

Paul Norris, Organist

The Carolina Theatre was for many years Charlotte's premier venue for live and movie entertainment. It opened in 1927 presenting "silent" films (actually film without synchronized sound) accompanied by organ and orchestra. On the same program as the film, audiences saw vaudeville acts and heard musical productions from organ solos and sing-a-longs on "The Mighty Wurlitzer" to jazz bands to the full sound of the Carolina Grande Orchestra. Fae Wilcox was the Carolina's first organist. Paramount sent her to study with Jesse Crawford in New York City before accepting the job as organist to play opening night at the Carolina. All seats were \$.50 that evening of March 7, 1927, in "The South's Newest, Most Beautiful Theatre: The Only Theatre Between New York and Atlanta that Manufactures Its Own Weather."¹

On January 17, 1912, in Oelwein, Iowa, Paul Westcott Norris was born. Paul's mother died when he was four years old, but his father, William Henry Norris, lived until 1937. Paul's father was born in Canada, studied music in Leipzig, Germany, and immigrated to the United States to teach music in Iowa, where he represented the Wurlitzer Company as a salesman and consultant. Paul's earliest exposure to the organ was from his father, a classically trained organist who sold theatre organs; no wonder he had an open mind! During his study at the University of Iowa, he took a class in radio production and worked at KSUI, the school's radio station, announcing football games. This earliest taste of broadcasting was to be a sign of things to come.

Paul joined his father in selling Wurlitzer organs from 1927 to 1933; he was listed as a traveling representative and demonstrator. From 1931 to 1933, Paul worked for WENR, a radio station in Chicago, as organist/pianist and announcer, an unusual combination position that he would repeat in Charlotte. Later in 1933, he and his father moved to Charlotte where Paul was to begin work as a charter member of the WSOC staff. The existing station, WBT, the first commercial radio station in the entire Southeast, had been Charlotte's only choice since 1922 and was part of the CBS network. WSOC began broadcasting NBC programs on Saturday, October 14, 1933, the second station in the Charlotte area. They were located for several years on the first floor of the Mecklenburg Hotel on West Trade Street (demolished in 1978). The many live broadcasts by Paul from the Carolina Theatre were an early form of what today is used by every local media outlet, the "live remote." (see photo of Paul at the console with his microphone)

During his nine years with WSOC, Paul held positions as Announcer, Traffic Manager, Chief Announcer, Play-by-Play Sports Announcer, Publicity Director, Program Director, Salesman, Sales Promotion Manager, and Assistant Manager, but through them all he served as Organist presenting the only live program from the Carolina Theatre Wurlitzer. Such diversity was quite valuable in a radio station just formed, and WSOC used Paul's talents in many areas. In a personals section in a local newspaper from 1937: "Paul Norris, WSOC program director, is seldom seen, even at meal time, without his camera, and will upon the slightest provocation snap your picture—unless of course you are quicker than his very speedy shutter-finger."² His photos, which he developed and

tinted himself before color film was available, won awards in the local camera club. One of them on early color film is of the vertical sign of the Carolina, taken in 1938. Another is a portrait of Ann Leaf from 1932, tinted on glass. (see photos)

In 1936, Paul married Ernestine Dorsey Hedden on Christmas Day, and this garnered the couple much attention from the local newspapers. In each notice, Paul was listed as the organist for WSOC, among his other abilities. His daughter, Angeline Hedden Norris was born in 1938 and has provided exceptional information and resources towards completion of this article.

Also in 1936, Paul and Bo Norris (unrelated) began a radio program playing piano duets with a singer on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Paul was announcer and organist for a program of popular theatre organ music performed on the Wurlitzer in the Carolina Theater. On Mondays he produced “Musical Moods,” sponsored by the Sanitary Laundry, Inc. (see newspaper ad)

Here are samples from Paul’s typed log of the fifteen-minute Carolina Theatre programs.³

- Tues Dec 22nd [1936]: Winter Wonderland, Home on the Range, Chapel in the Moonlight
- Thur Dec 24 [the day before his wedding]: Time On My Hands, Heres Love in Your Eye, A Thousand Love Songs, Paradise
- Tues Dec 29th: no record
- Thur Dec 31st: These Foolish Things, Auld Lang Syne, On the Beach at Bali Bali, Rendesvouz With a Dream, Me and the Moon (4 best of 1936)
- Tues Jan 5th [1937]: Moonlight and Roses, Two Guitars, Make Believe
- Thur Jan 7th: Trees, I Love You Truly, World Is Waiting for Sunrise

These samples are from his logs of the fifteen-minute “Musical Moods,” sponsored by the Sanitary Laundry.⁴

- Dec 21 [1936]: Joy to the World, Holy Night, Sentimental, Pennies from Heaven
- Dec 28th: Rigamarole, Desert Song & One Alone, Chapel in the Moonlight, Voice in the Village Choir
- Jan 4th [1937]: Im In a Dancing Mood, June in January, Until the Real Thing Comes

Paul’s musical resource for these programs was the Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ, opus 1495, located in Charlotte’s Carolina Theatre. It was a Style F which meant that in its two opposing chambers, it offered the following sounds on two manuals and pedals: eight ranks of pipes such as tibias and strings, five tuned percussions such as chimes and sleigh bells, and assorted sound effects such as doorbell, horse hoofs, cymbals, and drums. After much investigation to find the organ, we have sadly determined that no part of the Wurlitzer survives. When WSOC bought a Hammond organ for studio use, Paul played it on the air. Angie Norris Bean, Paul’s daughter, offered Metrolina Theatre Organ Society the only recording of a radio program that her father had, and it was a studio transcription of the Carolina Theatre Program from 1938. Because it was played so often,

the sound is badly distorted, but it is priceless to us because it remains the only recording of the largest Wurlitzer in Charlotte. The reader is invited to listen to the program at mtos.org.

- Feb 10th (1938): Talk of the Town, Don't Let Your Love Grow Old, Moonglow, Blue Prelude

From *The Mecklenburg Times*, October 29, 1936: "Paul Norris, WSOC's program director, may be heard on the air each Tuesday and Thursday morning at 11:00 o'clock as he presides at the console of the pipe organ in the Carolina Theatre in Charlotte. Paul, who began his radio career as organist in Chicago, has quite captivated Charlotte radio fans with his sympathetic interpretations of their favorite musical numbers—classics as well as the ballads and the popular hits of the day. Staff members are wondering if he won't have to engage the services of a secretary to handle his fan mail if it continues to increase."

From *The Mecklenburg Times*, December 10, 1936: "The versatility of WSOC staff members is demonstrated by Program Director Paul Norris when he seats himself at the console of the Carolina Theatre Organ each Tuesday and Thursday morning at 11:00. Beside presenting many of his own arrangements for pipe organ, he gives some very interesting informal commentary about the current and coming cinema attractions. Incidentally, it was this same young man who presented such a fine description of the grid-iron classic between Davidson and Wake Forest on Thanksgiving day. One scarcely sees Norris without his trusty camera, as he pursues diligently his hobby of photography."

At this time, Charlotte was privileged to hear the Jesse Crawford program and "Organ Melodies" twice per week on WSOC and weekly organ programs from Eddie Dunstedter, Fred Feibel, and Ann Leaf on WBT, the CBS affiliate. Organ music has been gone from Charlotte's commercial radio stations for a very long time, and we gratefully depend on WDAV, our public radio station from Davidson College, to bring us "Pipedreams" with Michael Barone.

In addition to radio programs, movies, and concerts, the Wurlitzer was used for "The Charlotte News-Carolina Theatre Pop Eye and Mickey Mouse Club," a children's club that met on Saturday mornings and was sponsored by *The Charlotte News*. Admission was a dime and included local children in an amateur stage show, a movie, and entertainment by Big Chief Wimpy (played by Paul), Big Chief Pop Eye, and Olive Oyl. Of course, Paul played the organ for them; what lucky children they were!

Paul left Charlotte in December of 1941 to help start one of the earliest FM stations, WMIT, an affiliate of WSJS in Winston-Salem. He was a pioneer in both AM and FM and set up research and promotion techniques still being used in FM today. On May 25, 1942, Paul enlisted in the Navy and served in technical positions of sonar, radar, and Chief Radioman while naturally volunteering to be Squadron Photographer.

He left the Navy after the war and on June 12, 1946, he was employed as Program Director and Production Manager by radio station WTIK in Durham which was soon to begin broadcasting on July 4, 1946. He was, by virtue of his experience, the perfect man for the job. Later, he became their Sales Manager and Assistant Manager. While he was at WTIK, he produced a Saturday morning radio program of theatre organ music from the Center Theater in Durham on their II/8 Robert Morton (first installed in Greensboro's National Theatre in 1922 and moved to the Center Theatre in 1939).

He left WTIK in 1948 and worked for a short while at WCAV in Norfolk, Virginia. He moved in 1949 to Iowa and sought long and multiple treatments from VA Hospitals due to Filariasis, a parasitic and infectious tropical disease that he contracted during his service in the Navy. He died on June 30, 1953, and was buried in Odebolt, Iowa. Of the several theatre organs located in Charlotte, all of them are gone today. We in Charlotte were lucky to have someone such as Paul who played the organ regularly and often to present and maintain the Carolina Theatre's Wurlitzer pipe organ as an integral part of our community. From 1933 to 1942, he was Charlotte's best known organist.

Appreciation for materials and research assistance: Angeline Norris Bean,
Carolina Room of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, John Apple

¹ "Gala Premiere Performance," advertisement from *The Charlotte Observer*, March 6, 1927.

² *The Charlotte News*, January 3, 1937.

³ Organ Programs — Carolina Theatre — Tuesdays and Thursdays, Paul Norris

⁴ Organ Programs — Sanitary Laundry — Mondays, Paul Norris