

Kilgen Organ Formed Part Of Grand's History

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Our trip down Memory Lane this week originally was made possible by two friends, both of whom are long-deceased — P.A. "Pop" Boone and his partner in the local theater business, E.Q. Benbow.

Boone and Benbow made an unbeatable combination for decades in Mount Airy when it came to the movie business. And it was because of the two old-time showmen that Rockford Street United Methodist Church came to possess one of the finest musical instruments anywhere, a Kilgen organ.

The church received the organ when the old Grand Theater, Mount Airy's film palace, was downsized into a smaller movie house. Less space meant that a new home had to be found for the good-sized organ.

Memory is somewhat elusive — as the years advance, it becomes more that way. But we think that Boone and Benbow gave the Kilgen organ to Rockford Street Methodist Church (this was a good many years before the Methodists added the word "United" to their designation) in memory of E.Q.'s parents or mother, or it might have been in memory of both sets of parents.

It always did seem fitting that the Rockford Street church would be the home of the famed organ. After all, that was the church where Jack Sargent, the head of North Carolina Granite Corp., made a famous comment.

"Cap'n" Jack donated the granite for those impressive steps leading up to the front entrance of the church. It is said that he came by once upon a time to check on all of the granite that was being taken from his quarry for the church.

He knew the granite was for front steps, but apparently didn't realize just how steep a hill the church was resting on — "I just wanted to see where they were building the stairway to heaven," Sargent said.

But back to the Kilgen organ. Tom Joyce, the managing editor of *The Mount Airy News*, recently wrote an article about the Kilgen or-

gan after it had been rejuvenated through the efforts and near-magic touch of technician David Chapman of Lexington.

But before Tom's article, we recalled that Barbara Summerlin, a former editor of *The Mount Airy News*, had written an account, probably in an issue of the *Simple Pleasures* publication, about the organ and Winnie Ward. Winnie was a musician whose talent could make Linus, the Greek mythological character who invented melody and rhythm, turn green with envy.

There are said to be only 11 Kilgen organs in the world. The organ was manufactured in St. Louis and came to Mount Airy in 1927.

Winnie, a member of the Ward family of Lumburg, Va., had been playing in theaters in Macon and Atlanta, Ga. This was in the era of silent films, you remember, and musical prologues were a part of the enter-

tainment.

Anyway, after Boone and Benbow acquired the Kilgen, they needed an artist to play the organ. So Winnie Ward returned home in 1927 to perform on the famed musical instrument. She quickly established a reputation in the area.

The theater would open its doors at 6:30 p.m. Winnie would play the organ until the movie started at 7 p.m. and also provided musical accompaniment for films.

Two speakers were mounted outside the grand old Grand in order for people on Main Street to hear the beautiful sounds.

Barbara's article related that the first song Winnie played on the organ was "My Blue Heaven." It was also the last selection she performed at the old Grand.

Winnie had beauty that equalled her talent. It was said that when she crossed the stage to seat herself at the organ, the musician would get a

round of applause.

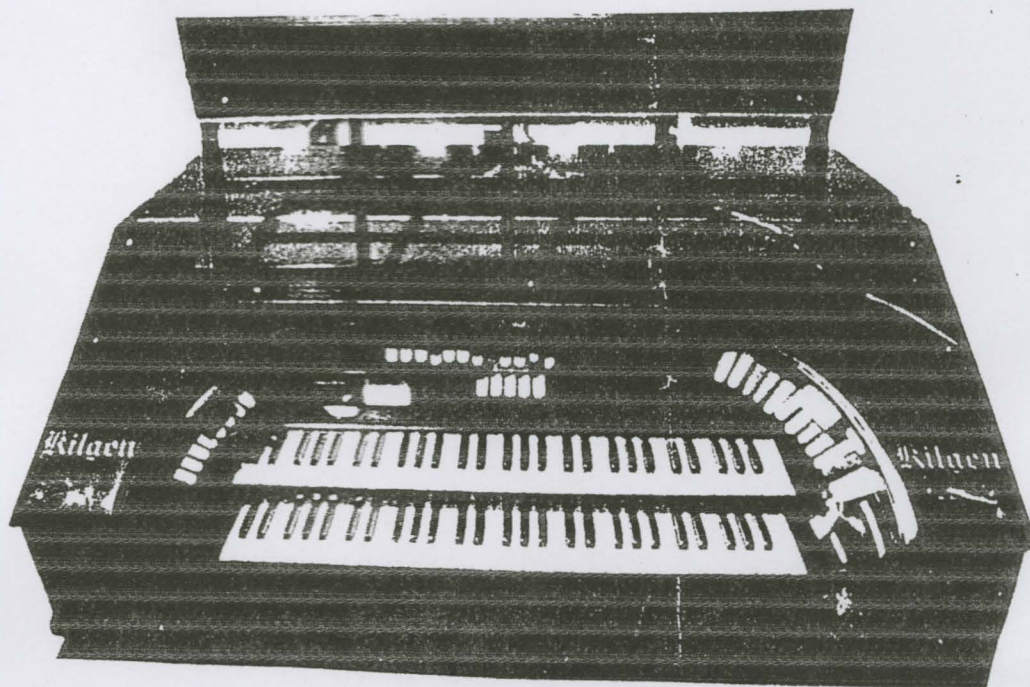
According to an advertisement by the Grand, which was called "The Family Theater," Winnie would play requests from the audience. "What's your favorite tune? the ad asked. "Ask her and she will play it!"

With the advent of talking movies, the role of theater musician declined. It was in the late 1940s or early 1950 that the famed organ moved into its present home.

It did have one final fling in the old Grand, however.

In an effort to bolster attendance, "Pop" Boone acquired the musical talent of John Mickey, who played the organ in the late 1940s. John was one of the stars of the old Mount Airy Opera Company, performing in many lighthearted operettas on the stage of old Rockford Street School.

More later about the grand old Grand.



NOW AND THEN: The famed Kilgen organ has been restored to its former glory.