

Wilf Carter

The Voice of Alberta



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Alberta's greatest storyteller was not a best-selling author or an award-winning journalist. He didn't write about famous people or imaginary places. He was a songwriter, and his name was Wilf Carter. His humble upbringing and adventurous spirit led him to Alberta, where he sang about the natural beauty and the joys of life in the west, becoming one of this province's most treasured icons.

Born in 1904, Wilf Carter grew up in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia. He spent many summers with relatives in Clementsport, where my great-grandmother also lived. His family was quite poor, and he started working on nearby farms at an early age. When he was twelve years old, Wilf attended a show by a travelling Swiss musician, and he began singing using the performer's traditional yodeling style. After an argument with his father, Wilf left home at the age of fifteen, eventually making his way to Calgary. He travelled by boxcar, finding work as a lumberjack, a field hand and a rodeo performer. His talent for singing led to a job with the Brewster Transport Company, where he served as an entertainer and trail guide for tourists visiting Alberta's Rocky Mountains.

Wilf auditioned for a Calgary radio station and was told to "stick to milking cows", but after performing at the Stampede he was offered his own radio show. In 1933, while travelling east to take a job as an onboard entertainer for a new ocean liner, he stopped in Montreal to make a recording for RCA Victor. He sang two songs: "My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby" (using an upturned bathtub to create an echo effect) and "The Capture of Albert Johnson". The record took off, and "My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby" became the first major Canadian country hit. Wilf had turned into an overnight sensation.

Wilf Carter became popular in the middle of the Great Depression. This was a period of severe hardship in North America, and people needed someone to cheer them up and give them hope. He knew what it was like to be poor and to dream of a better life, and he expressed this through his lyrics. Wilf's simple and heart-felt songs like "A Little Log Shack I Can Always Call My Home" and "My Little Gray Haired Mother in the West" helped countless Albertans and others to get through that difficult time. Some of Wilf's other songs like "Old Alberta Plains" and "My Old Canadian Home" focused on the natural wonders of Alberta and how important they were to him. This helped bring an increased awareness of the beauty of our land and how it should be cherished and protected. His influence can likely be seen in the many provincial parks created throughout Alberta since the 1930's.

By the 1950's Wilf Carter had achieved fame and fortune as a pioneer of Canadian country music, and had become one of this country's legendary entertainers. My grandmother, who during this time worked at a radio station, met Wilf and spoke with him about growing up in Nova Scotia and his summer visits to her mother's community. She was struck by how his songs had touched the lives of so many, and that despite his success he remained a kind and caring man. Because of his accomplishments and the legacy he left behind, Wilf Carter is a true Alberta champion.

Like Wilf Carter did with his music, I want to make others happy and help them in difficult times. Through volunteering in my community at a seniors' residence and at the animal shelter, I can improve the lives of both people and the pets they may no longer be able to care for. Wilf pursued his dreams even when he was told to stick to milking cows. By having the courage to follow my own passions, I also hope to make a positive difference in the world around me.

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Image

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