

## SOME INTERESTING HISTORY

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With significant material from Don Kinnier and the producers of *Capitol Gains*

### The Theatre

What is now the Capitol Theatre started its life circa 1910 as a one level movie house named the Jackson Theatre. It replaced the Martin Harness Works and the Independent Order of Mechanics Hall at the corner of North George and Philadelphia Streets. Frank E. Berry managed the place and his son Joe was the ticket taker.

When the theatre closed in 1917, a small 2 manual Robert Morton theatre organ was installed, a balcony and fireproof projection-booth was added and the building was reopened for movies and vaudeville. The organ was fitted into two tall chambers on either side of a spectacular cast-plaster proscenium arch. (The proscenium has been recently restored.) The stage was just large enough for a 'suitcase act'. An equally small orchestra pit was suitable for the organ console and a couple of sidemen. The movie screen was installed on the rear stage wall. In 1921, the M.P. Moller Co. was contracted to add 5 ranks of pipes to the existing Robert Morton. (A rank is a set of pipes.)

In 1925, Nathan and Louis Appell built the larger Strand Theatre adjacent to and surrounding Jackson. At that time, the Appells purchased the Jackson, conducted further renovation, removed the Morton/Moller, and installed a Wurlitzer theatre organ opus 1395 (a 190 special with 3 manuals and 9 ranks of pipes). They reopened the 752 seat theatre as the Capitol in 1926. Both theatres closed in 1976. Splendid civic action with great support from the business community resulted in the rebirth of these two theatres as The Strand-Capitol Performing Arts Center in 1980.

### The Organ

The instrument now installed in the Capitol Theatre began as a 2 manual 4 rank (2/4) Moller installed in a funeral home. From there it went to the home of an organist in New Jersey who added 2 ranks of pipes, percussions and a toy counter. In 1968, concert artist and organ enthusiast Bob Lilarose bought it and moved it to Reading, PA.

Around 1972, Bob sold it to Mike Clemens of Lancaster, PA. Mike merged it with a Wurlitzer organ from a Stanley Warner RKO theater in Raway, NJ, that was being torn down. Over the years it grew in his attic to 19 ranks. In 1986, Mike agreed to lease the instrument to the SCPAC for 20 years.

The organ console was built by Carl Becker, a master cabinetmaker from Wolfe Supply Co. in York, and delivered to the R. J. Brunner Organ Co. in Silver Spring, Lancaster County, for "outfitting." It is a 7/8th scale version of a Wurlitzer French-style console. After outfitting, the console was delivered to the theatre on April 7, 1987.

The organ made its first musical "noise" in February 1988. The first pipes to play were 3 of the 4 ranks from Bob Lilarose's organ! By December, 10 ranks were up and running. Dennis James performed the first concert on the instrument on July 20, 1991.

About this time, a group of area pipe organ enthusiasts formed the Susquehanna Valley Theatre Organ Society (SVTOS) to preserve and present the instrument. For some

10 years, the SVTOS, in cooperation with the SCPAC, offered silent films, vaudeville shows and concerts featuring the organ along with performing regular maintenance and upgrades.

In late December of 2001, volunteers from SVTOS helped removed remove the entire instrument and put in storage just in time for the extensive renovation of both the Strand and the Capitol. Some two years later, they helped move it back to the R. J. Brunner Organ Company for restoration.

The console was completely stripped of its components, sanded and given a new coat of paint and new gold trim. The keyboards and pedal board were refurbished. And a new stop rail was installed with new stop tabs and piston action. The "new" console features two new slide-out drawers, bright new toe studs and new swell and expression pedals. The organ can even be hooked up to a laptop computer for recording and playback and specification changes.

The wind chests (what the pipes sit on) were completely re-leathered, rewired and refinished and some new chests have were from scratch. With the help of volunteers, hundreds of wood pipes were cleaned, sanded and refinished. Metal pipes were cleaned and dents removed. Pipe stoppers got new leather and an entirely new rack system was fabricated.

During restoration the instrument grew from 3/17 to 3/20 including the addition of several ranks of strings and an Orchestral Oboe. Gone are the huge 16-foot Double Open pipes—to be replaced by digital samples. Also replaced by digital samples are the Marimba and Chrysoglott because there just wasn't room for them in the chambers. Most of the percussion and toy counter will be the same except for a new Crash Cymbal and Chinese Gong. Because of the extensive renovations of both the theatre and the organ, Mr. Clemens agreed to terminate the lease and donate the organ to the theatre.

The "new" organ was reinstalled in the Theatre over the winter of 2004-05—again with the help of volunteers from the SVTOS. The pipes rest on two levels in each of the two elevator-shaft-like chambers. Four panels of swell shades control the flow of sound into the theatre. The console sits on a new hydraulic scissors lift.