

# Gone 70 years, 'Ursula' plays on

By DICK SHEARER

While later generations were left with lifelong impressions of the Lansdale Theatre chandelier, earlier movie-goers were equally enthralled with the massive pipe organ which was installed in time for opening night, March 5, 1928.

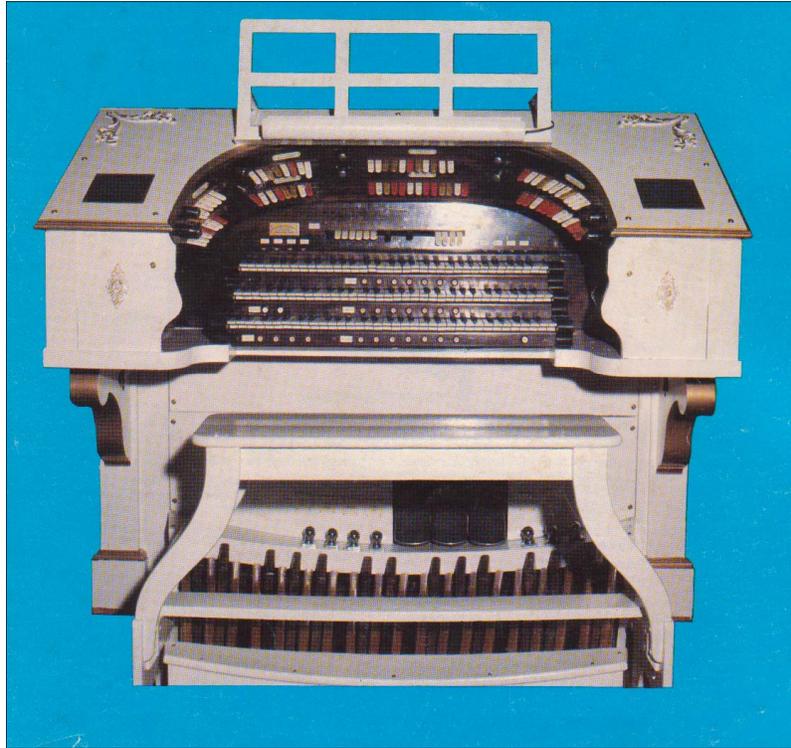
Nicknamed "Ursula" this lady is no shrinking violet. Built by the U.S. Pipe Organ Co. in Crum Lynne, Delaware County, she was – and still is – capable of belting out some ear-splitting music. And she's a survivor: Now residing at Sunneybrook Ballroom in Pottstown, she is the last remaining U.S. Pipe Organ in existence.

Ursula had plenty of work on opening night. The Lansdale was built with the intent to show talking motion pictures but because the sound equipment was on back order, a silent film, "The Dove", starring Norma Talmadge was substituted. The organ provided the suspense.

Over the next 15 years Ursula was used for concerts, live productions, recitals and some school commencements, but once talkies took over its importance to the movie house diminished.

In 1942 the organ was purchased by the Baptist Church of Phoenixville where, according to the American Theatre Organ Society, it was in service for 30 years, minus its tuned percussions and toy counter (for movie sound effects), which fortunately had been put in storage.

When the congregation decided



**URSULA** graced the cover of the American Theatre Organ Society's magazine during the 1980s.

to purchase a new organ in 1972, Ursula was bought by Roger and Dorothy Bloom of Downingtown, who installed it in their home. And that's where it stayed until the Blooms decided to retire to Florida a few years later.

Robert Hartenstine, owner of the Sunneybrook Ballroom at the time, heard that it was for sale and moved it to his Pottstown dance hall. It was first played there on Oct. 3, 1981.

Since that time, the ballroom has gone through several reincarnations and owners but Ursula continues to play on. In fact, the

percussions and toy counter have now been reinstalled, providing all the original bells and whistles.

In the final days of the Lansdale Theatre, the late Richard Schmidt of Delaware Avenue loaned his own self-built pipe organ for use during the last classic films series. Although it didn't match Ursula's punch, it provided memories of days gone by.

*(Information for this story was provided by society member Dennis Boyles and publications of the American Theatre Organ Society.)*

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Oregon Cabaret Theatre: [www.oregoncabaret.com](http://www.oregoncabaret.com)
- American Theatre Organ Society: [www.atos.org](http://www.atos.org)