

Stone, Fred

Rosin up his bow

STORY BY BENZIE SANGMA

PHOTO SUBMITTED

Fred Stone uses an egg to play his fiddle.



What do a Belleville man, Garth Brooks, Shania Twain, Anne Murray and Crystal Gayle have in common?

An appearance in The Tommy Hunter Show, a CBC radio program which became a television series in 1965.

The show was one of North America's longest-running variety shows, which mixed various musical sequences with dance and other country entertainment.

It was noted for nurturing Canadian country music, which it showcased alongside big-name American country stars. The show was cancelled in 1992.

Fred Stone, 86, of Belleville appeared in the show twice in 1979 and 1980.

Stone was, in his heyday, Belleville's only old-time fiddling virtuoso to gain amateur stage and radio fame in Canada. Loudly acclaimed wherever he performed, he traversed many parts of Canada and parts of the United States with his fiddle to join in competitions and concert shows. He performed both as a solo and with a group.

A longtime employee of the Corby Distillery in Corbyville, he auditioned for a CBS program - The Ted Mack Amateur Hour and got his first television appearance in 1968. He then appeared three times on King Ganam's Country Hoedown, a weekly country music program produced and aired on CBC. The show, which ran from 1956 to 1965 when it was succeeded by the The Tommy Hunter Show, was an on-stage revue with a house band and featured various musical

guests both from Canada and the United States. He was also featured twice on The Ken Soble Amateur Show in Toronto. He won fiddling contests in Brantford, Galt and Kitchener and zigzagged across the country from Newfoundland, Halifax, Toronto, Windsor, North Bay, and Sudbury to the West Coast doing his shows.

In Belleville, Stone appeared on a CJBQ radio program with the late Walter Taylor and two others for five years. They were known as the Rhythm Ranch Boys.

Stone's success and fame as a fiddler came from a

willingness to do more than his counterparts in entertaining his audience.

"I wasn't a great violinist," he said humbly. "I needed to do something different, give something different to the audience."

He quickly became popular as the trick violinist, who played the instrument with boxing gloves, toothpicks, ladies' shoes and eggs. His unique abilities attracted the attention of producers of television programs such as The Ted Mack's Amateur Hour, best of early live television where amateur performers showcase their talents,

Mr. Dress-Up, an interactive program with Ernie Coombs who, in the course of the short half hour, creates a small craft and "dresses up"; and The Bob McLean Show, a lunchtime magazine style show tackling all manner of subjects.

Host Bob McLean had several regular guests in the form of comics Roger Abbott, Don Ferguson, Sears and Switzer, Howie Mandel and Monica Parker.

Stone was not just a fiddler. He was an impersonator who imitated sounds made by chickens, cows, a crying baby, and a siren and integrated that with the music he played on his violin. He swept up prizes including a gold wristwatch and a diamond ring, with his performances in competitions.

Born in Frankford, his family moved to Belleville

when he was seven. He often watched his next-door neighbour play his violin and, as they say, that was that.

"I thought I would like to play that instrument. I wanted to learn how to play it. Then a man came to Belleville from Niagara Falls to teach violin. It was 75 cents a lesson. He was my first violin teacher," he said. He clung to his love for fiddling and one day in 1928, he graduated from the Canadian College of Music.

"I wanted to play violin, to learn to play it right and not just by ear. You don't play the good music that way," he said.

Stone is not particular about his music. From classics to pop music, he said he mixed it all up.

"I like to play everything. Pop music's my favourite. There's something about it that excites me."

He played in wartime shows in Halifax when he was serving in the Royal Navy in the early '40s. During these shows he appeared with Gordie Tapp of television fame who was then Master of Ceremony for service shows.

1970 saw him perform in public for the last time.

He is proud of the fact that he has remained a fiddler at heart but there was a time when he decided he wanted to be a boxer. He went up against Roger Wynoote in 1954 at the Halifax arena and was knocked out cold only to wake up in a hospital. Laughing heartily, he remembered Wynoote's remark to him after the boxing match.

"Wynoote said to me 'You go back and stick with the fiddle, Fred. Never mind the boxing'. I did what he said and stuck with the violin. He was tough."

He did just that.

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