



Joe's Jottings #9: 10: The Folksmiths - Summer of 1957

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

I recently received two communications about a project that I was involved with in 1957. The first was from a Beloit College student doing a paper on the subject; the second was a You Tube item. This was surprising for something which occurred 58 years ago, namely, a folk music group that performed and taught music, dance, games, etc. primarily at twenty summer camps and three resorts in the northeastern United States. The group was The Folksmiths, and we were (as we called ourselves) eight square-jawed, enthusiastic Oberlin College students with a passion for the folk arts. We began organizing in December 1956 and ended our career making an LP for Folkways Records on August 17, 1957.

But why such a project? At that time Oberlin College was experiencing an increasing interest and activity in folk music. There were folksings, a radio program, record sales, a brand new Oberlin Folk Song Club, and, most importantly, annual concerts by Pete Seeger (see my column in the November-December 2014 issue of Local Lore). By October 1956 Pete was doing two concerts in one day, attracting over 1,000 attendees. He led us in song and admonished us to form quartets and spread the word of folk music across the land. We doubled that number and formed The Folksmiths, "A Travelling Folk Workshop." We marvel to this day that at that time eight sets of parents gave their permission for us to proceed with this venture. Bless them all!

Here's the roster with our home states and classes as of June-August 1957:

- Joani Blank, Massachusetts (junior).
- Chuck Crawford, Ohio (sophomore).
- Joe ("Hick") Hickerson, Connecticut (graduated June 1957).
- Bo Israel, Ohio (junior).
- Sarah ("Newc") Newcomb, Virginia (sophomore).
- Ricky ("Rick") Sherover, New York (sophomore).

David Sweet, Ohio (senior - originator of the idea of the Folksmiths).
Ruth Weiss, New York, (junior - BTW, she now happens to be my sweetie,
PFS member Ruth Bolliger!).

One 1941 Plymouth.

One 1947 Landcruiser.

Here's a photo of the original group which originally included Jim Shaw. Jim came up with the "Folksmiths" name and designed our flyer, but he had to drop out of the group soon thereafter. Pictured are (back row) Ruth, Jim, Joani, Bo; (middle row) Joe, David, Ricky; (front) Sarah.



And here's a photo of Chuck, who replaced Jim (and kept our cars running).



We began by sending out 600 mailings to summer camps and resorts in the Northeast, which included a flier and introductory letter outlining our offerings. Our desire was to teach, but we were prepared to perform as well. We planned eight workshop topics on songs, dances, games, and instruments. We charged \$50.00/day with a maximum of two days at each location. We contacted publishers of recordings, song and instruction books, and instruments in order to

take orders for their products at the various locations on our itinerary. Here are some of them: Cooperative Recreation Service, Elektra Records, Folkcraft Records, Folk Dancer Records, Folkways Records, Israel Music Foundation, Kismet Record Company, New England Music Center, Riverside Records, Sing Out!, Stinson Records, Tradition Records, and World Wide Games.

We also compiled kits to leave with the camps. These included a Folksmiths songbook with 55 songs with lyrics and chords, a game book, a dance book, a list of the publishers listed above, and a list of folksingers. We also visited a number of performers and publishers for advice. We became acquainted with up-and-coming singer Bob Gibson, who advised: "When in doubt, sing 'John Henry.'" And we did. Some of us visited the Cooperative Recreation Service in Delaware, Ohio, who advised us not to include anything from the People's Song Book since it was "Communist." There went "Hi Ro Jerum" ("Rich Man, Poor Man") into the reject pile (sort of).

Some of us went to the April 12-14, 1957, Swarthmore College Folk Festival, where we met such performers as Robin Christenson, Ruth Finesinger, Barry Kornfeld, Tom Paley, Art Rosenbaum, Tony Saletan, Mike Seeger, Peggy Seeger, Kossoy Sisters, Ellen Stekert, and Happy Traum. Tony was our source of "Kum Ba Yah," "Lord, Lord, I've Got Some Singing To Do," "Run To Jesus," and "Three White Gulls." From Peggy we got "Glory Be To the Newborn King." We were so influenced by our experiences at the Swarthmore event that in four weeks we had conceived of, organized, and mounted the First Annual Oberlin College Intercollegiate Folk Festival (May 10-12, 1957), with performers from as far away as Cornell University (Ellen Stekert) and Cambridge, Massachusetts (Tony Saletan).

Then June arrived, I graduated on the 10th, and we all set out for brief visits to our homes. By mid-June we assembled in New York City for ten days of rehearsal at the 92nd Street YMHA and participation in a "School's Out" Hootenanny on June 21. This was a Sing Out! Production organized by Irwin Silber and Pete Seeger and was held at the Chateau Gardens at 2nd Avenue and Houston Street. It was advertised in the June 19th New York Post as "Folk Song Fun with Pete Seeger, Jerry Silverman, Juanita Cascone, and The Folksmiths." Other performers included Mary Travers and my brother Jay Hickerson who was a last-minute

replacement as piano accompanist for Juanita. And we received \$40.00 for our participation!

By June 30 we were ready to embark on our journey. Stay tuned for the next installment: "The Folk Things Are Here!"