

# The Organ Spiel

NEWSLETTER FOR THE SIERRA CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN THEATRE ORGAN SOCIETY

Covid-19 Edition



August 2020

## Community Clubhouse Update

For those of you who live outside of Fair Oaks, you can see from the headline at the right that we had a bit of a scare in July about a proposal to remove the organ and the stage. We were notified in early July, which gave Randy, Tom and Terry time to prepare and present some remarks at the virtual Board Meeting. We don't know the exact attendance, but we believe there were quite a few more than normal listening on the call-in line.

There were several e-mail comments along with the article from Ralph Carhart you see to the right. (Ralph is on the Boards of the Fair Oaks Park District and the Fair Oaks Historical Society.) Included in the e-mail comments was a very nice letter from the Fair Oaks Historical Society Board which spoke in our favor. No one spoke in favor of the proposal to remove the organ, so it was filed.

An assessment was made available prior to the meeting which showed the benefit would be that an additional 150 persons could be added to the occupancy of the auditorium, raising total capacity to 552. But the cost to accomplish that would be up to \$850,000. Details on the study can be downloaded here: <https://www.forpd.org/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Item/1150?fileID=10851>

As you may know, the Fair Oaks Measure J bond issue narrowly passed in 2018. This will make \$26.9 million in bonds available to the Fair Oaks Park District. A portion of those funds that are planned for the Clubhouse include a new HVAC and upgraded lighting and electrical work. Extensive changes are in the works for the area surrounding the clubhouse, including parking and landscaping. Our hope is that after this project is complete, we will be able to present quarterly silent movies in partnership with the Fair Oaks Park District.

## Theater Organ and Stage to be Removed?



The American Theater Organ Society, Sierra Branch, owns and maintains the wind-driven instrument initially built for a theater to accompany silent films. Photo: FORPD

in our region, is a unique instrument that can contribute to the District's vision of branding the Village as a venue for the visual and performing arts. I do feel that the organ is currently under-utilized and should be better publicized and used for more concerts, silent movies and weddings in the Clubhouse. I will advocate for that direction.

Most residents have never heard this remarkable wind-driven instrument and its

### Commentary by Ralph Carhart

At the June Zoom meeting of the Board of Directors of the Fair Oaks Recreation and Park District, during discussion of the planned renovation of the Community Clubhouse, it was requested by the Board that the District Administrator investigate the potential removal of the stage in the upstairs room and the theater pipe organ installed within the stage in order to enlarge the size and capacity of the room. The project to renovate the Clubhouse, using Measure J funds, is currently under design and is projected for construction beginning in December 2020 and continuing for approximately 18 months.

Consideration of the stage and organ-removal proposal and the findings of the District staff have been placed on the agenda for discussion and public comment during the July 15 Board meeting. That meeting will be conducted virtually on Zoom, beginning at 6:00 p.m. Members of the public who want to participate online in that meeting should contact the District at 916-966-1036.

Written comments may also be mailed or delivered to the District office in advance of the meeting.

I requested that the District Administrator identify and notify in advance of July 15 those of the District's community partners and other potentially interested persons of this discussion item. The proposal as initially discussed, would entail removal of the elevated stage area, the storage under the stage, and the theater pipe organ with its myriad of wind-driven instruments that are installed in spaces on either side of the stage. A replacement smaller portable stage may be included in the west side of the room. The proposal envisions removal of the pipe organ at the expense of the American Theater Organ Society, Sierra Branch, that owns and maintains the complex instrument.

As one of the five Directors of the District I do not support the proposed stage and organ removal. In advocating the enactment of Measure J, I envisioned investing in upgrading and adding amenities to the District's parks and facilities, not removing amenities. In my opinion the theater pipe organ, one of only a few



The committee seeks to enlarge the Community Clubhouse and remove the complex instrument with its array of pipes, bells, whistles and percussion. Photo: FORPD

array of pipes, bells, whistles and percussion. The organ was initially built for a theater in San Leandro where it accompanied silent films. Later it was moved to Cal Expo for a number of years until its thousand-hours restoration and installation in our Clubhouse.

If you have interest in this item, please register to participate in the July 15 Zoom meeting, drop off your written comments at the District office or send an email to the District Administrator in advance of the meeting so your input can be included in the Administrator's report to the Board.

And feel free to share this message with anyone else you think may be interested in this item. ★

By Ralph Carhart  
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as first published in American River Messenger



With Bill Field at the Wurlitzer, the Old Town Music Hall was a time warp that sailed its guests back to the early 20th century when movie houses were gilded palaces and orchestras supplied the soundtrack that film had yet to master.

Field's love affair with old movie theaters, silent film and the soaring power of the Mighty Wurlitzer was so infectious it attracted a hard-core stable of followers who would show up for an evening concert and a short film or a Sunday matinee at the downtown El Segundo theater.

"For a brief period of time you could leave behind your humble existence and live like royalty," said Don Manning of the Los Angeles Conversancy, explaining the dreamlike experience of the theater to *The Times* in 1991.

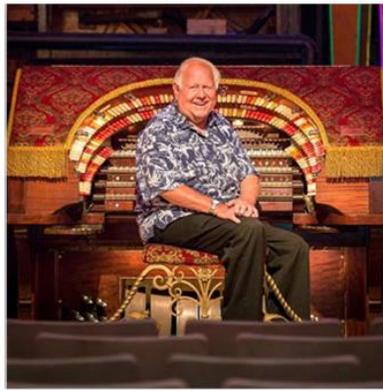
The music hall closed in mid-March when the pandemic began its march across California. But Field and his supporters remained hopeful that it would someday open again.

Waiting still, Field died June 28, his death likely a result of a stroke he had suffered as well as prostate cancer, friends said. He was 80.

"When we lost Bill Field, we lost a part of L.A. history," said Oscar- and Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker James Moll, an advocate for the theater and one of Field's friends. "Fortunately, he leaves a valuable legacy in Old Town Music Hall, which will keep doing its thing for as long as there are people in L.A. who love classic film and music."

Field and his friend Bill Coffman found the Wurlitzer at the old Fox West Coast Theater in Long Beach. Full orchestras had long since vanished from the pits at movie houses and now the pipe organs were on their way out as well.

The two borrowed \$2,000 from a credit union to buy the instrument and then put it in storage, where it sat — in pieces — for the next 10 years. The organ and the two film aficionados finally found a home when a boxy old movie theater on Richmond Street became available in 1968. It had once been home to the El Segundo State Theater and, for a



while, a Baptist church.

In came the Wurlitzer, the ruby red carpeting, the majestic curtains, the evocative oil paintings and glittering chandeliers. Reassembled, the Wurlitzer was a behemoth of an instrument — more than 2,000 pipes and 244 keys arranged on four keyboards along with stop keys that triggered the sounds of bells, cymbals, trumpets and drums. In short, a full orchestra.

In the dark, it glowed eerily and then sprung to life when the curtains parted, a musical explosion before Lon Chaney, or perhaps Charlie Chaplin, appeared on the screen. "You knew you were walking into somebody's dream bubble," Janet Klein, a musician who performed at the theater, told *Variety*.

William Charles Field was born in Los Angeles on Oct. 4, 1939, one of four children in a hardworking family. Both of his parents were employed by the Los Angeles Unified School District — his father as an electrician, his mother a secretary. Though they both worked in a public school district, the couple sent their children to Catholic schools.

Field found his love, his avocation and his future all at once when he wandered through the Barker Bros. department store in downtown L.A. and was

captivated by the sound of a pipe organ roaring and dipping in the background as shoppers browsed. By the time he was 12, he had been hired as the organist at the Los Angeles Theatre on South Broadway.

He never wandered far from the instrument. "Pipe organs were the soul and sound of the old theaters," Field told *The Times* in 2008. Both Field and Coffman lived simply — Field in his family's old home in South L.A. and Coffman in a rented room in El Segundo. Field repaired organs for a living, while Coffman got by on a small pension from his days as a musician. But at the theater, both felt rich and rewarded.

Even as his health declined, Field navigated his way to the organ on a scooter and pulled the audience under the spell of the Wurlitzer before the silent movies and early talkies began to roll. "We tried to create an escape from the bombardment of modern-day electronic trauma," said Coffman, who died in 2001. "Organ music does that."

The lights were turned off at the Old Town Music Hall in March following a showing of the musical "For Me and My Gal" with Judy Garland and Gene Kelly. Moll said the plan is to reopen the theater when the pandemic loosens its grip and that Edward Torres, a 24-year-old organist who was mentored by Field, will take over the Wurlitzer.

But Field's presence will linger inside the music hall. "We've lost a quiet champion of a defining cultural feature of Los Angeles: the music and film industry," said Tom Bopp, a musician who first walked into the music hall as an 18-year-old classical music student. "Bill Field, by keeping the classic films rolling and the vintage music flowing, nourished the roots of today's pop culture and kept them alive."

Field is survived by his longtime partner, Danny Tokusato, and two sisters.

By Steve Marble - Obituaries Editor LATimes

## PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE—RANDY WARWICK



Because of the disruption caused by COVID-19 this year, I have decided to update the membership regarding what has happened and our expectations for the near future.

Given that our group almost entirely consists of seniors aged 55+, it is only prudent that we have suspended all activities that would involve gathering in a building. Since all pipe organs except the Spreckels organ in Balboa Park, San Diego are in a building of some sort, we are left with no way to have concerts, silent movies or social gatherings. (Speaking of the Spreckels organ, if you are in San Diego in the summer and have not seen or heard this organ, it is a must do!)

We had an outline of activities for this year starting with the late January silent movie at Fair Oaks, which was immensely enjoyed by a very good turnout. By early March it became evident that we would have to cancel the April 4 concert in Rio Vista with Brett Valliant. From then on, there have been no further events; and as it now stands, there will not be any for the rest of the year. The FOPD has allowed Dave and Terry access on weekdays to work on the organ, which is nice, given nobody is using the building for anything.

As for next year, starting very early in the year, the Fair Oaks Recreation and Park District's major project is to upgrade and rebuild most of the Village Park where the Clubhouse is located; accordingly, this will necessitate closing all access to the building until, at best, late 2021 but most likely for the entire year. If an effective COVID-19 vaccine is available by early in 2021, then toward mid-year we will be looking to other venues until the Clubhouse is reopened.

Regarding the Clubhouse, there was a proposal put forth to the FOPD Board of Directors for a modification to the building that would have resulted in removal of the organ and stage. The ensuing study was closed, and we should be able to remain there for at least several and hopefully many years. Thanks much to **Terry Clifton** for marshalling support of the 200-member Fair Oaks Historical Society, who also meets in the Clubhouse.

Speaking of outstanding members, I wish to thank **Gary French**, who has ably taken over as Chapter Webmaster after the passing of **Dave Sauer**. Finally, I wish to sincerely thank **you, the members**, for hanging in with the Chapter through this difficult period. We have had many renewals of members, not knowing when events will resume. However, we fully intend to resume live activities as soon as it is safe.

# Closing Chord - Mac Wurtsbaugh

1930 - 2019

35 Year Member of Sierra Chapter

## THANK YOU MAC WURTSBAUGH FOR YOUR DECADES OF ACTIVE DEVOTION TO THE MIGHTY PICTURE HOUSE GIANTS, THE THEATRE ORGAN

Mac Wurtsbaugh came into my life during the exciting mid-nineteen-sixties, when a small group of organ buffs were producing and presenting “not so Silent Photoplays” at the tired old Avenue Theatre, located in the southern part of San Francisco, on San Bruno Avenue.

The Avenue adventure was the result of two good friends, Vernon Gregory and Ed Stout believing silent films, with organ scoring, might draw a decent “house” each Friday and Saturday nights. I believe the original Wurlitzer, style 240, from Chicago’s State Lake Theatre, was already installed and playing when Mac joined the crew. He had a civil and most kind personality and was always ready to pitch in with a project, some of which he “led the way”. The Avenue’s ceiling had a large round “flattened dome” that was originally painted to have the perspective of a deep and impressive dome. That decorative effect had been painted out following a fire in 1938 when a very special kind of lightening struck the balcony, just below the projection room. That special kind of fire did no structural damage, but allowed for the insurance to re-paint and re-seat the theatre.

At any rate, there were lights hidden all the way around the dome that we knew nothing about, but Mac, on his own, climbed around in the attic and after he discovered the lamp sockets surrounding the dome, he, at his own expense, re-lamped the dome. The effect was wonderful and it added greatly to making the auditorium warmer and inviting.

I was at the end of my relationship with the Avenue because that wonderful involvement was in conflict with our church organ obligations. Mac was directly involved with the idea of producing a series of “radio shows” written and produced in keeping with the early days of live radio. One of the “crew” was a clever and sometimes tiring fellow named Rick Marshall, which was his “stage name” He was from Texas and his real name was Joe-Don Dickie. We all wore formal evening dress for the performances and one night the very clever Jim Roseveare exclaimed to Rick Marshall, “ well Joe, it’s time to Don your Dickie”! Rosie was quick.

It was our pal Mac Wurtsbaugh who brought in the recording equipment every Friday night to record the half-hour radio program, which aired over station KBAY. The program was a true delight featuring many of the country’s finest organists, but dapper Jim Roseveare really carried the show. Mac did all of the technical and engineering work for those treasured moments and I believe many of the shows have been copied onto CDs.

In later years, Mac always supported and showed up for the Sierra Chapter event and many of us, who knew him decades before, looked forward to his warm smile and gentle voice. Thanks Mac.

Edward Millington Stout III  
July 23, 2020



I began my membership in Sierra Chapter, ATOS in 1987. I very quickly learned that Mac was one of the “regulars” who came to the events put on by the chapter. When we started showing silent movies at the Towe Auto Museum, Mac was the man who volunteered to be our Projectionist. Mac would arrive at the

museum mid afternoon bringing with him all of his personal projectors and equipment necessary to get the job done. Mac did this several times a year for the 19 years we had the organ in the Towe Museum.

Mac was always very supportive of the programs and brought with him the specialized expertise which he had gained as a professional projectionist. Mac donated those two projectors to Sierra Chapter.

Mac also worked on Stockton Fox Morton Organ project. Mac, as a faithful volunteer, would drive over 100 miles from his home in Colfax to the organ shop in Stockton; he made this trip every Monday for over two years to work on wiring chests and other things as needed.

Also, during that two year period, Sierra Chapter had a volunteer workday, once a month on a Saturday, and yes, Mac was always there working along with the rest of us. Even after suffering a stroke which left him with some paralysis, Mac remained faithful in his attendance of chapter events.

I will always remember Mac and his encouraging words through the years...peace to his memory.

Craig Peterson

Alan Ashby, Mac’s last living relative hopes to have a memorial at the clubhouse (assuming it opens this year or next) around October 18 (his date of passing.) Mac had a lot of electronic retro leftovers from his theatre and organ days and Alan would like to be able to share some glimpses of it at the memorial. He also has promo material from the Avenue Theatre, Grant Union HS, and some amazing photos of the SF Fox demolition.



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[www.sierrachapterATOS.org](http://www.sierrachapterATOS.org)

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## MEMBERSHIP NEWS

### Welcome New Benefactor Member:

**Alan Ashby**

### Renewing at the Benefactor Level:

**Terry & Sherry Clifton**

**Jan Hunter**

**Jim & Marilyn Pearce**

**Tom Sebo & Cheryl Young**

**Bob Suffel**

**Randy & Adele Warwick**

**Bob Wilcox**

### Renewing at the Patron Level:

**Gary French**

**Joan & Gary Grootveld**

**Bill & Alice Kutzer**

**Jeanne Paquette-French**

**Neal Wood**

## MEMBERSHIP NEWS

### Renewing at the Sustaining Level:

**Pat Fitzgerald**

**Frank & Sondra Fuson**

**Wendell Jacob**

**Bill Trabucco**

### Renewing at the Contributing Level:

**Jim and Denise Brown**

**Neil & Kathryn Morefield**

**Roy Powlan**



## WEBSITE UPDATE

Hear and see organs virtually by visiting the Chapter's feature-rich website. The "Library" section is loaded with bios, Northern California organ information and pictures, and audio recordings. (There is also a link to our YouTube channel.) One of our favorites, located under "Radio Programs" in the "Audio Recordings" section, is the six half-hour programs recorded in 1967 titled "Showtime San Francisco." You'll hear some outstanding playing on a terrific 3/14 Wurlitzer and some informative, witty, and campy announcing. The show was produced by our own **Ed Stout**.

[www.sierrachapteratos.org](http://www.sierrachapteratos.org)

The Chapter was organized in 1968 as a not-for-profit corporation under the statutes of the State of California and is recognized as tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and Section 23701d of the California Revenue and Taxation Code. It was organized for the purpose of preservation and promotion of the Theatre Pipe Organ and its music. Membership in the local Chapter also encourages membership in the National Organization, American Theatre Organ Society (ATOS.) [www.atos.org](http://www.atos.org)