

DETROIT THEATER ORGAN SOCIETY

A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

Senate Theater • 6424 Michigan Avenue • Detroit, MI 48210
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What's New?

MICHIGAN AVENUE ENTRANCE BEAUTIFICATION

By Christopher Dengate

With the beautiful new marquee on Michigan Avenue now complete, the Board of Directors approved funding and a design to continue the beautification of our theater entrance on Michigan Avenue.

The design called for the removal of the vinyl siding that flanked the doors on Michigan Avenue and it be replaced with new metal siding to enhance the entrance and our new marquee. The siding had been in place for over 30 years and the west side had become detached during a wind storm earlier in the year.

The metal work was going to be completed by a professional and it was up to the maintenance staff of the organization to provide the anchor for the metal to be attached to. What was found behind the vinyl wall was less than ideal for a secure attachment. This

brought on some challenges for the volunteers as they

found bricks that were falling off the building that would not provide the support needed to for a new wall. The Board of Directors also threw a "curve" ball to the volunteers as they wanted to recreate the curve in the wall that was original to the building in 1928.

The volunteer maintenance staff took a closer look at the structure that remained and determined that there was still enough intact structure to complete the task that they were given. So, onward they went attaching furring strips to the structure then bending plywood around that to recreate the curved wall that the Board desired. An exterior house wrap was then applied to the



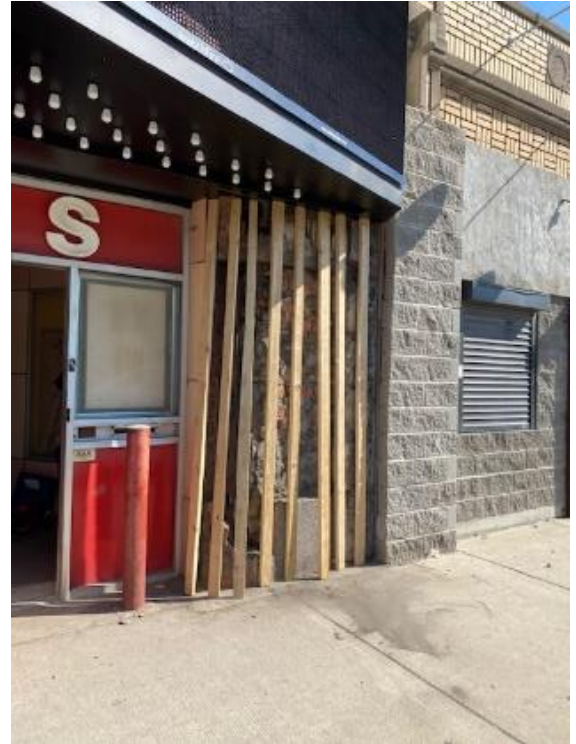
surface of the plywood to prevent water from penetrating everything behind it and then it was ready for the installation of the new metal siding.



The volunteers spent a couple of weekends to accomplish this task, many of which were during the hottest part of the day in August but it was well worth the effort spent. Special thanks to our maintenance crew Christopher Dengate, Lance Luce and Paul Ovares for working on this project and to Michael Fisher who also gave a helping hand. on a couple of those days.

Once the metal work is

complete, a final power washing of the Michigan Avenue entrance and sidewalk will be applied to welcome patrons and it will be evident to anyone who drives or walks by the theater now that we are open for business.



Cardinal Richelieu's Tea Room Studio (Scott Smith)

In my initial effort to document all of the organs and theatres for which they provided music in the Detroit metro area during the Silent Era, it never occurred to me that a theatre organ might have been installed in anyplace other than a theatre. At least not one that I'd never heard of before, and not in a church. Recently, during a random Google search, up came a link to a webpage that documented all of the restaurants and theatre organs that occupied them in the U.S. and elsewhere, up to and including modern times. The list was compiled by Jack Rhine and posted on the hotpipes.eu website, with the last update listed as September, 2017. While some of the details were incorrect and some out of date, it was rather complete otherwise and provided an interesting read. As I gazed down the list, my eye was caught by a listing in the area that was completely unfamiliar to me. Cardinal Richelieu's Tea Room Studio in Highland Park, Michigan.

Immediately, I went to my resource materials. The cardinal's name seemed vaguely familiar, and sure enough, there it was in Judd Walton's 1973 census of all known Wurlitzer pipe organs at that time, which I've had since it was first published. But Cardinal Richelieu's name was all that was listed, and since I had seen many other ministers of various faiths listed there, I had always assumed it was a sale to a church or a diocese. I had no idea that Cardinal Richelieu was a famous French clergyman, nobleman and statesman under King Louis XIII in the 17th century, known for his love of tea and his fourteen cats. It was he, Armand Jean du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu (commonly known as Cardinal Richelieu) who commissioned the construction of a mansion on the northern side of the Louvre Palace, known then as the Palais Cardinal. Today, it is known as Palais Royal, and serves as the seat of the Constitutional Council and Ministry of Culture. While admittance to that portion of the building is restricted, the garden, the galleries, the restaurants, and most importantly, the tea rooms are open to the public.

Not only was the organ's opus number right there in Walton's compendium, but so was the entire

history of the organ's movements from inception to final known sale. It was, after all, a full-fledged theatre organ; bells, whistles and all, and this wouldn't have been the last time a man of the cloth removed his collar and decided to swing a little, as local readers should know. But, obviously, I didn't know. Next, I went to "The Wurlitzer Pipe Organ," the last word on the subject by Jeff Weiler and David Junchen, which spelled out the name of the business in full. I've had my nose between the covers of that 800-page volume countless times. How did I miss this?

Tea rooms are quite common in France. If you Google "Paris tea room" or "Palais Royal tea room," you'll see any number of them in Paris. Many of them even post their menus, with soooooo many yummy treats. We can only speculate that someone wanted to emulate the atmosphere of a French bakery and tea room, offering light refreshments and an assortment of teas and other liquid refreshment. The mouth waters with the notion of finger sandwiches, croissants, scones, butter cookies, petit fours, macarons, teacakes and chocolate delights...but all accompanied by a Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ? This would appear to have been a pretty audacious move at what was the beginning of the Great Depression, but not everyone suffered equally during that time. While Highland Park is a mere shadow of its former self today, it peaked in population with over 52,000 residents in the 1930 United States Census. It's mind-boggling to think about the growth that took place in that city in such a short time. In 1900, there were 400 residents, and in 1910, there were 4,000. By 1920, it had grown 1,000% in a mere twenty years to 40,000, and continued to grow for the next ten years. The Ford and Chrysler auto assembly plants built in the Teens and Twenties were primarily responsible for the unprecedented population growth that broke all previous records. However, as the auto plants moved out, the city began a very slow, steady decline. Today, Highland Park has just over 10,000 estimated residents. Let's take a look at the information we have available to us today, as is now available in the revised list of the Detroit Theatre Organ Census:

CARDINAL RICHELIEU'S TEA ROOM
STUDIO (1930 - 1934)

12832 Woodward
Highland Park.

2/5 Wurlitzer (1926) Style B Special
[Opus 1532]

This instrument began its public life at the Van Croix Theatre in Eau Gallie (later merged with Melbourne), Florida, and was shipped from the factory on 12/10/26. Due to the financial hardship placed on the surrounding area by the Great Depression, the theatre closed permanently in 1930. The organ was



apparently resold and installed in Cardinal Richelieu's Tea Room, approximately 12/16/30. It was then sold to radio station WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia, approximately 7/08/34. The station's staff organist was Vivian Miller. Current information as to the organ's whereabouts or existence is unknown. The basic four ranks of the Style B were Trumpet, Vox Humana, Flute and Salicional. The fifth rank was a Tibia Clausa, making this stock model a "special." This instrument would have been similar to the Wurlitzer organ in the Punch & Judy Theatre in Grosse Pointe. It is believed that the organ was installed by Wurlitzer-trained technicians at all three locations.

Beyond the sale of the organ, we have no information about the tea room, but I have plenty of questions:

Who played the organ? How many organists were employed? By 1930, the streets would have

been crawling with competent organists, experienced in the playing of the theatre organ. While intermission playing would have continued at the larger downtown theatres, many organists would have been displaced by talking pictures and/or the onset of the Depression.

What did they play? Since high school, most of my professional organ playing experience has not been accompanying silent films or concertizing. If you include all of the hours I've played both pipe and electronic organs in bars, restaurants and one particular gift store, I've played mostly for diners or shoppers to (hopefully) enhance their leisure experience. I can only imagine that this was the policy at the tea room. Keep it light, and keep the volume down.

When did they play it? All day? Just certain hours or certain days? This was probably a factory-directed installation, and while it probably was done at a cut rate, Wurlitzer didn't exactly give their work away. I can only imagine that the owner wanted to get their money's worth.

Why did they choose an organ from a theatre? One would think that a residence organ would have been a better match, especially since so many of them had roll players, and given their softer voicing. Maybe none were available, or this particular theatre organ was exactly what they wanted, or Wurlitzer simply made it worth their while.

Were there regular hours you would expect to hear the organ, or did you just expect to hear it any time you stopped by?

Did the owners buy the organ on time, or did Wurlitzer demand full payment up front? Most of the organs in theatres were bought on time, and by 1934, Wurlitzer would have been left holding the bag for many of them.

What was the reason for tacking on the word "studio" to the name of the place? Was there fine art or photography displayed? Were there dramatic or poetry readings? Were there other types of performance art that took place? Sadly, we'll probably never know, but it's fun to speculate.

According to the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library, Cardinal Richelieu's Tea Room Studio was listed in the Detroit white pages in 1931 and 1932. It would appear that the organ was resold to radio station WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia when the business closed in 1933 or 1934. By that time, America's economy was beginning to be on the upswing, but there could be any number of reasons why the business closed, and subsequently sold the organ. They may have simply needed money, and it was a big enough asset that they could have cashed out in a hurry for whatever they could get for it. It may have even been seen as more of a liability than an asset, following the reality of what may have seemed like a good idea at the start. They may have simply gotten in over their heads. Who knows?

What did the radio station use the organ for? What was it's life like after leaving Highland Park? When did it end? Where did it go? Does it still exist in some form?

While we may not know what the fate of the organ may have been, we are currently witness to what is happening to the building in which Cardinal Richelieu's Tea Room existed. The business was apparently located in the southern end of what was known throughout it's entire life as the Highland Towers apartment building, which is on the East side of Woodward Avenue, between McLean and Farrand Park Streets, just South of the Davison Freeway. Like so many beautiful and majestic buildings of its time, this block-long building has given in to years of neglect, vandalism and fires, and is slowly self-demolishing. Highland Towers always was, and to some degree still is something to behold, despite its current condition. Built of orange brick, the design of this luxury apartment complex was the result of a collaboration of famed Detroit architects Frank W. Weidmaier and John B. Gay. The two also collaborated on the Luxor, Coronado, Trocadero, and numerous other apartment buildings in what is now known as the Palmer Park Apartment Building Historic District. In addition, Weidmaier worked with other architects on projects in that neighborhood, including the design of Palmer Lodge. Other examples of Weidmaier & Gay's work remain extant elsewhere, such as the abandoned Rosvimur apartments on LaSalle St. in Detroit's Dexter-Linwood neighborhood.

Ground was broken for Highland Towers in 1929, with completion at some time in 1932. It is believed that the complex was planned and financed during the height of the 1920s building boom, but with the sudden onset of the Great Depression, the financier was forced to move ahead with the project at a great loss, hence the lengthy building process. It has been further speculated that the entire project may have been scaled back, as the structure is only four floors, but still bears the name of "towers." Still, many of the apartment buildings in Palmer Park were designed with only four or so floors. Businesses on the avenue probably opened up much sooner than the apartments, since they would have provided at least some revenue for the developer while the apartments were being completed.

Life at Highland Towers must have been the epitome of luxury in its day. When you pulled up to the front door, a valet would greet you, drive your car around back to the secure underground parking garage (one of the first in Detroit), whereupon it was washed with heated water. According to the Sanborn maps, it had a capacity of 58 cars, leading one to speculate that there were roughly the same number of apartments. Any packages would have been immediately brought up to your apartment. When you entered the lobby, there was a clerk's desk on the right, where you'd pick up your mail and phone messages, even well into the 1980s. The lobby also had a switchboard, and each apartment was equipped with a non-dialing phone. To place an outgoing call, the operator would dial the number you desired, and after being connected, might even listen in on the call if they were bored. If you were a guest, the receptionist at the front desk would announce your arrival by phone to the appropriate apartment. On your way through the lobby to the mirrored elevators, you would pass by the large limestone fireplace, and beneath three Art Deco chandeliers.

Other features included a rooftop band shell and a fine dining hall. It didn't end there. Leaded glass windows, mirrored ceilings, tin ceilings, arched ornate detailed ceilings, intricate dark-stained woodwork, marble walls and arched entrances could be found throughout the structure in abundance. The footprint of the building was laid out in an "E" shape with two enclosed courtyards. Highland Towers dominates the Highland Heights-Stevens Subdivision, which is one of Highland Park's two National Register Districts. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.

Highland Towers was favored by the well-paid executives and managers employed by the burgeoning Ford and Chrysler assembly plants. With monthly rent in the neighborhood of \$180 during the depth of the Great Depression, it was definitely for the well-to-do. That would be roughly the equivalent of \$2,700 - \$2,800 per month today.

Luxury met its end in 2009 when the power was cut off for 11 days by DTE due to non-payment by the owner. Shortly after being turned back on via court order, the remaining residents were evicted, and in 2010, after being victimized by vandals, squatters and scrappers, an arson-set fire in three separate locations was the final blow for the luxury apartments that had faithfully served residents for nearly eighty years. A somber and sudden end for a magnificent building.

At this point, we can only imagine what the tea room experience was like. Tablecloths and fine linens, fresh flowers on the table, candlelight, a small table menu printed with elegant type, a variety of teas poured from silver tea sets into tiny cups with matching saucers, a nearly endless array of light desserts and baked goods...and a Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ providing just the right amount of musical charm for your noshing pleasure. Table for two?

Coming in 2020
TBD



We'd love to hear from you. Questions, Suggestions... We even take requests!!
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