

*"I keep coming back because I love Iowa. I owe Iowa. I love Iowa people. I have memories of Iowa that will never be erased."*

*—Meredith Willson*



For Release: January 31

Meredith Willson, composer, conductor, radio and television star, and author, who has now added to his long list of achievements a novel entitled "Who Did What to Fedalia?" Scheduled for publication by Doubleday on February 7, the novel tells the story of a young Iowa girl who came to the Big City to make a career as a singer and what she learned about the differences between Fort Madison, Iowa and New York, New York. Like his heroine, Meredith Willson is a native-born Iowan. He is currently heard on Tallulah Bankhead's "Big Show" and "The Meredith Willson Music Room," and seen on the TV panel, "The Name's the Same." He is the author of one previous book, "And There I Stood With My Piccolo," which was an account of some of the more humorous aspects of his life.

Credit: NBC Photo



# Meredith Willson

## Iowa's "Music Man" & "Ambassador to All the World"

by John E. Miller

What American is not familiar with Meredith Willson, author of the 1957 smash hit Broadway musical, *The Music Man*? In it, actor Robert Preston, in the role of the rascally but charming Professor Harold Hill, delighted audiences as a fiendishly clever con artist whose ability to sell band instruments and uniforms to gullible parents had as its only purpose the lining of his own pockets.

Most people understand that the fictional River City, where the play was set in the year 1912, was inspired by the author's own hometown of Mason City, Iowa, where he would have been ten years old at the time. But few people probably realize that even before writing this nostalgic nosegay to his hometown, Willson had been for many years not only the town's biggest booster

but also the promotion king of the entire state. Iowa probably never had a more vocal or effective spokesperson than this piccolo player from Mason City. Everywhere he traveled, Meredith Willson carried memories of his hometown along with him.

That he became Iowa's most enthusiastic cheerleader might seem a bit ironic, considering his rapid getaway after graduating from Mason City High School in 1919. The six-foot, well-scrubbed musical prodigy (he played the piano, banjo, mandolin, and ukulele as well as the flute and piccolo, sang in the school's choir and glee club, and even did a bit of conducting during summer recesses) headed straight for New York, where he enrolled in the Damrosch Institute of Musical Art (later renamed the Julliard School of Music). He also married



Right: Meredith Willson (center) and his brother, Cedric, practice piano under the watchful eye of their mother, Rosalie Willson.

Below: Willson poses with his piccolo (fourth from right, front row) with Mason City's Boy Scout band, about 1916.



BOTH PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MASON CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY





his high school sweetheart, Elizabeth "Peggy" Wilson (with one L).

Willson's meteoric rise in the musical world included three years as principal flutist in John Philip Sousa's touring band and five more years playing in the New York Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of the famed Arturo Toscanini and others. By 1928, he was guest conducting the Seattle Symphony, and during the 1930s, while sometimes wielding the baton for the Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles symphony orchestras, he took over as musical director of NBC Radio's western division.

During the thirties and forties, his radio programs involved him with performers from Frank Morgan and Fanny Brice to George Burns and Gracie Allen. Meanwhile, he completed two symphonies of his own, premiered by the San Francisco Symphony orchestra in 1936 and 1940. In Hollywood, he teamed up with Charlie Chaplin to do the score for *The Great Dictator* and composed the music for the movie version of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. During World War II, the U.S. Army assigned him to the Armed Forces Radio Service.

It all added up to quite an impressive résumé for the small-town Iowan who had left home at his first opportunity. All the while, however, Willson couldn't get Mason City out of his mind. He returned home frequently to visit family and renew friendships with old acquaintances. Memories of his boyhood continually flooded his consciousness, and radio programs in which he failed to mention his old hometown were few.

In his 1948 autobiography, *And There I Stood With My Piccolo*, Willson referred to himself as "a small-town kid." Always genial, considerate, and unpretentious, he had a way of easily sliding conversations around to the subject of his boyhood in Mason City. Attitudes, values, and lessons that he had learned there—at home, on the streets, in school, at Sunday school, and in the band—stuck with him the rest of his life, and he wanted other people to know about them.



SHSI (DES MOINES)

During World War II, Willson provided music for the Armed Forces Radio Service, based in Hollywood. He signed this portrait: "Iowa—it's a Beautiful name!"

Many of the positive memories of his boyhood found their way into a song he wrote about his native state in 1944. "Iowa" was sung on the radio and recorded on disk by Bing Crosby, and two years later the state of Iowa adopted it as its centennial song:

I-o-wa, it's a beautiful name  
When you say it like we say it back home.  
It's the robin in the willows,  
It's the postmaster's friendly hello.  
I-o-wa, it's a beautiful name  
You'll remember it wherever you roam;  
It's the sumac in September,  
It's the squeak of your shoes in the snow.



SHS (DES MOINES)



Sheet music of Willson's "Iowa" is autographed by Willson and singer Bing Crosby, who addressed it: "To a grand state."

It's the Sunday School and the old river bend;  
 Songs on the porch after dark;  
 It's the corner store and a penny to spend,  
 You and your girl in the park.  
 It's the picnic ground and the whippoorwill's call,  
 Acorns and the dew on the lawn;  
 It's the County fair and the Oddfellows Hall,  
 Meeting the circus at dawn.  
 I-o-wa, it's a beautiful name  
 When you say it like we say it back home,  
 It's a promise for tomorrow  
 And a mem'ry of long, long ago.  
 I-o-wa, what a beautiful name  
 When you say it like we say it back home.

"Iowa" was the first of many musical presents Willson wrote over the years to his old home state. In 1948 he was back in Mason City for the North Iowa Band Festival with his new wife, Rini. (Divorced, he had just married the former Ralina Zarova, a French-Russian opera singer.) Impulse prompted him to write a new piece, "The Iowa Indian Song." Its lyrics, he informed an enthusiastic hometown audience, were inspired by his boasting about his native state to the new Mrs. Willson, who was visiting there for the first time. The words this time were less lyrical, but more playful, than those of his previous effort:

Knee high by the Fourth of July in Iowa!  
 Aye I Ky-yi-choo-oh, Iowa, Iowa!  
 Belt high by the fi'th of July in Iowa!  
 Aye I Ki-yi-choo-oh Iowa, Iowa!  
 Just throw the golden seed down  
 Right down on Iowa ground  
 Before it ever gets there  
 That seed will grow in midair  
 Sky high by the sixth of July in Iowa!  
 Aye I Ky-yi-choo-oh, Iowa, Iowa!  
 Back there where I was born in Iowa.  
 That's what we call tall corn in Iowa  
 Aye I Ky-yi-choo-oh, Iowa, Iowa.  
 Aye I Ky-yi-choo-oh, Iowa, Iowa

Sentiments and songs such as these earned Willson his reputation as "Iowa's Super Salesman," and a "one-man Mason City Chamber of Commerce." Calling Willson "Mr. Iowa Ambassador to all the world," Iowa journalist Don Ross wrote in 1953 that "not only over the airways, but in hundreds of personal appearances, this Iowan has boosted his native soil." Ross continued: "In the days before World War II, I well recall how the British sent salesmen all over the world to sell the idea that British-made goods are tops. . . . Iowans have long had a similar salesman in Meredith Willson. He delights in telling the world about Iowa farms, Iowa factories, Iowa leaders, Iowa businessmen and all other things Iowan."

"Meredith Willson and Iowa are synonymous," Ross summed up. "He's made us known for something in addition to our tall corn, blustery winters and humid summers. Even if our state hired him on a full time basis to go out and sell Iowa, I doubt that he could do a more effective job of bringing credit to that state."

In his "tall corn" imagery, Willson gave substance to his reputation as something of a cornball himself. He did not mind being identified as a romantic and a sentimentalist. But some Iowans were ambivalent about the



way outsiders identified them with corn and corniness. In October 1950, when *Cedar Rapids Gazette* music columnist Les Zacheis reviewed an album of college songs, he reported that Iowa's "Corn Song," dating from earlier decades, was included. "Putting it bluntly," he wrote, "the university and its fine football teams deserve a better rouser than the rickety-tickey tune that fate wished on them. This may have been hot stuff in the days of the silver cornet band but it's strictly from hunger today." The former band man looked to Meredith Willson to "turn out a spirited, swingy state song fit for a university some day."

Not long after, Willson obliged, unveiling his new "Iowa Fight Song" with full musical accompaniment on *The Big Show*, the NBC radio variety program for which he was musical director. The State University of Iowa adopted the song in 1950, and Willson's lyrics of "Fight! Fight! Fight! For Iowa" still ring out at its athletic events.

With the growing popularity of the new medium of television, *The Big Show* remained on the air for only a few years. With its demise, Willson's career in radio was reduced to a daily program on which he played and commented on classical music. His stint on *The Big Show* was memorable primarily for the theme song that he wrote for its star, Tallulah Bankhead, "May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You," which had been his mother's parting words each week as her Sunday school students left to go home.

Willson, now approaching his fifties, was rethinking the direction of his career. One evening in 1949 (so one version of the story goes), as he was sitting around with friends in New York, regaling them as he often did with long-remembered stories from his childhood, composer Frank Loesser jumped to his feet. "What an idea!" Loesser exclaimed. "Why don't you write a musical about it?" The highly successful composer, known for his work on *Guys and Dolls* and for songs like "Baby, It's Cold Outside" and "On a Slow Boat to China," wasn't the first to broach the idea, but it was he who got Willson seriously thinking about it. Another eight years would pass before *The Music Man* opened on Broadway, with 30 or 40 rewrites along the way. In the end, it turned out to be the Iowan's ultimate musical bouquet to his home state and his hometown.

In the meantime, however, workaholic Willson kept busy on a variety of other projects (he would write more than 300 songs in his lifetime). Upon their request, he wrote new fight songs for Mason City High School and Iowa State College. And for Mason City's centennial, held in conjunction with the North Iowa Band Festival, Willson returned as a guest of honor. Besides directing

the Mason City Municipal Band in concert and selecting the centennial queen from ten finalists, the musical celebrity unveiled a new centennial march that he had written especially for the occasion.

All of these efforts paled, however, in comparison to his musical. *The Music Man* opened on Broadway in December 1957 to virtually unanimous praise from reviewers and to overwhelming public applause. For Willson, his roseate snapshot of a 1912 vintage Iowa town was obviously a labor of love. Despite his references to Iowans' stubbornness, gullibility, and propensity to gossip, the play cast a generally luminous glow over the small-town milieu that Willson recalled from his boyhood.

"I've thought and puzzled over why Iowa sticks with me," commented the first-time playwright, whose feat was all the more amazing for his having written the music, the lyrics, and the book—tasks usually divided up among three or more people. "I can still hear the back screen door closing. I can see the grass in our back yard. I can hear the sound of the cold air register at the entrance of the First Congregational Church as we kids ran across it with snow on our shoes."

Many details from his memory got worked into the play, but *The Music Man* that premiered in 1957 was not so much a realistic description of Mason City in 1912. (The town by that time had become a major commercial and industrial center; between 1910 and 1926 it was Iowa's fastest growing city.) Instead, *The Music Man* evoked a mythic, idealized hometown unlike the urbanized, industrialized U.S. of the 1950s.

Broadway, however, dealt more in the coin of myth than of reality, and *The Music Man* made its mark as one of the most successful musicals ever to light its marquees. Sweeping the major awards for 1957 (a year that also saw *West Side Story* premiere), it took its place along with *My Fair Lady* (1956) and *The Sound of Music* (1959) as one of the greatest stage hits of the fifties and, indeed, of all time.

*The Music Man* played to standing-room-only audiences. Produced and directed by Morton Da Costa, during its first three years the play grossed more than \$21 million from 4.5 million theater-goers, and racked up another \$6 million in album and sheet music sales. On opening night, a phenomenon never seen before on Broadway occurred when the entire audience jumped to its feet and spontaneously started clapping rhythmically with the rousing finale of "Seventy-Six Trombones." It happened over and over again, every night thereafter. *The Music Man* ran for 1,375 performances.



Meredith Willson, in staying so closely in tune with the sentiments of his childhood, also remained in touch with the emotions of his audiences. Many industry insiders had warned that his story was too old-fashioned and unsophisticated for the new Broadway audience. Moss Hart had turned down an invitation to direct it, believing it to be "too full of corn."

But Willson defended his romantic instincts and sentimentalism against the gibes of sophisticates and cynics. "I think it is idiotic to be afraid of being vilified for writing sentiment," he told a reporter. "Why should a man be afraid to write, with sentiment, about the small town in Iowa in which he grew up?"

Why indeed? Nor did the Iowa music man end his role as booster for his hometown and state after he began reaping his awards and paychecks for *The Music Man*. He kept returning home to Mason City—in 1958, to strut down Main Street at the North Iowa Band Festival; in 1960, to donate \$50,000 for a new wing of the Congregational church, named after his mother; in 1962, for the movie premiere of *The Music Man*; in 1968, for his 50th class reunion; and still more times after that.

His home state, realizing what a public relations treasure Willson was, persuaded him, with very little cajoling, to participate in two of its promotions for a better, faster-growing Iowa. In 1960, he made a recording for the Iowa Development Commission for distribution to industrial firms inquiring about locating new facilities in the state. Reminiscing about his Iowa boyhood and technological advances that followed, Willson played and sang parts of two of his well-known songs—"Iowa, It's a Beautiful Name" and "Iowa Stubborn."

Ten years later, the Iowa Development Commission enlisted him again, this time to assist with its new campaign, under the slogan of "Iowa—A Place to Grow." A new symbol, in the shape of a four-leaf clover, was unveiled, and Willson contributed a song, titled to match the slogan. The second of its two verses went:

I-o-wa—what a place to live and grow in  
Life there is just like you think it ought to be  
I-o-wa—you can always count on friends there

I-o-wa Great place!  
I-o-wa Grow place!  
I-o-wa Where the air smells fresh as spring-time  
I-o-wa We ought to know  
Yes-sir! I-o-wa I-o-wa  
Where a man can live and love and grow.

**Willson visits Mason City and leads a parade in June 1958, less than a year after *The Music Man* opened on Broadway.**



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**GREAT CHALLENGING EVENT**

The greatest publicity event in the corporate history of Mason City and one of its most colorful spectacles will occur on Tuesday, June 19, 1962, when top flight marching bands from all over the nation converge on the city for the Music Man Marching Band Competition Festival. The day will culminate with a press preview of Warner Brothers MUSIC MAN movie and will bring to the city Meredith and Rini Willson, many stars of the picture, and many of the nation's best known figures in press, radio and TV to cover the occasion.

**BANDS COMING FOR TRIPS, GLORY, PRIZES**

Many of the bands applying take regular trips, several have been in the inaugurations in Washington or the Tournament of Roses parades, many have won honors in local and state competition and service club and veterans parades. Five bands will be chosen from the morning parade and these will compete for position in a special stadium show in the afternoon. These bands will receive prizes offered by the Richards Music company valued at nearly \$15,000 and the top band will perform at the night show and be immediately taken on a nationwide trip by Warner Brothers.

**HUGE TREE FROM LITTLE ACORN !**

This colorful event grew from a suggestion by the chamber of commerce to the Willsons, duly passed on to Warner Brothers, that a premiere of the movie might well be shown in Mason City and possibly in connection with the annual North Iowa Band Festival. The idea had appeal and Warner Brothers sent its public relations man Bob Quinn to Mason City on two trips, on the last of which he proposed the press preview and the nation-wide marching band contest. The Warners were joined in the proposals by the Richards Music company of Elkhart, Ind., who had furnished band instruments for the movie and would offer valuable prizes. Forty-five representative men and women attending the board and Festival committee accepted the

**THE MUSIC MAN COMES TO MASON CITY**



**Robert Preston, Shirley Jones are Top Stars in Movie Version**

**THIRTY-FOUR OUT OF STATE BANDS COMING**

One hundred and 21 bands from thirty-four states had formally applied to represent their states in the Music Man Marching Festival when entries closed on Nov. 20. That means that thirty-four out-of-state bands will march in the huge parade in Mason City on June 19, because every application stated that the band was prepared to come, if chosen, and was signed by a school administrator, as well as the band director, and told how they would raise the money for the trip. Many already had that detail well in hand.

When came the task of selecting the bands from the many states with more than one application. The applications were accompanied by elaborate scrap books, records, movies and telegrams of recommendation.

**AND NINETY FROM IOWA AND MINNESOTA**

The Music Man Marching Band competition is, of course, the frosting on the cake of the 24th North Iowa Band Festival and the usual around 90 high school bands from North Central and Southern Minnesota will be here for the day. Each band will, as usual, have its candidate for queen of the Festival, or Miss North Iowa, and there will be numerous outstanding floats, including 10 or 12 representing scenes from the Music Man.

The Iowa and Minnesota bands will be hosts for the day and will not compete for the prizes offered. Numerous additional requests from the two states have been regrettably refused, unless vacancies occur in those which have been coming the past 3 years.

**IT WILL TAKE SOME DOING !**

The Music Man Marching Band competition event, combined with the 24th North Iowa Band Festival, is a several-way challenge to Mason City. It will be a challenge to house 3000 out-of-state visitors for two nights lodging and two breakfasts in private homes of the city. It will be a challenge to arrange the giant parade of bands, queens and floats and the other events of the day with the attendant problems of traffic and transportation. It will be a challenge to feed those out-of-state guests, to provide entertainment for the few dull moments when they won't be very busy... a challenge to properly entertain perhaps 125 screen stars and representatives of press, radio and TV.

**AND ALSO SOME MONEY !**

And it will be a great challenge to raise the \$35,000 budget which it will take to do these things, at least four times the normal \$9,000 budget for a North Iowa Band Festival. But this will be matched against at least A QUARTER OF A MILLION DOLLARS which will be spent by Warners, Richards and the 34 bands which will travel to Mason City. Already TEN THOUSAND has been spent by them on publicity and printing, \$15,000 is offered in prizes and visiting bands have travel budgets from ONE THOUSAND up to TEN THOUSAND EACH.

**AND TREMENDOUS POSSIBLE VALUES !**

The values of the Festival cannot be measured in dollars and cents, the committee points out... even though all of the local budget will be spent right in this community. There is the inspiration which comes to the boys and girls of North Central Iowa and Southern Minnesota in seeing and participating in the Festival—5000 of them, plus thousands of friends and parents from the very heart of the Mason City trade territory. Mason City has already become nationally known through the persistent good will of the WILLSONS and industrial representative of Mason City on promotional trips have found doors opened more quickly and a basic friendly conversation more quickly established. Let Mason City do ITS BEST on JUNE 19, 1962, and it will be a household word in thousands of places in America—and it will also have the satisfaction of a wonderful time had by all and a tremendous community celebration WELL DONE.

THE MASON CITY GLOBE-GAZETTE  
 ESTABLISHED IN 1877  
 PUBLISHED DAILY EXCEPT SUNDAY AND HOLIDAYS

**AMERICA!! WELCOME!!**

to the 24th Annual  
**NORTH IOWA BAND FESTIVAL**  
 in Mason City, Iowa

**JUNE 18-19 1962** and **THE MUSIC MAN**

**Marching Band Competition**

In 1962, Mason City's annual North Iowa Band Festival included a movie debut of *The Music Man*. With Meredith Willson came Hollywood celebrities Arthur Godfrey, Hedda Hopper, Shirley Jones, Robert Preston, and Ron Howard.

After *The Music Man* elevated him to fame, Willson was called upon by two U.S. presidents to plug their programs. In 1962, he wrote the "Chicken Fat" song to encourage the public to exercise, as part of President John Kennedy's fitness program. Then, during the 1973-1974 recession, he wrote a song named "WIN!" to promote President Gerald Ford's campaign to "Whip Inflation Now":

Win! Win! Win!  
 We'll win together,  
 Win together, That's the true American way, today.  
 Who needs inflation? Not this nation.  
 Who's going to pass it by?  
 You are, and so am I.  
 Win together.  
 Lose? Never!  
 If you can win,  
 So can I.

The WIN program went nowhere, but Willson, at least, had done his bit for it.

Despite his years in New York and Hollywood,





SISI (DES MOINES)

**At a 1963 Minnesota-Iowa football game, Willson directs the "Iowa Fight Song," which he wrote for the university in 1950.**

Meredith Willson always remained an Iowan and a small-town boy at heart. On being urged to leave town to save himself, Harold Hill, Willson's fictional "music man," told little Winthrop Paroo, "I can't go, Winthrop. . . . For the first time in my life I got my foot caught in the door." Meredith Willson, Iowa's music man, had left Iowa after high school, but he could never let go of it. His mind and his memories got caught in the door of Iowa and his old hometown. He wrote them into one of America's best-loved musicals, and he sang their praises to anyone who would listen. Willson was truly Iowa's "ambassador to all the world." ❖

*John E. Miller is professor of history at South Dakota State University. His work on Meredith Willson is part of a book-length project on small-town midwesterners.*

NOTE ON SOURCES

The Meredith Willson Collection in the Mason City Public Library comprises clippings from the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, photographs, and other material on Willson. Lyrics to his Iowa songs also often appeared in the *Globe-Gazette*. More biographical material on Willson and musical theater can be found in *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); *Current Biography* (1958); David Ewen, *American Songwriters* (NY: H.W. Wilson Co., 1987); David Ewen, *Complete Book of the American Musical Theater* (NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1958); Ken Bloom, *Broadway: An Encyclopedic Guide to the History, People and Places of Times Square* (NY: Facts on File, 1991); Gerald Martin Bordman, *American Musical Theater: A Chronicle*, 2d ed. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy* (NY: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1968). See also: "Pied Piper of Broadway," *Time* (July 21, 1958), 42-46; and "A Happy Oom-Pah on Broadway," *Life* (Jan. 20, 1958), 103-8.

The newest biographical treatment of Willson is John C. Skipper, *Meredith Willson: The Unsinkable Music Man* (Mason City: Savas Publishing Co., 2000). Willson's own books include his autobiographical *And There I Stood With My Piccolo* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948); *Who Did What to Fedalia?* (NY: Doubleday, 1952); *Eggs I Have Laid* (NY: Holt, 1955); and "But He Doesn't Know the Territory" (NY: Putnam, 1959).

Annotations to this article are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).