

**Lance Johnson**  
**Narrator**

**Bill Jones**  
**Interviewer**

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**BJ:** Okay, this is March...15<sup>th</sup>? And I'm Bill Jones, interviewing Lance Johnson as part of the Heritage Education Commission's Oral History Project. Lance, I think it would be useful first for you just to give us a thumbnail sketch of who you are, where you came from, and your education, and training, and what you're doing now.

**LJ:** Well, I was born in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, August 10, 1938. I'm the son of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard G. Johnson. And I left Fergus in 1964 after graduating from Concordia College. Ah, I went to NDSU [North Dakota State University] for three years and studied electrical engineering. I transferred to Concordia [College] and got a bachelor of music degree in organ with a minor in piano. At that time I was already in the business, the organ business full time, having started Johnson Organ Company when I was fourteen. And ah...in fact, my last year at Concordia, I was in the process of building and installing the second largest organ that I've built to date, and which turned out to be one of my most successful.

I was carrying twenty credit hours per quarter at Concordia, and I completed the bachelor of music program in two and a half years. Hmmm, then I went to work for M.P. Moller, Incorporated, which is the nation's largest pipe organ builder. I represented them in North and South Dakota for two years. And then I went completely independent. I thought I could a better job on my own, and I liked the freedom of being my own boss. And I opened up a shop in Moorhead in the Simon Warehouse building, that's 1002 Center Avenue. I was there until July 1968, and then I bought a building in the Moorhead industrial park across the street from Silver Line Boats, and remained there until the fall of 1972, at which time I moved to Fargo with the whole operation. And...we moved into the lower level of the F-M Insulation Building, which is at 806 Np Avenue, and we've been there ever since. And that probably has been our most productive headquarters to date. We have four thousand square feet, and five employees. We operate on...the shop is on the basement level, we have our offices and drafting department on the first floor, and our inventory storage on the second floor.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Now you...obviously, you were a performer, too, then.

**LJ:** Well, my performance had very little to do with my classical organ training, because when I was...in 1963 I began playing the organ at Bud's Roller Rink, an organ which I installed while I was at Concordia—which used to belong to me, incidentally.

**BJ:** Is that a theatre organ, this organ?

**LJ:** Theatre organ.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** It was enlarged to a three manual, seven rank organ. The basis for the organ, or the nucleus of it, was the old WDAY studio organ, which used to be in the Black Building.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** After they sold the organ in the early 1950s, it went to a church in Mayville, and then I finally bought the whole thing for a hundred dollars.

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** Carted it home like kindling wood, and put it together, and then enlarged it. I played at Bud's Roller Rink for nine and a half years. And that was my...ah, I guess that was my beginnings in theatre organ playing. And then after we got into the Fargo Theatre in August of 1973, I started playing at the theatre. And I resigned from the Roller Rink at that time because the organ music was no longer important to the skaters. Rock music had made such inroads at that time that I was competing with rock music. And it...the organ just kind of faded out of the scene.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Now ah...you started building organs at age fourteen?

**LJ:** I didn't actually start manufacturing organs until the late 1950s, but during that period, Johnson Organ Company was a service organization. I did servicing of reed organs and pipe organs during that period, and then rebuilding additions, total additions, replacement parts. Ah, I was really a...pretty much a one...one-man operation for those first five or six years.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** My sister Sonja Carlson[sp?], works for Western States in Fargo, worked for me for about five years on a part time basis. And then my father worked for me for a couple of months, hmmm, when I was about twenty years old, when we installed the Bethlehem organ in Fergus.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Ah, not because he needed to work for...but as I needed the help.

**BJ:** [Chuckles] Was he an organist, too? Or...?

**LJ:** He is...his background was...he founded the Johnson Organ...Johnson...[Chuckles] Johnson. Fergus Jobbing Company in Fergus Falls in the late 1920s with Cliff Feegan[sp?], his partner. He sold out in 1955 and became a stockbroker.

**BJ:** Hmmm.

**LJ:** A very successful one. And...and then he...he died in 1965 of leukemia. But his stock brokerage years were his happiest years. And he was quite successful at that.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Now, hmmm...so basically, your career...you...you still keep playing, but just as kind of...for fun. And...

**LJ:** The theatre organ playing for me is strictly fun.

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** All of the work that we do in the Fargo Theatre is strictly volunteer.

**BJ:** Yeah.

**LJ:** And I also volunteer a lot of my organ scores for the film department at Moorhead State University. I've played probably over a hundred films here since we've...Ah, that was even before we put the pipe organ in Weld Hall, because before that we used to use piano and a borrowed electronic organ until we got the pipe organ installed in the early 1980s.

**BJ:** So when you talk about film scores for silent films, that was one of the things that came along with the film, is that right?

**LJ:** Right. [Sighs] I...the way this got started for me was Ted Larson had...was asked to show silent films at the Family Y in Fargo during the Imagination Arts Festival, which I don't think went for too many years, but that was in the late 1970s, early 1980s. Ah...no, it was early 1970s.

**BJ:** Early 1970s. Correct.

**LJ:** Early 1970s like 1970 and 1971. They showed silent films over there. And then he found out that I played the organ at the roller rink and asked me if I'd come over and score films for him. I said I'd never done this in my life, I wouldn't even know where to start. Well, Ted has a way of persuading people...

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** And hmmm, we borrowed an electronic organ and brought it over there in the gym. And I spent a lot of time developing scores to *Phantom of the Opera* and *The Circus* with it, or the...for the...for my first films.

**BJ:** So you...you developed the score yourself?

**LJ:** Yes.

**BJ:** Yeah...and...

**LJ:** And I spent a lot of time taking notes, and working up, and...and getting all the music in order for these films. And much to our surprise, the films were *extremely* popular. It was turn-away crowds every time we showed these films.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And so when we...when the Imagination Film Series of the Imagination Arts Festival finally faded away, then our silent movies and the film scores gravitated into the Fargo Theatre and in...and then, of course, to Weld Hall Auditorium at Moorhead State University.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Hmmm. Let's talk about organ design and construction a little bit. And I guess one way to start off is: what's the difference between a theatre organ and an organ you'd have in a church?

**LJ:** Okay. They...the church...the difference is quite vast, but the layman would probably not understand technical terms, so I'll try to make it as simple as I can. Hmmm, a pipe organ, of course, works on compressed air. You have air moving through a tube, and a sound is produced, and that's how the pipe organ is conceived. A church organ uses what we call low pressure. Hmmm, pressure in a church organ or on any kind of pipe organ is measured in inches on an air...on a water column of air, an anemometer. And for people that have studied physics, they know what that is, but hmmm...a church organ works anywhere from two and half to about five inches of wind...is a low pressure instrument.

A theatre organ works on high pressure from ten inches to twenty inches of wind. The reason for this is a theatre organ has to be voiced of...with about three to four times the power of a church organ, because in a theatre you have soft seats, curtains, usually some acoustical treatment on the walls, and the organ's installed in chambers. And in order to fill the auditorium with it, with enough sound to do the job, it has to be voiced very loudly. And then, too, a theatre organ has to do the job with much fewer pipes than a church organ. For example, a seven rank theatre organ is comparable in size to about a twenty-five rank church organ. And the reason being is that the theatre organ has to be voiced louder, and the theatres had much less space to install an organ, and so the organs had to be made louder and with fewer pipes. And then as a result of the additional power, the pipes had to be made to a much larger scale.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And then the voicing, of course, is a very important feature. The voicing of a theatre organ is totally different than a church organ. A theatre organ is voiced with a very mellow sound. It can produce a lot of emotion. It has totally different tone colors than a church organ. Whereas a church organ is voiced more for a dignified worship setting, and has a “churchy” sound, as compared to a theatre organ, which has more of a theatrical sound.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. And the attempt, sometimes, to take an organ out of a theatre and put it in a church is doomed to failure as a result, isn't it?

**LJ:** I've never seen one yet that was successful. In fact, back in the 1930s when most church organ companies had failed because of the Depression, a lot of the companies that were still building theatre organs had a lot of organs that they had repossessed from theatres and were sitting in warehouses. And they sold them for next to nothing just to get rid of them. Organ builders would pick up these old organs and cram them into churches. A lot of them didn't last over fifteen and twenty years because, first of all, they were probably half worn out when they bought them, and secondly, the sound in many cases was so powerful and so un-church-like.

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** That people finally wised up and decided that they're better off getting a real church organ.

**BJ:** Okay. Let's...let's talk a little bit about your profession as it relates...Now, clearly, your organ building is basically building for churches. How does this happen? A church committee approaches you and says to you, “We want to...we want an organ.” What do you do from then on?

**LJ:** Well, many times, more than one builder will be brought in, and they will be asked to submit specifications for an organ that they feel will be best for that church. And we have many variables that we have to work with, parameters, right off the start. First of all, we have to ascertain whether or not the church can afford an instrument, or how large an instrument they can afford. And do they have the space, do they have the acoustics for it?

Hmmm. A lot of the modern churches, for example, are built with such low ceiling heights that it makes it very difficult to install a pipe organ because, first of all, the organ has to be on such a low level that it is difficult for the sound to diffuse throughout the whole church. And secondly, with the carpeting now that is in vogue, then making the church into more of a country club atmosphere, it absorbs the sound of the organ so much that it really harms the sound of it. And so we work with churches many times...If they are building a new church, especially, we will try to get the architect to allow space for the organ and a high enough ceiling and enough volume, a cubic volume in the building, so that the sound can resonate and fill and that the organ will sound well. There is an old saying about acoustics and pipe organs: the best stop in the organ is a good building.

**BJ:** [Chuckles] Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And it would be comparable to taking a violin and stuffing the sound box underneath the strings full of rags.

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** Ah...you wouldn't have much left. Well, this is what's happening in a lot of modern churches. Well, after we meet with the committee, then what we'll do is design an organ we feel is best for their church. And in the meantime, they will probably go out and make a field trip and listen to and hear some of our instruments as well as other...other builders. And if they like what they hear, oh, they'll probably ask us to come back and make the formal presentation of the organ that we would like to see in their church. Many times they'll ask for sketches and drawings. They like to know what it looks like, how much space to allocate for it. They're going to want to know what electrical service will be required. And hmmm, perhaps even some acoustical changes. Ah, we had some churches where they have removed their carpeting for the organ. We had a church in Jamestown who put in a whole new ceiling because they had an acoustical type ceiling like in this studio.

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** Throughout the whole church that was ripped out and hard boards put in.

**BJ:** Soaked up all the sound.

**LJ:** And that enhanced not only the sound of the organ, but they noticed a tremendous difference in their singing.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** Ah, so...oh, there are many, many facets to...to designing an organ and working with a committee. Ah, one of the most disheartening things about working with a church organ committee, I think, is the fact that sometimes three or four builders will be called in, and we will find out later that the church has already selected the organ that they're going to buy, but they have to satisfy the congregation by telling them that we've...we met with these four or five builders and we've selected this organ. Whereas they probably selected that builder right from the start, and the other builders that come in there and waste all this time meeting with a committee are...they are just a...

**BJ:** Going through the motions.

**LJ:** ...a wild goose chase.

**BJ:** Yeah. Now obviously you are also competing with electronic organs.

**LJ:** I would say that's probably fifty percent of our competition is the electronic instrument.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. And what do you tell a committee that is debating between electronic and natural or pipe organ?

**LJ:** Well, we tell them to make their own comparisons. They should go out and listen to both and...and listen carefully for the sounds and how the organ plays. We tell them, too, that a pipe organ has usually fewer stop controls because it doesn't require as many stops on a pipe organ to produce the same sound that an electronic organ does. For example, in a small church...let's say the church seats a hundred people. Now an organ with eighteen stop controls will fill that building very well, and you can play any kind of music on it. Whereas that same church, if they purchase an electronic organ, would probably have an organ of forty to fifty stops in order to get the variety that they require.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Hmmm...Electronic organs, too, are mass produced. Many of them are, some are not. But many that are mass produced do not have a terribly long life. We have examples of electronic organs in our own area that...twenty to twenty-five years, ah, they are ready to be thrown out, in cases where they can't get parts, and in cases where the tone improvement of the electronic organ tone has improved so much in ten to twenty years that the church organists and the musical people at church can tell the difference between the sound today and the sound produced twenty years ago.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And they want none of it, they want that new organ. And so they'll...many times, they'll buy a new electronic organ, because it has such a superior sound over the old electronic organ. And so we have quite a rapid turnover. Well, of course, in the pipe organ...Hmmm, we tell a church that once they've bought a pipe organ, they've bought their last organ. The organ should last the life of the church. And we service at Johnson Organ over a hundred and twenty organs on a regular basis.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And some of these organs are approach a hundred year...a hundred years.

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** And they're fine. Some are thirty and forty years, and they're not so fine, perhaps because they weren't very well built in the first place. And we've got organs that have been very badly water damaged from leaky roofs where it wasn't caught in time. Ah...we had one organ that was so badly vandalized it was considered a total loss.

**BJ:** Hmmm.

**LJ:** So there are...there are circumstances where a pipe organ will not last a century. But if they are well built, and the congregation takes care of them, they should go on for generations.

**BJ:** Alright. Now the committee has said, "Alright, Lance Johnson, we want you to build us an organ." What happens then?

**LJ:** Well, we then...ah, if we have a contract with the church, we set it up on a payment schedule so that the church pays us twenty-five percent down with the signing of the contract. And that allows us to send money off to our various suppliers for down payments for custom built materials for the organ. Even though we build sixty percent of the organ ourselves, there are lots of parts (especially electronic parts) that we can't make. And blowers, rectifiers, keyboards, things like that, we have to buy from suppliers.

Well, then we also...we do what we call shop drawings. Hmmm. A modest sized organ will require four to five pages of blueprinted drawings showing how the organ is to be constructed. Since there are no two organs alike, every organ has to have its own blueprint. After these drawings are made...and this can take one to two weeks alone, just...just the drawing portion of it, or what we call engineering. Ah, we send the copy of the plans off to the church and just look at...and have them look at the drawings. If there's anything on there they don't agree with, then they should contact us right away. If they initial it and say that it's okay, then construction begins.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And the construction of an average organ, a small organ, takes about four months. And the large organs can take up to a year.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Now you've been here long enough, been doing this long enough, so obviously, there are...you've installed a fair number of organs. Why don't you give us a rundown of some of the ones in this immediate area, at least, that...that you've done?

**LJ:** Well, I could probably just name some churches.

**BJ:** Right.

**LJ:** Peace Lutheran in Fargo.

**BJ:** Peace. Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Ah, Faith Lutheran at West Fargo; Calvary Methodist, Fargo; Nativity Catholic Church in Fargo; Holy Redeemer in Moorhead; Grace Methodist, Moorhead; Our Savior's, Moorhead. And of course we installed the Moorhead State University Recital Hall organ as well as the Wurlitzer theatre organ at Weld Auditorium.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.



**LJ:** Hmmmm...we are now currently installing a second organ in the Fargo Theatre. And that's probably due to completion in about a month. And throughout the six-state area we've got approximately a hundred organs installed.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And many of them are rebuilt organs or used organs. Churches that have folded, or organs that are no longer wanted, we obtain and rebuild them and put them in churches where they'll have a loving home.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Hmmmm. Our sales territory extends from Montana to Michigan. In fact, just this past summer, we installed our third organ in Michigan. And then we've also built a different type of pipe organ, which nobody builds in this country anymore. It's called the band organ. A band organ is an organ without any keyboards! And it plays music rolls.

**BJ:** Yeah?

**LJ:** It's all automatic. It's an entertainment type organ that was first developed for use on the merry-go-round, and the rolls are still available. And we've built about seventeen of these, and we have these just about scattered all over the world from Hawaii to Europe.

**BJ:** Really! [Chuckles]

**LJ:** Along with the largest one we built in our shop, I think it was 1974, was fifteen ranks. It played a roll which was, I think, seventy-three holes, and it played symphony music, concert music, and that went to San Francisco. I haven't seen that organ since we shipped it out. But we had so much fun with that organ. In fact, WDAY was over there and did a tape on it before we shipped it out, because they got such a kick out of it. But it's...it made a lot of noise and a lot of music, and...it had bells on it, and percussion instruments, and trumpets, and violins, and everything, so...

**BJ:** Did you design that?

**LJ:** Yes. Mmmm-hmmm.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Yeah. The design that I came up with was based loosely on the Wurlitzer counterpart that was built up to about 1925. And I was able to secure a lot of information about the old band organs that Wurlitzer built through reprint catalogs that are available. And then I was able to scale the organ to what I found in those catalogs as...as best I could. Ah, we haven't built a band

organ now for, I think, four years. Because the cost to build these has gotten so high that the individual people that buy these simply can't afford them. [Chuckles]

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** Ah, the last one we built was for the Western Minnesota Steam Threshers Reunion and that organ is played every Labor Day weekend nonstop for about four days. [Chuckles]

**BJ:** [Chuckles] Out at Rollag then.

**LJ:** It's now become their biggest attraction out there, I understand.

**BJ:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, hmmm, that's one thing about building organs, it...it is basically tailor-made, isn't it? I mean, you can't build a standard model and then market that. Every...everything has to be a...

**LJ:** It is possible to build various models of pipe organs, and several firms have done it, but the problem is that...finding the customer for that organ. Because you may...like if you bought...if you built, manufactured, let's say, three four-rank organs and had them ready just to go, it may be in the next two years that you won't find a church that will suit that organ.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Rather, you'll find churches that will probably want something larger or can afford a larger instrument, and so you're stuck with these four organs. And marketing pipe organs, too, is...it's a very low keyed affair. Now pipe organ companies usually don't advertise. Ah, I think, maybe the biggest reason is cost. Because the...the markup on a pipe organ is so small that there just isn't any room to advertise.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** There isn't space for that. And so most pipe organ firms will settle for a brochure, a small handout brochure, which usually gets mailed to our prospective customer, and that's it.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** You won't see ads in national magazines or your newspaper for pipe organs like you would electronic organs.

**BJ:** How many organ companies are active, building in the USA?

**LJ:** There are about two thousand pipe organ builders in the United States at this time.

**BJ:** Is that right?

**LJ:** And about ninety-five percent of those are one-man operations.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** Where they are basically service people who will build an organ occasionally when asked to do it. As far as...factories, we're probably talking less than a hundred in the whole country.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Ah, I would say maybe eighty percent of those are concentrated in New England, where the organ building movement really got started after this country was settled. And because the population out there is so concentrated and so dense, therefore you have many more churches and many more organ builders. Hmmm, California and Texas right now are in a growth situation for pipe organs. There's a lot of activity down there because there is church building going on. People are moving down there from their northern homes in the wintertime, they'll join a church, the churches expand, the stewardship goes up, and bang, they buy a pipe organ. Now Florida, and Texas, and California are really big pipe organ areas now.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Because the vacationing people are swelling the ranks of the people that are normally living there, and with the extra cash flow that makes it available.

**BJ:** What...what distinctives mark a Lance Johnson organ?

**LJ:** Well, it's really difficult to...to tell...ah...how we are different from other builders, because the differences are so subtle. If...if a person were blindfolded and sat down and played three different organs...and three organs...ah, let's say you played a Johnson, and a Holtkamp, and a [unclear], for example. Now a blindfolded person would probably have a difficult time telling one from the other. But if they were to play those organs for several weeks, like during church services, and practice on them, then little things would start to get into their minds. There will be certain things about each organ that they like, and maybe even some things they'll dislike, until the sound of the organ will finally gel in their minds. Hmmm...then, too, I think pipe organs today, the classic church organs, are voiced really quite similarly from one building to another. This was not true thirty years ago. Where we had organs, thirty, forty years ago built by some builders that were very romantically voiced, like the nineteenth century organ, very mellow.

**BJ:** Aeolian-Skinner, for example, and...

**LJ:** Very mellow.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Whereas other organs were building a very sharp sounding instrument, a very incisive, bright, north European style. And the differences are very, very discernable. Ah, you could

go...for example, in the 1950s, I think probably the most romantic sounding organ built was probably the Moller.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And then probably one of the brightest sounding was the Holtkamp. Well, today, the voicing of these various companies has kind of gelled into a pattern, into kind of an American classic sound, where the sound now, all the organs have become more similar, and the competition even more stiff as a result. We have many, many more organ companies today than we had in the 1950s.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** Probably ten times as many.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And when I first started working in this area in the 1960s, up in the Fargo-Moorhead area, I was the only one. If I went into a church to bid a job, I was the only bidder.

**BJ:** Hmmm.

**LJ:** And maybe one other.

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** Now I go to a church and I've got four or five other people bidding against me within a radius of three hundred miles.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And South Dakota used to not...didn't have any pipe organ builders. Now they've got four factories down there. Ah, Minnesota has got four or five good sized organ factories that are...that are busy. Whereas, ah, maybe one in the 1950s.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** Where...and back in those days, in the 1950s, and 1940s, and 1930s, if you wanted to buy a new pipe organ, you had to get an outfit from New England states out east to send a representative to your church and meet with them. And now you can buy a new pipe organ, yeah, from a factory less than three hundred miles away.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And that's good in some respects. The churches have more to choose from. But it's...it's rough on the small builder like us, because the competition has gotten so keen.

**BJ:** Yeah. And to have to make half a dozen presentations in order to get one order or something like that.

**LJ:** And sometimes it's more than that.

**BJ:** Yeah.

**LJ:** It's more like ten.

**BJ:** Yeah.

**LJ:** Yeah.

**BJ:** Yeah, that's rough. Let's move over now to the thing that probably you're identified with within the community more than anything else, and that is the Fargo Theatre. Ah, clearly, although your interest, I suspect, was...it started out being largely because of a very fine theatre organ there, ah, you've been involved rather considerably beyond that. Why don't you sketch a little bit of your involvement with...with the Fargo Theatre [unclear]?

**LJ:** Well, let's back up to 1958.

**BJ:** Okay.

**LJ:** That's when I started. In 1958, I was a student at NDSU. And ah...like any normal, red blooded American boy, I liked to find a girl to take out on the weekend, and go to the movies, or something, or go to a dance. And a couple of those times in those years I had a date...I don't even remember who it was. Well, we'd go to the Fargo Theatre and watch a movie. Well, the first time I went into the theatre in 1958, I gazed down towards the orchestra pit and I saw something that looked very familiar. I found an organ console. It was a horseshoe shape, which told me it was the theatre organ. And it was covered up with a black cloth, completely covered up.

**BJ:** Hmmm.

**LJ:** But the outline of the console, to me, was very discernable. I knew what I was looking at. Well, then I went to the manager, who was Ed Kraus, Hildegard Kraus' husband. And I told him that my folks were building a new large house on Hoot Lake outside of Fergus Falls, and we were kind of thinking about a pipe organ installation. In the 1950s, you could pick up a theatre organ for less than a thousand dollars.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Because there were so many of them available and there wasn't much interest in them. And he said, "Well, we might be interested in selling this organ to you." He said, "Why don't you make us an offer?" And so I talked to my parents about it and we thought maybe a thousand dollars is...would be the most we could come up with. In fact, maybe five hundred would even be closer. And so I asked him if I could come down and look at the organ on Saturday morning. He said, "Sure, come on ahead." So I came down and looked at the organ and I wanted to see how well it played, and see how much work it needed, because at that time I had a really good knowledge of organ building, and I knew if the organ was in poor shape I would have been in for a lot of work. So I started up the blower, and lo and behold, the organ had not been started for about twenty-five years.

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** And ah...the organ was...it made a lot of noise, it was leaking air, and the starter on the motor head shorted out, and it was starting to smoke. Well, then I went upstairs right away into the organ chamber to get the pipes that were ciphering unplugged, so I could ascertain the condition of the organ and see if maybe I could play it a little bit. Just then, the manager, Ed Kraus, came running down the aisle and he says, "What are you doing?" He said, "You had no authority to turn that organ on." I said, "Well, I wanted to see it, see if it played." He said, "I never said you could turn it on."

**BJ:** [Laughs]

**LJ:** And so he ran downstairs and threw the main switch and shut the blower off and...and was quite panicky because of the smoking relay. And actually, what happened was, in the early 1950s, Fargo was very badly flooded, I think it was 1952 or 1953, and the basement was full of water. And the electrical mechanism that started the blower had gotten wet, and since the organ hadn't run since that time, the coils had shorted out.

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** In fact, you could...up to a few years ago, you could see the high water line in the basement, until it was fixed up and cleaned up. Well, anyway, I went back to talk to my folks about it, and we decided that...Well, then he said that the theatre company, which then was Minnesota Music Company, would probably want about fifteen hundred dollars for the organ, and it was way beyond what we wanted to spend, so I just dropped the whole thing. Meanwhile, every time I went to the Fargo Theatre, I saw that organ sitting down there, and of course it drove me crazy.

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** Well, I figured, well, maybe someday I'll be a little bit older, and a little bit more money, and I'll be more established in my business, I'll be through school, and maybe I can buy that organ. So I just let it sit there. Well then 1973 rolled around, and...well, Ed Kraus, first of all, died, I think, in 1964. And they had many different managers in there during that time, that took his place, that were very, very unfriendly to organ enthusiasts. In fact, when we asked about the

organ, they just about threw us out, and there was something very sensitive about the organ. Ah, for them, it was a liability, and they...they just couldn't see any commercial value in it, and it was...to them it was just a piece of junk.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** In fact, they told me that part of the organ had already been removed and damaged, which wasn't true, because they...they said that just to discourage me. Well, then in the summer of 1973, Dave Knudtson, who was working for the ABC television station in Grand Forks was transferred to Fargo to Channel Eleven. And Dave and I kind of got to know each other, and he...it turned out he was a theatre organ enthusiast. And then so we certainly had a common bond right off the bat, and we just hit it off right off the bat. He came out to the roller rink and watched me play, and that was my last year out there.

He says, "How come you fellows haven't got the organ in the Fargo Theatre playing?" And I said, "Well, first of all, they don't want us in there." I said, "They don't want anything to do with organ enthusiasts." "Well," he says, "Are you aware of the fact that they just got a new manager?" I said, "No, I didn't know that." He said, "Well, the manager that was there before had health problems and he had to move to Phoenix. They've got a young kid over there now." "Well," I said, "Dave," I said, "Let's do this right. If we're going to get that organ playing, let's...let's do a real PR job on these people and not scare them away like I did last time."

So we took Doug Owens, the new manager, and [unclear – sounds like Marv Shako] was the city manager, out for lunch to the Black Angus. And I said, "This is what we want to do. If you allow us to get the Wurlitzer organ..."

So we took Doug Owens the new manager, and [unclear – sounds like Marv Shako] was the city manager, out for lunch to the Black Angus. And I said, "This is what we want to do. If you allow us to get the Wurlitzer organ playing again, and let us use it and play it, we will not...it will not cost the theatre a cent. We'll put our own labor and our own materials into the organ to make it play again." He said, "Fine, we don't care. Just go ahead." Well, since Dave at that time was also our projectionist—he was a part time projectionist, he had the key to the Fargo Theatre, and was in the union and everything. And so he knew the manager, and knew his way around theatres, and knew his way around getting along with managers. Well, *he* got us into that theatre.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** I couldn't...I'd...I couldn't do it for that ten years, fifteen years, I was not able to get into that organ. But Dave pulled it off.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** Having the new manager, a different attitude. And then the theatre was sold. The theatre company was sold at that time and it became ABC North Central Theatres. So we were dealing with even different management in the Twin Cities at that time. Dave and I then tore into the

organ. We spent several nights working through the nights trying to get it to play. I understood what it took to get it to play was just a lot of hard work. Ah...the organ had so much soot and dirt in it that the contacts were being insulated.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And only three notes played on the whole organ.

**BJ:** Hmmm.

**LJ:** And so I told Dave, I said, “You take the console apart and clean all the contacts, and I’ll go up inside the chamber and clean the relay, and we’ll see what we get.” Well, after the second night, which was like...now like five o’clock Sunday morning, we were in a position to get that organ playing. We cranked up the blower, and the organ played. It had a lot of dead notes, and of course the organ was so badly out of tune that it was almost a joke.

**BJ:** [Chuckles] And the sound...

**LJ:** And he had his tape recorder along that morning. And he started up the recording, and he says, “This is...we’re making history, so we’ve got to tape this organ.”

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** And so we...we played a little bit on it, and put it on tape. And of course it was...it was so bad that it sounded like cats with their tails tied together, because it hadn’t been tuned for many, many years. Well, then after we discovered that we had this beautiful organ...the sound of the organ *far* surpassed anything that I had dreamed. And I had heard pipe organs in recordings, I had been to other theatres, but there was something about this organ that really stood out. And Dave had to agree that we had a goldmine.

Well, then we decided that we would get the organ club involved in it as maybe a restoration project—that would be the Red River Chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society [ATOS]—asked them if they wanted to undertake this as a project to get this organ playing. You know, and they were very enthusiastic about it. And then we pulled Ted Larson into the picture, and decided to do a silent movie with the organ. And the club decided that we would rent the facility for one night and show a silent movie with the organ. And of course we were scared to death because we thought we were going to lose money on it. So we figured, well, Ted says, “If you can get three hundred people in here, you’re doing very well, and I think it would be a successful show.” We’re not so concerned about making money on it, we just want to try this and see how it works out.

Well, then a lot more work went into the organ. We got all the dead notes out of it. And we did our first silent movie in the fall of 1974. Harold Lloyd in *The Kid Brother*. A lot of publicity had been focused on the organ restoration, and the *Fargo Forum* and the media and so on were down there and seeing what we were doing. And we had an advanced ticket sales. And at twenty



minutes to eight the evening that I was to start playing the organ for the overture, my wife came down to my dressing room. She said, “We just sold our last ticket, and there’s still two hundred people outside!”

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** The audience was absolutely *wild*. And when I first struck the first chords on the organ, which was *That’s Entertainment*, the audience burst into applause, and screamed and hollered like they were at a basketball tournament.

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** Then we knew we had...we had done something right, and we had found something that the community liked. During the course of the evening, hmmm, two television stations came into the theatre with their video cameras and taped portions of the program, and showed on the news the next day. The editor...or the entertainment editor of the *Forum* was there and wrote about the show, and said it was the entertainment highlight of the year for Fargo-Moorhead. And we were famous overnight.

**BJ:** Hmmm.

**LJ:** The organ, the Fargo Theatre, the ATOS, had really made their mark. Well, then...well, after we paid our humongous rental fees to the theatre manager, he called Chicago the next day, they had a home office—or was it Minneapolis?—and told them what we had done. And they said, “Ask them if they want to do it once a week!”

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** Well, of course, they made lots of money off of this. They made far more money off us than they would showing first run movies.

**BJ:** Well, sure.

**LJ:** Well, of course, we knew right off the bat, there was no way we could do it. There was so much work to putting a show together, and there are just so many silent films that you can show that are available today.

**BJ:** Yes.

**LJ:** So...well then that was the birth of Silent Movie Night. And since that time we’ve done about twenty-seven or twenty-eight shows. We’ve done two twice a year. Most of them have been sellouts. And in the spring show this year we’ll be featuring Hildegarde, a tribute to Hildegarde Kraus and her career.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Hildegard Usselman, I knew her as, when she was playing for WDAY back when I was a kid. Okay. And now, ultimately, didn't you take over the theatre?

**LJ:** Well, then...ah...during the 1970s, we not only got the organ playing, but we also worked on the dressing rooms and cleaned those up so they're usable, did a lot of work on the stage. In fact, we had a lot of materials in there that belonged to the Organ Club, and that was almost our headquarters by that time. And then by 1983 I got a phone call from the manager from Sioux Falls, the regional manager, and he said, "We need to talk to you. Will you please come over to the theatre right away?" And when he said that, I knew there was something bad that was about to happen. And he announced when I got there that they were closing the Fargo Theatre for good.

The theatre had lost so much money that they were shutting down the theatre, and there was no possibility of reopening it. And they were negotiating to sell the lease of the theatre, as well as the Lark Building, and the lease on the Gateway Theatre to Cinema Entertainment Corporation of St. Cloud. Well, we asked...asked him, we said, "Is there a chance that they will reopen the theatre?" And he said, "I doubt it, because the single screen theatres can't make a profit anymore." And the Fargo Theatre was so expensive to operate. The heating bills, the size of the building, the thousands of lightbulbs, and the cleaning problems, they said they just couldn't make a profit. Well, of course we were very, very sad, very upset, because we knew that was going to be the end of Silent Movie Night, and the end of the organ. Because we didn't own the organ, it still belonged to the theatre company, so we would lose that also, along with all the work that we'd put into it and all the materials. [Coughs]

Well, then something happened that came to a total surprise to us. A fellow by the name of Rick Solarski, who today is the manager of South 123, who worked for CEC, went to his boss and he said, "Wait a minute." He says, "Look at this beautiful theatre." He said, "You just can't throw this place away. You're going to be paying lease payments on it, and it's going to be shuttered, and it's going to be dark. Why don't you ask the ATOS if they want to reopen it and run it? And then maybe just to sweeten the pot a little bit, why don't you just donate all the furnishings and the organ and give it to them? Because it's no good to us." Well, then Rick came over to my shop and he's all excited. And he says, "You know," he says, "You people should really open that theatre. You've got the expertise to do it, you've got the people that can do it, and keep it going." And I said, "Well..." [Chuckles] I said, "I don't know anything about running a theatre. And none of us do, in fact. Except Dave Knutson's had some experience in projection, that's about all."

Well, we knew that the Organ Club would fold. It would be the end of the theatre organ movement in Fargo-Moorhead if something weren't done. And so I took the whole...the whole proposal to our chapter meeting. I said, "They've told us that we can rent the theatre or lease it, twelve hundred dollars a month, as long as we don't run first product, first run movies. And they in turn would donate all the furnishings, including the organ, to the club. What do you think about that?" We had a vote, and the vote was unanimous that we reopen the theatre. And so it was reopened on July 1<sup>st</sup> of 1983 to *Doctor Zhivago*. And that night, I believe, we had tornado warnings out. Everybody was ushered into the lobby during the scare. And ah...motors broke

down, we had...[coughs] then rained very hard, there was water all over the stage, but the audience had a great time.

**BJ:** Hmmm.

**LJ:** And the *Forum*, writing was [unclear] Anderson, wrote all about us and told us how hard we had worked and how valiant we were to reopen this theatre. And as a result of their advertising for us, we got a lot of people in there, a lot more than...than the other company was doing with their first run pictures. We were doing three to four times the audience with our second run movies.

**BJ:** Yeah.

**LJ:** On our classic movies and our foreign films or whatever. Well, we were not in there maybe six months where we realized that we had inherited a broken down building. The water inspector just threw up his hands. The roof leaked so badly that we had...we had several sections of seats that were roped off, because when it rained you couldn't have people sitting there. And the rain made so much noise when it hit the stage from the fly loft that's fifty feet above that it had a...you could hear the smacking sound of the water hitting the stage during the movies, which interfered with the sound a little bit. We had to turn the sound up so you wouldn't hear that.

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** Oh, we had motors, and blowers, and...and all types of the machinery that just simply didn't work or was on its last legs. Ah, the marquee only half worked; half the wiring was shot in it. And hmmm...the theatre was...it was very dirty, very rundown. Any attempts to remodel it by amateurs had...had really done more harm than good, I think. But we were faced with some pretty monstrous expenses. There was no way that we could take box office money and start putting a new roof on the building or replacing the boiler. And so...what to do?

We had one choice...actually, two choices. We could either have some kind of a drive to save the theatre or close it down. And so I went to Ken [unclear] who at that time was the head of the Fargo Parking Authority. And I said, "Ken," I said, "We're in trouble over there." I said, "If we can't fix up this building we're going to have to let her go." And I said, "There's already been an offer on it to buy the building to make a parking lot." Oh, he just stood up and his eyes lit up like lightbulbs. He says, "That can't possibly happen! We have to save that theatre!" So he called a bunch of his business friends down to his office and we had a meeting. And from that came the steering committee for the Save the Fargo campaign. The next year we spent planning the campaign, and we decided we were going to raise \$460,000 to fix up the building.

Well, as time went on, we found that that was totally inadequate for what we needed. So that the campaign had to be extended way beyond that, but as a result, we got grants from the Fargo...City of Fargo, through the block grant program, to replace the roof, and boiler, and the heating system. We got \$195,000 from the Reineke Foundation. \$10,000 here, \$10,000 there. And...and we had to buy the building. The building was in ownership of the Powers and Elliott

family at that time, and we had to buy it, because nobody would give us any money if the building was owned by somebody else.

**BJ:** Sure. Sure.

**LJ:** So that was our first hurdle, working with those people. Well, it turned out that they were willing to sell, but we had to come up with the cash. And so we had to borrow just about every bit of it from the bank, and the bank backed us. You know, and I don't know how, today, how they even got away with that. Today they probably wouldn't do it because...

**BJ:** The security was somewhat...[Chuckles]

**LJ:** The financial climate today is a lot worse than it was five years ago.

**BJ:** Yeah. Yes.

**LJ:** But they took a chance on us.

**BJ:** Yeah.

**LJ:** And we had...we had paid off in the first three or four months of the campaign, we had paid off \$60,000 on the building already. Well, we're at our tail end of the campaign now, we have yet to raise about \$100,000, and then we're done with that phase of it. But the remodeling and the repair costs were almost double what we had figured.

**BJ:** Hmmm.

**LJ:** In fact, even the architect's estimates were way far...far off. When you get an old building and decide to fix it up, you're really gambling. You don't know what you're in for.

**BJ:** Yeah. One...

**LJ:** Once you tear into it, you find it's a lot worse than you think it is.

**BJ:** Yeah. One thing leads to another.

**LJ:** It's just like...it just grows, and grows, and grows. There's no end to it. And even when we finish this Save the Fargo portion of the campaign, we're looking at seat replacement, some more work on the auditorium; we're looking at a hydraulic orchestra pit lift, re-rigging the stage, new projectors. You're talking about \$200,000...\$200,000-\$300,000 right there.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** So eventually we're going to have to find money to do that, too, you see.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** But I think probably the Fargo Theatre, now being a nonprofit artist organization, is the only arts organization that I know of that is open 364 days of the year. And that's just not evenings, that's also many times daytime rentals, afternoon matinees, and ah...the only one night that we are closed is Christmas Eve.

**BJ:** Hmmm. And it's still being operated by the Theatre Organ Society?

**LJ:** Yes, the theatre organ...the Red River Chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society formed a new corporation at the opening of the theatre in 1983, called the Fargo Theatre Management Corporation, a separate entity, which will protect the club against worst case scenarios.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And also gave us an identity where we could...hmmm, we could file for a 501c3 nonprofit status, which we got, and that of course allowed us to become nonprofit and receive gifts, tax deductible gifts.

**BJ:** Right.

**LJ:** But the ATOS today is still the main governing body of the theatre, because they furnish the board of directors. And each spring they have an election and elect the board with...there are eight board members. And one of them's a...of those eight is a member or a representative of the downtown business community.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Which is our liaison with business people, which has done enormous things for us, and our current representative is Richard Baustad[sp?] who is the manager of the Radisson.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And the Radisson has also been extremely supportive of the theatre. They furnish us free rooms for our meetings, free rooms for our guests who perform.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And when they had their first birthday party, they gave fifty percent of the proceeds to the Save the Fargo campaign.

**BJ:** Great.

**LJ:** And so we get along very well with the Radisson folks. Mmmm-hmmm.

**BJ:** Yes. Yeah. Well, it's understandable that they would appreciate it, obviously, because it adds a dimension to that downtown area that is really distinctive. Now you're putting another organ in.

**LJ:** Yes. Well, we did the Reineke Lobby last summer. In fact, it wasn't completed until end of the year. We had discovered that when the old air conditioning and ductwork was removed from behind the mirrored wall that there was quite a large space in there that was really...ah...basically storage space. And we had always dreamed of the idea of having a lobby organ, like the big theatres in New York had.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** There are only about five theatres ever built in this country that had lobby organs. And only two of those remain today. And so what we propose is having a smaller version of the Wurlitzer in the lobby, which would be used when the auditorium organ would not be played. It could be used for walk-in music; it could be used for receptions, afterglows after concerts, as a practice organ, and would be tied into the three-manual console in the orchestra pit, so that it would serve as an antiphonal division for the main organ. And then, too, when the prologue music is played during movie nights, the regular...our regular weekend prologues, the lobby organ will be set to play with the main organ in the auditorium, so...and will literally flood the whole building with sound.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** And it has already gathered quite a lot of attention. Hildegard is very thrilled about it.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** The lobby console, by the way, is the one that she used to play on. It was in the orchestra pit, and it was replaced by a three-manual console in 1977.

**BJ:** I see. Now...ah...who are the theatre organists in town?

**LJ:** Well, let's see. Ah...[sighs] besides me, it's Lloyd Collins.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Who plays usually on Sunday nights. Ah, Saturday nights it's either Pat Kelly or Tyler Engberg. I do the Friday night program. I've also had a college student, Lorraine Nelson, who has substituted for me during my vacation periods. She's a nineteen- or twenty year old girl who plays very well.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And then, of course, Hildegard plays for our Silent Movie Night presentations many times. And if she's not in the program itself, she will play the lobby piano as people are walking in.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Well, it's a very distinctive operation and a really distinctive contribution to this...this community. No question about it. Hmmm...I guess we need to talk a little bit about you. You have family. And, you know, how your present circumstances...we need to get that on tape, too.

**LJ:** Well, my home is in Dilworth.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** I'm married to...my wife's name is Judy. Hmmm...and I have six children. My oldest is a daughter, Mary Lou, twenty-six, she's a pre-med student. My oldest son is Michael, who is a pre-law student, and also works at Johnson Organ Company, and as a full-fledged organ builder.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Ah...I have a son, Greg, who has opened up three or four new businesses on Pelican Lake with...for the resort people. And I have a son, Joe, who is in electronics at Wahpeton science school, Wahpeton...the tech school. And a daughter, Susie, who is a finance major at Moorhead State University. And my son Skip, who is eleven years old, who is...goes to the Dilworth Public School. I had a daughter who was born in 1973 who was killed in 1975 when she was run over by a car in front of our house.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** I should say that when I married my wife Judy in 1972, she already had five kids. The oldest one was about nine or ten, I guess. She had been widowed and...and we were married at that time. And so I gained an instant family.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Ah...we went to South Dakota, where we were married, and...and the day we got back, we walked in the back door, and all the kids had made a wedding cake for us.

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** And so we had this humongous wedding cake to eat. And the next day, two of the kids came down with chicken pox. And by the end of the week, they *all* had chicken pox.

**BJ:** [Laughing] Everybody!

**LJ:** I had already had it, so it didn't affect me, but...

**BJ:** Oh, boy.

**LJ:** My wife was wondering how long I was going to last! You know...if I could take that. The kids are...too, are all very active, and very bright. And...when you get five young kids in a very small, two-bedroom house, the house, it really shakes from dawn to dusk.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And the noise I was not used to. I was in a very quiet family, I was raised in a very quiet family with just one sister, and ah...it was a *totally* different environment. But it's been a very...

**BJ:** [Unclear].

**LJ:** ...very rewarding one, because I've got some pretty wonderful kids. I'm awfully proud of them and...by my wife.

**BJ:** That sounds like it's...yeah. Okay. Ah...are there some things that we haven't covered? Hmmm...I tried to...to get a picture of both your building, and then the Fargo Theatre, which is so distinctive. You were heavily involved in the Weld installation, too, the theatre organ.

**LJ:** Yes, I think that's kind of an interesting story. Ah, as I alluded to before, Ted Larson had asked me to provide film scores for many films over there. And during summer cinema, where they show movies every Monday night, we had usually run three or four silents. And then we ended up going out to music stores and borrowing these old, used, broken down electronic organs so we could do scores. And I said, "You know, Ted, you've got a theatre here. You've got space for a pipe organ. We should have one in there." He said, "Well, that'd be fine, but how do we do it?" "Well," I said, "I know the Organ Club has got a lot of stuff in storage." And I said, "Maybe we can put something together out of that."

And so the club voted to spend fifteen hundred dollars to buy additional parts. And what we did is we made an offer to Moorhead State that we would furnish this organ to the school at no charge, no rental cost, if they would at least provide the chambers for the organ. And the school could use it as often as they want, as much as they want. And right away, the school accepted it, they thought it was a pretty good deal.

So the school's architect, Les Johnson decided...designed two chambers for them. They built them in back of the stage. And the club and I installed it. I think it was in 1981 or 1982, hmmm, during the winter times. And the organ was an immediate hit. Ah, the organ has been used far more than we thought it would be. It's not only used for film classes, but it's used for concerts and recording sessions. And then, of course, summer cinema, it's played every night, every Monday night during the summer during the movies.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.



**LJ:** If it's not for a film score, it's used for prologue music.

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** And so it gets...it gets played quite often.

**BJ:** Isn't often that a school gets an offer like that.

**LJ:** Also, we used the organ in an educational purpose, because when Ted has his classes on silent film, part of the curriculum requires the students to be familiar with the theatre organ.

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** A little bit about the makeup of what makes it an organ, and how it was used for the film score, because the organ music is considered to be almost as important as the film itself.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** That... that one cannot exist without the other.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. The relationship between music and film, with the silent films, is obviously a totally different relationship...than the music has with the sound films, because the music has got to really fill a void there, doesn't it, actually?

**LJ:** Yes. Today I see so many first run pictures with electronic sound, where they use synthesizer. Ah...the modern audiences who probably don't care that much about a film score are very satisfied with that sound. To me, it bothers me, because it's a cop out.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** When you don't compose music just for a picture, I think you're really cutting corners. Ah, today, the Academy Award winning pictures like [*The*] *Color Purple* and some of these others will have full blown symphony scores, and yeah, scores written for the movies. Well, and something similar to that happens with silent movies, because first of all, when we're scoring a silent movie made in the 1920s...or before 1930, we can't play music that was composed after that period.

**BJ:** No, that's true.

**LJ:** Because it would destroy the uplifting effect of the organ with the...it would not heighten the mood one bit.

**BJ:** Yeah.

**LJ:** In fact, audience members will pick out tunes that are familiar to them. They say, “Hey, I remember that when I was a kid, well maybe the 1940s.” And if the music starts to become familiar to them, it just destroys the whole effect of the organ.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** The organ should...you should not notice that the organ is being played. The organ should heighten the action of the picture, but it should not be something that would draw attention to itself. And that’s probably one of the most difficult things that the organist has to do in scoring a picture.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Is to make the...the music fit the picture *yet* not call attention to the organ.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Ah. A...almost lost art.

**LJ:** Yes...ah...you could say almost in one respect, but in another respect, there are *so many* young people today in this country that are learning theatre organ, and to play the theatre organ, and to score films. It’s just unreal. We have so many universities that are installing theatre organs today. I think the most notable one is probably Colorado’s northern...University of Colorado in Fort Collins, which has an eighteen-rank Wurlitzer that is played *constantly*.

**BJ:** Mmmm.

**LJ:** The students play it. They have instruction on theatre organ through their music program; they have instruction on silent film scoring. Ah...another one is the Northern Michigan Tech School, which is up in Hancock, Michigan. Ah, there’s quite a few colleges and universities now that are...are moving towards that area, especially if film is taught.

**BJ:** Yeah.

**LJ:** Then the organ becomes important.

**BJ:** An intrinsic part of that, of that art form. Mmmm-hmmm. Well, is there anything...other things that we should be covering?

**LJ:** Well, ah...I like to plug my book, of course. Ah...

**BJ:** Oh, yes.

**LJ:** Even though the book is six years old, I wrote a documentary or a book on the Fergus Falls Tornado of 1919, which wiped out two-thirds of the city. And when I was about ten years old, when the weather was very hot and humid...ah...I’ve never gotten along well with hot weather. I mean, even as a boy I would escape the hot weather by going down to the basement of the

courthouse in Fergus Falls and going through the museum. I don't think there were too many young people who were interested in museums at that age, but *I was*.

**BJ:** Hmmm.

**LJ:** And I was faced with these full blown copies of the *Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, describing the cyclone, they called it in those days, and the many people that were killed, the property damaged. And at age ten that made quite an impression on me. I couldn't get it out of my mind. That something could have happened to my hometown, so devastating, and yet make such a marvelous comeback. And so back in the early 1980s, I suddenly got this compulsion; I wanted to write a book about the cyclone. And well, the museum people down there gave me a lot of support, and I was able to get the publishing donated by the book firm, because they believed in the book, too.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And we decided that we...the book would be kind of a gift to the museum, they could sell it and keep the proceeds for their publishing accounts. And so I set out to write this book. And I spent three years writing it. I think I wrote the book three or four times. Hiram Drache served as my editor, and I interviewed almost forty people, survivors. And it's a good thing I did it when I did, because most of those survivors are dead today. [Chuckles]

**BJ:** Mmmm, yeah.

**LJ:** So I caught them just in time. But I got many, many hours of tape with these folks, and from that was able to put the whole picture back together again, the puzzle of what had happened before the...and during and after the cyclone.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm. Hmmm.

**LJ:** And I keep the books on sale in Fargo-Moorhead at various outlets as well as in Fergus Falls. I understand they sold a little over a thousand of these books, so...

**BJ:** Was that fun?

**LJ:** Yes, it was. Yeah, it was very rewarding, fulfilling, but very hard work.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** And I think probably the most heartbreaking part of it was having my editor saying, "This won't work. This page...this chapter should be here. Ah...I would forget about that, that isn't going to work. Why don't you write more about this part of it and develop this idea?" [Laughs] It was hard on my ego there for a while. But ah...when I finally finished it, I'm glad that it turned out the way it did.

**BJ:** Yeah.

**LJ:** Because he was a tremendous help to me.

**BJ:** Have any others planned?

**LJ:** No. Ah...I don't consider myself a professional author. And to get a book published today is so difficult. Everybody thinks they're an author.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** I know that a very large percentage of the books that are submitted for publication are rejected. And ah...for the time that's involved, I don't think I have that good a story to tell anyway. [Chuckles]

**BJ:** [Chuckles]

**LJ:** I think that the cyclone will be my one and only book. And in fact, I decided that if that book sold *really* well that I would do a sequel, or an extension, or a second edition.

**BJ:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**LJ:** Because after the book went out, all of a sudden I got all these letters from people I'd never heard from before. "Oh, I was in the cyclone. I could tell you all about it." And...

**BJ:** Sure.

**LJ:** Well, I missed on that. So I could...I could have included ten or fifteen more stories, at least.

**BJ:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, that's quite an interesting sidelight. You've...you've had, obviously, a very busy, busy life, running a firm, and all that volunteer work that you've done with the theatre organ, and...and then this additional dimension. [Clears throat] Well, very good. Hmmm, I guess we'll say that we have completed the interview, and it's a very interesting one. Thank you.

**LJ:** Thank you very much.

[End of interview]