

The Day The Singing Cowboy Rode Into Town

It's not often a famous entertainer makes a stop in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. But on occasion it does happen. When it does, it's a big deal.

On January 18, 1950, Gene Autry came to town and put on a live show at the Oshkosh Theater in downtown Main Street.

Known as "The Singing Cowboy", Gene Autry was one of Hollywood's biggest stars. His career spanned 70 years and he was famous in motion pictures, radio, television and as a recording artist. During his career, he wrote and sang hundreds of songs, starred in 93 movies and 91 television productions. In his later years, Autry owned a television and radio station on the west coast and even owned a major league baseball team, the Los Angeles Angels.¹ Some of his Christmas songs still get play and are popular today.

On that Wednesday, the city was "electric". The local Sears store on Merritt Street invited kids to come and see Autry's equally famous horse named "Champion" from 2:30-3:30pm. Free autographed photos of the famous cowboy were given to the first 1,000 kids in attendance.²

Two live performances were also scheduled that day at the Oshkosh Theater featuring a 4pm matinee and an evening performance at 8:30pm. The live shows were billed as "Gene Autry and his Melody Ranch Hands with Champion, the Wonder Horse". Also featured in the performance was Rufe Davis, Pat Buttram, the Cass County Boys, The Pinafores, Frankie Marvin and Little Champ. All seats were reserved with matinee seating priced at \$1.80, \$1.20 and 90¢, the evening show a bit more. The show included several songs made popular by Autry's movies and recordings, along with tricks performed by Champion and Little Champ. Rubber-faced comedian Rufe Davis "almost stopped the show" with his imitations.²

A touching scene took place between shows when Autry was made aware of a big fan of his that was too ill to attend. The *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern* reported the visit:

Perhaps the most excited little girl in Winnebago county Wednesday night was Edna Schinke, 6, a patient at Sunnyview sanitorium. Edna, unable to walk or even to sit up, was visited by her favorite movie star, Gene Autry, singing cowboy, who appeared with his western troupe yesterday afternoon and evening at the Oshkosh Theater.

The youngster had been expecting a visit from the personable actor during the afternoon. Autry, however, was unaware the appointment had been made. Edna was deeply disappointed although she made every effort not to show it.

Informed late in the afternoon of the slipup, the cowboy star said he wouldn't leave Oshkosh without seeing the youthful patient.

Immediately after his matinee performance, Autry was whisked by auto to Sunnyview where the belated meeting took place.

The movie star talked with the overjoyed little girl and presented her with a silver dollar which he told her "is the kind we use out west."

Edna sang a little song for her ideal, after which Autry reciprocated with a selection from his show. His audience included a number of adult patients of the sanitorium and members of the staff. Autry had to cut his appearance short to return to the city for his evening performance at the theater, but he left behind him a very happy little girl. □

Later that evening, Gene Autry had dinner with some friends at the Hotel Raulf. Joining him were Mrs. G.C. Mamer of 408 Grant Street, Oshkosh, and her sister from Savannah Georgia, Mrs. A.E. Satherley. Mrs. Satherley's husband was the Vice President of the Columbia Recording Company and a personal friend and business associate of Mr. Autry.

Sources: ¹ www.autry.com; ² *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, January 17, 1950, Sears Ad; ³*Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, January 17, 1950, Oshkosh Theater Ad; □ *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, January 19, 1950, pg2;