

Whatever Became of the WLS Organ?

by Stu Green

Back in the early '30s, Frank May, of Kokomo, Indiana, often listened to the organ broadcasts emanating from station WLS "the Prairie Farmer station" in Chicago. It was a 3-manual Barton of eleven ranks with a wonderfully appealing tone as played by such console luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson, wife Elsie Mae, Howard Peterson or Al Melgard. The organ was then in continuous use, introducing soap operas, accompanying vocalists, filling a spare 15 minutes or, best of all, providing a late night half hour of

music to dream by. Young Frank couldn't know then that one day he would own the WLS Barton, and install it in his home. The organ had quite a history even before Frank heard it on the air.

It started life in 1923 as Barton No. 197, its identification number when installed in the Barton Organ School in the Mollers building, corner of Madison and Wabash in Chicago. There it was used by Al Melgard to crash-train pianists who wanted to help fill the large demand for organists during the ascendancy

of the theatre organ. 1923 was a good year for them.

The instrument was also used as a demonstration instrument by the aggressive sales force of the Barton Organ Company. Its mellow tonal qualities, which would eventually make it a fine broadcast studio instrument, sold many a Barton for theatre use in those wonderful days.

In 1928, with the demand by theatres much reduced, the 3/11 was sold to Sears Roebuck for use in its Chicago radio station, WLS ("World's Largest Store"). It was given a complete overhaul, then moved to the WLS studios on the seventh floor of the Hotel Sherman, where it was again in continuous use from 1928 to 1932. During that year Sears sold the station and all equipment to the *Prairie Farmer Magazine*, a publication still read by the rural population of the midwest.

The organ (now Opus 6524) was moved to the Prairie Farmer Bldg., 1247 West Washington Blvd., Chicago. It was installed in the large studio A in a favorable acoustical environment. It was here that the organ probably reached its greatest prominence, as played by Howard Peterson and Al Melgard. The location was only six blocks from the Chicago Stadium, where both were featured at the famous 6/62 Barton.

The 3/11 was again on the air frequently during the WLS broadcast day, seven days a week, from early morning through noonday, introducing and closing programs. One memorable early evening program was the WLS Dinner Bell Show which provided easy listening music

Ralph Waldo Emmerson playing a late night 'slumber session' at the WLS Barton in the early 30s.





Howard Peterson enjoyed the longest engagement at WLS — 20 years.

guaranteed to aid digestion. Then there was that inevitable late night show which put many midwest residents to sleep with the sound of palatable organ music.

The longest broadcast residency was enjoyed by Howard Peterson who played WLS organcasts for some 20 years, until about 1960. By then Peterson was playing a 4/11 organ. In 1950, the worn original Barton console was replaced with a Reisner duplicate, with one difference — a 4th manual had been added.

By 1959 the broadcasting industry was feeling the inroads of television and WLS had to pull in its horns and depend on recorded music. The organ fell into disuse. Prairie Farmer sold WLS to ABC in 1960. The organ was acquired by Warren North. It was removed from the WLS studio and stored in an abandoned railway station in Brookston, Indiana, where it remained in storage for several years. Enter Frank May.

Frank was retiring after a fruitful career as a Delco engineer. He and wife Frances needed a hobby. They heard about their old friend gathering dust in the Brookston railroad station. True, he didn't play much,

but what the hell! Here was a fine instrument in need of succor. He could learn to play it after the rescue. He made the deal with North and by 1965 he was ready to move. One thing Frank and Frances hadn't fully realized was the enormous amount of space a dismantled organ re-

quires. All of a sudden they were confronted with six tons of organ parts.

Frances recalls, "We had no place to put it all. We couldn't leave it outside so we filled the attic and the garage. We put parts under beds, in closets — even lined the walls with organ parts. We needed more room, lots more room."

Then came the "unravelling the puzzle" chore. Frank was faced with the task of trying to determine the reason for and the operation of each item. He had no original plans or blueprints, only a heap of parts. On top of that, he wanted to add some pipework he had acquired, to enlarge the original instrument. Rather than try to follow the original plan which involved mechanical switching, Frank decided to apply electronic computer circuitry he had adapted from systems he learned about during his engineering career at Delco.

In all, it took Frank and Frances eleven years to get the monster installed and perking. Here's the current stop analysis:

Original Barton ranks
(Dennison pipework unless otherwise noted)

Diapason, 8' and 4'
Viol d'Orchestra, 8' and 4'
Viole Celeste, 8' and 4'
Concert Flute, 16' thru 2'
Tibia Clausa, 16' thru 4'

Frank May examines some of his pipework. It's all in one large chamber.



Clarinet, 8'
 Oboe Horn, 8'
 English Horn, 8'
 Kinura, 8'
 Vox Humana, 8' (Gottfried)
 Harmonic Tuba, 16' thru 4'
 (Hope Jones)
 Marimba Harp
 Xylophone
 Chrysoglott
 Glockenspiel-Orch. Bells
 Chimes (Deagan, Class A)
 Drums and Toy Counter

Added Voices

English Diapason, 8' and 4'
 Tibia Clausa II, 8' and 4'
 Stopped Flute, 8' and 4'
 Harmonic Flute, 8' and 4'
 Salicional, 8' and 4'
 Gamba, 8'
 String Celeste, 4'
 Cymbelstern
 Vibrachord (44 notes)
 Glockenspiel-Celesta II

Note: Designation "8' " indicates 61 pipes, "8' and 4' " 73 pipes, "16' thru 2' " 97 pipes, etc.

Between 1966 and 1977, Frank and Frances worked on the organ without pause. It had suffered the usual ravages of time, neglect and long storage. There was much to do to put it in playing condition. Frances took on the job of washing away the accumulated dust and grime of decades. She washed the pipes, chests, regulators and wind conductors. In the process she discovered that some of the leather on pneumatics and regulators had deteriorated. She learned how to replace the leather and she also revarnished the wooden parts.

Frances' diligence proved to be a source of renewal to Frank.

"I became discouraged many times, but her persistence gave me renewed determination to finish the job."

Assembly was Frank's job. Many parts were beyond restoration. He fabricated some, acquired a few, had others made. Within two years he had a few ranks playing. There were the usual thousands of solder joints. And he had to accommodate the additional seven ranks and percussions from other organs. This meant additional stopkeys on the stoprail and more chamber space. The additional space requirement was solved by a spacious 2-room addition to the May



Frances and Frank May pose at the console of their enlarged Barton, now a 4-decker.

home, which is west of Kokomo, Indiana.

Both Mays consider the 11-year project a worthy one. Frank took some lessons a few years ago and can now play a passable pop tune. And the organ has made the May home a focal point of the organ hobby in Indiana. Not only have ATOS meetings been conducted there but the organ brings well-known organists to their door, talent such as John Landon and Dennis James,

among many others.

When the organ had been installed, there was considerable curiosity about it and reporters beat a path to the May door. Thus the Mays became promoters for the hobby.

The initial story about the May Barton appeared in a 1974 edition of the *Delco Broadcaster*, published by Frank's former employer. Then in 1977 came a spread in the *Indianapolis News*, complete with a photo of Frank and Frances among

Frank tries out his playing skills on 'Fascination' as Frances listens. He insists he's merely an organ technician but his prowess at the manuals has improved greatly since the Barton moved in.



some of the Barton's 1400 pipes. The *Kokomo Tribune* frontpaged its 1977 May story. By 1978 the *Prairie Farmer* Magazine publishers learned what had become of their famous organ and ran an illustrated story. All of these were written in non-technical terms, stories which make the public aware of both the hobby and ATOS. The Mays have been members for years.

The *Prairie Farmer* story contained a quote by Frank May which sum-

marizes his philosophy about his organ installation:

"Regardless of what restoration project one may pursue, anyone taking on such a task must consider it a labor of love. He cannot count the hours, not the work, nor the cost — if he is to achieve his goal. But the rewards of success in satisfaction alone are worth all the effort."

Then, with a knowing smile, Frank adds, "I couldn't have done it without Frances' help." □

On State Street, that Great Street . . .

DEATH COMES TO A LOVELY LADY

by Carl F. Guiney

CHICAGO — Sept. 10, 1979 Today, I stood at the bier of a lovely lady. In her relatively short life span she served the noble purpose of bringing happiness to many people. She had a way of making people feel better for having been in her presence, even if only once. Usually, however, it was a case of people enjoying so thoroughly what she offered, they came back again and again.

She first saw the light of day in the early twenties. And what a beautiful sight she turned out to be for the State Street family! Her voice was just as beautiful as her appearance, due, largely, to the musical talent of two devoted members of her "household" — Russ Benjamin and Dr. Edward Eigenschenck — who saw to it that the lovely lady also sounded as glorious as possible. Her beauty remained with her throughout the thirties, the forties, and even the fifties.

It was in the sixties that she began to feel the pangs of neglect. The world had suddenly become strange with new styles, new sounds. It was no longer the world of friendly sights and harmonious sounds into which she had been born and in which she had grown and prospered. Times had changed. And *how* they had changed! Surely, that lovely lady must have cried, behind the scenes, many times over the ugly sights and uglier sounds closing in upon her, powerless to stem the tide. Everything had banded together in some kind of miscasting; a wild ride, as it were, with oblivion as the coming attraction. Now she's gone, her very life's blood clotted fatally by the

macabre dance of man's inhumanity. Nevermore will those friendly arms reach out to embrace the community she had nourished so bountifully for most of her lifetime.

As I stood peering at her remains, I couldn't help but wonder what her famous parents, Balaban & Katz, might say, could they see her today, in her final moments. My silent benediction was powerless to raise her from the dead, and powerless to stay the untender hands of her undertaker.

It's been said that one's lifetime passes in review in the moments preceding death. Did this lovely lady behold such a panorama as the final curtain came down? Perhaps so. I won't deny that I was deeply moved. With so much dissonance in daily life today, I readily confess to being moved when witnessing the passing of anything beautiful.

Allowing myself one final look at the cold remains, I turned and walked slowly away, deep in thought. I had a deep sense of gratitude for having had the privilege of knowing her.

Goodbye, lovely lady. Yesterdays audiences will always remember you as the Roosevelt, a lovely lady of State Street's family. Surely, the heavenly chords of the greatest of all sounds — the theatre organ — are even now pealing out a majestic song of welcome as you take your place alongside your notable relatives of yesteryear — the Apollo, Garrick, Grand, Orpheum, Tivoli, Granada, Marbro, Paradise, Norshore and Southtown theatres.

May you rest in peace. □

A Tribute to One of the Finest of the Golden Age

by Bud Taylor

At the 20th annual convention in San Francisco, Mildred Maginn Fitzpatrick was installed in the ATOS Theatre Organists Hall of Fame. THEATRE ORGAN Magazine, April 1973, featured two articles on Mildred and she has been featured in other publications in the organ world. No mention has been made, however, of the fact of her passing, on July 26, 1978.

At the height of her career, she was one of the best-known theatre organists and teachers in Chicago. She always felt that her career began at the age of ten when she played the first movement of Chopin's "C Major Concerto," the evening of her graduation from the Metropolitan Conservatory.

In succeeding years she was organist in a number of large motion picture houses in Chicago, including five years at the Pantheon. She also had extended engagements with Chicago radio stations.

In addition to her public performance career, she was the private teacher of many students and won a reputation for instruction and guidance of persons wishing to enter the theatre musician field. She was head of the Theatre and Organ Department of the Sherwood Music School in Chicago for 21 years.

It was at Sherwood that I met Mildred and have been grateful to have had her friendship for over 40 years, until her passing. She no doubt was one of the most devoted teachers to her students, and had more organists become well-known theatre organists in Chicago and throughout the country of any teacher I have known.

She was well-known for her concert work on both pipe and electronic organs before her retirement.

In naming Mildred Fitzpatrick to the Theatre Organists Hall of Fame, the Society called her one of the finest theatre organists of the golden age, and the outstanding woman organist of the time. She will be missed by many. □