

Editor's Note: Much has been written about the theatre organists who played in the movie palaces, but seldom do we read about the many theatre organists who were heard by millions of people on radio, particularly those who played for religious programs. In this article, Lorin Whitney shares with us his memoirs of a long and very successful career playing the theatre pipe organ for radio listeners all across our country. The following article is based on information contributed by the late Harvey Whitney, brother to Lorin, and includes autobiographical notes written by Lorin. Parts of the autobiographical material have been edited for space considerations. Direct quotes are printed in *italics*.

My name is Lorin Whitney. I was born on September 11, 1914, in Madera, a little town about twenty miles from Fresno, California. My father's name was David. He lived a good, long life and died at the age of 92. My mother's name was Caroline. She was resting in her rocking chair after coming home from church when she had a heart attack. She died at the age of 80. I had a sister, Myrtle, and a brother named Harvey.

My father worked for Standard Oil Company as a teamster, delivering oil to the surrounding farms with a team of horses. Later, he was transferred to Fresno and delivered oil and gasoline to service stations by truck. We bought a modest house on the edge of town and though we were poor I didn't realize it. We had plenty of room to grow vegetables and chickens and my dad was very fond of goats. One of our nannies had five kids at one time. That was very unusual, and we had a lot of visitors come to see the goats. I even had a goat cart and had a good time as

MEMOIRS *of* LORIN J.

*By Harvey Whitney
(Edited by Bob Kalal)*





Lorin at the 2/10 Wurlitzer in his home in Glendale.



MAXHEIM

Lorin at the 3/36 Robert-Morton console, Whitney Recording Studio, Glendale California.

the goats pulled me around. I had plenty of activities to keep me busy and carried the *Fresno Bee* for spending money. My sister, Myrtle, was attending the Southern California Bible College in Pasadena, training for the ministry. She was ordained as a minister after graduation.

We all attended a local church and were quite excited when we heard that Aimee Semple McPherson was going to have a citywide revival in the Armory Auditorium. We attended nightly and drove downtown in our old Ford. After the very successful Crusade produced hundreds of converts, some local Christian men decided we needed a new church to take care of the new converts. Money was raised to build a tabernacle. The church was built with volunteer labor and could seat 1200 people. The name of the church was called *The Full Gospel Tabernacle*. It was affiliated with the Assembly of God denomination. I spent many years there with my parents. I accepted the Lord as my Savior at the age of 11 at one of the children's meetings.

My dad was very involved with the church, as Sunday

School Superintendent, Deacon and Elder and it was natural that I would be expected to participate. The church had home-made benches and, as a youth, I sprawled out and slept during some of the long services. We had many famous evangelists and some of them were very long-winded.

As I grew older I started dating some of the girls in the church. I never thought of dating outside of the church. I was dating one fairly attractive girl one time. Her uncle came up to me and told me that the Lord spoke to him in a dream that I should marry this girl. I told him that the Lord would have to talk to me personally.

We had a grand piano, but no organ in the church. We also had an orchestra of a few would-be musicians. Among the musicians, my dad played the drums, my brother Harvey played the clarinet and I played the trombone. My folks asked if I would like to play the piano. I reluctantly said, "Yes." My sister helped me before she went off to Southern California Bible College and, after that, I found a local teacher and began to learn the rudiments of music.

My teacher, Mrs. Bannister, and her husband owned a Standard Service Station, and they invited me to work there, pumping gas and greasing cars. For some reason or other, Mrs. Bannister thought that I would enjoy playing the organ. I didn't think too much about it at the time because I had no place to practice.

My father thought I would enjoy going to a Christian boarding school for a year. I wasn't too thrilled with the idea, but thought I could stand it for one year so in 1929, at age 15, I was enrolled in the Monte Vista Christian School, near Watsonville. There were about 200 students at the campus, which was located on a large apple orchard where vegetables were also grown. I lived with another fellow in a tank house, but it leaked and we moved to an abandoned farmhouse with outdoor plumbing.

The school was in the process of putting up additional buildings using male students, assisted by part time workers from a local church, for most of the work. I handled a team of horses, hooked up to a Fresno Scraper, to dig a large hole for the basement that was to become the school dining hall. Later, those same horses would sometimes escape from their corral and because they knew me, I would be given permission to leave school and track them by foot, looking for their hoof prints. The last time I did this, I had to pursue them to the outskirts of Santa Cruz, about a ten-mile hike. The horses were so glad to see me that I had no problem getting a rope around them and riding them back to the school.

The people who ran the school liked my work and had heard, from someplace, that I knew something about electricity, so they gave me the job of wiring the building that was to become the girl's dormitory. I must have done OK because they were still using the building sixty years later.

Some of us were trying to put together an orchestra and once a week a Professor Andrews came out from Santa Cruz to give us music lessons. One day he came out with a beat up trombone and asked me if I would like to learn how to play it. I said, "Yes," and that decision played a significant part in my life later back in Fresno.

I returned to Fresno when I was 16. I probably would have stayed at Monte Vista a little longer but it was taking a drain

on my father's finances. I took up piano again with Mrs. Bannister and she again brought up the matter of learning to play the organ.

One morning, while riding my bicycle to Fresno Tech High School, I passed a church that was unloading a small theatre organ. After a period of time I asked the pastor if I could practice on the organ. He agreed if I would pay a small sum for the electrical power used. I bought an organ book and, with the help of Mrs. Bannister, I began to catch on to the organ. My sister had some popular music of the day that I enjoyed playing and, after a period, the pastor asked me to play occasionally at the church.

I was quite active in sports at Fresno Tech, and was halfback on the varsity football team. I also played trombone in the school band, and was selected to play my trombone in a ten-piece band that played for school dances. This was quite different than what I was used to and, after a lot of discussion and prayer with my folks, I dropped out of the worldly group. Dad did buy me a Ford coupe with a rumble seat, though. It was pretty neat and I didn't have any trouble getting dates with the local girls. I also learned quite a bit about cars by taking the engine apart and keeping it running.

One Sunday, we had a group of musicians from Southern California Bible College, the same school that my sister had attended, put on a program. They were on a summer deposition, deputation project, and were traveling along the Pacific Coast advertising the school. They were fine musicians and I decided that, if possible, I wanted to continue my schooling at SCBC. I had just finished my first year at Fresno State College. My dad managed the finances and I enrolled at Southern California Bible College for the fall semester.

The school, formerly a boy's military school, had about 200 students enrolled. I continued my study of the piano and organ and, for organ practice, used an old tracker organ in a nearby church.

Near the end of the semester, a couple of fellows driving an old Ford stopped at the school. They were forming a male quartet and were looking for a bass and a baritone to complete a foursome that would sing on a new radio program. Ernie Payne and Bob Bowman auditioned and were selected for the parts. It was mentioned that they would also need someone that played the organ. I just happened to be nearby and the fellows introduced me as the only organist at the school. We rehearsed together until we felt that we could perform satisfactorily and aired our first program in March of 1934 on a 50,000-watt station in Beverly Hills. I was 20 years old.

The time for the half-hour program was 3 p.m. every afternoon. The theme of the program was nautical and the first mate that did the speaking was Paul Myers. I played an organ solo in the middle of the program. The boat that we were supposed to be on was called the Good Ship Grace. The singers were called the Crew of the Good Ship Grace and the theme song was a chorus from an old hymn that started, *I've Anchored My Soul In The Haven of Rest*.

It was the depression of the 1930s. We did not buy time on the radio, but were a sustaining program. Radio stations were not yet selling time to religious programs, but we drew a large audience and that helped the station sell commercial time. As we became better known, we started getting invitations from



Studio "A" Whitney Recording Studio, Glendale, California, 1965.

ED SWEENEY



Lorin Whitney in "Haven of Rest" uniform seated at the Wiltern Theatre Kimball theatre organ, circa 1940.

churches to make personal appearances. This helped us financially as we were usually allowed to take an offering. One invitation we received was from Dr. Clare Brittain, a pastor in Alhambra. We performed for his church, but we didn't look much like a crew. Dr. Brittain offered to buy us uniforms, an offer we accepted, and our style of dress was established from that time on.

Radio KNX, another independent radio station, invited us to be on their station. They also were 50,000 watts of power in their outreach. Their studio was in downtown Hollywood on the second floor of the Otto K. Olsen Building. It was equipped with a small Robert-Morton organ that had a great sound. After we were there for about a year, the station built new studios on Sunset Boulevard, again equipping the studios with a Robert-Morton pipe organ, this one a larger instrument. Charles Fuller and *The Old Fashioned Revival Hour* used the same studio and we got acquainted with them. When he moved to the Municipal Auditorium in Long Beach, I was



4/36 Robert-Morton, Whitney Recording Studio, Glendale, California.

invited to play for some of the programs. KNX had a large following and covered most of California. This enabled us to have personal appearances in a lot of other cities. Most of the churches had organs and this gave me a chance to learn about different organs.

We changed stations about every two years. Radio KFI in Los Angeles was our next move. They also were a 50,000-watt station. They gave us a daily afternoon broadcast and one in the evening. They also sent us to the Blue (ABC) Network for a transcontinental broadcast.

One evening, we had a missionary speaker named Cuba Hall, and her husband, John. It turned out that Cuba had gone to school with my sister, Myrtle, back in the 1920s. They were missionaries from Africa and had brought with them Cuba's sister, Aimee Hill, to watch over one of the younger children. I was very impressed with Aimee and managed to meet with her afterward. I had already checked out most of the other girls in the school. I found out where Aimee lived—in a little town called Brea—and decided to make a call on her. There were no freeways in those days so it took about an hour to get there.

I went to their home and was invited in. Her parents and the whole family were Christians and they were very friendly to me. I managed to have a date with Aimee a few days later. After a few dates, I had fallen in love with Aimee and knew she was the girl for me. We were married over Radio KFI at 10 p.m. March 17, 1937. The radio station covered half of the United States at night. We notified our relatives out of state and had them tune in. KFI had only a Hammond organ so they allowed us to use the facilities of a church that had a fine organ.

The next move was to the Don Lee Broadcasting Company radio in Los Angeles. They had a large assortment of stations on the Pacific Coast. They offered us a daily program on the network and a transcontinental program on Sunday. KHJ was located on the second floor of a Cadillac dealer in downtown Los Angeles. The studio had a two-manual Estey pipe organ that wasn't too good. We asked the management if we could move the Estey out and bring in a Wurlitzer theatre organ. They agreed and the crew and I removed the Estey, which is now in the Church of the Reconciliation in Forest Lawn in Glendale.

A dear old lady who was a widow and a great fan of *The Haven of Rest* gave us the money to buy a theatre organ and have it installed in the studio. This meant that we wouldn't have any organ but the Hammond for three months. A fellow

by the name of Don Leslie had invented a new speaker for the Hammond organ. He loaned us the experimental model and we connected it to the Hammond. Wow! It sounded great. It became very popular and thousands have been sold over the years. We finally got the Wurlitzer installed and it had great sound, however, we only got to use it in this studio for one year.

We were informed by the Don Lee organization they were building new studios in Hollywood. They had made no provision for the organ. We contacted Aunt Mary again and told her our problem. She suggested that we build our own studio. We got a Christian contractor and built the *Haven of Rest* Studio in East Hollywood. Provision was made for the pipe organ. The studio worked out very well and is still being used after 50 years.

I played the Hammond for ten years at Youth for Christ. Rudy Atwood and I were a team. We played marches and all kinds of music the young people liked. Christ for Greater Los Angeles was a group of men that sponsored revival meetings in L.A. They usually used large tents. I played for most of these events. I first met Billy Graham in 1945 (age 31) as he spoke for one of the YFC meetings. In 1949 they put up a large circus tent seating 5000 in downtown L.A. I was asked to provide a Hammond organ and be the organist for the crusade. It was planned to run three weeks, but went to eight weeks. I was then asked to travel with Billy and his crew, but decided against it. Later in 1956 (age 42), I did join the team for two years.

Broadcasting over the Don Lee Network let us have meetings all over the coast. Tape recording had not been invented yet, so we had to broadcast live from the little cities and theatres that had a pipe organ. Dr. Tovey of Biola College asked me if I would consider teaching the Hammond organ. They had several students that wanted to learn the organ. I wound up with 15 students and went to the college once a week to give lessons.

During World War II I took a job at Lockheed Vega in Burbank, California. I specialized in hanging the large wings on the Hudson Bombers. In order to be at the *Haven of Rest* Studio in the early morning, I had to work the graveyard shift. It was a tough shift and I was always sleepy during the day. I actually fell asleep once during the live radio program. It was while the narrator was speaking and I was only out for a few seconds. No one seemed to notice the difference. My draft board had put me in 1A and I fully thought I would have to go into the military service. They evidently thought my job was more important and they never called me.

I had always wanted my own pipe organ in my home. My next-door neighbor was a builder and I had him design a home that could handle a pipe organ. I purchased a two-manual Wurlitzer from the Hollywood Theatre in Hollywood. The California Organ Company removed the organ and restored it in our home in Glendale.