

MUSICAL TRADITIONS
PACIFIC NORTHWEST FOLKLORE – PAUL ASHFORD
By Stewart Hendrickson

At the Northwest Folklife Festival last May I led a panel workshop entitled “55 Years of Folksinging in Seattle.” Sponsored by the Pacific Northwest Folklore Society, it referred to the founding of the society 55 years ago in Seattle. Some of the panel members were founders of the society, and others were Seattle folk singers in the ‘50s and ‘60s. John Ashford, an early member, has roots in Northwest folk music that go back to the ‘30s and ‘40s. His father Paul was a song collector and folk singer in Washington state. The following is an edited transcript of John’s remarks at the workshop.

John Ashford at the NW Folklife Workshop, May 26, 2008

“If we talk about folk music in the ‘50s, there was a lot going on before the ‘50s happened. People were singing, nobody had iPods, nobody was using amplified instruments, one of the best instruments people had access to was their voice.

There was a lot of communal singing, and my father took an interest in this. He was working for the WPA. The WPA had a writer’s project in the ‘30s that sent people out around the state, basically to do a guide of Washington State. But it expanded, and the people who went out found that there was a lot more going on, there was a lot to be interested in, and my father’s interest was in music.

When he was supposed to be out interviewing people, sometimes at the first house if he saw a piano in the room, he’d stop and spend the whole day there sharing and learning songs from people. And he came up with quite a collection of folk songs.

One of his best friends from college days was Ivar Haglund, and Ivar had a radio program at that time. Ivar and my father got together a lot and he sang a lot of those songs. A lot of the songs my father collected was material Ivar used. Sometimes it was a fragmentary song. The two of them would sit down with a couple of bottles of beer and make up the rest of the verses and have a great time.

That was one of the things that was going on. Ivar, as some of you may know, had a regular radio program, and he was a good singer, played the guitar and sang, and was fairly well known at the time, but that was long before he started the restaurants.

Well in 1940 I think it was, Woody Guthrie came out, working for the Bonneville Corporation, and was commissioned to write some songs about the Pacific Northwest. Woody wanted to look up Ivar, and he was traveling with a nineteen-year-old named Pete Seeger at the time. When they got together with Ivar, Ivar suggested that they come over to my father’s house. So they came over to our house.

I was about five years old at the time, and I remember it was a big music party with some people I had never seen. My father met Pete Seeger at that time, and the two of them carried on a correspondence for several years. And then Pete Seeger was in the Army during World War II, that was when Fort Lawton was still active, it is Discovery Park now. Pete Seeger was stationed at Fort Lawton for several years. On Sunday afternoons he’d come over to our place and help my mother cook dinner, and then he’d sing with my father.

One of the interests that my father had, coming out of the 1930s and prohibition, was in prohibition songs. He had quite a good collection of songs that came out of the prohibition era.

As a young man he felt scarred by the temperance movement. His mother entered him into a essay contest when he was fairly young and he won. It scarred him for life. “Why alcohol will never touch my lips,” that kind of an essay.

So he pretty much got revenge later on learning how to make bath tub gin during prohibition. And we always had a crock of home brew going in the kitchen when I was growing up. But what he loved to do was invite people over to the house and they’d gather around the piano, and he’d play some of those prohibition songs, and people would join in and sing these songs – they’re great songs for singing.

One of them he taught Pete Seeger. I’d heard Pete sing it several times, he sang it when he came to Seattle, and when he was talking about political movements and the songs that went along with political movements. He sometimes sang this song, it’s called “Cold Water.” This is one my father really liked because he really thought cold water was meant to run under bridges and go through pipes, and he never thought water was good for you because he’d seen how it had rusted out the radiator of his 1928 Ford. It goes something like this: *There’s nothing like water to give / The strength that we need for to live / And so to the river, the creek or the spring / I’ll go for a drink and I’ll merrily sing / Cold water, cold water, cold water, cold water for me.* And fortunately that has just one verse.”

Transcribed and edited by Stewart Hendrickson from a recording of the workshop at NW Folklife on May 26, 2008.

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