

## "How Great Thou Art" History

Hymns generally take time to catch on, but this one, "**How Great Thou Art**" struck the American church like a thunderbolt.

The hymn got its start in Sweden in the 1880's, well over one hundred years ago. This song was well known in several countries before it finally reached the shores of the United States.

Carl Boberg, a twenty-six year old Swedish minister, had been to an afternoon church service with friends in 1885. It was the time of year when everything seemed to be in its richest coloring; the birds were singing in the trees and wherever they could find a perch. As they were returning a thunderstorm began to appear on the horizon. They hurried to shelter. There were loud claps of thunder, and the lighting flashed across the sky. Strong winds swept over the meadows and billowing fields of grain. He was struck by both the beauty and the power of nature. The storm was soon over and the clear sky appeared with a beautiful rainbow. After reaching his home, he opened his window toward the sea. The church bells were playing the tune of a hymn. His mind flashed to Psalm 8: 3 & 9 - where David says, "*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers*" and concludes "*how majestic is your name in all the earth!*" That same evening he wrote a poem that he titled, '**O Store Gud,**' or "**O Mighty God.**" The poem was published in an 1886 newspaper and "*forgotten*" or so he thought.



Two years later, it was paired with a folk tune and he was surprised to hear a congregation in Sweden sing his poem to an old Swedish melody. Neither the poem or song achieved widespread fame.

In 1907, Manfred von Glehn translated it into German, and five years later a Russian pastor, Ivan Prokhanoff, made a Russian adaptation.

In the 1920's Stuart Hine, a British Methodist missionary serving in Ukraine and his wife heard the Russian version. He was so moved by the greatness the song extolled and glorified God for the wonders of His creation that he translated it from Russian to English, modified it, expanded the words and made his own arrangement of the Swedish melody.

In 1925 the Reverend E. Gustav Johnson of North Park College, Chicago, Illinois, made a "literal" English translation of "**O Mighty God, When I Behold the Wonder.**" It was quite different than the song we know today, but can still be found in hymnals.

Later, Dr. J. Edwin Orr heard it sung by Naga tribes people in India and decided to bring it back to America to use in his own meetings and it finally reached the shores of the United States in California. One day Tim Spencer, a cowboy member of the Son's of the Pioneers, who was leading a troubled life, looked at a song his son brought home from a student missionary conference. The song happened to be the English version of "**How Great Thou Art.**" Upon knowing who the author was, he spent no time contacting Stuart Hine. It was copyrighted, published and recorded.

Somewhere between 1951 and 1954 a famous gospel singer, George Beverly Shea, became acquainted with the song and shared it with the Billy Graham Crusade team and they began using it.

In 1957 George Beverly Shea sang it at the New York Crusade ninety-nine times with the choir joining in the chorus "**Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee. How great Thou art! How great Thou art!**"

Since then it has been recorded by Carrie Underwood, Elvis Presley, Willie Nelson, and Alan Jackson to name a few.

Today, the beautiful hymn continues to charm millions of people across the world. With it, they honor and glorify God for who He is – the Creator of the universe.