

**This Is Us**

# 3,000-pipe organ hits right chord

Caledonia man's 'basement bijou' features 1920s-style movie palace

By CHELSEY LEWIS

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**Caledonia** — Fred Hermes says he doesn't move as easily as he used to.

You wouldn't believe him if you watched the 89-year-old play the rare 1926 Wurlitzer theater organ housed in his Caledonia basement, his fingers flipping buttons and flying across the five keyboards while his feet effortlessly work the pedals below.

Tucked under a three-bedroom ranch at the end of a dead-end road along Lake Michigan, the basement looks ordinary enough from the outside. A hand-painted wooden "Theatre" sign is the only hint of what lies inside.

But a step through the basement door is like traveling through a time machine straight into a 1920s movie palace. Rows of red theater seats on the main level and in a balcony face the organ console elevated on a stage; Roman columns, sculptures and crystal chandeliers decorate the room; multicolored lights illuminate the stage and ceiling.

The theater — Hermes calls it his "basement bijou" — is something to behold, but it's the organ that takes center stage — literally.

"It's the biggest organ that Wurlitzer ever built," said Hermes, a member of the Dairyland Theatre Organ Society.

Of the thousands of organs the company made in the 1920s, it only made three like Hermes' "Mighty Wurlitzer." The 3,000-pipe organ weighs 25 tons and is housed in four chambers measuring from 20 to 75 feet. Bells, trumpets, flutes, percussion and all manner of other instruments create a maze of pipes, wooden beams and electrical wires inside.

"You can get almost anything out of this organ you want," Hermes said. He stroked a key to play a heavenly note on the tibia flute. "Almost makes you want to cry, doesn't it?"

## **Obsessed from childhood**

Hermes took piano lessons growing up, but it was during a trip to a Racine theater that he found his passion.

"My mother used to take me down to the Rialto Theatre in Racine, and the guy played an organ down there — it was a small Wurlitzer — and when he played those low notes,

## **ABOUT THIS FEATURE**

This Is Us is a recurring feature in the Journal Sentinel Green Sheet, with stories on the people, places and things reflecting the spirit and heart of our community.

about what he wanted to do with the space.

"That was in about 1959. They started tearing down all of these beautiful movie palaces all over the country," he said. "I got ahold of building records, and they would tell me when they were tearing a theater down, and they would say, 'Come and get whatever you want out of the theater, that's less stuff for us to haul to the dump!' So I would go and pick up all this stuff here and there."

Hermes said he has artifacts from about 50 theaters: a mustard-yellow curtain from the Crown Theatre in Racine; the motor mechanism that opens and closes it from the Palace Theatre in Dallas; stage lights from Kenosha's Lake Theater; crystal chandeliers from the Piccadilly Theatre in Chicago; more than 100 theater seats from the Uptown Theatre in



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Fred Hermes sits in front of his rare five-keyboard Wurlitzer theater organ in the basement of his home.

(I was so excited) I'd kick her all over the place," he said. "I decided then and there, someday I was going to buy that organ, because I liked it so much. Then about four weeks later, I was born. I bought my first organ."

The industrious 8-year-old bought the pump organ from his piano teacher and hauled it home on a wagon with the help of a few friends.

Two decades later, Hermes was at it again, recruiting friends and a couple of semitrailers to help him haul the massive five-keyboard Wurlitzer from the Michigan Theater in Detroit home to Racine. Hermes paid \$3,000 for the organ in 1955; he estimates it's worth about \$3 million today.

Hermes then built the Caledonia home for his organ, including a basement with 20-foot ceilings.

Once his son and daughter grew up and stopped using the large basement as their indoor playground, Hermes started thinking



Hermes has turned the basement of his home into a 150-seat movie theater. The seats came from Racine's Uptown Theatre, which opened in 1928 and closed in 1959.

Racine; Italian Renaissance décor from Racine's Venetian Theatre.

About 20 tour groups arranged through the Racine County Convention and Visitors Bureau (800-272-2463, [realracine.com](http://realracine.com)) make their way through Hermes' miniature movie palace every year to watch silent movies and hear him play.

Every three years or so he stages his favorite: the original 1925 "The Phantom of the Opera."

As he made his way through the dark theater to turn off the blower for the organ, the spry octogenarian — who still goes into his real estate and insurance office a few days a week — didn't miss a chance for a joke.

"Now I'm the phantom of the opera," he quipped before turning off the hissing blower, silence descending on the theater and ending the 1920s spell — for now.

## **Featured attraction**

Watch a video of Fred Hermes and his "basement bijou" at [jsonline.com/greensheet](http://jsonline.com/greensheet).