

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

ARCHIVING FOLK MUSIC

By Stewart Hendrickson

Anyone who's been involved in folk music for many years has probably accumulated a lot of recordings in many different formats. Back in the *pre-digital age* we had reel-to-reel tapes, cassette tapes, vinyl 78s and LPs. And before tape recordings there were wire recordings (spools of magnetic wire). I have seen them all and collected many.

Listening to these today requires special equipment not readily available – tape recorders of various types and turntables of various speed. The first step is to convert these to a digital format. The next problem is to sort out the gems from the trivia, and finally, to catalog and archive them for posterity, or at least for the next few generations.

Bob Nelson has been around folk music for over 50 years, and as an inveterate collector he has amassed a treasure trove of recorded material. I'll let him tell you about his collecting and the beginning of his project to archive this material.

"I was thirteen when I heard my first folksong. It came to me by way of a man who had a profound impact in my life, Bill Higley, aka "WilliWaw Willy." He was a radio personality from the earliest days of radio when he was the radio partner of Harry K. McClintok, aka "Haywire Mac." Bill married a family friend, moved to Seattle, and became an early morning DJ on KJR radio. He used to drag me to the station before dawn where we'd unlock the door, warm up the radio tubes, and start broadcasting. By the time I was 14, I was reading hourly weather reports on air... completely against the law but the FCC was loose in those days. All this was pretty heady stuff for a young kid."

"Bill and Verna Higley also took me into their home and became my surrogate parents. Bill drilled me, hour after hour, on the basics of diction, elocution and song presentation. It was during these early years that I also became adept at recording, first with a wire recorder, then a tape recorder. While still in high school I bought an 80-pound WebCore tape recorder and started dragging it with me wherever I went... my back still hurts. I started building a collection of recordings of sessions where other singers would teach me a song or two. I also recorded *hoots*, jam sessions, parties, you name it."

"Now that I am safely retired, I am able to take a step back and look at what I have amassed. I've begun a twenty year dream... archiving all these hundreds of recordings. I have over 300 reel-to-reel tapes and over 400 cassette recordings. As word of my project has spread, people are contacting me and offering their tapes for posterity. As I start to dig into this material, I realize just what a treasure I own. Most of the people on these tapes have passed on... that is quite humbling. And yes, I've shed a tear or two as I hear those treasured voices again."

Bob has just begun to send me digital copies of some of these recordings. So far it is only the tip of the iceberg, but it is quite interesting. I have edited a couple of these and put them up on the Pacific Northwest Folklore Society's web site (<http://pnwfolklore.org>).

In 1959 KCTS-TV in Seattle produced a series of six programs entitled *Ballads and Books*. Five of these programs were recorded in the studio by Bob Nelson. The fifth program (Jan. 20, 1959) is particularly interesting as it features [James Stevens](#), [Ivar Haglund](#), and local folk singers John Ashford, Patti McLaughlin and Don Firth. Now after 50 years we can again hear Jim and Ivar talk about the folklore and folk music of the Pacific Northwest and hear some of the songs.

The show's host, Buzz Anderson, begins with a short introduction to local folk songs. Patti McLaughlin and Don Firth then sing Woody Guthrie's Northwest classic, *Roll On Columbia*. And John Ashford sings a Pacific Northwest variant of *Little Old Sod Shanty On My Claim*, known as *Little Old Log Cabin On My Claim*. The words may have originated with his father, Paul Ashford, perhaps in collaboration with his friend Ivar Haglund.

Buzz Anderson then introduces Jim Stevens and Ivan Haglund. Jim Stevens was a popular Northwest writer who introduced the American public to the tales of Paul Bunyan. He also wrote lyrics to many songs of the Northwest, including *The Frozen Logger*. Jim worked as a logger in Canada during his youth, and was active in promoting the logging industry in Washington State. One of his projects was the “Keep Washington Green Campaign.” He talks about the songs he wrote with Ivar Haglund for this project, and Ivar sings short portions of some of the songs.

Ivar then sings his favorite Northwest song *The Old Settler*, written by Judge Francis Henry of Pierce County, Washington, around 1874. Ivar used the words “Acres of Clams” from this song as the name of his seafood restaurant in Seattle. Ivar was a colorful raconteur, folk singer, and restaurateur in Seattle.

Jim Stevens then talks about some of the books he had written about the Northwest. And Don Firth sings Jim’s iconic Northwest song, *The Frozen Logger*.

Patti McLaughlin and Don Firth conclude the program by singing an old folksong *Life Is A Toil*, which speaks about the hardships of life for women on the frontier.

You can hear portions of this program on the [Pacific Northwest Folklore Society web page](#).

The term *hootenanny* was first used in Seattle for folk music get-togethers or jams. This was picked up by Pete Seeger during a visit to Seattle around 1940 and he carried it back to New York. It soon became a familiar term in the folk music scene.

Hoots were a staple of the Pacific Northwest Folklore Society in the early ‘50s. Don Firth describes them: “Most of the *hoots* I attended in the Fifties and Sixties were held in somebody's private home, but they were basically open—come one, come all, sing or just listen. Solo singing, group songs, whatever the people who came wanted to do. Some of them were held in halls of one sort or another and were more like informal, free-for-all concerts. They were mostly unstructured, with no formal program.”

The final program in the *Ballads and Books* series of KCTS-TV in 1959 was a live *hoot* put on by local folksingers Don Firth, Patti McLaughlin, Nancy Hubbard, Bob Nelson, Helen Stark, Mike Reedy, Don Clarke, Ron Ginther, and Sally and John Ashford. It is particularly interesting to hear the kind of folk songs that were sung back then. Several of these people are still singing in the Seattle area, and it is a thrill to hear how they sounded 50 years ago. You can listen to this program in its entirety on the [Pacific Northwest Folklore Society web page](#).

These recordings are like time capsules from 50 years ago. Listening to these is like being transported to an earlier time and hearing how your friends sounded back then, or becoming acquainted with people you’ve only heard about, but have since passed on. That’s all quite fantastic. I can’t wait to hear more. Hurry up Bob!

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