

WARD ALLEN

1922—1965

Official Biography of Ward Allen by Ann Allen, 2012

Warden Amber Allen was born May 11, 1922 on his paternal grandparents' farm in Blanchard Township near the village of Woodham, Ontario. He was the youngest of five sons born to Jeanette Fairley Gardiner (1885-1972) and George Case Allen (1879-1960).

Music was in his blood. On both sides of the family, uncles and grandfathers were noted for their ability in fiddle-playing and step-dancing. His four older brothers all played fiddle and/or piano. When unobserved, Ward would lovingly tune and play the forbidden instruments.

His family had moved to the town of St. Marys sometime after his grandfather died in 1925. During the summer of 1933, he was seriously injured by a car that backed over him and crushed his skull. This accident was to severely scar him for the rest of his life. It has been said that during his convalescence he excelled at playing the fiddle. Once he recovered, his older brother Lorne started him out as a partner on barn dance dates playing twin fiddle and sometimes doubling on the piano.

In his teens, Ward won many local fiddle contests but it was not until after a sojourn out West (harvesting in Manitoba and logging for several years at Port Alberni, BC) that Ward Allen became a name of national significance.

By the late 1940s, Ward was back in Ontario and became associated with radio station CKNX Wingham. At the time, CKNX was home to the Traveling Barn Dance, a live country music showcase that was broadcast from a different location in the surrounding area every Saturday. Many artists who later went on to fame started their careers there, including Tommy Hunter and Gordie Tapp.

During the next few years, Ward went on to win the following contests:

1949 & 1950 – First prize at CNE Toronto

1952 & 1953 – First prize Western Ontario Championship

1953 – Won the Canadian Open Championship at Shelburne, Ontario

A gold recording of Ward's fiddle-playing was sent to Queen Elizabeth II as a coronation gift by the Chamber of Commerce of Hensall, Ontario. The recording was made immediately after the announcement that Ward had won the Western Ontario Championship in 1953. Ward was given the gold shavings from the record as a keepsake.

Ward met Ken Reynolds in 1953 while playing at the Monterey Club in Montreal. This meeting was the catalyst that changed Ward's career path. It was there that Ken, manager of the Wilf Carter tours, signed Ward as the feature fiddler for the 1954 and 1955 tours.

Following the success of the Wilf Carter tours, Ken was asked by Frank Ryan, owner of the CFRA radio station, to form a county music group to perform on radio and at various local dances throughout the Ottawa Valley. Ward was part of this group, which became known as The Happy Wanderers. These musicians were stars of regional radio and dances for a decade leading up to Ward's death in 1965. They aired a mid-day radio broadcast from Monday to Friday and then travelled throughout the Valley playing for dances. They quickly won the hearts of the people of the Valley. The Happy Wanderers also toured Canada with the Wilf Carter Show during the summers of 1956 and 1958.

During 1955-1961, Ken Reynolds arranged and contracted for many CFRA Old Time Shows in either the auditorium or the old coliseum building at Lansdowne Park in Ottawa. The Happy Wanderers were the opening act for all the CFRA Old Time Shows. The shows included many star attractions, including Hank Snow, Johnny Cash, Marty Robbins, Ray Price, Kitty Wells, and Ernest Tubb. Ward was very privileged to be part of a venue that included these outstanding country music stars.

On a December evening in 1955, while the group was performing in Smith Falls, Ward met Ann MacLean. By spring, the two were engaged and were married August 25, 1956. In 1957 son Wade was born, followed by another son Randy in 1959.

In the late 1940's, Ward's first 78 RPMs were on a small record label called Alvina. In 1954, after winning the Canadian Open Championship, he signed with Sparton Records in London, Ontario. They released several singles, one of which was "Maple Sugar" in 1956. Although it was actually the "B" side of the record, it quickly eclipsed the "A" side to become a radio hit in Canada and the United States. Based on the popularity of this tune, Sparton Records went on to release three albums—Maple Leaf Hoedown, Volume 1, Volume 2, and Volume 3—and a number of singles. BMI Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI) Canada also released two music books of Ward's compositions.

Ward performed on a number of television programs during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Among them were King Ghanem's Country Hoedown and Cliff McKay's Holiday Ranch Show, both out of Toronto. He also appeared on several Don Messer Shows and was a regular on the Shorgas Barn Dance at CJOH-TV in Ottawa during 1961 and 1962.

Ward's career suddenly came to an end on August 3, 1965 when at the age of 43 he died of a heart attack at his home in Hull, Quebec. Over a two-day period people lined up for city blocks outside an Ottawa funeral home to pay their respects. His body was then transported by train to Exeter, Ontario, where, for another

two days, the line-ups were as long and the tributes as heartfelt. After the funeral, Ward was buried in Roy's Cemetery near the place where he was born.

The honours did not stop with his death. In 1965, within a week of his burial, Ward was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee. One of his fiddles is on display in their museum. BMI Canada awarded him a "Certificate of Honour" for "Maple Sugar" in 1968 and the Ottawa Country Music Hall of Fame chose him as its 1982 inductee. More recently the Canadian Country Music Hall of Fame inducted him as an artist in 1993; the New York based North America Hall of Fame and Museum Institute honoured him as the Canadian inductee for the year 1994; and in 1997 he was awarded the "Pioneer Award" by CKNX Wingham in Ontario.

There have been several memorial nights honouring Ward and his fiddle music. The first was organized in Ottawa in November 1965 by local artists, with Tommy Hunter as feature artist. The show raised funds which paid for his funeral and a headstone engraved with a fiddle to mark his resting place.

In 2005, the Heritage Old Time Country Music Association hosted a memorial in Renfrew, Ontario. Close to 1,000 people attended the historical evening to pay homage to one of Canada's most loved fiddlers.

Most recently, Ward was honoured at the 2010 Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony in Vancouver when they played his composition "Maple Sugar."

It is probably safe to say that every present day Canadian fiddler who knows how to rub rosin on a bow includes "Maple Sugar" in his or her repertoire. After fifty-plus years, "Maple Sugar" remains the most popular Canadian fiddle tune ever recorded and played.

Ward Allen's skill with the fiddle and the melodies he created will mark his time with us for as long as there is a love of Canadian fiddle music.