

Alaska State Library  
Historical Collections

Guide to Collection

Sawyer, Wilson

Alaskan Symphony Collection, 1945-1976

MS 210

1 box  
1.25 linear ft.

Processed By: Gladi Kulp  
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**Acquisition:** The manuscript of the Alaskan Symphony was donated by Wilson Sawyer to Gov. Ernest Gruening for the Alaska Historical Library and Museum, March 20, 1947. The correspondence programs, tapes, and other memorabilia are of various and sometimes unknown provenance. 5 B&W 8x10" Photographs, 15 items: clippings, papers, sheet music, posters donated June 23, 2008 by Wilson Sawyer's sister, Patricia McHaney and her son, Roger Wilson McHaney via Bob King and Sally Schlichting of the Juneau Symphony Orchestra. Acquisition number for addition: 2009-04.

**Access:** The collection is unrestricted.

**Copyright:** Request for permission to publish material from the collection must be discussed with the Librarian. Photocopying does not constitute permission to publish.

**Processing:** The manuscript was removed from the Alaskana Collection, M1001.S289, No. 1 Oversize, and the other materials from Phonotape 16, to be housed together with the manuscript collections.

## Biographical Note

Wilson Sawyer composed the Symphony no. 1, known as the Alaskan Symphony, at Gypsy Trail, Carmel NY in 1945. In December of that year the Symphony was first performed by the American Symphony Orchestra coast to coast and rebroadcast to the armed services overseas with the composer conducting. The Honorable Gov. Ernest Gruening was guest speaker on the program and later requested the original score to be placed in the Alaskan Museum of Natural History [Alaska Historical Library and Museum] in Juneau.

The Sawyers lived in Carmel until they moved to Pawling because of his wife's health problems. Because of the financial hardship trying to make a living on musical composition, Sawyer opened the Pawling Laundromat in 1960. He says, in a letter to Alaska Lt. Gov. Lowell Thomas, Jr., Sept. 1975, "One year ago a world famous violinist [probably Arthur Schuller] came into our laundry looking for a phone. He remembered my symphony and recognized me. In short this is how I received a new lease and may find a place in music again." The letter was requesting that the recently rewritten score for the Alaskan Symphony replace the original version. The American Symphony Orchestra and the Hudson Valley Philharmonic performed the new version as part of the Antonio Vivaldi Tri-Centennial Concerts, Oct. 17, 18, 19, 1975 in Poughkeepsie NY with Wilson Sawyer conducting.

According to the 1975 program notes, "Wilson Sawyer was composing at the age of four, and conducted his own orchestra at thirteen. He graduated from Traverse City High School in northern Michigan and entered the University of Michigan School of Music. At Michigan, in addition to the orchestra he also conducted the University Women's Glee Club, was conductor of Company A Soldier Choir and choir master of the First Congregational Church on the Campus. He was offered a commission to write two ballets in Chicago. This led him to New York City where he conducted the ABC Symphony."

*[From program notes, correspondence, and clippings in the collection.]*

## Scope and Contents Notes

The collection includes the original 1945 manuscript of the Symphony No. 1, the Alaskan Symphony. It also includes correspondence and memorabilia regarding the Symphony and its performance. Other memorabilia as well as a tape cassette and CD of the Alaskan Symphony are in the collection. A reel tape of Robert Keys Clark, Opus 39 concerto as well as an unidentified reel are included, probably because they were also composers considered for the 1975 simulcast. The simulcast notes state, "the Alaskan Symphony was performed in Dutchess County, New York at a concert honoring a

former New Yorker, Lowell Thomas Jr., becoming Lt. Governor of Alaska. Violinist, Arthur Schuller, rediscovered the score at the composer's home in Pawling, New York.

Interestingly, a score with orchestral parts was also found in the Whitney Blake Collection, Eastman School of Music at Rochester, New York."

### Inventory

- Folder 1: Musical score, Symphony no. 1 (Alaskan), 1945, by Wilson Sawyer
- Folder 2: Correspondence - correspondents include Lt. Governor Lowell Thomas, Jr., conductor Gunther Schuller, Washington music critic Kurt Hetzel, and American Symphony Orchestra manager Arthur Aaron.
- Folder 3: Newspaper accounts in 1945, program and poster from the 1975 performance, letter from Leonard Newman, who may have been a promoter.
- Folder 4: Budget and notes for a simulcast of American music to include the Alaskan Symphony in 1975.
- Folder 5: Reel tape, 7 1/2" per sec.: Symphony No. 1 (Alaskan) Opus 19, 1945 and Passacaglia for Orchestra (7<sup>th</sup> Movement), Opus 169, 1975. Composed and conducted by Wilson Sawyer
- Folder 6: Cassette tape, same program as Folder 5.  
CD - copied from cassette
- Folder 7: Reel tape, Concerto for Violin and Strings with Timpani, Opus 39 by Robert Keys Clark [probably considered for simulcast program]  
Reel tape, [unidentified]
- Folder 8: Bob King's inventory, Cover letter from Roger Wilson McHaney, Hudson Valley Philharmonic program, *Eight A Capella Arrangements for Women's Voices, Alleluia* (1947) by Sawyer [photocopy], memorial piece, five [5] 8x10" photographs of the Bill Sawyer Orchestra [dated April 10, 1939], two notebook entries, three newspaper clippings, poem by Sawyer.
- Folder 9: Juneau concert performance of the Alaska Symphony by Sawyer [June 14 & 15, 2008]: 3 programs, poster, local newspaper articles with mistakes, additional redundant materials. See Bob King's inventory for more detailed descriptions of items.