Martha rank with accompaniment, of course, on the VDB's! I hope this meets with your satisfaction. Hope you give another concert soon.

Sincerely yours  
ERIC ZELIFF

P.S.: When do I get my record?

Dear Sirs:

Being a theatre pipe organ buff, as well as a fellow ATOE member, I am curious to know how many of our membership was fortunate enough to catch the color TV show, titled "Across the Seven Seas" (*Face and Place*), which featured in the opening segment an all too brief series of shots of Leon Berry's two-manual Wurlitzer pipe organ in his home at Norridge, Ill. I accidentally tuned the program in for want of watching something other than a rerun and the caption in the TV guide stated merely, "World's Greatest 'Do-It-Yourself' Organ Builder." I am glad it featured an artist from our Chicago area as I have all, or most, of Mr. Berry's albums as well as hundreds of other pipe organ albums, from Jesse Crawford down to the most obscure artists. My only wish is that more exposure should be accorded to the pipe organ to give the public a more concise picture of the "World's Greatest Instrument."

Hoping you will find this item of interest to our subscribers, I remain

Yours sincerely  
Harry C. Miller  
Box 336, R. R. #3  
Palatine, Illinois 60067

(Program data: Channel 9, July 23, 1967—9:00 p.m.)

## CLOSING CHORD

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John E. Mitchell, 65, known throughout the Pittsburgh area by the phrase "Johnny Mitchell at the organ!" died on August 22, shortly after a cancer operation, in a Pittsburgh hospital. Mitchell's career started in 1918 when he started playing for silent movies at 16 in the Loew's Lyceum Theatre in Pittsburgh.

In 1921 he moved on to the Victor Theatre in McKeesport, then joined the Clark chain which operated the Regent and Liberty Theatres in East Liberty, Penna. Leo Palucki of Erie recalls hearing Mitchell at the Warner House when it first opened. He opened at the Enright in Pittsburgh in 1929, but by then "talkies" had doomed silent movies so he changed to broadcasting with a daily "Footlights and Stardust" program from



the Enright. In recent years he did club work and teaching. A friend, Vincent Volpe, says, "Mitchell was a demanding teacher, but his students loved him. And he was always ready to go along with us (ATOEers) to play the Leona Theatre Kimball over in Homestead. We in the Pittsburgh district are going to miss him." He was planning a record release to be played on the Leona organ, according to Jay E. Smith.

Mitchell played at the Pittsburgh Civic Arena right up to the day of his admittance to the hospital for the operation. He is survived by his widow, Marie; a son, John, and a daughter, Mrs. Joanne Dunn. He was a member of AFM and ATOE. A story about his musical career appeared in the April 1967 issue of THEATRE ORGAN-BOMBARDE.

Harry Reed of Seattle, 73, organist-musician, long active in Pacific Northwest music circles, died in Miami Beach August 7 after an illness of five weeks. He became ill while attending the National Convention of the American Federation of Musicians in that Florida city.

He began his musical career at 14 as a church organist. Later, he was staff organist for Loew's St. James Theatre in Boston. He came to Seattle in 1921, and played the organ at cinemas there and in Everett. In 1931, Reed became assistant program and musical director for radio station KJR. Leaving radio in 1937, he

played for vaudeville shows at the Palomar Theatre until 1944 when he took over the orchestra at the Showbox Theatre.

Reed was president of Local 76, AFM, from 1944 to 1954, and served several terms on its board of directors. He was president of the Northwest Conference of Musicians from 1946 to 1952, and was its secretary-treasurer from 1953 until 1962.

He is survived by his wife and two sons, Eugene A. Reed of Seattle, and Capt. Charles C. Reed of New York.

## DELAWARE VALLEY

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the organ installation technicians indicated that something was amiss. A call to the factory at Hagerstown, Maryland, confirmed that there had indeed been a mixup; this was the "Met" organ mislabeled to the Sedgewick Theatre. The "Met" Moller was practically a twin of the 4-43 organ in the Fox, Atlanta, Georgia, the "Big Mo." Some fast reshipping resulted and finally the 19-ranker arrived at the Sedgewick.

In the spring of 1928 the theatre opened with the largest theatre organ in the Germantown area. This was opus 5230. Among the professional organists that were to play this Moller was Leonard MacClain—demonstrator, designer and soloist.

Once again, 39 years later, was organist MacClain to present a lifetime of tunes flowing from his fingers, and those Moller pipes responded.

Leonard MacClain—the master of the console—the teacher and the friend.

## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF Gaylord Carter

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DURING THIS TIME, we were playing Harold Lloyd pictures. He would make about two pictures a year, and one evening, one of his managers was in the audience at the Seville. Apparently, I was feeling pretty well that night, because I was just going to town on the movie. He phoned the manager of one of the big downtown theaters, and said, "There's a kid out here in the sticks who's really kicking heck out of this organ! You could probably use somebody down there."

"They sent for me, I did an audition, and in 1926, I went into the Million Dollar Theater at Third and Broadway, which was the leading presentation house in Los Angeles. The pictures ran from a month to two or three months, and we

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