

When Gene Autry Rode Into Town

It was a road that brought the first settlers to South Milwaukee in 1835. Since then, millions of people have travelled that road to *or* through South Milwaukee - each with their own purpose. Roads are a great equalizer. They really don't care if you're young or old, rich or poor, famous or anonymous. Moreover, roads have that distinct ability to connect people with places and events.

One such connection was made at 12:15 a.m. on Friday, June 16 1933 when South Milwaukee Police Officer Nick Conrad pulled over a snazzy late-model Buick with out-of-state license plates near the intersection of South Chicago and Marquette Avenues. Conrad had spotted the vehicle travelling fifty miles per hour down 10th Avenue. Little did he realize that he was about to come face-to-face with one of the most up and coming singers in the country - Gene Autry. The handsome, twenty-five year old Autry had earned national fame as "Oklahoma's Yodeling Cowboy" on Chicago's 50,000-watt WLS radio station. He was broadcast live on a morning show five days a week, as well as Saturday evenings on the highly popular *WLS Barn Dance* program.



Gene Autry in 1934

It is not exactly clear what brought Gene Autry to South Milwaukee in the first place. In those early days of live radio, artists were usually allowed by their sponsors to travel on their off time to perform at other venues as a means of supplementing their income - as long as they were back in the studio by broadcast time. As such, it was likely that Autry was hurrying back to Chicago after an appearance elsewhere in Wisconsin. Perhaps... but he was still in too *much* of a hurry - as Officer Conrad dutifully noted, writing out a ticket. Eager to settle the matter and get home, Autry was soon brought before Police Justice George Anderson by Officer Frank "Pinky" Chybowski. Waiving his procedural regularities he pled guilty to speeding, paying the \$10.00 fine plus \$5.83 in court costs. With that,

"The Singing Cowboy" left town, presumably making his eight-o' clock Friday morning broadcast. It is uncertain whether Gene Autry ever ventured through South Milwaukee again - but if he did, he probably kept a closer eye on his speedometer.



This 1934 photograph shows the approximate location of Officer Conrad's brush with fame.

Gene Autry left WLS in July 1934 and moved to Hollywood, California where he began a successful career in the film industry - making ninety-three motion pictures in all. He would also record 640 songs, selling over 100 million records - including his 1939 signature tune "Back in the Saddle Again." Currently, Mr. Autry is the only performer to have five stars on Hollywood's renowned "Walk of Fame" - one each for Radio, Recording, Television, Live Performance, and Motion Pictures. Not only an entertainment icon, Mr. Autry also possessed tremendous business acumen, amassing a fortune estimated in 1990 at \$300 million. In 1961 he became the owner of Major League Baseball's new expansion team, the Los Angeles Angels and would own the team for the next thirty-six years. Mr. Autry was also a generous philanthropist, donating large sums of money to various charities until his death in 1998.

Anyone wishing to study a genuine American success story would be well served by reading more about the life and times of Mr. Gene Autry. And as brief and mundane as the encounter was, the road that brought him to South Milwaukee and under the watchful eye of a local cop would forever cement a connection between our fair city and one of the most popular and successful entertainers in American history.

-Nels J. Monson