

THE SINGING TROUBADOUR OF THE HIAWATHA VALLEY: THE LIFE AND  
RADIO CAREER OF RONNIE OWENS, THE SINGING COWBOY OF RED WING,  
MINNESOTA

by

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## ABSTRACT

### THE SINGING TROUBADOUR OF THE HIAWATHA VALLEY: THE LIFE AND RADIO CAREER OF RONNIE OWENS, THE SINGING COWBOY OF RED WING, MINNESOTA

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Gillian Rodger

The number of local, rural radio stations grew dramatically at the aftermath of World War II. These stations modeled their programming on that of large, urban radio stations while providing local news and music and entertainment by local musicians and performers. One such performer found on radio stations throughout America was the character of the singing cowboy, originating from paperback novels and the silver screen. Little research has been conducted on the singing cowboy on local radio stations however. In this thesis, I will provide a model on how to examine the singing cowboy on a local radio station. More specifically, I will examine the life and career of Ronnie Owens and his radio career on the rural radio station, KAAA, in Red Wing, Minnesota.

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This thesis is dedicated to my Grandpa Ronald who decided to follow his heart and his dream. His musical talent and radio career has been and continues to be an inspiration.  
Thank you, Grandpa.

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I hope I have made both of these men proud.

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## Introduction

Before radios became household items, it was customary for the elite and art patrons to attend concerts weekly to make their presence known and to socialize. Families of lower economic status who could not afford to attend most concerts downtown would create their own music for entertainment, whether it was square dancing music or narrative songs. Radio star and musician Billy Folger reminisced “I grew up in a different world. If you wanted music, you made it. So, a lot of people learned to play musical instruments.”<sup>1</sup> But once radios became a highly valued and permanent piece of the household by the 1930s, people of all economic statuses had the chance to listen to the same program with the option to be as comfortable as possible, wearing what they chose, talking when they wanted to, and having the option to listen for as long as they desired. Radio introduced an “unlimited theater, where rear seats are hundreds of miles from the stage and where the audience, all occupying private boxes, can come late or leave early” into American homes.<sup>2</sup>

Radios became a vehicle of change in entertainment and communication at the turn of the century. Reginald Fessenden from Canada came to America in the early 1900s to work with General Electric to improve Guglielmo Marconi’s spark transmitter and coherer receiver by developing his own alternator, a device that sends out continuous radio waves instead of spark signals.<sup>3</sup> His invention made transmitting voice and music possible, helping the illiterate receive news and all to be entertained. Radios also affected commercialism by making brands recognizable through jingles and slogans. Once radio

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Barfuss, *David Stone in Sunset Valley* (Minneapolis: James D. Thueson, Publisher, 1983) 46.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Peter Haeg, *Sixty Years Strong: The Story of One of America’s Great Radio Stations, 1924-1984: 50,000 Watts Clear Channel Minneapolis-St. Paul* (Minneapolis: Viking Press, 1984) 11. The quotation is cited from 1922.

<sup>3</sup> “Background,” *National Capital Radio & Television Museum*, 2012, [http://ncrtv.org/?page\\_id=26](http://ncrtv.org/?page_id=26).

became an established medium and continued to grow, radios and radio stations depressed the sale of phonographs and sheet music, pianos and violins, theater tickets, and newspaper advertising through its popularity.<sup>4</sup> However, if a listener liked a particular piece, song, or performing group, they may have been enticed to buy the music, buy the record, or go to a concert. Continuous performance of a popular song on radio shows, however, shortened the average life of the song from two years to eight weeks.<sup>5</sup>

Radio programs invited the radio stars into the listeners' homes and made the listener part of the experience within their living space. Sound envelopes the listener while visual performances tend to only allow the listener to participate from the outside looking in. Radio entertainment takes the listener's mind out of the present and transports them somewhere else; helping alleviate their daily problems by letting their minds wander.

Listeners in California could listen to the same broadcast as listeners in Kentucky through programming shows on radio networks, like Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and National Broadcasting Company (NBC). It encouraged a creation of national identity and commonality between two listeners from different regions of the country. Radios also helped foster an appreciation for classical music as well as expose listeners across America to more isolated kinds of music, such as blues and western folk. Broadcasts of musics like these helped bring down the cultural and economic barriers across the country through radio networks.

Barn dance radio shows around the country created an aural and visual getaway for listeners across the nation. Beginning with radio shows like *Grand Ole Opry* and

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<sup>4</sup> Haeg, *Sixty Years Strong*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Haeg, *Sixty Years Strong*, 25.

*National Barn Dance*, western folk musicians and vaudeville acts greeted guests on the air and invited the listener to partake in their party. These shows also encouraged the listener to attend the live recording of their show, which had sets ornately decorated with western scenery like barns, fields, and hay bales, creating an artificial recreation of a genuine barn dance.

The popularity of barn dance radio shows created opportunities for individual western folk shows to air around the country. Radio stations made celebrities out of local talent. One of those local stars was Ronnie Owens, a shy, pleasant man from Red Wing, Minnesota who aspired to be the hometown yodeler in the white hat. Owens sang western folk music, a genre of music that evolved into Country/Western. He played an acoustic guitar while singing and yodeling into a microphone, and his performances made their way into the homes of many listeners via radio. Owens sang covers of well-known songs, but he composed songs that give an insight into his life and how his show's programming reflected the tastes of his listeners in Post-World War II America.

In this thesis, I will suggest a model for future research in American musicology and mass communications history that investigates how local radio music shows fit into the national picture. I will draw out the cultural significance of radio barn dance shows and how they affected the listeners. I will point out gaps in the western folk music research that need to be explored in order to create a narrative for this type of music and its transmission. By looking at the social context and history of the city, I will draw conclusions as to why the radio station KAAA-Red Wing (now KCUE-Red Wing) was created and what services it provided for its listeners. I will examine the kind of music

programmed on the radio station that reflected the listeners' taste and how they reacted to it. Through the radio career of Ronnie Owens, I will examine how a musician made his start on radio and how he interacted with his listeners.

The first chapter of my thesis contains the literature review of books pertaining to radio barn dance shows as well as the history of the singing cowboy. Since 2000, information has been published about the beginnings of commercial western folk music that evolved into Country/Western. Encyclopedias of western music are a dominant format in published research of the genre.

The second chapter of my thesis discusses the history of the Red Wing area as well as their sources for local entertainment. Newspapers have proved to be the best resource in reconstructing a musical history of Red Wing and surrounding area. However, there have been several books published on the general history of the area that include some mention of the local music.

In the third chapter of my thesis, I will explore the life and radio career of Ronnie Owens, KAAA's first local radio celebrity. I have used primary documents in researching Owens. Access to Owens' personal collection (records, sheet music, lyric sheets, correspondence, and photographs) was granted by his daughter, Patricia J. Owen. Interviews were conducted with his former colleagues Genevieve Hovde and Harley Flathers and family members. Newspaper articles, advertisements, and radio programming listings provided additional resources. With these resources, I constructed a narrative of how Owens' career relates to the national picture of western folk radio shows.

The fourth chapter of my thesis examines how Owens programmed the music played on his show to respond to local taste. I looked at songbooks that he marked, song lyric sheets that he transcribed, and letters from fans who requested songs for special occasions. I look for parallels between music programming at the local level, the regional level, and national level. For this information, I examined radio programming schedules found in the *Red Wing Daily Republican Eagle*, microfilmed WCCO Programming Guides, and the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*.

Chapter Five of my thesis focuses on the songs that Owens wrote throughout his life, many of which reflect the society at the time. Being around family his entire childhood made an impact on Owens' music because his music often depicts the virtuous traits of religion, hard work, and looking for love. The earliest songs are about soldiers coming home from World War II and hobos riding trains. The songs evolve into songs about hard work and chasing after love. The songs could be seen as autobiographical as they align with what was happening in his life at the time. Songs set at the end of the war could reflect what he saw throughout town and what he heard in the papers. As he grew older, he was more concerned about finding true love. In the end, there were songs about the love he lost, relating to his divorce, and songs to his subsequent girlfriends.

In the sixth chapter of my thesis, I will explore the end of Owens' radio career. There are many factors as to why Owens bowed out of KAAA. Flathers says that there was a format change in 1956 when the station became KCUE and shifted to rock music. Family members attribute Owens' marriage and need for steady income as his reason for leaving. Owens briefly returned to KCUE in the 1970s when he and his second wife,

Julie Moe, teamed up for a show in which they interviewed county musicians who were performing in the Twin Cities.

I conclude the chapter with a review that Owens was the first local radio music celebrity in the Red Wing area and opened opportunities for other local musicians to do to the same. I will also argue for the parallels seen between the local, regional, and national programming of western folk radio music and how the trends compare and contrast.

With the completion of this thesis, American musicologists and mass communication historians will gain a better understanding of whether the claims made in current studies that focus on large cities are correct. Although this cannot be done with one work alone, I hope that my study of one local radio personality can contribute to the larger study of this genre. By examining the social context of the radio stations, one can determine how the people affected the station's programming.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

### Current Research on the Red Wing Area and Its Music Scene

There is little recent research on the history of the city of Red Wing. The best resource to consult for the musical history of the area is to look in the actual newspapers. However, there have been a few books published on the general history of the area with small mention of the local music.

Madeline Angell's book, *Red Wing, Minnesota: Saga of a River Town* is a comprehensive history of the city. Published in 1983, the book gives an account of the city's history starting when the Native Americans were the only ones who lived on the land up until the book's publishing in 1983. After the turn of the century, a chapter is designated for each decade, outlining the social context within the country, the city's agriculture, economy and trade, arts, and sports. Angell mentions Red Wing's radio station KAAA in two small paragraphs throughout the book, the first paragraph on the establishment of the radio station and the second paragraph on the changing of ownership from Maxine Jacobs to George Brooks. Angell does go into great detail about the Sheldon Auditorium and select dance bands that performed in the area.

Jim Franklin wrote an autobiographical narrative titled *Last Waltz in Goodhue: Adventures of a Village Boy*. Goodhue, Minnesota is a neighboring village where Owens spent the first part of his life. The book, published in 1997, is about his upbringing in the small town up until his graduation from Goodhue High School in 1955. There is a chapter devoted to the music scene in the late 1940s and early 1950s where Franklin mentions venues that Owens performed at, such as Heaney and Gorman's and the Skyline Ballroom. However, there is no actual mention of Owens or his radio colleagues.

In 2000, Frederick L. Johnson wrote a history of the area. *Goodhue County, Minnesota: A Narrative History* examines the history of the region, going as far back as Angell did with the Native Americans, but focused on all the cities, towns, and villages in the area, especially Red Wing, Pine Island, and Kenyon. Compared to Angell, the book based most of its sources directly from the newspaper sources and other primary resources. Angell, on the other hand, used more history books and historical literature, having a bibliography heavy on secondary resources. Johnson included minimal information about the local music and therefore this source was used primarily for its regional information.

Within smaller, rural communities, such as Red Wing, radio stations were emerging to broadcast local news to the communities, but to also showcase local talent. When radio programming began in large cities in the 1920s, everything was brand new and free game since there was no precedence. Similar situations came up with local radio stations when they emerged in the 1930s and 1940s. Harley Flathers, a former radio announcer for KAAA-Red Wing and KROC-Rochester, wrote *Back in a Moment: A Look Back at Life and Radio History in Southeastern Minnesota*, a narrative autobiography about his time on the air at local radio stations. Flathers reminisces about KAAA programming, particularly pointing out the programming and outreach that Owens and his colleagues did during the beginning years at the radio station.

### **Current Research on Western Folk Music and Radio Barn Dances**

Since 2000, resources have been published about the beginnings of commercial western folk music that evolved into country. The common resource format for this genre

is the encyclopedic canon of an author's opinion regarding which artists made an impact on the beginnings of western folk music.

Jeffrey J. Lange researched the role of hillbilly and western folk music into the American culture in his book, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954*. By looking at the demographics in the North and the South, Lange examined the obstacles that hillbilly and western folk music faced when becoming assimilated into America's mainstream music. Lange discovered that the music performed on radio barn dance shows was not necessarily western folk music. The term "folk" described a demographic of people who were simple, uneducated, and less sophisticated.<sup>1</sup> Folk music is about real life, mundane problems, topics that a general audience could understand. However, the music performed on the radio, or in general, was never a pure folk cultural product because of its centuries of ethnocultural, interregional, and urban-rural interaction.<sup>2</sup>

Radio barn dance music also respected how the medium changed the performance of the music. The manner which the musician performed songs changed in their performance style. There was now a physical disconnect between the audience and the musician. In its natural barn setting, the musicians could interact with the audience. Radio musicians could communicate to the listener, but not with the listener. The changes in music and performance demonstrated western folk music's acculturation into mainstream America in the 1940s and 1950s. The music was no longer a southern peculiarity. It evolved into a nationally-accepted music genre.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4.

In his book *Country Music Originals: The Legends and The Lost*, Tony Russell states “[h]istorical narrative lures the writer to re-create the past not as it was, but as he would like it to have been.”<sup>4</sup> People recreate events and people in the way they want to remember them. Russell examined the lives of one-hundred and ten musicians who established the western folk music of America. He focused on the transition represented by adapting an old art, such as unpolished American folk vocal music and folk instrumental music, to new technology, including wax cylinders, radio, and records, and how that affected the musician. It was these types of recording manifestations from which Owens learned western folk music.

As the image of the performers changed over time, Americans created a romantic image of what cowboys and folksingers looked like. Bill C. Malone, the author of *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, analyzed the preconceived notions of cowboy appearance and the musical sound that shaped western music. Malone found that “outsiders” like northerners, foreign observers, and middle- and upper-class southerners shaped the definition and reception of western folk music.<sup>5</sup> According to Malone, southern folk musicians were not regarded as being true musicians and were instead just plain ordinary folk. It was the Northern and urban societies that established this mindset.<sup>6</sup> When radio came to the forefront of American entertainment in the 1920s, the “poor white” musicians were featured and somewhat exploited by being typecast into a genre that had expectations built upon myths. These myths evolved from older traveling shows, such as Buffalo Bill and similar Wild West shows from the 1880s and 1890s. Although

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<sup>4</sup> Russell, *Country Music Originals*, [iv].

<sup>5</sup> Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, 3.

these shows were managed by business-savvy musicians and managers, these types of shows portrayed a wild and unrestricted entertainment.

Douglas B. Green researched the genre of singing cowboy movies as well as the history of the cowboy profession and its portrayal in the arts and literature. Hollywood's cowboy was the hero, who had a trusty sidekick, a horse, a knack for timing, a lady he tried to woo (and usually won), and an outlaw he had to chase out of town. When it was time to relax, the cowboy pulled out his guitar and sang; this was a role that Owens aimed to recreate. Green wrote that this image of "popular mythology was cowboys crooning soft lullabies and yodels to the cattle on the open ranges," to calm the cattle down, to think of the good times back at home, and to improvise in the long, lonely night.<sup>7</sup> It was these images and role models that comforted a troubled America, one that was facing hard times of economic hardships and that was entering its second world war.

During the Great Depression, record sales decreased because it was an unneeded expense for families. Barn dance troupes traveled to rural festivals and fairs to perform in order to be more accessible. There was a new show on the radio every week and listeners could listen to new songs and performances. Radio barn dances presented a mixture of musicians, vaudeville, and the Hollywood cowboy.

Many American singing cowboys got their start on barn dance shows, including two of Owens' role models. Roy Rogers, a cowboy from Ohio, started in a singing group that he co-founded, Sons of the Pioneers, who sang on radio shows and as backup vocalists for other singing cowboys. He then emerged as the cowboy hero who was found on many metal lunchboxes and other merchandise that Americans could purchase. Gene

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas B. Green, *Singing in the Saddle: The History of the Singing Cowboy* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 2002) 13.

Autry got his start on *National Barn Dance*, but then broke off to build his movie career. Autry rarely sang in his movies, though, and found radio to be more successful for him.

Chad Berry, the editor of *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*, claims barn dances symbolized authenticity sponsored by capitalism through the combination of a musician singing hillbilly music donning cowboy attire.<sup>8</sup> This collection of essays by eleven different scholars focuses on the *National Barn Dance*'s history and different sociological factors, including race and gender present in the show. *National Barn Dance*, which aired from Chicago, "a mecca or junction between rural and urban lifestyles," and served as a microcosm of what occurred throughout the nation: rural families and urban families gathered around the radio and listened to the same show that performed western folk music from the countryside in Chicago, one of the largest cities in the nation.<sup>9</sup> Quoting Bill C. Malone, Berry notes the "innocence of rural entertainment" in Chicago, infamous for its jazz and risqué night culture.<sup>10</sup> Owens and his family were among the show's rural audience, and it introduced him to a warm, welcoming singing show that was well-received by its audience.

In *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio*, Kristine M. McCusker researched the lives of seven women who shaped radio barn dance shows. The women were tasked to bring the American culture back to its original moral, God-fearing beliefs by portraying the wholesome girl next door or the mother that men left behind. McCusker's argument is that women singers are not often included in the historical narrative of western music, especially in the earliest stages.

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<sup>8</sup> Chad Berry, "Introduction: Assessing the National Barn Dance," in *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*, ed. Chad Berry (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Entertainment radio shows were created based on vaudeville acts, and thus emphasized the importance of stage presence and appearance. American theater, including vaudeville, had a need for women to look feminine and have some level of sex appeal.

McCusker opens her introduction by quoting Lily May Ledford, a barn dance singer, who was upset about making music her career because it took away from the authenticity of the music through displacement.<sup>11</sup> McCusker examined the relationship of musician's music in an inauthentic setting, that included the stage and a large *seated* audience. Music on these shows originally was meant for actual barn dances and/or intimate settings, such as a parlor. "Ledford and her peers sold barn dances as remnants of an authentic past: their music was a work of vernacular (common, traditional) art kept safe and secure by generations of Southern mountain and western women who preceded them."<sup>12</sup> With the displacement by being on the airwaves or on a recording, the sound was manipulated by timbre and by the acoustics of the recording location, but it was also displaced through being more readily accessible through recording technologies. Instead of the listener physically coming to a barn dance in a barn, the dance would be brought to them.

Gerald Barfuss' book, *David Stone in Sunset Valley: The Story of the KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance*, documents the history of the radio barn dance show from Saint Paul. The show started in 1940 when KSTP owner Stanley E. Hubbard wanted to have his own version of the radio barn dances that had become so popular. The problem Hubbard faced in adopting his show for Scandinavian, Italian, Irish, and Germanic demographics of the Twin Cities, who may not have related to barn dance programming.

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<sup>11</sup> Kristine M. McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>12</sup> McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels*, 2.

He contacted David Stone, of the *Grand Ole Opry*, who felt he could combat the demographic challenge through his experience on the nationwide show. By September 1940, Stone was hired and relocated to Saint Paul. KSTP's *Sunset Valley Barn Dance* aired for the first time on Saturday October 26, 1940, and the live show played to an overflow audience.<sup>13</sup> The show was modeled after the *Grand Ole Opry*, and was a country-style vaudeville show presenting a mixture of music and comedy acts. Hubbard wrote “[w]e have long sensed the need of a friendly type of program that would bring to our listeners, young and old, the true American folk music in its original form.”<sup>14</sup> A similar need may have driven Owens to create his own music show on KAAA.

There are a few key reasons why barn dances were so successful. The first reason is that the cast was authentic, passionate, and excited to be there to give the audience a great time. Second, the show allowed the audiences to feel they were a part of the ensemble, singing along and dancing right with the cast. When barn dances traveled to local events, they freely interacted with the audience by chatting and dancing with them and that helped the audience feel like a member of the family. And third, most of the cast was made up of local talent.

### **Gaps in Western Folk Music and Radio Barn Dance Research**

Within this research, I have found three gaps in my materials. First, I have not been able to find anyone in the musicology or ethnomusicology fields who have researched this topic. The authors that I have used in this research have included music

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<sup>13</sup> Barfuss, *David Stone in Sunset Valley*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> *KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance: favorite songs: cowboy songs, home songs, mountain songs, western songs*, [ed. Billy Folger] (Chicago: M.M. Cole Publishing Co., c1943), front cover.

enthusiasts (Barfuss), performers (Green), radio announcers (Flathers and Russell), and history professors (Lange, Malone, Berry, and McCusker).

The problem that I am seeing with the lack of musicological focus on this field is that there is little to no published musical analysis of this genre of music. There is published research about country singers (both pre-commercial and commercial country), but I have yet to find information written by musicological scholars. This may be a topic that could be researched by sociologists to study the societal effects of the audience and the social context in which these shows existed, but there is still a great need for analysis of the instrumentation and musical arrangements of the songs. I think the benefit of musicological analysis of this music would be to trace the different changes in music that needed to be made in order to adapt to the times and the recording technologies as well as the acoustics of the performance venue.

Second, there is little analysis of the radio shows themselves. I think it would be beneficial to see the shows dissected to view the programming of each show, to see how the acts changed, and how the songs changed over time. This will help us understand how musicians and producers formulated the beginnings of commercial country music.

From my own personal research with KSTP's *Sunset Valley Barn Dance*, I have found that radio and television stations did not keep a strong collection, if they even kept one at all. KSTP's archivist granted me access to recordings of some of the shows, but program line ups or scripts were not preserved. Recordings were even rarely obtainable. Maybe a script did not exist, or maybe it is in David Stone's personal collection. With the problem of little to no preservation, it is hard to piece together information that may not exist anymore or they may be in the basements of the families of the performers.

And third, I found in this research is that there is little comparison of the reception of western folk music and radio barn dance shows between urban and rural areas. Radio barn dance shows created a past for urban Americans but it was still portrayed the life and music of rural Americans. How did rural Americans react to this kind of music? How did they react to being associated with the stereotype of being simple people with southern accents was popularized by the radio barn dance shows?

To address these questions, it is essential to investigate the region of the radio station, since it is their listeners who help shape the programming. The taste of the local listeners reflects their background and their values. In the case of Red Wing, Minnesota, the hard working residents of the area wanted music that reflected a strong work ethic, family values, and good morals. It is by these standards that Ronnie Owens got his position on KAAA, representing the good and wholesome cowboy that attracted listeners.

## Chapter 2: Southeastern Minnesota and Its Music Scene

Red Wing, Minnesota is located at the junction of the Mississippi and Cannon Rivers on the southeastern border of Minnesota. Originally inhabited by the Sioux nation, the area was incorporated in the Louisiana Purchase and soon settled by European missionaries in 1837. Tension grew between the Sioux and white settlers from the East coast and immigrants in the 1850s when the Sioux were forced to relocate outside of the newly-established town of Red Wing.

In August 1862, the struggle came to a head between the Sioux and the white settlers when many of the Sioux, after not receiving land payments, died of starvation. This resulted in the Sioux Uprising (now referred to as the Dakota Conflict). At the end of the conflict, President Lincoln signed an order to hang 38 Sioux Indians.<sup>1</sup>

Because the area's origins were predominantly Sioux, there was intermixing between white settlers from the East and the Sioux. Individuals who were of both European and Sioux descent were given some privileges that full-blooded Sioux were not given, such as rights to live within city boundaries and the right to rent a house.<sup>2</sup> Many of the first settlers were from eastern United States, but after the Civil War, the Red Wing area attracted many European immigrants. Most of these people came from Norway and Sweden, followed by Germany, the British Isles, and Canada. Other countries that were represented through immigration included France, Austria, Russia, Belgium, Switzerland, and Jamaica.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Tribes: Prairie Island," Indian Affairs Council: State of Minnesota, 2013, [http://mn.gov/indianaffairs/tribes\\_prairieisland.html](http://mn.gov/indianaffairs/tribes_prairieisland.html).

<sup>2</sup> Angell, *Red Wing, Minnesota: Saga of a River Town*, 64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

The town's economy was both agricultural and industrial. The southern part of Minnesota had rich soil irrigated by the Mississippi River and that was suitable for farming. The farm land within the river counties was coveted by the new settlers.<sup>4</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the area yielded the biggest wheat harvests in the country. With its location along the river, factories and mills were created, utilizing water power and easier shipping accommodations via river transportation routes. The S. B. Foot tannery, Red Wing Brewery, Red Wing Potteries, and the lumber mills were some of the most influential businesses that helped create the foundation of the town by exploiting the local natural resources.

Theodore B. Sheldon, a mercantile and grain businessman and pioneer of Red Wing, died in 1900. Half of his estate was given to the city of Red Wing to be put to use for the civil good. The city dedicated its share of the estate, some \$83,000, to building a municipal auditorium. Given that Sheldon had been involved with building a music hall in the city in 1867, the venue selection seemed a fitting tribute. The auditorium was to be used for “musical and theatrical entertainment, public meetings, lectures” that would benefit the public’s “education, enjoyment, improvement, or amusement.”<sup>5</sup>

On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1904, the T. B. Sheldon Memorial Auditorium made its inaugural debut. Guests were welcomed into the Renaissance-style building that was designed by Lowell Lamoreaux, a Minneapolis architect. There was a carriage entrance on the west side of the building for its patrons. The front side of the building had two reliefs above the canopy: one of William Shakespeare and one of Richard Wagner representing the drama and music that was performed on the auditorium’s stage.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 224.

The inside was decorated with gold, ivory, and marble and was lit up by two chandeliers. The house could seat 864 people, and had floor seating as well as three balconies. Since its construction, two of its balconies have been removed and seating has been reduced by half.

The Sheldon Auditorium opened October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1904, one day later than originally planned. The original show, “Joseph Entangled,” was replaced by Sam S. Shubert from New York City’s Lyric Theatre, who wished to perform the “latest light opera success, ‘The Royal Chef.’”<sup>6</sup> The night also featured a small concert by the Rossiter Orchestra from Minneapolis and speeches were given by Mayor A. P. Pierce and the architect.<sup>7</sup> Tickets ranged from \$1 to \$5 a seat.<sup>8</sup>

This seemingly innocuous event was not well-received by all Red Wing citizens. Some citizens were concerned about the theater’s expenses they would have to pay, from tickets to concert attire.<sup>9</sup> The citizens posed the question whether it was worth the hard-earned money or whether men had the right to spend their money as they chose. There were also vacant seats as Red Wing church groups boycotted the event, certain that the auditorium would contribute to the demoralization of the town. The *Red Wing Daily Republican*’s coverage, in its October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1904 issue, noted:

Both galleries were packed to their utmost capacity but there were some vacant seats in the parquet circle which were a silent, but eloquent commentary upon the citizens who stayed away.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Red Wing Republican Weekly*, October 5, 1904 [p.9]

<sup>7</sup> Information is from both Angell, *Red Wing, Minnesota: Saga of a River Town*, 226, and from R.L. Cartwright <http://www.mnopedia.org/structure/tb-sheldon-memorial-auditorium-red-wing>.

<sup>8</sup> *Red Wing Daily Republican*, October 9, 1904, [p.3]

<sup>9</sup> *Red Wing Daily Republican*, October 11, 1904, [p. 4]

<sup>10</sup> Angell, *Red Wing, Minnesota: Saga of a River Town*, 226.

The mayor's speech acknowledged the empty seats with the proverb "evil to those who evil think."<sup>11</sup> In his speech, the mayor would not address the people who are against all stage performances, because "one who is not open to conviction is not qualified for discussion."<sup>12</sup> The protestors were regarded as having a "lack of appreciation and denounced their lack of public-spirit and [of] narrow mindedness."<sup>13</sup> Church groups who disapproved took their complaints to the city council, petitioning for greater censorship and to not allow performances on Sundays. Their petitions were denied.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the history of the auditorium, many famous people appeared on the Sheldon stage, including band master John Philip Sousa, actress Billie Burke, and politician and lawyer William Jennings Bryan. On February 22, 1918, a fire caused by a lit cigarette being carelessly discarded resulted in the entire interior being gutted and renovated. The renovation brought modern technology into the theater and with the installation of a permanent movie projector, the theater turned towards movies and began drifting away from live theater.<sup>15</sup> Questions were raised whether a movie theater fit into the guidelines of Mr. Sheldon's estate. However, the building remained as a movie theater and auditorium.

Throughout the 1930s, the Red Wing Symphony Orchestra, led by Randall Webber who once played with Sousa, performed in the auditorium. Miss Blanche Miller, the first registered music therapist in the southeastern part of the state, ran a lecture series and presented music demonstrations and a rationale for why music education is important

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid. Town*, 226.

<sup>12</sup> *Red Wing Daily Republican*, October 11, 1904, [p. 4]

<sup>13</sup> *Red Wing Daily Republican*, October 11, 1904, [p. 5]

<sup>14</sup> R.L. Cartwright, "T.B. Sheldon Memorial Auditorium, Red Wing," *Minnesota Historical Society*, May 22, 2012, <http://mnopedia.org/structure/tb-sheldon-memorial-auditorium-red-wing>.

<sup>15</sup> The theater began showing movies between 1911-1912. The projector they used at the time was not permanently installed.

through her series “Musical Kiddies” and “Kiddie Revues.”<sup>16</sup> The sixty-member Red Wing Civic Male Chorus, sponsored by the city recreation board and funded by local business men, performed at the auditorium from 1946 to 1954.<sup>17</sup> In 1987, the auditorium showed its last movie and closed its doors for renovation. However, on the night of its last movie showing, an explosion erupted, raising its roof off the building. The explosion was caused by a spark of a workman’s torch underneath the theater’s stage. The interior has been renovated once again to its original décor.

Citizens of Red Wing who sought to dance rather than to listen to a performance were not catered to by the Sheldon Auditorium, but small venues around the area hosted dancing that had music performed by dance band orchestras. Newspaper advertisements for dance bands reveal the ethnic make-up of the area. Bands such as the Dutch Masters and George Olson’s Scandinavian Rough Riders associates the musicians with the area’s demographics, tracing back to the Scandinavian and northern European roots. Groups like Skarning’s Old Time Orchestra and Mel’s Old Timers chose names that reflected the music they performed, playing music from the turn of the century. Bands such as Walter’s Vagabonds and Slim Jim and His Jolly Millers, reflect the socioeconomic status of the region. The musicians performed at local dances as a form of hobby, since many of them were in other professions. The amateur musician brought a sense of carefree entertainment for the dancers with the message that everyone is there to have a good time.

The Red Wing newspaper, the *Daily Republican*, carried daily advertising for dances, revealing that these venues were not only in Red Wing but also in neighboring

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<sup>16</sup> Angell, *Red Wing, Minnesota: Saga of a River Town*, 328.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

cities. Red Wing dances were held mainly downtown at the armory, in a pavilion outside of town, and in rented spaces within buildings. In the 1920s, businesses started renting out large spaces to host dance bands in order to make some extra money. In 1925, a group of men leased the first floor of the Co-op building and established the Red Wing Rainbow Gardens.<sup>18</sup> The space was a dance hall that accommodated as many as 1,000 people in an evening. Another such place was the Dimitre Brothers' General Merchandise store that rented out its space that became the Blue Cloud Ballroom starting in 1930.<sup>19</sup>

Neighboring towns also welcomed people to take part at their dances. Dances were held in neighboring towns in Goodhue County, such as at Zumbrota's armory and Goodhue's Heaney and Gorman's, a department store that had a dance hall. Directly across the Mississippi River from Red Wing, Bay City's Hortenbach's store hosted a weekly dance, bringing in local acts, such as Svensy's Old Time and Modern Swingers, as well as acts from the Twin Cities, such as Eddie Wilfahrt's Radio and Recording Orchestra and Whoopee John's Orchestra,<sup>20</sup> that are known throughout Minnesota and western Wisconsin. 14 miles north of Red Wing at the Pierce County [Wisconsin] Fairgrounds, Red Wingites could attend dances were held at the pavilion for 40 cents a person, featuring local groups, such as Tiny Little and His Orchestra<sup>21</sup> and Al Menke and His Orchestra.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Shirley Nelson (Red Wing historian) in discussion with author, July 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Nelson (Red Wing historian) in discussion with author, July 2012.

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Republican Eagle*, April 2, 1942, April 9, 1942, and November 28, 1939.

<sup>21</sup> *Daily Republican Eagle*, October 19, 1939. In an interview with Harley Flathers, he noted that Tiny Little was neither tiny nor little.

<sup>22</sup> *Daily Republican Eagle*, October 26, 1939.

## Western Folk Music

Western folk music is the narrative cowboy music that was written before the “Nashville Sound” dominated the commercialized Country/Western music of today. The lyrics represented the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of those who listened to the music, capturing the mindset of a group of people who faced the changing nation in war time and modernization, urbanization, and industrialization.<sup>23</sup> The music, originally based in the southern states, was regarded as rural and unsophisticated. As the genre moved northward, commercialism, technology, and modernization began to dilute its unsophisticated qualities to be accepted by a wider, more urban audience.

Music that barn dance musicians sang was either traditional American folk songs or songs that were written to supplement the American folk discography. American folk songs were not a pure folk cultural product, as they went through centuries of ethnocultural, interregional, and rural-urban interaction.<sup>24</sup> Roots of American folk songs can be traced through British, African, and European traditions as they were transported through immigration. As with all folk music, the songs vary between regions.

Compared to “traditional American folk songs,” cowboy music was romanticized and popularized within a matter of decades.<sup>25</sup> The romanticized cowboy songs were aimed at three different demographics. The first was the urban dweller who could listen to the story of the cowboy, roaming freely on unpopulated and free lands not answering to anybody but himself, a life that they would likely never experience in America. The second is the urban dweller who was transplanted from the country, in which case the cowboy songs reminded them of home. The third was the hardworking rural farmer who

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<sup>23</sup> Lange, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly*, ix.

<sup>24</sup> Lange, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Green, *Singing in the Saddle*, 16.

“felt overwhelmed by the fast-paced” times that were accompanied by frantic jazz music, the soundtrack of America’s early twentieth century.<sup>26</sup>

Originally, a western folk song was a sung narrative that had a raw sound that was accompanied with a yodel, singing quickly between the natural voice and a higher voice. Yodeling, commonly accredited to Jimmie Rodgers through his blue yodels, added an emotional touch to the sad, narrative song.<sup>27</sup> With the establishment of the musical group Sons of the Pioneers, there was more finesse in their musicality. The cowboys were no longer rough cattle rancher adventurers who fought Native Americans every day. The newly revised cowboys were romantic visionaries who sang in perfect harmonies.<sup>28</sup> What carried over in the evolution of the cowboy was the narrative song that sought to bring the urban dweller to another place and to comfort the rural farmer.

#### How western folk evolved from Barn Dance Radio

Western folk music and barn dances gained public recognition in the 1920s. A.C. “Eck” Robertson was among the first musicians to be recorded playing southern fiddle music, a precursor to both western folk and radio barn dances.<sup>29</sup> The *Grand Ole Opry* first aired in 1925, just five years after commercial radio started. It became one of the first shows transmitted nationally, featuring music from Appalachia and southern United States. Radio’s prominence in the home came with President Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats as a means of establishing a national sound by bringing up memories of a simpler time, whether Americans had an actual connection to those times or a manufactured one.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 19. Green gives credit to Emmett Miller, a vaudeville artist, for popularizing the yodel and proposes that Rodgers may have learned about the yodel from Miller either by attending a show or hearing about it.

<sup>28</sup> Green, *Singing in the Saddle*, 76.

<sup>29</sup> Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 1.

The transition from oral to recorded transmission was not a smooth one. Some musician-record producer teams worked well, but the relationships between others were either tense or harsh, especially when the musician's performance vision differed from the producer's.<sup>30</sup> Another hurdle in the transition was buyer preference. The generation of New Deal Americans wanted to be told a story instead of listening to music.<sup>31</sup> Although there were some pieces performed by instrumentalists only, instrumental musicians were either relocated to the back of the stage to accompany vocalists or were forced to retire. The songs that were instrumental-only were for dancing, whether it was a square dance, a jig, or a waltz. If the instrumental-only piece had a story behind it, barn dance musicians could enlighten the audience by telling its significance. Compared to playing records for entertainment, radio had an extended play time that created an in-person experience. Radio programming ran until sundown or midnight at the latest, but once turned on, radio engineers were responsible for transmitting and mixing the entertainment instead of the listener who needed to be attentive to changing records.

Radio barn dance music gave American listeners narrative songs, carrying on the oral tradition of passing down stories from musician to listener through transmitting on the airwaves. Radio shows were based on vaudeville shows and shows that were performed in front of a live audience, such as radio barn dances, included costumes with stage scenery and props. Radio barn dance shows were a mixture of song, dance, humor, and banter performed by celebrity performers and musicians. Those who listened to radio barn dance shows listened for the stories and to be a part of the family. Even for those who were first generation Americans, "as they plowed and sowed and reaped a new

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<sup>30</sup> Russell does not explain why this is the case.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 156.

existence for themselves on the limitless prairies, they found it easy to respond to songs and stories about life on the frontier.”<sup>32</sup>

This rural image fought for by America’s World War II soldiers and was meant to help get Americans back on the moral track, combatting the “immoral” messages sent through jazz and the dark urban lifestyle. The image and the music were “remnants of an older and valued way of life that was fast disappearing.”<sup>33</sup>

For the urban listener, radio barn dance shows provided an escape to the romanticized simple life. A large portion of urban dwellers were recent transplants from the country. They were the individuals who had left the family farm to start a new life in the city. Those who lived in the city had easier access to attend a live performance of radio barn dances and therefore could experience the entertainment live as well as in their own home.

Rural towns like Red Wing still held actual barn dances, but radio barn dances were what attracted both rural and urban audiences to the radio. It was the type of programming that rural citizens could relate to. The Red Wing area was able to tune into at least three radio barn dances: *KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance* from Saint Paul, *WLS National Barn Dance* in Chicago, and *Grand Ole Opry* in Nashville on WSM.

The likely audience for radio barn dance shows was from white middle- and lower-class families. The songs and comedy performed on the barn dances were not opposed to other races, but also did not seek to cater to these populations. The songs performed on the barn dance programs were about cowboys, working on the farm, and love, among other topics. Songs with religious themes and novelty songs were also sung

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<sup>32</sup> Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 174.

<sup>33</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003) 65.

on the programs. Although the topics of the songs were relatable to other races, the language and song style were more relevant to white listeners, and the music of other races were not included. Small rural stations carried the white middle- and lower-class audience programming that paralleled the programming of the radio barn dances.

### **Southeastern Minnesota's Rural Radio**

Southeastern Minnesota farmers had access to radio programs broadcast by stations in bigger cities, such as Minneapolis, Saint Paul, and Chicago, but programming on these stations catered mainly to the people who were living in the city. The first radio station in the Twin Cities was WDGY that signed on for the first time in December 1923, followed by KSTP in April 1924.<sup>34</sup> During the 1920s, more radio stations started up around the Twin Cities and to the north, but there were no local radio stations founded in southeastern Minnesota until October 1935, when Rochester's KROC signed on for the first time.<sup>35</sup> Starting around 1945, the nation began shifting their emphasis from a large radio station with network affiliations to radio stations individually owned and operated. Smaller radio stations were focused on community service and civic responsibility, like civil defense programming and agricultural reports. When KAAA-Red Wing first broadcast in 1949, there were at least seven small radio stations in the southern portion of the state.

Because Red Wing is immediately across the border from Wisconsin, those who lived in the area were also in close proximity to western Wisconsin radio stations. If the signal was strong enough, they may have been able to tune into WKBH-La Crosse which

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<sup>34</sup> Minnesota Broadcasters Association, *Historical Scrapbook and Station Directory* (St. Louis Park, MN: The Association, c. 1990?), 12.

<sup>35</sup> Minnesota Broadcasters Association, *Historical Scrapbook and Station Directory*, 19.

aired in 1926; this station had its own barn dance. WEAU in Eau Claire also aired its own barn dance, *Chippewa Valley Barn Dance*.<sup>36</sup> WKBH and WEAU are in towns from which Owens received fan mail, suggesting the possibility of Red Wing listeners having access to these stations as well. The programming on WKBH and WEAU were likely more farmer-friendly because of the stations' location in rural areas.

The musical programming on the Twin Cities radio stations were aimed at white middle- to upper-class listeners who tuned in to hear different orchestras, Irish tenors, or German polka bands. European immigrants could hear people who spoke and sang with an accent to maintain connections the old country. Eventually, the tastes changed to include swing music, which was more widely listened to due to the upbeat tempos encouraging listeners to dance. However, barn dances were more popular within the rural audiences. Those shows went around to the small towns to perform, unlike the swing bands who went on tour through the bigger cities.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> It is unknown if those living in the Red Wing area could listen because of the lack of listings in the Red Wing paper. "WKBH Barn Dance," *Hillbilly Music Dawt Com*, 13 October 2013. <http://www.hillbilly-music.com/programs/story/index.php?prog=545>. "Chippewa Valley Barn Dance," *Hillbilly Muisce Dawt Com*, 13 October 2013, <http://www.hillbilly-music.com/programs/story/index.php?prog=555>

<sup>37</sup> Virginia Pfingsten Born (former sister-in-law to Owens), in discussion with the author, 17 August 2012.

### **Chapter 3: Ronnie Owens, The Singing Troubadour of the Hiawatha Valley**

Ronald Owen, Junior was born February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1930 in Red Wing, Minnesota. His parents, Ronald and Maude Carlon Owen, came from English, Welsh, and Irish farming families that had deep roots in American history. Both families had arrived in America before the American Revolution. Owen's lineage came from Sylvanus Owen, a minuteman from Vermont, his mother's side descended from Arunah Kilbourn, a Revolutionary War soldier, from New York. Owen's lineage since then shows a long line of farmers, living simple lives, working with the earth to maintain an existence without relying on others. With the hardworking family also came the belief in helping others, especially family.

The Owen and Carlon families moved from New York and Vermont to Mazeppa, Minnesota, a small rural town located in Wabasha County and is situated halfway between Red Wing and Rochester. Continuing their agriculture trade, some of his mother's family discovered they could supplement their income by digging for ginseng, a root that grows wild in the trenches of southeastern Minnesota. The Carlons called their side-profession "truck farming" and they sold their findings alongside the road.<sup>1</sup>

When Owen was born, the family lived with his mother's family in Goodhue, Minnesota, where his father was a truck driver for a flour mill. When that was not enough for the family to live on, his father worked for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) building bridges and culverts in southeastern Minnesota.

Relatives describe Owen as a quiet, nice boy who kept to himself. As an only child, he gained a lot of attention from his parents, but he also had his cousins for playmates. Like his cousins, he was expected to help out with farm chores. As time went

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Diercks Jackson (cousin of Owens), in discussion with the author, March 18, 2012.

on, however, both Owen and his family acknowledged the fact that his heart was not in farming.

Owen attended a one-room schoolhouse through eighth grade, earning average grades. His strengths were in woodshop and he showed skill with shop tools. He decided to leave school at the age of fifteen and is unclear whether he did so to help on the farm or due to his lack of desire to continue. Education was not emphasized in the Owen family; his mother dropped out in sixth grade and his father in eighth grade.

By 1945, the Owen family had moved to a dairy farm in Featherstone Township, a small area located six miles south of Red Wing, on a rent-to-own basis. Their farmhouse was a two-story white building tucked away in the valley of the property. The house was surrounded by corn and wheat fields, pastures that were filled with grazing cows, and a creek that passed through the farmland.

The Owen family was by no means lacking extended family at their farm. Due to continuous economic hardships, the family opened their doors to their relatives, allowing many to live on their dairy farm and to help with daily chores. Uncles, aunts, and cousins lived on the farm until they established their own farms.

The family lived on the farm with the bare minimum; the house and its buildings lacked electricity and indoor plumbing. Telephones and electricity connected the Owen



Figure 1: Owens as a young boy (center) with family members (clockwise) Uncle John Owen, Father Ronald Owen, Sr., and relative Paul Books.

family to the modern world in 1948. It was at this time that the family acquired their first radio; this was a pivotal moment for Owen who, at the age of 18, received the chance to immerse himself in radio programming. This experience inspired him to get on the radio.

In his late teens, Owen developed a back problem and had to be in bed rest for a year, preventing him from doing any farm work. As he was convalescing, his life shifted from that of a farmhand to an aspiring musician. Relatives say his dreams of getting on the radio happened during this time because it was radio that helped him through his health problems.

### **Owen on *Stairway to Stardom***

In early November 1948, Owen and his aunt, Molly Carlon Diercks, auditioned to be on *Stairway to Stardom*, a talent show competition. The show was sponsored by Home Brand and broadcast on WCCO-Minneapolis that featured contestants from the Midwest. They sang “Rainbow at Midnight,” which was written by Lost John Miller and was first recorded by the Carlisle Brothers, followed by Ernest Tubb and by Texas Jim Robertson and His Panhandlers in 1947. On November 10<sup>th</sup>, Owen received a telegram from Bob Sutton, the program director, asking them to perform the duet on the show, confirming that they had passed the audition. They performed on the show Saturday November 13<sup>th</sup> and won second place.

WCCO formed from WLAG, the first radio station in the Midwest, in 1924 when the Washburn Crosby Company (now General Mills) bought the radio station for

advertising purposes.<sup>2</sup> One of the ways the station advertised for Washburn Crosby Company was by forming the Wheaties Quartet. The quartet sang the first radio jingle in American radio history, “Have You Ever Tried Wheaties?” written by Henry Bellows and Earl Gammons. The quartet was made up of an undertaker, clerk in the court house, a clerk in the grain exchange, and a tobacco salesman and only one of the men could read music.<sup>3</sup>

In the beginning, the music programming on WLAG (and then WCCO) was orchestrated by Eleanor Poehler, a classically-trained musician from MacPhail School of the Arts in Minneapolis.<sup>4</sup> Poehler programmed only high art music because she “would not to descend to popular music, jazz...or ‘the curse of the country fiddle.’”<sup>5</sup> Early programming featured syndicated performances of orchestras from New York and classically-trained local talent, such as Eddie Dundstetter, a pianist and organist; Jerry Harrington, an “Irish tenor voice [that] found thousands of enthusiastic listeners among WCCO’s predominantly Scandinavian audience;” and Ramona Gerhard, a MacPhail School of Music graduate who performed with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra on organ and piano.<sup>6</sup> Once Poehler left the station in the late 1930s, music programming was

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<sup>2</sup> *WCCO 1924-1949: For 25 Years Good Neighbor to the Northwest: The CBS Station in Minneapolis and St. Paul.* (Minneapolis?: 1949?): [p.1]. Washburn Crosby was in a “flour mill war” against competitor, Pillsbury.

<sup>3</sup> Earl Gammons (former WCCO manager) in discussion with Larry Haeg, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Haeg. *Sixty Years Strong: The story of one of America’s great radio stations, 1924-1984: 50,000 watts Clear Channel, Minneapolis-St. Paul* (Minneapolis, MN: Viking Press, 1984) 13. Poehler’s education gave her an advantage for earning the position. WLAG stood for its original owner William “Willie” MacPhail, the founder of the music school.

<sup>5</sup> *Sixty Years Strong*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *WCCO 1924-1949* [2 and 9].

dictated by CBS in New York, which aired a mixture of syndicated orchestra performances, such as the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, and swing band orchestras.<sup>7</sup>

Originally recording and transmitting from two consecutive hotel lobbies in Minneapolis, WCCO built its own building downtown. The building opened in 1938 and created a permanent location for the radio station and it included recording technology and structures for higher quality product.

The building had “floating studios”: the floor, walls, and ceiling of each of the six studios were physically separated from the rest of the structure to prevent picking up outside noises on the microphone. The entrance to each studio had a short hallway and two heavy “sound lock” doors to prevent outside sound from leaking in. The sound booth had sloping glass to prevent glare reflecting into the eyes of the performers and/or audience members. Each studio had a client audition room and musicians had their own lounge for comfort and to present a high class status. What remains of the original interior decoration is the elegant circular Art Deco lobby in Columbia blue and satin wood, lighted with indirect lighting, symbolizing the history of the building, the high class status it achieved, and its long partnership with CBS.<sup>8</sup>

*Stairway to Stardom* broadcast from the fourth floor of the building. The large room can be described as having “Midwestern modern plainness,” with its cream-colored walls with CBS blue accents and the agricultural motifs that created the ceiling border.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Earl Gammons interview. Originally part of the NBC network, WCCO was removed from their network and taken up by CBS in 1931.

<sup>8</sup> Haeg, *Sixty Years Strong*, p.32.

<sup>9</sup> Haeg, *Sixty Years Strong*, p. 32.

There were folding chair rows that would fit 700, but the stage was only large enough for a twenty-piece orchestra.<sup>10</sup>

Cedric Adams emceed *Stairway to Stardom*. Adams was employed by the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* as a columnist. His column, titled “In This Corner,” ran for 31 years and made him a household name. In 1931, Adams was hired by CBS Vice President Gammons to do dramatic readings, but he soon left that particular role because he laughed at what he was reading as well as the way he read the dramatic text. Despite this, Adams was kept on at WCCO.<sup>11</sup> Adams took on emceeing positions for WCCO while writing for the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, which he would do until his death in 1961.

The tickets to many of the *Stairway to Stardom* performances sold out to watch Adams’ star power and attraction, along with the musical performances. This opportunity gave Owens more publicity than if he had started his career playing at different venues in Red Wing. His performance on *Stairway to Stardom* created a large fan base and gained him fans from both the Twin Cities and the surrounding area for those listening at home on the radio. Owens and Diercks’ placing in the competition validated his musical skills and radio persona.

### **The Beginning of KAAA**

Although the strongest signals were from big cities, small towns began investing in radio broadcast equipment to establish their own stations. After World War II, stations located closest to Red Wing were radio stations in the Twin Cities, KDHL-Faribault, and

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<sup>10</sup> Haeg, *Sixty Years Strong*, p.38

<sup>11</sup> Sarjeant, *The First Forty*, p.10

KROC-Rochester. Three KROC employees, Fred Clarke, Maxine Jacobs, and Larry Miller, collaborated to create their own radio station. Red Wing was the closest city to Rochester that was seen as “the most desirable location” and was one of the largest cities in Minnesota that still lacked a radio station.<sup>12</sup> The city council of Red Wing wanted to establish a radio station of its own, since the city was the largest in Goodhue County.

An application to create a radio station was sent to the FCC on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1948 and Clarke obtained a building permit on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1948 to begin construction on Red Wing’s AM radio station.<sup>13</sup> On January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1949, the FCC authorized the station to add an FM antenna to the vertical antenna just two weeks before the station signed on for the first time, hoping to make the radio station more marketable.<sup>14</sup> The building, one of the first in Minnesota to be built for the purpose of radio broadcast, and 216-foot tower were located on “radio hill,” located on 4.5 acres about three miles south of Red Wing, in the country along Highway 58, on approximately 5 miles north of where Owens lived. Prior to the radio station, the land was part of Hi-Park Dairy, owned by Cletus Hallquist.

On January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1949, Red Wing’s radio station debuted for the first time on 1250 AM.<sup>15</sup> The station, KAAA-Red Wing, was alphabetically first in radio listings in the nation. The station was operated by Clarke, who was the president, program director, and chief engineer; Jacobs, the treasurer and secretary; and bookkeeper Miller, a

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<sup>12</sup> “Red Wing Radio Station Celebrates Fifth Birthday,” Chamber of Commerce *Newsbulletin*, May 1949, 1. The article states that this information was based off of a survey completed in 1947, but the name of the survey was not disclosed.

<sup>13</sup> “Red Wing Radio Station Celebrates Fifth Birthday” and Jan D. Lowry, “Broadcast Profile KCUE Red Wing, Minnesota,” (broadcast profile, Sioux Falls, SD, n.d.), 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> “Red Wing Radio Station Celebrates Fifth Birthday,” 1.

Rochester businessman.<sup>16</sup> The station's air time began at 6 AM and they needed to sign off by sundown, due to FCC regulations.<sup>17</sup>

### **Owens on KAAA**

On Saturday May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1949, Owens became Red Wing's first singing cowboy when he made his KAAA debut at 5:15 PM with a fifteen-minute show, sandwiched between local area news at 5 PM and 5:30 PM. He performed in the only studio the station had, which had egg cartons covering the ceiling and walls for recording acoustics.<sup>18</sup> According to the radio schedules published in the *Red Wing Daily Republican Eagle*, he competed against WCCO's Lake Success, KSTP's Mr. Jaycee, and WTCN's musicale (unnamed).<sup>19</sup> Owens held that spot through October 1949, but then was not listed on air again until February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1950, when he was scheduled for 11:30 AM to 12:15 PM Saturday mornings, a time slot he maintained for the rest of his time at KAAA. In this period in Minnesota, radio stations did not program anything before noon on a Saturday morning, so starting this early in the day meant that Owens had no competition.

His shows were self-titled at first, listed in the radio schedules as "Ronnie Owens," but then with formatting changes, his show became "The Goodhue Hour" in July 1950 to recognize the local talent. As Owens became established, he gained a theme song. He chose The Sons of the Pioneers' "The Rovin' Cowboy" to be his theme song.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lowry, "Broadcast Profile," 1. By 1949, Jacobs became General Manager, making it unclear who hired Owens.

<sup>17</sup> Harley Flathers, *Back in a Moment* (Rochester, MN: Harley and June Flathers, 2003) 150.

<sup>18</sup> Virginia Pfingsten Born (former sister-in-law of Owens), in discussion with the author, 17 August 2012.

<sup>19</sup> *Daily Republican Eagle* (Red Wing, MN) May 20, 1949.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Pfingsten Born (former sister-in-law of Owens), in discussion with the author, 17 August 2012.

Written by group founder and member Bob Nolan, the song describes the quintessential cowboy, roaming the lands and keeping an eye on his herd. This was the scene and atmosphere that Owens wanted to set up as his weekly show began:

*Hear my song as I ride along  
I'm a Happy Rovin' Cowboy  
Herdin' the dark clouds out of  
the sky  
Keepin' the heavens blue.*

*I aint got a wife to bother my life  
I'm a Happy Rovin' Cowboy  
Let me make my bed where the  
varmints prowl  
Beneath the sky of blue.*

#### CHORUS

*I aint got a dime; I'm just  
spendin' my time  
I'm a Happy Rovin' Cowboy  
Let me ride that long trail down  
to the end  
Where the skies are always blue.*

#### CHORUS

Owens achieved local celebrity status by being on KAAA. The fan base that formed called for the need of public appearances and performing outside of the studio. The radio station did not provide public relations for Owens, so he had to be his own manager. The first documented big time performance for Owens was Kramer's Hatchery's Chick Days. He performed for the two-day festival in February 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>,



Figure 2: Ronnie Owens' KAAA publicity card. (Courtesy of Patricia J. Owen)

1952 and February 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1954. Kramer's Hatchery, located downtown along the Mississippi River at 116 Plum Street, sold chicks and farming supplies, such as seed, to farmers in the area. Owned by Frank and Shelly Kramer, a father and son team, they hosted Chick Days since 1947.

The newspaper ad for each Chick Days event was a two-page spread, implying the importance of the event for the business and the community, especially the farmers. The local entertainment was listed for when they were going to perform throughout the day. Owens is listed in each year's ad as "Goodhue County's Singing Cowboy Ronnie Owens."<sup>21</sup> Both ads state that KAAA will be broadcasting from Kramer's Hatchery, revealing that the radio station had equipment advanced enough to facilitate the recording. Also in both ads, Owens is playing on the air for two 15-minute segments each day and says that he will be entertaining for the attendees in between broadcasts. There is no documentation on if Owens was paid.

However, two contracts left in Owens' collection reveal that he did get paid for some special events. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1952, Owens performed at the Potters Union Picnic on Goose Lake, located near the Prairie Island Reservation. The Potters Union was made up of those who worked at the Red Wing Pottery plant, one of the many important resources in the city economically and historically. Using a blank contract from the American Federation of Musicians, George Schomman filled out the contract on the behalf of the Potters Union. Owens was paid a total of \$31.60 to play for four hours. The expenses broke down as the following:

- Ronald J. Owen        \$26.00
- Local 1%                \$2.60

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<sup>21</sup> *Red Wing Daily Republican Eagle* (Red Wing, MN) January 30, 1952.

- Expenses                      \$3.00
- 

\$31.60<sup>22</sup>

He also signed a one-time contract with Bahl's Motor and Implement Company, a company "synonymous with farm machines and equipment" out of Hastings, Minnesota, located 25 miles north of Red Wing.<sup>23</sup> This event shows that Owens had fans from a farther distance than the Goodhue County area. He performed for their party on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1952 from 2-5 PM. Signed by B. J. Bahls, Owens earned \$35.00 to perform at their event. The breakdown of expenses is listed as such:

- Ronald Owen Jr. (565) \$26.00
  - Local 1%                      \$2.60
  - Expenses                      \$6.40
- 

\$35.00<sup>24</sup>

With further investigation into the contract, the number 565 was the local number for the American Federation of Musicians. Through many tries connecting with the American Federation of Musicians, the resources were not available to determine whether or not Owens was indeed a member of the union. If he was not a part of the union, it is unknown why the union number would be listed.

The working class citizens of the Red Wing area were the people on whom Owens focused his attention. He socialized at events in order to get to know his audience and to discover who his fan base is. Listeners also reached out to Owens through mail

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<sup>22</sup> "Potters Union Picnic Contract" (musical performance contract, Red Wing, Minnesota, 27 August 1952) 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> Hastings Newsroom, "Bahls Motor and Implement now Minnesota Ag Group," *Hastings Star Gazette* (Hastings, MN), 10 July 2008. <http://www.hastingsstargazette.com/content/bahls-motor-and-implement-now-minnesota-ag-group-hastings>

<sup>24</sup> "Bahl's Contract" (musical performance contact, Hastings, Minnesota, 12 September 1952), 1-2.

and telephone to make requests. Owens used these requests to program his show. The show and Owens were about the people.

## Chapter 4: Programming

KAAA formatted its programming to fit the needs of its listeners, many of whom were farmers. At the time the station was established, radio was no longer a new technology and therefore the station had some precedents to aid in programming. One of the stations that served as a model was KSTP-St. Paul.

KSTP was created by Stanley E. Hubbard in 1929 when he merged his two radio stations into one. Hubbard went into business with Lytton J. Shields, the president of National Battery Company. The result of the merger was KSTP (K-ST. Paul), one of the strongest radio stations in the country at that point. Hubbard brought the financial backing and programming to KSTP, but he also made a deal with the Saint Paul Orpheum Theater for access to vaudeville stars, such as Eddie Cantor, The Marx Brothers, and Jack Benny.<sup>1</sup> KSTP also was the first radio station to feature fifteen-minute news segments, which was made possible through a radio scanner that Hubbard owned that allowed him to tap into police car airwaves so that the news was broadcasted on KSTP before it was printed in the newspapers.<sup>2</sup> Newspapers and Hubbard soon became rivals, competing for news scoops.

Big businesses were the common source of funding for radio stations throughout the country. To break away from big business ownership, Hubbard fought with the Federal Radio Commission (now Federal Communications Commission) to allow individual businesses advertising time in his programming. Hubbard used his connections to politicians in Washington, D.C. to persuade the FRC to approve his plan and also exploited his connections to business entrepreneurs in Florida to make his financial vision

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<sup>1</sup> "Museum of Broadcasting Hall of Fame: Stanley E. Hubbard," *Museum of Broadcasting*, Saint Louis Park, MN: Pavek Museum of Broadcasting, 2012, <http://www.museumofbroadcasting.org/HubbardSE.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Griffin (KSTP Archivist) in discussion with author, July 6, 2012.

possible. This plan increased his income and provided a variety of advertising that was selected with the KSTP audience in mind.

KSTP's programming sought to present the best content available in "programs created especially for the northwest listeners."<sup>3</sup> The affiliation with NBC brought KSTP listeners shows by Jack Benny and George Burns and Gracie Allen. KSTP's news department made it the first radio station with its own complete news bureau, providing the most recent news to its listeners. They had a developed education department that aimed its programming at housewives.<sup>4</sup>

Music programmed on KSTP provided wholesome, moral entertainment for its listeners. The station marketed its creation of the *KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance* heavily. Musicians from around the country were hired for the barn dance troupe in order to both replicate the Grand Ole Opry and to expose their listeners to the best western folk musicians in the country. As *KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance* singer Billy Folger said, "We offered a good time for everyone. If you saw a program and you didn't cry a little or you didn't laugh a lot, then you were just a hard person to entertain."<sup>5</sup>

*KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance* first aired on Saturday October 25, 1940 as part of a western folk music line up:

6:00-6:30	Grand Ole Opry
6:30-8:00	News
8:00-9:00	WLS National Barn Dance
9:00-9:30	News
9:30-10:00	KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance
10:00-10:30	News

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<sup>3</sup> *KSTP Family Album* [1].

<sup>4</sup> *KSTP Family Album* [front cover].

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Barfuss, *David Stone in Sunset Valley: The Story of the KSTP Barn Dance* (Minneapolis, MN: James D. Thueson, Publisher, 1983): 21.

10:30-11:00 KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance<sup>6</sup>

The *Sunset Valley Barn Dance* musicians also performed throughout the week in an early morning music show entitled *Sunrise Roundup* that provided continuity with *Barn Dance* and started each morning with uplifting music and lighthearted comedy.

Red Wing area listeners tuned into KSTP for entertainment and statewide news, but they turned to KAAA for their local news beginning in 1949. Initially, KAAA's programming was dominated by news, providing important information to the farmers in the area as well as local and national news. Its airtime began at sunrise and ended at sunset, and it provided no musical entertainment to compete with KSTP or WCCO. Its earliest music programming was syndicated symphonic orchestra recordings and religious programming from local churches. The music programming was reformatted in November 1949 when KAAA began to present shows that showcased talent from different regions of the listening area, such as *Lake City Hour*, *Plum City Hour*, and *The Goodhue Hour*.

*The Goodhue Hour* was a thirty-minute western folk music show that featured Ronnie Owens singing recently released songs. It first aired on Saturday November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1949 at 11:30 a.m., and Owens chose the songs he featured or he responded or he responded to listeners' requests. Mail, telegram, and phone call requests were taken during the week of the show, allowing Owens time to program his show and to prepare the music for the broadcast. Since Owens did not read music, he could not his arrangements in staff notation. Instead, he had two methods to prepare the music. The first method was to find the sheet music in the music store or, if the song was a popular standard song such as "The Old Rugged Cross," to search through western folk

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<sup>6</sup> *Saint Paul Dispatch*, October 25, 1940.

songbooks he collected to read the chord progressions and guitar tablature. The songs he read are marked, providing information about what he performed either on the air or at guest appearances. Owens sang songs that had been made popular by Eddy Arnold, Ernest Tubb, and Jim Reeves. The surviving field recordings of Owens are mostly of him singing songs that were not his own, giving insight to the musical programming of his shows.

He also transcribed the recordings of the song and deciphered the harmony by ear. In Owens' collection, he has sheets of paper and notebooks with songs transcribed from the radio. The songs were written either in his handwriting or an uncredited female's handwriting. Then, he figured out the chord progression by ear, jotted down the chords onto his makeshift song sheet, and was able to play the songs on his radio show.

Owens' surviving playlists show that on average, he sang six songs per show with spoken banter in between. The shows provided a warm, friendly ambiance that welcomed families to listen and to participate. Like the *KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance*, Owens spoke to the listening audience in between songs so that they could get to know him; in these sections Owen told stories and relayed the requests.

The following is an example from "The Goodhue Hour" from 1949. Since the show was fifteen minutes long, there were only three songs. However, each song had multiple dedications attached to it.

#### Careless Hands

- 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday of Danny Hayes of Ellsworth by his mother
- Dorothy Bergman, by her mother
- LaVern Lostitter of Goodhue by Larry Poffenberger, the Star Bread Man, of Rochester
- Mr. and Mrs. Albert Olson, Mr. and Mrs. Alden Hayes, Jim and Geery, Mr. and Mrs Bud Hethington , + Don + Gary Lee

#### Close to My Heart

- Mrs. John Boller, by a friend
- Birthdays of Paul + Erwin Vomhof, by Mr. and Mrs. Waldemar Wolf and Girls
- LaVerne Groth, who's [sic] birthday was June 4, by his sister Luan
- Leora, Marvin, and Loren Born, Verna Arvin, + Willis Hadler By Arlene of Ottertail, Minn

#### Sioux City Sue

- Audrey Gunderson of Spring Valley and Maynard Rigelman of Hager who were married June 2. By Audrey's mother, Dad, and sisters.
- Birthdays of Joseph Hayes + Kenneth, by Mrs. Marvin Hayes
- Birthdays of our sister, Margie of Cannon Falls and for our mother, by Theresa and Florence of Hastings
- Mrs. Julian Kurth + Mr. + Mrs. George Kurth of Whitehall, Wisconsin by a friend in Red Wing.<sup>7</sup>

Request sheets like this reveal a lot about Owens' show. First, the songs that were chosen reflect the national trends at the time. These songs were popular and came from other sources, in contrast to *KSTP's Sunset Valley Barn Dance*, where most of the music played was written by the musicians. "Careless Hands" was written and recorded by Mel Tormé in 1949 and then rerecorded by Bing Crosby on March 22<sup>nd</sup> of the same year.<sup>8</sup> Tormé's original version, released by Capitol Records, was arranged for big band and featured a swung drum pattern, trilling muted trumpets, and saxophones. Crosby's western folk rendition, released by Decca Records, took the tempo a little slower than the original, has vocalise male accompaniment, and was performed with guitars, steel guitar, and drum.

"Close to My Heart" was written in 1943 by Billy Folger of *KSTP's Sunset Valley Barn Dance*. The song is narrated by a spouse who was left for another, as described in

<sup>7</sup> ["Unnamed Request Sheet,"] dated 1949.

<sup>8</sup> It is unknown why Crosby recorded this song. According to 27 April 1949 *Variety* review, "Good pairing, but Crosby's plenty late on 'Hands,' a widely played melody that so far hasn't reached solid hit status. It's possible that it could provide the impetus." [Untitled review], *Variety* (27 April 1949) quoted in Malcolm Macfarlane, *Bing Crosby: Day by Day* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 380.

the lyric “True be our vows, there will be no regrets, my heart will never love again.”<sup>9</sup> Folger, a Louisiana native, was a songwriter and headliner in Sunset Valley Barn Dance. Known for his songs, he worked closely with emcee and director David Stone to compile and publish four volumes of KSTP Sunset Valley Barn Dance songbooks to encourage listeners to perform the songs in their own home. Folger left the barn dance troupe to serve in World War II to support his country and to avenge his brother’s death.

“Sioux City Sue” was made popular by Gene Autry in 1945. The song was written by Dick Thomas that same year. This song, like many that Owens sang on his show, made it to number one on Billboard’s Juke Box Folk Records list. Thomas’ rendition of the song features a bridge of him yodeling, whereas Autry’s did not.

As Owens gained in popularity, his shows were extended to 30-minute and 45-minute segments. Owens programmed triple the number of songs in his programs, with each song accompanied by three to five requests. At the end of each show, he repeated one or two songs that he had sung earlier. An example of an extended program is shown with the program line-up from March 25, 1950 for the “Goodhue Hour”:

- (1) POISON IVY
- (2) BE SURE THERE’S NO MISTAKE [1948]
- (3) MAYBE I’LL CRY OVER YOU
- (4) PETER COTTIN TAIL
- (5) IS THERE ANY NEED TO WORRY
- (6) SOME DAY
- (7) LIVE A LITTLE
- (8) BE SURE THERE’S NO MISTAKE
- (9) PETER COTTON TAIL<sup>10</sup>

A song that was performed twice in this particular show was “Here Comes Peter Cottontail.” The song was written in 1950 by Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins and recorded

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<sup>9</sup> Billy Folger, “Close to My Heart,” Sheet music, (New York: Westpar Music Corp.), 1943.

<sup>10</sup> “Goodhue Hour Request Sheet,” dated 25 March 1950. The request sheet was transcribed as written.

by Gene Autry. The song was most likely scheduled twice in this show because of the proximity to Easter, which fell on April 9 that year.

Request sheets also provided information about the people who listened to the show. The dedicatees of the songs were family members or community members of the requesters, ranging from birthday requests to greetings to visitors, to dedications for family members. It also pinpoints how far KAAA's signal was received. Many of the requests were made by listeners from Goodhue County or western Wisconsin, such as Hager City and Ellsworth, Wisconsin and White Hall and Rochester, Minnesota. There are also requests by listeners who lived along the farthest perimeters of the signal's radius, including Eau Claire, Wisconsin (80 miles), Stanley, Wisconsin (108 miles), and Ottertail, Minnesota (238 miles).

Fans often wrote in to the radio station to request songs for Owens to perform on his radio show. Examining the letters in his collection, details are given about who is listening, where they are listening from, details of the show, and information about the lives of the people in the requester's family and friends. There are two different styles of requests found within surviving letters.

The first request style are letters that ask Owens to sing for a particular person or family members. An example can be found in a request from Ann, Walter, and Antonia Buck from Hager City, Wisconsin. Postmarked August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1950, the three requesters sent in a postcard requesting Owens to sing a song for two people: Mrs. Peter Skroud who had a birthday on August 12<sup>th</sup> and Mrs. Albert Peters of Lake City, Minnesota who

had a birthday on August 13<sup>th</sup>. The requesters ended the correspondence with “Thank you very much. Listen to your program regularly.”<sup>11</sup>

The second style of request asks Owens to sing a particular song. This gives insight to what songs were popular amongst his listeners, whether they are recently released songs, old standard songs, or songs that reflect a particular celebration. An example can be found in a request sent in by Vivian Hemmingson. Postmarked October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1950 from Red Wing, Hemmingson requested “The Anniversary Song” for Mr. and Mrs. Willard Cowden of Pine Island to be played on Saturday October 7<sup>th</sup>. When requests were sent in, Owens mentioned who the requests were made by if the name was listed. In this particular request, Hemmingson signed the request as “Requested by a niece of Red Wing. Please do not read name.”<sup>12</sup>

Two of Owens’ biggest fans were Margie and Millie Moss, twin sisters who lived in Scandia, Minnesota, a town 72 miles north of Red Wing.<sup>13</sup> The Moss twins produced a fan newsletter that featured a biography of Owens and provided news about barn dances and other western folk musicians in the area. The newsletter was typed by hand and had actual printed photographs they took themselves affixed to it by tape. The Moss twins are seen in photographs taken at venues at which Owens performed. This shows both their dedication to him as a performer as well as their efforts at informing other fans.

The Moss twins also followed Leo Dressen, Jr., who gives credit to Owens for giving him his start on radio when he appeared as a guest on his radio program.<sup>14</sup> Dressen was born in Marshfield, in southwestern Minnesota, on August 1927. His family moved

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<sup>11</sup> Ann, Walter, and Antonia Buck, postcard to Owens, August 11, 1950.

<sup>12</sup> Vivian Hemmingson, postcard to Owens, October 3, 1950.

<sup>13</sup> Margie and Millie Moss, “Song News,” (Fan bulletin, Scandia, Minnesota, April 1950), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Moss, “Song News,” 8.

to Hay Creek, a small village between Red Wing and Goodhue to farm. Dressen auditioned for a spot as a radio musician at KAAA, but was not accepted. He continued performing around the area at bars, and Owens heard him and invited him on to perform on his show. Fans of Owens wrote to express their excitement about Dressen's performance, which encouraged KAAA to give him his own show.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 3: Ronnie Owens (left) with Leo Dressen Jr. in KAAA's recording studio. Circa 1950. Courtesy of Patricia J. Owen.

KAAA did not pay its musicians, so they all had other sources of income. Dressen worked for Everett J. Klampe in Rochester, Minnesota, selling awnings at Rochester Awning Company. In order to be on the radio and employed by Klampe, Dressen was sponsored by Klampe, providing his employer with on-air advertising in return.<sup>16</sup>

Dressen began his shows with a theme song he had composed called "Melody Trails." His time slots were on Monday and Wednesday afternoons at noon, but eventually switched over to Saturday afternoons at 1:15. Compared to Owens, his songs were sadder and more serious.

On one occasion, to gain publicity and audience participation, Dressen sang one of his own songs that lacked a title. He hosted a naming contest, asking the listeners to come up with a title for it. After all the submissions were received, he chose "My New Treasured Love."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Moss, "Song News," 8.

<sup>16</sup> Harley Flathers (former colleague and friend), in discussion with the author, 10 November 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Moss, "Song News," 8.

In October 1950, Owens teamed up with singer Genevieve Hovde of River Falls, Wisconsin for the show “Gen and Ronnie.” Hovde had an early start to radio fame, having been a child star on the air for KSTP’s *Sunset Valley Barn Dance* and WLS’ *National Barn Dance*. Born in 1932, Hovde got her start in radio after taking part in a singing contest at the 1943 Fall Festival in River Falls. She sang “Ships from O’er the Blue” and was accompanied by her mother on the piano. She won 21 silver dollars as was noted in the town’s paper.



Figure 4: An autographed publicity photo of Genevieve Hovde. The inscription reads "To a real pal, Ronnie. Love, Genevieve." Courtesy of Patricia J. Owen.

The following Monday morning, KSTP *Sunset Valley Barn Dance* director David Stone contacted Hovde’s mother, asking if she would come to Saint Paul to meet with him about the possibility of Hovde joining the *Sunset Valley Barn Dance* troupe. In 1943, Hovde signed on, becoming the youngest paid performer in KSTP history.<sup>18</sup>

After four years with *Sunset Valley*, Hovde was contacted by WLS with a request to join the *National Barn Dance* troupe. A scout from Chicago had seen her perform in Duluth with *Sunset Valley Barn Dance* and thought she would work well in Chicago. For six to eight months in 1947, Hovde was WLS’ “Little Sun Bonnet Girl.” Hovde was homeschooled and her family tried commuting by train to Chicago each week via the *Empire* or the *Zephyr*, leaving late Friday night to travel through the night to get to 4 p.m.

<sup>18</sup> Genevieve Hovde Rugo (former colleague and friend), in discussion with the author, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013

rehearsal and performance on Saturday.<sup>19</sup> The performances were five and a half hours long, running from 6:30 p.m.-midnight each Saturday. The commute became too much for the Hovde family, so Genevieve left WLS went back to KSTP and stayed there until 1950.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout Hovde's time on the barn dance circuit, she stayed close to her family even as she befriended famous cowboy stars. Her mother sewed all of her dresses and braided her hair for each performance, establishing herself as Hovde's agent and escort. While performing on WLS' *National Barn Dance*, she met Roy Rogers and Ronald Reagan and befriended stars like Pat Buttram and Rex Allen. Hovde also once opened for Elvis Presley in Meridian, Mississippi in the 1950s.

Owens, Dressen, and Hovde used their local celebrity status when they participated in special community events. Owens and Dressen often judged talent contests at the frequent Skyline Ballroom, just south of Red Wing, which was also where Hovde sang as a special guest. Participant entries for the talent contests were addressed to Owens at the radio station.<sup>21</sup> It is uncertain if anyone who requested to partake in the event was automatically entered or if there was an entrance audition.

The Skyline Ballroom was one of the many places Owens sang to make money and to connect with his fan base. He also performed at the Red Wing armory, White Rock Town Hall in White Rock, Minnesota, Fisherman's Rest in El Paso, Wisconsin, and at the Pierce County Fairgrounds in Ellsworth, Wisconsin. He also performed at the Farmer Fun Fest at Red Wing's Colvill Park and was listed to play for a fifteen-minute time slot. The

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Caton-Rosser, "Entertainer Recognized for Work with KSTP," (*The Shopper/Free Press*, Hager City, WI, February 28, 1999) 9.

<sup>20</sup> Rugo, in discussion with the author, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Virginia Goetz, "Letter," Letter to Ronnie Owens, Elgin, Minnesota, postmarked 29 December 1953.

newspaper listing cites Owens as being “singer (hillbilly and guitar).”<sup>22</sup> Owens aimed to perform in the local, rural areas rather than travel to the Twin Cities even though his show’s signal reached Saint Paul and Minneapolis because he was comfortable and familiar with the people and farming culture found in the Red Wing area.

In 1953, Owens gained an announcer to introduce his show and to talk with him throughout the program. Harley Flathers, from Chatfield, Minnesota, was a young announcer who had just graduated from the American Institute of the Air in Minneapolis. He began working at KAAA on April 10, 1953 and was paid \$1 an hour.<sup>23</sup> He was the morning man who signed on anywhere from 5 a.m. to 6 a.m., depending on when the sun rose, and returned on the air in the afternoon.<sup>24</sup> He worked along with another announcer, Peter Lyman, who was his boss, who announced from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. Lyman read stories from 10:30 a.m. to 10:45 a.m. and 2:45 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Monday through Friday.<sup>25</sup>

As Owens became established at the radio station, he gained sponsors. In one document from March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1954, Joe’s Café from Goodhue sponsored his show from March 13 through September 4 of that year. The sponsor, Joe Sheldstead, likely chose Owens because he was associated with Goodhue. The station was paid \$91 total, earning \$3.50 a week. It is not known if Owens received any of that money.

By 1954, Owens achieved local celebrity status as a musician and showman. He became the first radio celebrity in Red Wing area. He was well-liked by people of all

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<sup>22</sup> “What, No Mustard? Nobody to go Hungry at Farmers Fun Fest,” (*Red Wing Daily Republican Eagle*, Red Wing, MN, [n.d.]), [n.p.]. It is unknown whether Owens agreed with the hillbilly tag, but it does not seem appropriate with his cowboy image.

<sup>23</sup> Flathers, *Back in a Moment*, 157.

<sup>24</sup> Flathers, *Back in a Moment*, 149.

<sup>25</sup> Flathers, *Back in a Moment*, 149.

ages, providing a family-friendly radio show, and this is reflected in his fan mail and request sheets. It was during this time that he began composing most of his catalog of music that reflected what he saw throughout southeastern Minnesota and the feelings that the average American could feel and experience.

## Chapter 5: Owens' Original Songs

While Owens' songs do not feature prominently in surviving radio programming lists, he wrote songs throughout his life. Owens' songs resembled the western folk songs that were nationally known, and that he learned songs in school music classes, on the radio, and from the records he bought. The surviving songs written by Owens do not have chords or notated music with them, so the melodies are unknown.<sup>1</sup> It is also unknown if he wanted to be a singer/songwriter, but the songs he wrote give insight into his life and the world in which he lived.

Owens' songs were inspired by what he heard on the radio. Because Western songs, like much popular songs, were learned aurally through imitation, he used songs broadcast on the radio as the models for his own compositions. Owens also used themes found within the published songs, including straightforward lyrics that tell tales of everyday life, and incorporated musical embellishments such as yodeling.<sup>2</sup> It is unknown whether Owens sang many of his songs on the air, but fan mail and interviews have suggested that he sang at least one or two of his own compositions.

The first dated song in Owens' collection, "Coming Home to Rattlin' Cannon Ball," was written when he was fifteen, on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1945. The song, written in the final months of World War II, describes a hobo-turned-soldier returning home, looking forward to seeing his old train, the "Rattlin' Cannon Ball." The train was his home, which took him on many adventures throughout the country.

*I recall one winter morning as she rolled out on the way through frosty Minnesota  
down by Chicago's bay from north to south from east to west  
she rolled above them all*

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<sup>1</sup> It was a common practice for songs for untrained musicians to write lyrics alone for songs.

<sup>2</sup> Although no recordings of Owens' original works do not exist, yodeling is commanded within the lyric sheets.

*that was my first rambling trip on the Rattlin' Cannon Ball*

*I'll never forget her whistle to me twas like a song  
as she rolled [over] the maintains thro [sic] vallyes [sic] all day long  
as she glided through the woodland her whistel [sic] seamed [sic] to call  
hobos you are welcomed on the Rattlin' Cannon Ball.*

The listener learns that the “Rattlin’ Cannon Ball” was modernized by becoming a steam-lined engine, which was “their last improvement for the war.” This song may have been inspired by Roy Acuff’s 1940 song “Steamlined Cannonball,” about the great advantages of the train.

*She moves along like a cannon ball  
Like a star in its heavenly flight  
This lonesome sound from the whistle you love  
As she travels through the night.*

*Her headlight gleams out in the night  
The firebox flash you see  
The blinds I ride, the life that I love  
It's home, sweet home to me.*

In Owens’ song, the change from coal train to steam-lined train symbolizes modernized transportation technology. Although the soldier realizes that his old coal-powered train has evolved into a new train, he still holds sentimental attachment to the train itself, remembering the times he had riding the train and praying to God that the train will be protected while he is away.

*Oh God please protect her as she glides along the rail  
and down the southland how dose [sic] sail  
for when the war is over and the Bugules [sic] no more call  
I'm coming home to the USA and the Rattlin' Cannon Ball.*

Owens continued to write narrative songs about trains and hobos, a common scene in the countryside and a common theme in nationally-known songs. For the remainder of this chapter, Owens’ songs have been grouped into five different categories:

war songs, old timer songs, sad love songs, religious songs, and miscellany. The following discussion features a sampling of songs that represent each category.

### War Songs

“There’s a Gold Star on Her Banner Tonight,” written by a sixteen-year old Owens, dates from August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1946. It tells the story of a woman who lost her son at war and what that sacrifice he made meant to Americans, especially the singer.

*There’s a gold star on her banner tonight  
It shines from her windo[w] so bright  
It shows her son was true to the old Red White and Blue*

*There’s a heart filled with sorrow tonight  
For her boy who died for our right  
He was loyal and true  
He died for me and you  
There’s a gold star on her banner tonight.*

*May God bless her loyal son tonight  
He gave his life so we may live right  
He was honest and true to the Red White and Blue  
There’s a Gold Star on her Banner Tonight*

The term “banner” in the lyrics refers to service banners, which hung in the front windows of parents’ homes who had children serving in the military. The service banners had a star for each child who served in the military. The tradition began in 1917, towards the end of World War I. During World War II, strict regulations were placed on how the banner was made and who could have it hanging in their window. The standard size for a banner in World War II was an 8.5 x 14 inch white field with one to five stars sewn onto a red banner. Blue stars meant that the soldiers were alive and fighting in the war. Gold

stars, like the one in Owens' song, were placed over the blue star to symbolize that the soldier had died in action.<sup>3</sup>

Owens wrote another song in which the soldier was also ill-fated at war, but this time the focus of attention was on the lover he had waiting at home. "When the Lilacs Bloom in Heaven" describes a woman waiting for her soldier to return home from fighting over the sea. She received a letter from the soldier who said he will return home once the lilacs are blooming. But as fate would have it, the soldier had died in war and would not be returning to his sweetheart. As she prayed to God, she asked if there were any lilacs that were blooming in heaven. She replied, if there are:

*When the lilacs bloom in Heaven  
I'll be with you up there  
Farm from this land of snow  
Far from this land of care.*

In another song set immediately after World War II, Owens put the soldier in another position altogether: keeping his girl from leaving him. The soldier in "Wait for Me, Darling" is happy to have returned home to his sweetheart, and wishes that he could stay and be with her, but "Uncle Sam" requires him to return and finish his duty. It is not certain why he must continue his service and why he was not discharged. But he asks her to promise to wait:

*You will wait for me won't you my darling  
Even though I myself wonder why  
All though the war is over  
Uncal Sasm says we now must say goodbye.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> "Blue Star Banner," *American Legion*, 2013, <http://www.legion.org/troops/bluestar>.

<sup>4</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

## Old Timer Songs

Another genre of Owens' music features songs that were set in the past or had romanticized reminiscences of days of old. Based on handwriting comparisons, Owens' first Old Timer song was "Sidewalks Made of Wood." Within this song, the singer reflects on how he wished he could go back in time to when his father was a child and thinking ahead about how much the world will be different in forty years.

*I'd like to bring back days of you'r  
I only wish I could  
I like to see dad's childhood days  
the sidewalks made of wood*

*When streets weren't streets and when the rain did fall  
a horse all most got stuck  
Pops says if you'd a had a car  
Youed just be outta luck*

*I'll bet in forty years from now  
time's again will change there proply won't be any roads  
We'll all have aroplanes but that don't worry me a bit  
though I can't figure out how  
But time has changed from year to year and they won't stop just now*

*But back to what I said be for  
I only wish I could  
But I guess they were not ment for me  
those side[walks] made of wood.<sup>5</sup>*

If Owens based this song on his father's life, the singer was romanticizing life during the 1910s and 1920s in a small rural town thirty miles south of Red Wing.<sup>6</sup> This song was written with the same penmanship as "There's a Gold Star on Her Banner Tonight," which dates this from approximately 1946, and the narrator imagines everybody having "aroplanes" in the 1980s, reflecting his views about the rapidly evolving transportation technology.

<sup>5</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Owen, Sr. was born in 1908.

However, this song speaks of wishing for simpler times, ones without machinery. The streets were made of dirt and therefore horses provided easier transportation than a motorized vehicle would. The sidewalks are reflective of the wooden sidewalks seen on television shows and movies set in the Old West, back when the cowboy was a prominent profession.

Instead of being a professional cow-herding cowboy, Owens worked to be a singing cowboy. In “I’ll Be a Yodeling Man,” Owens sings about a boy dreaming about what he wants to be when he grows up.

*I was borned down south,  
away out west up where the bad men are.  
I learned to yodel the way I was borned  
and strummed on a big guitar [yodel]*

*Some said I’de be a gangster  
Some said I’de be a man  
Some said I’de be a HoBo and a drip throughout the land  
But when I’ve grown older + my vulcoal cords they change  
I hope to God I’ll be a yodeler + ride the western Plains [yodel]*

*Some lads want to be a sailor  
+ sail to the lands that’s strong  
Some want to be coppers  
but yodeling in my range [yodel]*

*My mom she plays a fiddle  
My pops he plays a drum  
but I guess I’ll be a yodeler  
until my days are done<sup>7</sup>*

This is not an autobiographical song. Owens was born in southern Minnesota, not in a southern state. His parents were not musically inclined, so he was not raised by a fiddle-playing mother or a drum-playing father. The song does, however, reflect the different lifestyles that were prevalent in southern Minnesota. Jesse James and the James-

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<sup>7</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

Young gang were captured and killed in Northfield, Minnesota in 1882, thirty-six miles away from Owens' farm, and John Dillinger roamed the streets of Saint Paul in the 1920s. Coppers, slang for policemen, in Saint Paul were mostly Irish immigrants or of Irish descent, an ethnicity that was part of Owens' genetic makeup. Hobos were prominent in Goodhue County during the 1920s and 1930s, financially unsuccessful because of unemployment caused by the stock market crash in 1929.

Owens wrote two similar songs about a hobo who rode trains: "Box Car Bill" and "The Train He'll Never Ride." The story stays the same throughout the two songs. A hobo named Bill is known throughout town. He is a friendly man who knows the townspeople, but he remembers who will and will not give him food. A train comes in and its whistle blows, forcing Bill to run for the train, hoping to catch it.

In "Box Car Bill," his fate is grim, suggesting that he was killed by trying to catch the train. The last stanza says:

*As he reached for the box car,  
his halt it was not found + the poor old hobo was thrown to the ground  
And when the train had gone we heard a lonely sigh,  
the last words of Box Car Bill was "Good By my friends Good By."<sup>8</sup>*

"The Train He'll Never Ride" describes "Hobo Bill" who will never ride the "Wabash Cannonball," giving more detail than "Box Car Bill." Being a local attraction, the townspeople knew that he wanted to try to ride the train. The last stanza in "The Train He'll Never Ride" gives a more positive ending:

*When he heard the whistle calling from him we heard a sigh  
He said I'll try and catch her on the fly  
As she was drawing closer from him these words did fly  
If it's my misfortune to all my friends goodbye*

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<sup>8</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

Comparing the actual handwritten lyrics of the two songs, there is evidence as to which version came first. “Box Car Bill” could be considered the first version of the two songs because spelling improved in “The Train He’ll Never Ride.” Owens’ corrected spelling mistakes such as “grope” for “group.” On the other hand, the song, written in ink, has the word “hobo” crossed out in pencil and has “Box Car” written over it, insinuating that he had originally called the character “Hobo Bill” as he did in “The Train He’ll Never Ride.”

### **Sad Love Songs**

The most extensive genre in Owens’ catalogue is sad love songs. These songs are about a man being cheated on or left by the woman he loved. In Owens’ life, these songs foreshadowed what would become of his own love life: betrayed and left behind.

The male narrator in his songs is stunned that the woman he loved cheated on him, and did not hold true to her word. Owens scheduled his song “Bitter Tears and a Broken Heart” on his radio program more than once. The central character had lofty ideas about the relationship, but also suspects that his beloved had planned the betrayal from the beginning; he is waiting for the day when his pain is avenged.

*Bitter Tears and a broken heart  
I never dreamed we’d ever part  
I guess you planned it from the start  
Bitter tears and a broken heart.*

*You told me dear that you’d be true  
You made me care for only you  
Now you’re gone and I’m so blue  
There’s bitter tears and a broken heart for you.*

*Someday sweetheart your gona cry  
Then you’ll think of days gone by  
Then you’ll be blue and I’ll be free*

*There'll be bitter tears and a broken heart for me.*<sup>9</sup>

Another heart-breaking song written by Owens was "I'll Forgive You but Will My Bitter Heart" that was written on the same weighted paper as his KAAA stationary. The song was likely written around 1950, and in it the narrator describes the struggle of trying to let go of his feelings for the woman he loved, stating "but I can plainly see I will never be free" until she is gone from his heart. He sings that he should have seen the signs from the beginning:

*My heart is broken because I love you  
I could've seen thoes selfish lies  
I trusted you  
Don't you worry bout me*<sup>10</sup>

Being left for another man was another common theme in Owens' songs. The men were depressed and regardless of the woman's wrongdoing, the women would be forgiven if they come back. "I'll Never Love Nobody Else but You" is one of many songs that describes how the man is hopelessly in love with a woman who does not love him back. However, he continues to harbor hope and feels he will be fulfilled if she returns.

*[II.]  
If you would come back and say your sorry you know  
I'd forgive you for your wrong  
For I can't live without you  
Ever nigh my hart for you dose long*<sup>11</sup>

The man's desire for the woman's return can also be seen in "Don't Say Our Love has Ended." The woman made the man empty promises, "that you forever would be true," but peer pressure got the best of the woman and she left him for another man. The

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<sup>9</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

<sup>10</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

<sup>11</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

singer had high hopes and he prayed “theyed [sic] come true someday,” insinuating that this was not a marriage but a courtship instead. The man is still giving the woman a chance, hoping they would still have another chance at their love:

*Oh please come back + say you did not mean it.  
I'll forget the things you said to me.  
Oh pleas [sic] come back well start all over darling  
Think how happy we could be.<sup>12</sup>*

Later in his life, around 1970, Owens wrote on more serious topics. “Lollie Love,” written by “Ron Owens” instead of “Ronnie,” describes a woman who was happily married and was a good mother to her children. The husband left her and, unable to fill her emotional needs, she turned to the life of prostitution, searching “each night for a new love affair.”

*She'll let you kiss her tender lips  
And with passion hold you so tight.  
She'll ask you to stay till morning comes  
And Lollie is yours for tonight.*

As the song continues, we learn that Lollie knows that what she is doing is wrong, but “she won’t chance hurting again.” Owens took a different perspective on the life of a prostitute. He saw it as a means of filling an emotional void rather than making financial ends meet. This places the role of the prostitute in a romanticized light to one who is looking at this through naivety.

### **Religious Songs**

Raised by a farming family, Owens did not attend church on a weekly basis. The Owen family was Christian, but as farmers, they did not have time to go to a church that was more than ten miles away. Americans were strong in their faith at the time and

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<sup>12</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

tended to be God-fearing people, which most likely is the reason why Owens wrote songs that incorporated God.

His surviving religious songs are about heaven. One describes how one gets to heaven via the Cannonball, a train that continues to appear in other songs written by Owens. “God’s Own Cannonball” brings out a socioeconomic conflict that Owens dealt with first hand: the poor and the rich.

*Come listen to my story I will tell it friend to you  
about a mighty railroad train that’s bound for above the blue.  
The poor man will ride by the rich ones we’ll be equal one and all  
for no one else is wanted on God’s Own Cannonball*

*Here on earth we’re divided the rich man shuns the poor.  
But when we bound that heavenly train twill be that way no more.  
When your earthly time is over and the curtains round you fall,  
you be homeward bound to heaven on God’s Own Cannonball*

This song could fit well into the folk blues revival that would arrive in the 1960s, approximately a decade after this song was written. It acts as a civil rights song, providing a social critique, breaking down boundaries between the rich and the poor, stating that we are all going to the same place in the afterlife and there will be no dividers between the economic classes.

“The Cowboy’s Dream” fantasizes about what heaven already looks like in cowboy rancher terms and how exactly to get there:

*The road to that bright happy region is a dim, narrow trail so they say  
But the broad one that leads to perdition blazed all the way.*

At the gate, there is a group of angels referred to as the “Riders of Judgment” who will determine if the individual can enter cowboy heaven.

The chorus provides a play on words referencing the well-known American folk tune “Get Along Little Dogies.” The chorus to “The Cowboy’s Dream” reads: “Roll on, roll on, roll on little dogies” to imitate “get along little dogies.”

“Where We Can Trode the Golden Streets” describes the journey that a newly departed person will take. The song could be sung as a eulogy, the verse starting out with “The Master has beckoned oh brother for you, to come home to heaven that land above the blue.” In heaven, the newly departed and the singer will one day be reunited:

*Where we can trod the golden streets and plow the golden land  
Will cross the golden river on a mighty golden span  
We’ll reunite my brother you and I  
When the master does call me to my home up in the sky.*<sup>13</sup>

The scene painted is an agronomic heaven, sowing the seeds and reaping the benefits of living in the golden land. The town has golden streets as opposed to dirt roads and the wooden plank sidewalks, painting the scene of the old west through his song in a subtle fashion.

### **Miscellany Songs**

There are a number of songs in Owens’ catalog that do not fit into the themes outlined above and are placed under miscellany. The four remaining songs below belong to that category and include a happy love song, a song about incarceration, an observational song, and a novelty song.

Owens sang other happy love songs, but they were all written by other people. “Love Birds Refrain” is the only surviving happy song written by Owens in his catalog.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

The song does not focus on an individual woman, but is rather about the sweetness of love. The yodels in this song symbolize bird calls, a pleasant musical embellishment to set the mood.

*You may speak of your Darling  
Whatever her name but  
She's not as sweet as the Love Birds Refrain  
[yodel] But she not as the Love Birds Refrain*

*There's many a casle  
in London and Spain  
but none can come pare with the  
Love Birds Refrain [yodel do same]*

*The Love Birds the yodel [yodel]  
There notted for fame  
By twetlin that formuliar refraine [yodel]  
By twetlin that formilier refrain<sup>15</sup>*

In sharp contrast, “Dear Warden” is sung by a man who has been in jail for twenty-one years for a crime he says he did not commit. “Everyone thinks I’m guilty, I think that my life is nere [sic] through,” sings the prisoner. He insists that if he is given the chance, he will prove his innocence and that he will be freed.

*I pray that you'll answer this letter  
and here's what I hope you say,  
“yes you may have your freedom  
to prove your not guilty somday.”<sup>16</sup>*

“There They Go Side by Side” suggests that it would be a song that would fall into a romantic category. The song is about love, but it is a caring love rather than a romantic love. The narrator describes a man who is visually impaired and his relationship with the Seeing Eye Dog that guides him around town. “Sheep and shepherd are far from

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<sup>14</sup> The signature on this song and two other songs is “RJO Sunney Sunset.” It is unknown if this was part of the process of creating a stage name or a songwriting alias. There is not enough information to explore this signature.

<sup>15</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

<sup>16</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

the fold, just a man and his dog, a Seeing Eye dog, heaven's blessing are truly untold.”

Throughout the song, the Seeing Eye dog's abilities are credited to God, stating that “God must be there in between.”

Finally, the novelty song found within the surviving catalog of Owens' music is “Whiskers.” His father's long, curly, gray whiskers get in his way wherever he goes and whatever he does: farming, eating, sleeping, and traveling. This is the only song in the collection that uses any racial slurs:

*My pappy went to Africa  
And met up with some Japs.  
He hide behind his whiskers  
And folled the little saps.<sup>17</sup>*

The Owen family did not promote racial segregation, which is why there are so few racial slurs throughout Owens' music. The handwriting of the original document is comparable to the handwriting of “There's a Gold Star on her Banner Tonight,” suggesting that this was written in the late 1940s, amidst the tension between the United States and Japan, making slurs against the Japanese common in American propaganda.

Owens' songs are simple, straightforward narratives that provide insight into topics that were featured in western folk songs of the day. The songs that Owens wrote were relatable to his listeners because they featured local dialect, everyday scenarios, and it is the musical genre that his listeners are familiar with. Although these songs do not have any surviving recordings (if they were recorded at all), Owens used nationally-published western folk songs as a model for his own works and it is likely that these songs also provided a model for the melody and accompaniment.

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<sup>17</sup> The lyric is transcribed as written.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

By the early 1950s, KAAA's shows focused on local talent and sponsors, with structured programming with a relaxed demeanor. However, there was a social shift in the nation's musical taste. Rock 'n' Roll was growing in popularity, along with the stations that aired that format. Rock 'n' Roll stations had disc jockeys who spoke quickly and offered to give away money to the nth caller. That is something that KAAA's casual, rural format could not keep up with.

The dynamics at the radio station changed in December 1955, when the station was officially bought by Victor J. and Nicholas Tedesco, brothers and business owners from South Saint Paul who bought small town radio stations in Minnesota and western Wisconsin. The Tedesco brothers paid \$60,000 and renamed the station Hiawatha Valley Broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> The station changed its call letters to "KCUE, your cue for better listening."<sup>2</sup>

Owens was still performing at KAAA on a volunteer basis and therefore needed to find work. By 1953, Owens worked part-time at Koehler's Book Store in Red Wing delivering books and magazines to customers around the area. In his spare time, he attended social events in the rural towns in the Red Wing area, such as barn dances and makeshift drive-in theaters, where the movie was projected against the side of a building.

Owens met a Dorothy Pfingsten in 1953 through her sister, Delores. Dorothy, who was eight years younger than Owens, often accompanied him on the radio.<sup>3</sup> The age difference prompted a great deal of teasing from his radio station colleagues, which damaged Owens' self-esteem. The couple married on June 12, 1954 and lived on Owens'

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<sup>1</sup> Lowry, "Broadcast Profile," 1.

<sup>2</sup> Flathers, *Back in a Moment*, 157.

<sup>3</sup> Quam (ex-wife of Owens), in discussion with the author, 15 July 2011.

family farm. Owens remained on KAAA until 1955 when the station's format changed and ownership was transitioning. Owens returned to farm work after the format change and became a family man; his first child, Patricia, was born on June 26, 1956.

When Owens' father was diagnosed with cancer in 1960, Ronald Senior knew that his son was disinclined to be a farmer and decided to sell the property and most of the family's belongings through auction. The Owen family, including his parents, young daughter, and pregnant wife relocated, to the Town of Goodhue and Owens began his tenure at the Goodhue Creamery. Ronnie's father died in April 1961 and his son, Ronald Edward Owen, III, was born in September of that year. It was a hard time of transition for Owens.

His father's death was a major blow to Owens. The Owen family had relied on his father for support, for guidance, and for well-being. Once his father died, Owens knew that he could not step into that role. He was distraught; his radio career ended because of the format change, he had two young children he had to provide for, and the family was living on welfare. As a result of stress, Owens turned to alcohol for support. This turned into a problem; he became a chronic alcoholic for the rest of his life.

Owens' alcoholism became too much for his family to bear. Alcoholism was a recurring problem in Owens' lineage. His wife left him in 1966 and filed for divorce in 1967, leaving the children to be raised by Owens and his mother. Owens worked late-night shifts at the Goodhue Creamery, giving him a nocturnal lifestyle, that made it easy for Owens to drink into the early hours of the morning. However, it created an emotional separation between Owens and his family.

Owens' former brother-in-law and childhood friend Marvin Born said that he never viewed alcoholism as a problem for Ronnie when they were younger. Owens never drank when they sought leisure Saturday nights in Goodhue.<sup>4</sup> Flathers, a coworker and longtime friend of Owens, believes that Owens drinking began during his time in show business. When Flathers accompanied Owens at a show, he witnessed audience members and bar owners buying Owens beer or shots of alcohol as a friendly gesture.<sup>5</sup> With the family history of alcoholism, these experiences got the better of Owens' tolerance and judgment.

Although he was not working at the radio station, Owens still wrote songs. One in particular was an autobiographical song, which he left untitled, and was addressed to his wife when she ran away before filing for divorce. The song speaks of a husband, daughter, and son who want their mother back:

*It made some people happy  
And I wonder were one.  
When you walked out on your husbyn,  
your daughter, and your son.*

*Three hearts you broke still long for you  
And wonder why you roam  
Tears fill my eyes each time I hear  
When is mommy coming home*

*We long so much to have you nere  
3 hearts for you do yearn  
3 pair of lips each nite do pray  
That mommy will return.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Born, Marvin (former brother-in-law and friend of Owens), in discussion with the author, 17 August 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Flathers (former colleague and friend of Owens), in discussion with the author, 10 November 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Lyric is transcribed as written.

Owens returned to work on the radio when he was hired by KCUE to conduct interviews with Country Western stars of the day. Hired by new owner George Brooks in the early 1970s, Owens and his second wife, Julie Moe, interviewed musicians in the Twin Cities. One of the venues at which Country Western musicians like Jim Reeves, Slim Whitman, and Webb Pierce appeared was The Flame Cafe in Minneapolis, which was known as “a genuine Midwestern mecca of country music.”<sup>7</sup>

On December 5, 1979, Owens’ alcoholism affected the family’s life more than ever. He had his son drive him to a bar in Hager City, Wisconsin, just across the Mississippi River from Red Wing. As they left the bar, Owens’ son drove head on into a semi-truck, killing himself instantly and leaving Owens with a few scrapes. His son’s mental state was never known because Owens would not talk about the accident. When his son turned out of the bar’s driveway, however, he was heading away from Red Wing rather than towards it. This, too, has raised questions within the family about what exactly Owens’ son was thinking.

After the death of his son, the end of Owens’ life was rather quiet. He continued to drink after the tragedy, even though his alcoholism had killed his only son. On February 18, 1982, he died of a heart attack just weeks after his 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

Once Leo Dressen’s radio career at KAAA ended, he opened up an old-time western themed saloon in Hay Creek, where he and his KAAA friends would perform frequently through the 1960s and 1970s. Genevieve Hovde says that Dressen was a brilliant man who created many interesting things, like intricate saddles and other

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<sup>7</sup> Jim Meyer, “A New Flame,” *City Pages* (St. Paul, MN), Published 11 October 1995, accessed 26 November 2013. <http://www.citypages.com/1995-10-11/music/a-new-flame/>.

leatherwork.<sup>8</sup> He, too, has since passed away. He always said that he would “go to hell in a ball of fire.” That day came when he fell asleep on his couch, smoking a cigarette, and he and the couch caught on fire.<sup>9</sup>

Genevieve Hovde Rugo continued her singing career after she married Bill Rugo and had a family. She continued recording, selling tape cassettes of her songs, and toured with other Country Western musicians, such as longtime friend Rex Allen. She also started a rental property business and an antique store. She currently lives in River Falls, Wisconsin and makes guest appearances due to her time on KSTP’s *Sunset Valley Barn Dance*. She is KSTP’s longest employed personality, having been on the payroll for over sixty years.<sup>10</sup>

Surviving family members and friends have conflicting views about why Owens did not continue on to other radio stations or to try to get to Nashville. His ex-wife, Dorothy, says that his mother, Maude, told him to stay at home and to fill the shoes of his father, encouraging him to find a real job and be a family man.<sup>11</sup> His daughter, Patricia, says that says that her mother, Dorothy, told him that he needed to stay home and help raise the children.<sup>12</sup> Colleague Genevieve Hovde Rugo believes that his personality and music style did not fit the Nashville Sound because he did not try to conform to the new Country Western sound that emerged in 1954.<sup>13</sup>

Despite never reaching national fame, Owens was a local celebrity in the Red Wing area. KAAA made Owens their first celebrity star by making him Red Wing’s

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<sup>8</sup> Rugo (former colleague and friend of Owens), in discussion with the author, 13 June 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Rugo (former colleague and friend of Owens), in discussion with the author, 13 June 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Rugo (former colleague and friend of Owens), in discussion with the author, 13 June 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Quam (ex-wife of Owens), in discussion with the author, 15 July 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Owen (daughter of Owens), in discussion with the author, 14 June 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Rugo, Genevieve Hovde (former colleague and friend of Owens), in discussion with the author, 3 August 2012.

singing cowboy. Personifying KAAA, Owens was the station's representative in the community. He also replicated the big singing cowboys like Roy Rogers by having the trusty sidekick, Dressen, and his on-stage gal Hovde. Owens paved the way for Dressen and Hovde to establish their own shows on KAAA through the success of his show and allowed other local musicians to be guest musicians on his show.

The music Owens sang and/or wrote reflected the recent and distant past. His song, "There's a Gold Star on her Banner Tonight," reflected recent history of World War II, documenting what he saw in the town as news came back from the war front about which soldiers were not coming back home. With Owens' song "Sidewalks Made of Wood," he compared current times with the past; cars versus horses, cement sidewalks versus wooden sidewalks. People were afraid of the rapidly changing world that was brought on through scientific and technological discoveries as well as the onset of the Cold War. Sentimental Americans wanted to revert back to the romanticized easier times of previous generations that established America.

Owens' music was written at the end of the early twentieth century western folk genre that embraced those romanticized, historic ideals. The Nashville Sound came in, electrifying the sound by bringing electric guitars over from the emerging Rock 'n' Roll genre to create a Country/Western commercial sound. Although songs remained narrative, the topic variety narrowed, and songs were primarily about love, religion, and patriotism. These new country songs focused on timeless situations that could be passed on and relatable to future generations of country fans, such as Jeannie C. Riley's "Harper Valley P.T.A." and Faron Young's "Hello Walls" and with musicians like Elvis Presley

and Jerry Lee Lewis who incorporated elements, such as rhythm and instrumentation, from Rock 'n' Roll genre to country music.

As Nashville Sound evolved, so did its wardrobe fashion. Small town performers like Owens and musicians who performed on radio barn dance shows wore Hillbilly linens, like gingham, and cowboy clothes that were relatable and down-to-earth fashions. The Nashville Sound musicians wore clothes that were sequined, tightfitting, and high-set hair. The wardrobe tried to bring glitz and glamour into the genre to continue to assimilate the music into everyday America and to distance itself away from its comparatively primitive roots.

Interviews have been the best resource throughout this research. Many of those who sang on the radio with Owens or who worked with him have passed away, but a small number still remain. People who listened to his shows on the air or saw him in person give a different perspective from those who worked with him. Family members add another level of insight to Owens' life because they knew what was happening behind the scenes and were aware of the different climates that affected direct Owens' decision making.

Radio program schedules are another valuable source within this type of research because they lay out the different programs listeners had to choose from. When Owens went on the air, televisions were just starting to gain popularity in households, but southeastern Minnesota still relied on radios for their main source of transmitted entertainment. Programming schedules showed the transition of programming from wartime (comedy and patriotic shows) to postwar (situation comedies and home/domestic programming).

It is essential for radio stations to develop, curate, and maintain an archive in order to better preserve their history. KWNG/KCUE does not have an archive that houses information about KAAA. Flathers remembers the day when management changed and the Tedesco brothers threw away everything relating to KAAA. Flathers took it upon himself to save as much as he could, as did other KAAA employees, but those artifacts traveled farther from the radio station and are not able to serve to their full potential.<sup>14</sup> Steps should be taken to preserve what information and artifacts radio stations do have and retrieve what has left in order to piece together the history of a valuable asset to the city.

By investigating Owens' radio show, we discover that the smaller town radio stations relied on local talent in their formative years. After World War II, rural towns rejuvenated their entertainment, news, and employment through creating radio stations that were aimed for their residents. While the urban and metropolitan stations were airing music and news through nationwide networks, the small town radio stations provided news and entertainment by the people and for the people. The stations determined their own programming and had free reign on what they want to cover. By studying shows like Owens', it is revealed that listeners supported the local musicians by listening to their shows, requesting what would be performed on the show, and to also hire the local musicians out for community events.

This work serves as a model for music historians, ethnomusicologists, media historians, and sociologists to discover what local entertainment was offered in rural towns. It is essential to comb through newspapers to learn about local musicians who performed on radio stations to understand what the area residents wanted to listen to and

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<sup>14</sup> Flathers (former colleague and friend of Owens), in discussion with the author, 10 November 2013.

what shaped the radio stations before they joined a network. Small town radio stations across the country need to be researched in order to understand their histories and the people who helped create them. This work delved into newspapers and magazines, oral histories and interviews, photographs, sheet music, scrapbooks, recordings, and papers and notebooks in order to reassemble a radio career that was nearly forgotten.

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### Appendix A: Ronnie Owens' Song Transcriptions

The following songs were written by Ronnie Owens/Ronald Owen, Junior, and are hereby copyrighted with the publication of this thesis. The lyrics are transcribed as written.

#### Bitter Tears and a Broken Heart

Bitter Tears and a broken heart  
I never dreamed we'd ever part  
I guess you planned it from the start  
Bitter tears and a broken heart.

You told me dear that you'd be true  
You made me care for only you  
Now you're gone and I'm so blue  
There's bitter tears and a broken heart for you.

Someday sweetheart your gona cry  
Then you'll think of days gone by  
Then you'll be blue and I'll be free  
There'll be bitter tears and a broken heart for me.

### Box Car Bill

Down by the station a group of people stand talking to a hobo who known through this land.

They stand there for a thrill that's to be shown them by the man called Box Car Bill.

The folks who turned him down for a bit to eat are now this old hobo this hobo glad to meet

But old Bill still remembers when they turned him from [there] door and said sorry hobo but we just have no more.

When he heard the whistle calling from him we heard a sigh

He said I try + catch her

I'll catch on the fly

But if I might all of you good by

As he reached for the box car, his halt it was not found + the poor old hobo was thrown to the ground

And when the train had gone we heard a lonely sigh, the last words of Box Car Bill was "Good By my friends Good By"

### Coming Home to Rattlin' Cannon Ball

Come gather round me all you flok and listen to this tale about my good old hobo days  
when I used to ride this rail-  
But now I'm in the Army, Uncal Sam has maxe his call he took me from the box cars of  
the Rattlin' Cannon Ball

I recall one winter morning as she rolled out on the way through frosty Minnesota down  
by Chicago's bay from north to south from east to west she rolled above them all that was  
my first rambling trip on the Rattlin' Cannon Ball

I'll never forget her whistle to me twas like a song as she rolled over the maintains thro  
vallyes all day long as she glided through the woodland her [whistel] [seamed] to call  
hobos you are welcomed on the Rattlin' Cannon Ball.

You could here the bells a ringing a lone conductor call we're all aboard your city on the  
Rattlin' Cannon Ball

As years roll by they improved her the streme lined engine came she zomed up for the  
mountains from Washington to Main that was their last improvement for the war then  
made its call that's how I still do picture the Rattlin' Cannon Ball.

Oh God please protector as she glides along the rail and down the southland how dose  
sail for when the war is over + the Bugules no more call I'm coming home to the USA  
and the Rattlin' Cannon Ball.

RFD4

June 7, 1945

### The Cowboy's Dream

Last night as I lay on the prairie and looked at the sky  
I wondered if a cowboy would drift to that sweet by and by

Roll on, roll on, roll on little dogies  
Roll on, roll on, roll on little dogies, roll on

The road to that bright happy region is a dim, narrow trail so they say  
But the broad one that leads to perdition (I posted?) blazed all the way

Chorus

They say there will be a great round-up and cowboys like dogies will stand to be marked  
by the Riders of Judgement [sic] who posted and know every ground?

Chorus

I know there's many a stray cowboy who'll be lost at the great final sale.

Dear Worden

I'm writing a letter Dear Warden Behind these walls of gray. I'm writing to ask for my pardon Please answer this letter today.

It's hard just to set here in prison for there's nothing I can do. Everyone thinks I'm guilty I think that my life is nere through.

Oh warden I've been in your prison just twenty one years today. I've served out this time for anouher behing these walls of gray.

I know that I never was guilty for the crime which I've had to pay. So please if you'll give me my freedom, I'll prove it to you today.

I pray that you'll answer this letter and here's what I hope you say, "yes you may have your freedom to prove your not guilty someday."

### Don't Say Our Love has Ended

I once had hopes that we'd be happy + prayed that they'd come true someday but now you've gone + left me crying you have taken my hopes all away.

Oh please don't say that our love has ended. Don't say I were not meant for you. if you will brake my hart in peaces all my life I'll be so sad + blue.

You said that you all ways would love me and that you forever would be true but they'll just change your mind my darling + know you say that we're through.

Oh please come back + say you did not mean it. I'll forget the things you said to me. Oh please come back well start all over darling think how happy we could be.

## God's Own Cannonball

Come listen to my story I will tell it friend to you about a mighty railroad train that's bound for above the blue.

The poor man will ride by the rich ones we'll be equal one and all for no one is scis wanted on God's Own Cannonball

Here on earth we're divided the rich man shuns the poor. But when we bound that heavenly train twill be that way no more.

When your earthly time is over and the curtains round you fall, you be homeward bound to heaven on God's Own Cannonball

### Where We Trode the Golden Streets

Verse: The Master has beckoned oh brother for you. To come home to heaven that land above the blue. The angels will greet you oh brother of mine and you will live there forever in that golden land so fine.

Chorus: Where we can trod the Golden Streets + plow the Golden land will cross the Golden River on a mighty Golden span someday we'll reunite my brother you + I when the Master he does call me to my home up in the sky.

Someday I will join you oh brother up there in the land of the true beauty [beauty] we will find no more dispare- When God he dose call me home, way up high and I'll take my last journey to that land up in the sky.

### When the Lilacs Bloom in Heaven

Verse: When the Lilacs Bloom in Heaven on the banks of the mighty ocean, a maiden sat alone thinking of her sweetheart who sailed far over the fome Today she received a letter that told her to be true for when the lilacs are blooming, I'm coming home to you.

Chorus: When the lilacs are blooming I am coming home to you when the lilacs bloom in the springtime so always be true blue

Verse: The lilacs have bloomed and faded he'll come home nevermore for he died on duty across on the other shore. Tonight as she knelis by her side to the lord she sends a prayer and asks if there's any lilacs that bloom away up there.

Chorus: When the lilacs bloom in Heaven I'll be with you up there far from this land of snow far from this lands of care.

## I'll Be a Yodeling Man

I was borned down south, away out west up where the bad men are. I learned to yodel the way I was borned and strummed on a big guitar [yodel]

Some said I'd be a gangster  
Some said I'd be a man  
Some said I'd be a HoBo and a drip throughout the land  
But when I've grown older + my vulcoal cords they change I hope to God I'll be a yodeler + ride the western Plains [yodel]

Some lads want to be a sailor + sail to the lands that's strong Some want to be coppers but yodeling in my range [yodel]

My mom she plays a fiddle My pops he plays a drum but I guess I'll be a yodeler until my days are done

### I'll Forgive You but Will My Bitter Heart

My heart is broken because I love you  
I could've seen those selfish lies  
I trusted you  
Don't you worry about me  
make now that we are far apart. My tears will fade your memory from my heart  
For now, day I'll sail, a new life I've begun, into ringten have washed your memory  
from everywhere

Tonight I'm sad + blue – you would say and last under when you list I could the teardrops  
stop!  
But I can plainly see I will never be free until I have your memory in my heart.

I'll Never Love Nobody Else but You

I.

All alone here I'm setting broken hearted  
The world for me it ended long ago  
When you went away with another  
My troubles drifted round me just like snow

Chorus

Though you broke your promise  
I'll keep mine so true  
I'll never love nobody else but you

[II.]

If you would come back and say your sorry you know  
I'd forgive you for your wrong  
For I can't live without you  
Ever nigh my hart for you dose long

## Lollie Love

Now she'll never change, she'll stay just the same  
No longer a pure white dove  
And she searches each night for a new love affair  
The girl they call Lollie Love

She once was a bride filled with hopes and with dreams  
And a love for her husband and home  
Then he went astray and then one day  
Left sweet Lollie alone

She'll let you kiss her tender lips  
And with passion hold you so tight  
She'll ask you to stay till morning comes  
And Lollie is yours for tonight

She's the first to admit what she's doing is wrong  
And lord she knows it's a sin  
She was torn apart by a man she still loves  
And she won't chance hurting again

She'll let you kiss her tender lips  
And with passion hold you so tight  
She'll ask you to stay till morning comes  
And Lollie is yours for tonight

RON OWENS

## Love Birds Refrain

You may speak of your Darling  
Whatever her name but  
She's not as sweet as the Love Birds Refrain  
[yodel] But she not as the Love Birds Refrain

There's many a casle  
in London and Spain  
but none can come pare with the  
Love Birds Refrain [yodel do same]

The Love Birds the yodel [yodel]  
There notted for fame  
By twetlin that formuliar refraine [yodel]  
By twetlin that formilier refrain

Signed RJO Sunney Sunset

### My Good Gal Done Turned Me Down

My good gal done turned me down  
To go with a boy who lives in town  
Baby you done flubbed your dub with me  
You drink my liquor and spent my money  
Baby you done flubbed your dub with me

I'll just take my old guitar  
I'll not worry about where you are  
I'll sing a done song to the moon  
And let you dance to your own tune

Came in the other night calm as a lamb  
I thought I heard that back door slam  
Gonna knock on the front door and run around back  
Gonna shoot the first <female?> come down my track

Came in the other night been run round  
Hair all tangled and stringing down  
I've got you gal where the <wool?> is tite

### No Buddy Else Can Take Your Place

I well remember when I first met you it was a bright and sunny day but since those times these things have has changes you all my sunshine has gone away.

You said that you loved me and would always be true. I thought that + was so fine, no buddy else can take your place, but somebody is taking mine.

There are times when I'm looking toward heaven and pray for God to ease my pain. For you to come back and love me but I guess its all rain

Cho. Same.

Ron Owens  
 428 9<sup>th</sup> St.  
 Red Wing, Minn.  
 Minn.

Carl Esterby  
 445 9<sup>th</sup> St.  
 Red Wing,

Sherryl Ann

I recall a little girl  
 And How we'd walk arm in arm  
 By the banks of r a little creek  
 That ran through our family farm

I recall the night I left her  
 How she pleaded with me to stay  
 I said I was born to wonder  
 And had to be on my way

The years passed by so awfully  
 And I came home today  
 I asked about my Sherryl Ann  
 But they said she'd gone away

Then I asked the postman  
 If she'd left an address there  
 Yes Sir son, the address in Heaven  
 And the zip code is prayer

At night when I lay dressing  
 We're walking arm in arm  
 By the banks of a little creek  
 That runs through the family farm

Then when I awaken  
 My Sherryl Ann's not there  
 It's yes sir son, the address is Heaven  
 And the zip code is prayer

## Sidewalks Made of Wood

I'd like to bring back days of you'r  
I only wish I could  
I like to see dad's childhood days  
the sidewalks made of wood

When streets weren't streets and when the rain did fall  
a horse all most got stuck  
Pops says if you'd a had a car  
youed just be outta luck

I'll bet in forty years from now  
time's again will change there prople won't be any roads  
We'll all have aroplanes but that don't worry me a bit  
though I can't figure out how  
But time has changed from year to year and they won't stop just now

But back to what I said be for I only wish I could  
But I guess they were not ment for me those sidewalks made of wood.

There's a Gold Star on Her Banner Tonight

There's a gold star on her banner tonight  
It shines from her window so bright  
It shows her son was true to the old Red White and Blue

There's a heart filled with sorrow tonight  
For her boy who died for our right  
He was loyal and true  
He died for me and you  
There's a gold star on her banner tonight.

May God bless her loyal son tonight  
He gave his life so we may live right  
He was honest and true to the Red White and Blue  
There's a Gold Star on her Banner Tonight

### There They Go Side by Side

There they go side by side  
Every eye open wide  
Sheep and shepherd are far from the fold  
Just a man + his dog a seeing eye dog heaven's blessing are truly untold

A toxic cry out the crowded turned about  
but the dog has control of the seen just a man and his dog, a seeing eye dog,  
surely God must be there in between

## The Train He'll Never Ride

Down by the station a group of people stand  
Talking to that hobo who's known throughout the land  
They stand there talking awaiting for the thrill  
That'll be shown to them by the man called Hobo Bill

[Chorus]Hobo Bill the mighty who says he'll ride them all  
But the train that boy will never ride is the Wabash Cannonball

The folks who turned him down for a bite to eat  
Are glad now Hobo Bill to meet  
But Old Bill he'll remember when they turned him from their door  
And said I'm sorry hobo but we just have no more

[Chorus]

When he heard the whistle calling from him we heard a sigh  
He said I'll try and catch her on the fly  
As she was drawing closer from him these words did fly  
If it's my misfortune to all my friends goodbye

[Chorus]

## Unfaithful One

Unfaithful one, your tears are falling, at last you're payin for your fun. To many honest hearts you're broken- go on and cry unfaithful one.

So now you said you were mistaken  
You thought your game was almost wone  
The tide has turned and left you wepping—go on and unfaithful one

Unfaithful one, your tears are falling  
It ended like it was begun  
It started with a careless promise  
Go on and cry unfaithful one.

Your wepping cause your world has trembled  
Like a broken heart it came undone  
A million tears can't now rebuild it  
Go on and cry unfaithful one

## Wait for Me, Darling

You will wait for me, won't you my darling  
Eventhough I myself wonder why  
All though the war is over  
Uncal Sam says we now must say Good By

Many years have gone by little darling  
Since the first time I went away  
Now I come back to you darling  
But time tells I must now must leave today.

You'll be true to me won't you my darling  
Even though I must leave you now  
Someday I'll come back darling  
But while I'm gone please don't make your vow

You will wait for me won't you my darling  
Even though I myself wonder why  
All though the war is over  
Uncal Sam says we now must say goodbye

### Where We can Trode the Golden Streets

Where we can trode the golden streets and ploy the G.Lord + cross the G. river on the mighty G. Span. Some day we will reunite my brother you and I where (?) master he dose call me to my home up in the sky.

The M. becon oh brother for you to come home to heaven that land above the blue The angels will greet you oh brother of mine you'll love there for \_\_\_\_ is gone (?) that gold land so fine

Someday I will join you Oh brother up there in the land of true blue will find no dispare  
When the Master dose call me to my home way up high  
I'll take my last journey to that land up in the sky.

[seems out of place, but this came next:

If you would come back and say you're sorry you know I'd foregive for your wrong  
Fore I can't live without your every night my heart for you does song]

## Whiskers

I have a dear old daddy  
 For whom I daily pray  
 Who's got long curly whiskers  
 That's always in the way

[Chorus]They're always in the way  
 The cows calfin' ? in the hay  
 They hide the dirt on daddy's shirt  
 They're always in the way

When seated at the table  
 In a family group  
 Those old curly whiskers  
 Are always in his soup ?

My pappy got a fliver?  
 It's quite a \_\_\_\_\_  
 He uses his long old whiskers  
 To strain the \_\_\_\_\_

My pappy went to Africa  
 And met up with some Japs  
 He hide behind his whiskers  
 And folled [sic] the the little saps

Old Mother chews them at her sleep  
 And thinks they're shredded sheat  
 Oh they're always in the way  
 The cows eat \_\_\_for hay  
 They hide the dirt on papa's shirt  
 Oh they're always in the way.

## Appendix B: Request Sheets, Letters, and Miscellany

The following pages are surviving request sheets and letters used in The Goodhue Hour accompanied with miscellaneous artifacts that detail in Owens' career. Make note of the variety of spellings of "Ronnie Owens" in the letters.

### Request Sheets

#### Request Sheet (1949)

##### Careless Hands

- 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday of Danny Hayes of Ellsworth by his mother
- Dorothy Bergman, by her mother
- LaVern Lostitter of Goodhue by Larry Poffenberger, the Star Bread Man, of Rochester
- Mr. and Mrs. Albert Olson, Mr. and Mrs. Alden Hayes, Jim and Geery, Mr. and Mrs Bud Hethington , + Don + Gary Lee

##### Close to My Heart

- Mrs. John Boller, by a friend
- Birthdays of Paul + Erwin Vomhof, by Mr. and Mrs. Waldemar Wolf and Girls
- LaVerne Groth, who's birthday was June 4, by his sister Luan
- Leora, Marvin, and Loren Born, Verna Arvin, + Willis Hadler By Arlene of Ottetail, Minn

##### Sioux City Sue

- Audrey Gunderson of Spring Valley and Maynard Rigelman of Hager who were married June 2. By Audrey's mother, Dad, and sisters.
- Birthdays of Joseph Hayes + Kenneth, by Mrs. Marvin Hayes
- Birthdays of our sister, Margie of Cannon Falls and for our mother, by Theresa and Florence of Hastings
- Mrs. Julian Kurth + Mr. + Mrs. George Kurth of Whitehall, Wisconsin by a friend in Red Wing.

“Chord Sheet” (Request Sheet)

- 1. Good Night Irene
  - For Bud + Clarence
- 2. It's a Sin
- 3. We Live in a diff
- 4. Have I told you lately
- 6. One Kiss to
- 5. Don't live (in/a) Line
- 7. Lilac Time

## Wedding Bells Request Sheet (Goodhue Hour)

For Rosie, Goldie, Audrey, + Fairist, all of River Falls, Darlene + Betty of Spring Valley  
request by Donna Mae

For Mr. + Mrs. Art Born, Mrs. Geo Cederberg, Marvin, Loren, Leora, Wilbert, Mary  
Lou, Lorraine, Delores, and Gary. All requested by Virginia of Red Wing

For Barbara, Cassie, Donna, Rosemarie, and Arlean

And also for Gladys Kruger of Elgin, Minn

Also for Joyce of Baldwin, Wisc. Requested by her mother

Goodhue Hour—Mohey, Ma [October 1, 1949]

For the birthday of Mrs. Clarence Stusz, requested by Darlene Klitzke

For Buddy Whipple on his 7<sup>th</sup> birthday requested by mother, dad, + brothers

For Vail Smith of Mazeppa

For LuVerne Vieths of Red Wing, requested by his sister Marlis of Lake City

For the birthday of Lorraine Wilcox, requested by her

## KAAA Request Sheet

For the B.D.S. of Dorthy, Ila, Joyce, Rena, and Butch. Reqs by Lola

And for mother Mrs. Elizabeth Dahl for her 75<sup>th</sup> B.D. tomorrow. Reqs and happy B.D. from her daughter Mrs. Melvin Johnson and family of Ellsworth

And for all the Theilman kids reqs by Shirly

And a happy B.D. to mother Mrs. Hilda Mueller from Jeanette. Her birthday was on Wedn.

For Sugar of Stillwater and Margie and Millie of Scandia. Reqs by Joann Lohmann of Lake Elmo

Also for Dolores, Dorothy, and Marie and everyone from the north end of Rice St. Req. by Marie of St. Paul.

And for the B.D. of Richard Alix reqs by Betty Alix of Stanley, Wisc.

Also for the B.D.s of Louis and Luella Groth reqs. By Lois Kells

Nice letter from Mr. + Mrs. Chester Koalska. Do a song for all friends and realtion from Alaska just back

And a big hi to Russell Kunde and thanks for the picture

Also for the B.D. of Uncal John also reqs from Annie and family of New Richmann [Richmond]

And Lola and Norma and Dorthy. B.D. was yesterday

And for Doris Gossett who is visiting in New Richmand also for the Wm Wilkens family, all reqs by Norma.

Also for the B.D. of Dorthy Rightman of Hager, reqs by Annie and family

And for Dicky Diercks

Also for Laura (?) Lossetter

And for B.D. S. Dorthy + Ila reqs by mom

And the B.D.S. of Butch and Rane, reqs by grandma.

**Letters**

Woodville, Wis  
July 20, 1950

Ronnie Owen:

Listen to your program over KAAA on Saturdays and enjoy them very much.  
Would like to have you play + sing this new song "Today is Ours" on Saturday July 29<sup>th</sup>  
for Lorraine Johnson of Woodville, Wis.

Sincerely, Mrs. Otis Johnson  
Woodville

Do not mention who sent it in for her, please or read my letter

Dear Mr. Owens,

Would like you to sing a song for Mrs. Peter Skorud who has a birthday on the 12<sup>th</sup>. Also sing one for Mrs. Albert Peters of Lake City has a birthday Sun. 13<sup>th</sup>.

Thank you very much. Listen to your program regularly. These are requested by Ann, Walter, and Antonia Buck

Hager City, Wisc.

Postmarked: August 11, 1950

Dear Ronnie,

Would you please sing the "Anniversary Song" for the 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Willard Cowden of Pine island. Would you play this Saturday October 7.

Requested by a niece of Red Wing. Please do not read name (Vivian Hemmingson)

Postmarked: October 3, 1950

Dear Ronnie,

Please sing a song for our Grandpa + Grandma Powers and Grandpa + Grandma Kells.  
We always listen to your program.

From  
Charles + Patsy  
Dennis + Beverly  
Tommy + Sandy  
Anna

Dear Sir,

Please play a song for Harold Frye of Elmwood and Chuckie Madson of Spring Valley.

Elaine + Arlene

Dear Ronnie:

Would you please play and sing "Hi Joe" on your next Sat. morning show for Judy Fredrickson who was 10 years old on Thursday Nov. 12<sup>th</sup>.

Thank you very much.

Requested by parents Mr. + Mrs. Roy Fredrickson from Red Wing.

Dear Ronnie,

Will you please sing “Sick Sober and Sorry” or “Pine Tree Pine Over Me” on your Saturday morning show. I want this song to be played for Jerry, Tom, Earl, Harry, and Waleigh.

Requested by Alice

Dear Ronnie,

Would you please play "Convict and a Rose" for Donald Ellingson, Leo Dessen, yourself, and Genevieve Hovde requested by a steady listener.

Thanks,

Marian Jablanski

Postmarked: July 17, 1950

Wabasha, Minn.

June 5, 1950

Dear Ronnie:

Heard you sing 30 pieces of silver, 30 shackles of shame, was the price paid for Jesus. On the Cross he was slain. And oh I would like a copy of that song so bad, would you consider sending me a copy, just hand written or anyway is o.k. Please.

Sincerely,

Roy Swagger  
R. 1  
Wabasha, Minn

Wabasha, Minn  
June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1950

Dear Mr. Owen,

Please request + play this for Mr. and Mrs. Robert Ward of Goodhue Minn, who were married 1 year on June 1<sup>st</sup>. Please play + sing Wedding Bells. Requested by aunt Mrs. Veronica Schqirtz and song Alva of Wabasha Minn.

Thank you

Postmarked: June 12, 1950

Addressed to: To the Goodhue Hour  
c/o Mr. Rodney Owens Saturday Program  
Radio Station K.A.A.A.  
Red Wing, Minnesota

Lois Kells  
R 1 Box 113  
Red Wing  
Minnesota

Red Wing

Dear Ronny

Would you play a tune for Louis and Luella Groth who both have a birthday this month. They are from Goodhue. Play a peppy song.

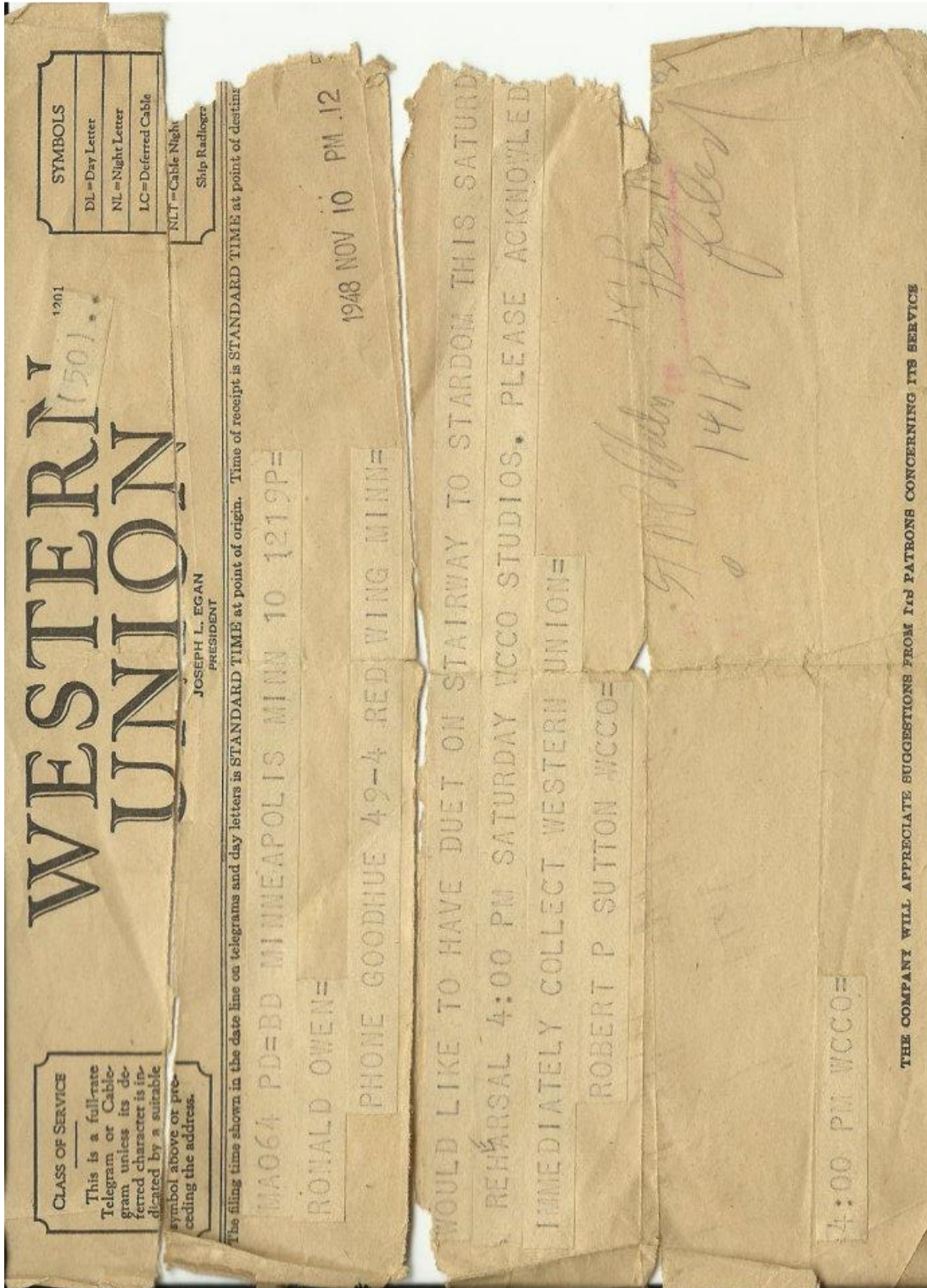
Thank You

Requested by Lois Kells

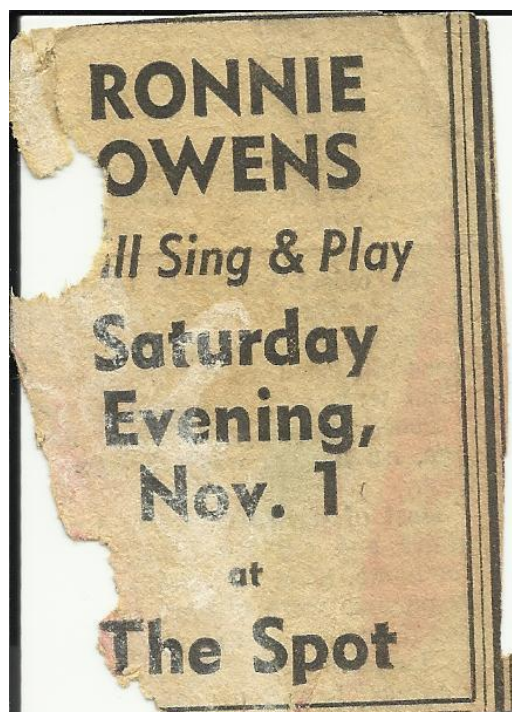
Postmarked: August 10, 1950

Addressed to: Ronny Ohans  
KAAA  
Red Wing  
Minnesota

Miscellaneous



Telegram from WCCO's Robert "Bob" P. Sutton to inform Owens of passing the audition for "Stairway to Stardom."



Uncited newspaper clippings from Owens' collection detailing Owens' special appearances in Red Wing.

# Happy Valley JAMBOREE

and MEL'S OLD TIMERS

All Appearing in Person  
for a Big Show & Dance

**LEO DRESSEN**  
Singing Captain of the Happy Valley

**RED MOLDENHAUER**  
The Belvidere Flamingo King

**RONNIE OWENS**  
The Stormy Troubadour of EAAA

**MEL HIMSELF**  
and the Dancesable

**LISTEN TO KAAA, RED WING  
TO THE FOLLOWING PROGRAMS**

Have Little Genevieve Hovde every 4th Monday thru Friday from 11:45 to 1 p.m.

Have Leo Dressen on "Happy Jam" every Wednesday thru Friday from 11:45 to 12:15.

Have Mel's Old Timers every Sunday from 11:45 to 12:15. Music on the Grandstand Stage.

Have Mel's Old Timers, Red, Mel and Leo every Saturday Evening from 8:00 to 9:30. Sponsored by Red White Independent Companies.

**LITTLE GENEVIEVE HOVDE**  
Soprano of "Happy Jam" and "Lamentation"

**WHITE ROCK BASEBALL TEAM BENEFIT DANCE**

**WHITE ROCK HALL** WHITE ROCK MINNESOTA

Floor Show Starts at 8:30 **Sat. Nite, July 8th** Old Time Dance Music

A poster advertising local musicians, including Owens, Dressen, and Hovde, at a local dance.



## Farmers, Poultry

WE EXTEND A SPECIAL

# 7th Annual Fair

## FRIDAY - SATURDAY

Open House Friday and Saturday

### Free Lunch

SERVED FRIDAY & SATURDAY  
STARTING 9:00 A. M.

FREE PRIZES

1. 100 Master Mating Pullets  
(Your Choice)
2. 75 Master Mating Pullets  
(Your Choice)
3. 50 Master Mating Pullets  
(Your Choice)

4. 200 lbs. Purina Click Startena

5. 1 Gallon Gland-O-Lac Funjol

One Hundred \$5.00 Certificates

Will be given and may be used only as credit on your 1954 Click Order at Kramer's Hatchery if your minimum order is for 200 Pullets or 400 Straight Run Chicks.  
(Only 1 Certificate to Each Family)

## RULES OF

Register Immediately After Entering Hatchery.  
(Only Persons 16 or Over Allowed to Register)

Only Farmers and Poultry Raisers Are Eligible to Win the Above Prizes.  
Registrations Close at 3:00 P. M. on Saturday, Feb. 6th.

Plan Now to Attend Our Big Party. It Will Be Interesting and Educational to

# KRAMER'S

Shelly and Frank Kramer,  
Proprietors

## Raisers and Friends

A SPECIAL INVITATION TO ATTEND OUR

# Farm Days Celebration

## FRIDAY, FEB. 5th & 6th

Children Will Not Be Admitted Unless Accompanied by Their Parents



## Program of Events

FRIDAY and SATURDAY

The following programs will be broadcast direct from Kramer's Hatchery over Red Wing's own Radio Station KAAA

**FRIDAY, FEB. 5**

9:45 to 10:00 A. M. Goodhue County's Singing Cowboy Ronnie Owens

12:15 to 12:30 P. M. News and Market Reports

12:30 to 12:45 P. M. Goodhue County's Singing Cowboy Ronnie Owens

BONNIE OWENS WILL ENTERTAIN YOU BETWEEN BROADCASTS

**SATURDAY, FEB. 6**

11:00 to 11:30 A. M. Goodhue County's Singing Cowboy Ronnie Owens

12:30 to 1:00 P. M. County Agents' Program  
Goodhue, Wabasha and Pierce Counties

BONNIE OWENS WILL ENTERTAIN YOU BETWEEN BROADCASTS

## CONTEST

Prizes Will Be Awarded at 3:30 P. M. Saturday, February 6th. Anyone Who Has Registered Need Not Be Present to Win a Prize. If a Prize is Won, Contestant Will Be Notified. In Case Any Contest Winners Tie, Drawings Will Be Made to Determine Winner of Prize. Loser Will Then Take Next Prize on List. Decision of the Judges Will Be Final.

See One of the Most Modern and Finest Equipped Hatcheries in the Country.

# HATCHERY

116-120 Plum St.  
Red Wing, Minn.

Two-page advertisement for Kramer's Hatchery Days at which Owens performed. [1950]

**ER'S HATCHERY**  
**Farm Days**  
 y, Feb. 1st-2nd

*Chickens*

**BABY CHICKS**

ation To Attend Our 5th Annual Farm Days Ce...  
**AY AND SATURDAY**  
 Unless Accompanied by Their Parents

**Program of Events**

The following programs will be broadcast direct from Kramer's Hatchery over Red Wing's own Radio Station KAAA

**FRIDAY and SATURDAY**

**Friday, Feb. 1**  
 9:15 to 9:30 A. M.  
 Goodhue County's Singing Cowboy  
**RONNIE OWENS**  
 12:15 to 12:30 P. M.  
 News and Market Reports  
 1:30 to 1:45 P. M.  
 Goodhue County's Singing Cowboy  
**RONNIE OWENS**  
 Ronnie Owens Will Entertain You Between Broadcasts

**Saturday, Feb. 2**  
 12:15 to 12:30 P. M.  
 News and Market Reports  
 12:30 to 12:45 P. M.  
 County Agents' Program  
 Pierce, Goodhue and Wabasha Counties  
 Ronnie Owens Will Entertain You Between Broadcasts

**AMATEUR CONTEST 1:30 to 3:00 p. m. Saturday, Feb. 2**  
 You'll Enjoy Being Entertained by Your Own Friends and Neighbors

**CONTEST**

Prizes Will Be Awarded at 3:00 P. M. Saturday, February 2nd  
 Anyone Who Has Registered Need Not Be Present to Win a Prize.  
 If a Prize Is Won, Contestant Will Be Notified.  
 In Case Any Contesters Winners Tie, Drawings Will Be Made to Determine Winner of Prize. Loser Will Then Take Home a Prize on List.  
 Decision of the Jury Final.

See One of Most  
 Equipped Hatcheries in the Country.

**HANG CO OF RED WING, INCORPORATED**  
 116-120 Plum St  
 Red Wing, Minn.

**COME TO KRAMER'S**  
**5th Annual**  
**Friday-Saturday**

Farmers, Poultry Raisers and Friends... We Extend a Special Invitation  
**OPEN HOUSE FRIDAY AND SATURDAY**  
 Sorry, Children Will Not Be Admitted

**Free Lunch**  
**FREE PRIZES**

**SERVED FRIDAY & SATURDAY**  
**STARTING 9:00 A. M.**

1. 100 Master Mating Pullets (Your Choice)
2. 75 Master Mating Pullets (Your Choice)
3. 50 Master Mating Pullets (Your Choice)
4. 200 lbs. Purina Chick Startena
5. 200 lbs. Doughboy Starter Jets
6. 1 Bu. Kingscross Hybrid Seed Corn
7. 1 Gallon Funjol

**SIXTY \$5.00 CERTIFICATES**  
 \$5.00 in cash and may be used only on credit on your 1952 Chick Order at Kramer's Hatchery if your minimum order is for 200 pullets or 400 straight blue chicks.  
 (Only 1 Certificate to Each Family)

**RULES OF**

**Register Immediately After Entering Hatchery**  
 (Only Persons 18 or Over Allowed to Register)

**Only Farmers and Poultry Raisers Are Eligible to Win the Above Prizes.**

**All Registrations Must Be in by 2:30 P. M. on Saturday, Feb. 2nd.**

Plan Now to Attend Our Big Party. It Will Be Interesting and Educational

**Shelly and Frank Kramer,**  
**Proprietors**

**KRAMER'S**

Two-page advertisement for Kramer's Hatchery Days at which Owens performed. [1952]