

Theatre Organ

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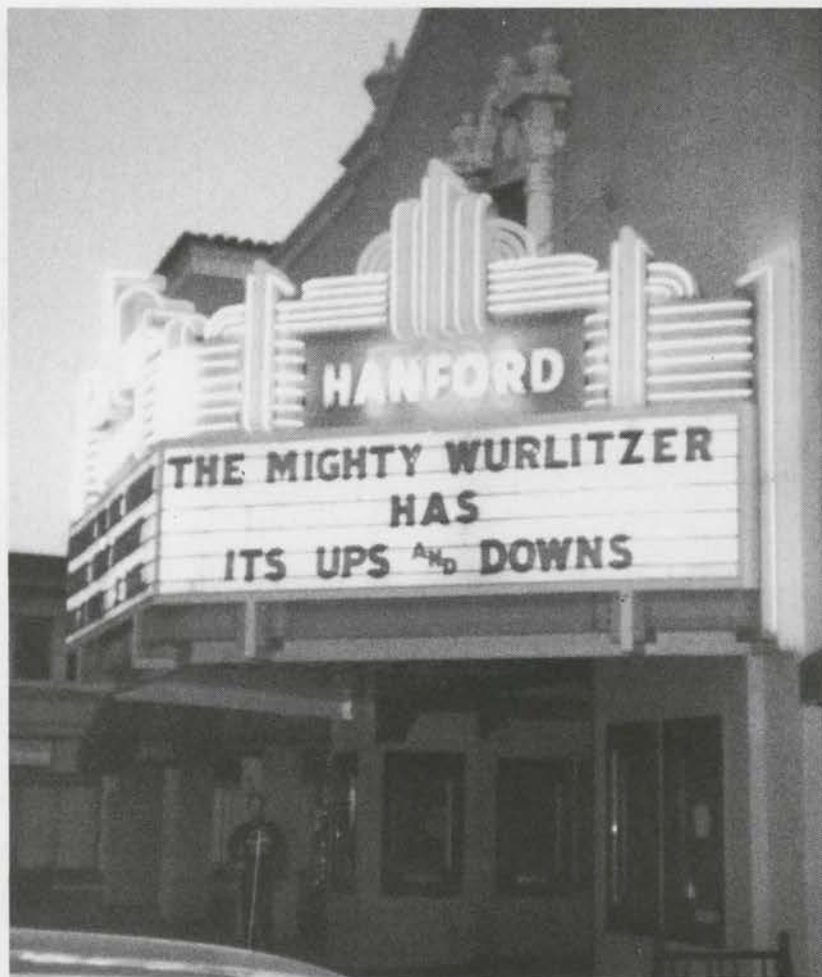


The Wurlitzer in the FOX-Hanford Theatre

*1990 is a good year for
Sequoia Chapter ATOS.
Foremost is the hosting of the
fall, 1990, Central California
Regional ATOS Convention.*

*It will also be the year
of the premiere of the
chapter-installed 2/10 Wurlitzer
Style 216 pipe organ.*

Photos by Howard Martin and Tom DeLay



Sequoia Chapter had, as one of its charter members, the late Richard S. Villeman. A well-known pipe organ builder who also had a deep love for the theatre organ, Richard was given posthumously, one of the 1988 Technical Awards and his sister, Mrs. Ruth V. Dresser, also no stranger to pipe organs, accepted the award on behalf of her brother. A couple of years before Richard's passing, Ruth had given the fledgling Sequoia Chapter a two-manual Wurlitzer of roughly seven ranks — all Wurlitzer, and one of the conditions of the donation was that the organ would be installed in a public location to be heard and enjoyed by the public.

Back in the early 1980s the Hanford, California, family of Dan Humason bought the 1929 FOX-Hanford Theatre. The house was virtually intact, sans pipe organ. Built by the William Fox interests, this 1200-seat house was a "budget" atmospheric, designed by the architectural firm of Balch and Standbury. They designed several such atmospheric theatres throughout California, most notable of which was their now (temporarily?) tripled FOX Theatre in nearby Visalia with its fabulous Burmese architecture. The FOX-Hanford was originally complete with twinkling stars and drifting clouds in a pleasingly indirectly lit auditorium. The illusion is not unlike a Caribbean/Spanish courtyard. The two organ chambers spoke through the Spanish "houses" on either side of the proscenium arch. A spectacular fire curtain completes the courtyard illusion.

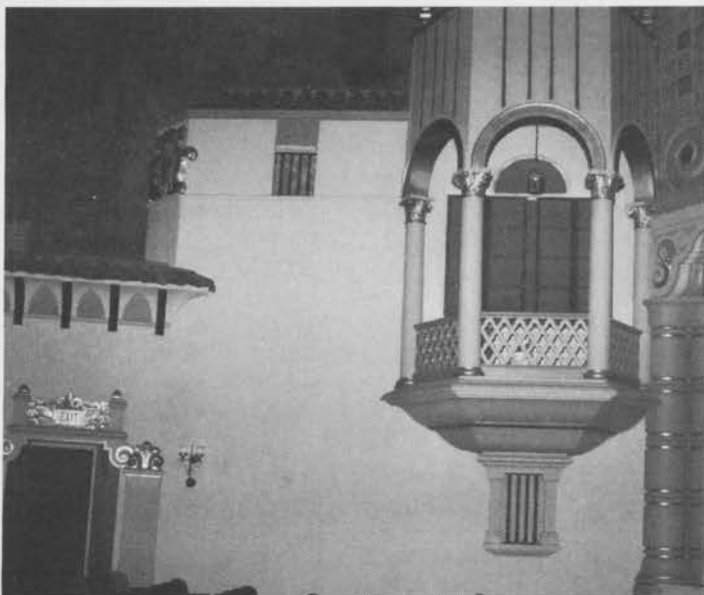
As was fairly typical of the smaller, rural, later FOX West Coast theatres,

transplanted theatre organs were brought in from earlier FOX houses that had installed newer instruments. Rather than junk the earlier organs, many such instruments were "souped up" by FOX West Coast organman Louis A. Maas. Maas was a great one for taking a four- or five-rank Wurlitzer or Robert-Morton and enlarging it with a Diapason, Clarinet, Tibia Clausa and Oboe Horn. True enough, the original FOX-Hanford organ was a transplanted Style B, opus 860, to which Maas added all but the Oboe Horn. This original FOX-Hanford organ was now a 2/7 with the entire Style B installed in the right chamber and the Maas additions installed with its own relay in the left loft. Maas built his chests to look very much like early Robert-Morton layouts, but employed a chest action built of Kilgen design. This 2/7 was found floating in the orchestra pit after a summer downpour. Thus, in the late 1950s its theatrical career ended; it was removed and

reinstalled in a miserable configuration in a local church where it remains in a mildly playable condition.

When the Humason family bought the FOX, the house, though intact, was a mess from neglect. Seats were ripped to shreds, and the lobby had a beautiful drop ceiling made of drab 1960's Celotex. Above this they found the remains of the original plasterwork. Molds were made of these remnants on site and were carefully made to fit the missing plaster decorations. These reproductions cannot be distinguished from the originals. It is fabulous to consider that these were made on site and did not require a city council, consultant, or lay committee to figure out how to accomplish the work. These carefully poured and painted "beams" and ceiling trim exactly duplicate what had been lost years before. Also, long gone is the cloud projector. The stars still shine, but the clouds will have to wait until a unit can be found to drift them back into the night sky.

MAIN CHAMBER



SOLO CHAMBER



The present FOX-Hanford Wurlitzer is also a replication — of the rare Wurlitzer Style 216. Built only for FOX West Coast Theatre, the 216 can be considered the ultimate two-manual organ. Virtually all parts of the organ are from previously broken-up Style 216 Unit Orchestras. The entire Main chamber, shades, relay and percussions were from the Los Angeles Westlake Theatre. (The pipework from the original Westlake Solo chamber is now in a well-known Hollywood Philharmonic recording organ.) So, it was this division that required the parts of the FOX-California Theatre in Taft. The 216 from this theatre, as well as the Westlake instrument, had their consoles destroyed in separate fires. As a result, the present console controlling the organ is from Wurlitzer opus 433. It is a beautiful 1921 console style with closed keydesk brackets and more elaborate console paneling than was found on most mid-1920's panel consoles. An elegant style, it was probably discontinued by Wurlitzer as it might have been too expensive for mass production.

Sequoia Chapter's Style 216 in FOX-Hanford.



One feature of the 216, as with other similarly sized Wurlitzer units, was a 49-note Marimba/Harp. At present the Hanford organ does not have the all-important harp, but it does have a Wurlitzer pressure piano that came with opus 433. It is hoped to secure and add a Wurlitzer Harp to the organ in the not-too-distant future. Also missing was the 16' Pedal Tuba Profunda. A replacement set was found and purchased through the efforts of a generous gift from Nor-Cal member Bill Schlotter who is already up to his eyebrows supervising the installation of Nor-Cal's world class 4/33 Wurlitzer. Other Nor-Cal members also gave generously to the project: Bert Atwood, Dave Schutt and Ron Downer gave hundreds of feet of wire. Sequoia Chapter members also graciously gave over and above installation labor. Past President Lloyd Bledsoe gave a new set of stoprail contacts. When longtime enthusiast Howard Martin was faced with the assignment of straightening 32 sets of pedal contact blocks, he decided to donate a new set of blocks — then proceeded to install them. What some guys will do to get out of contact straightening! This has truly been a project in which many have con-

tributed. There would not have been a way for Sequoia Chapter to get the organ into the condition it is today without these many helpers. Harold Roque had his electricians drive the 80-mile round trip from Fresno to Hanford to install the rectifiers and DC wiring. The crew has remained completely faithful from start to finish! At the risk of omitting an essential name, we will not attempt to list them all, but we started with 6-8 people and finished with the same folks. Others would come and go as time permitted. The organ was installed under the direction of Tom DeLay and tonally finished by DeLay and Dave Moreno who have also tonally finished all the other theatre organs in the area.

The actual installation was started in late January 1989, with the organ being brought to playing condition one year later. The instrument consists of a typical five-rank Main: Concert Flute 16-1, Viol d'Orchestre 8-2, Open Diapason 16-4, Viol Celeste 8-4, and Clarinet 8. The Chrysoglott is unenclosed high above the Main chamber. The Chimes are installed in a similar location above the Solo chamber. The Solo contains a typical Vox Humana 8, unleathered Tibia Clausa

Main Chamber in FOX-Hanford 16' (metal) Diaphone is to extreme left.



8-2, Orchestral Oboe 8, Harmonic Tuba 16-8 (on 15" wind pressure), and the English Horn 8. The original console stoplist has been respecified to reflect more modern styles of theatre organ playing. There are no manual Clarion, Bourdons or tremulated English Horns! This, coupled with the fact all basses below 4' are off tremulant, all contribute to the big sound of this organ. Another factor is the auditorium itself. Being atmospheric, the ceiling is essentially a large, parabolic reflector. The organ mixes well to all parts of the house, even under the balcony.

Finally, mention must be made of theatre owner Dan Humason. A determined preservationist, HE is the one who approached the chapter about installing an organ in the FOX. He knew that a professionally installed organ was out of the question, but somehow hoped to have the "voice" returned to the FOX someday. How lucky Sequoia Chapter is to have had this opportunity! Dan and his family have lavished on this Wurlitzer beyond belief. As described in the original agreement between the chapter and Mr. Humason, the console was to be installed in a fixed position in the orches-

tra pit. However, while attending a theatre owners' convention in Los Angeles, Dan made the mistake of going to the Orpheum Theatre and seeing its fine 3/13 Wurlitzer rise up out of the pit. That was all it took! We now find the rather small orchestra pit covered over as an extension of the stage and at pit center the two-manual Wurlitzer now rises into the spotlight. Always one to figure out the impossible, Dan, together with his son, Dan Jr., came up with a lift that was virtually designed and built on site in the FOX-Hanford Theatre!

As in the case of the previously chronicled Fresno Warnors Theatre and organ, Sequoia Chapter and ATOS are very fortunate to have theatre owners who take a large interest in the fine organs installed in their houses. It is quite something to have one privately owned and preserved movie palace, but to have TWO is incredible. Now that the "voice" of the FOX-Hanford Theatre has been returned, it can easily be understood why a theatre organ's true place is, whenever possible, in a theatre auditorium. Only in a large, live room can the tonal resources of an instrument be allowed to bloom into the big sound we all treasure.

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