



Joe's Jottings #10: The Folksmiths - Summer of 1957 Part 2: The Folk Things are Here!

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

At the end of my previous column, it was June 1957 and our Oberlin College octet, The Folksmiths (Bo, Chuck, David, Joani, Ricky, Ruth, Sarah, and yours truly), were in New York City. We had just completed ten days of rehearsing and performing in a "Hootenanny" concert with Pete Seeger. By the end of the month, we were ready to roll! We packed our 1941 Plymouth and 1947 Studebaker Land Cruiser with three guitars, three banjos, a mandolin-banjo, several recorders, one harmonica, one kazoo, a set of bongo drums, a washboard, and a washtub bass (which we attached to the roof of the Land Cruiser), along with camping and cooking equipment. We carried one suitcase and sleeping bag apiece, and still had room for the eight of us in the two cars. We certainly must have been a sight when we pulled into our first destination, Green Chimneys School in Brewster, N.Y., on July 1. The first young camper who spotted us ran frantically to the director's office yelling: "The Folk Things Are Here, The Folk Things Are Here!" Our summer excursion had indeed begun.

Over the next seven weeks we traveled 3,600 miles and visited approximately 20 camps, four resorts, and two colleges in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. We taught and entertained approximately 3,000 campers and staff and over 1,500 concert attendees. And none of them had ever heard "Kum Ba Yah" before we taught it to them!

Our plan at most camps was to provide a mix of teaching/demonstration and performance, for either one or two days. We generally began with a conference with the camp director, followed by an introduction to the campers and staff where we outlined and demonstrated our various workshop topics. These included folksinging and dancing, instrument making, outdoor games, indoor games, recorders, poi balls, and Lummi sticks. The campers would then choose which sessions they wanted to attend (we often had several of these going at



Bo and Ricky 'assist' Chuck, who is changing a tire on the 1947 Land Cruiser.

once). In the evening we entertained and led folksinging and dancing. Then the campers settled into their bunks while we strolled by serenading them to sleep (we hoped). "Abiyoyo" was a favorite in this category (without the long story which Pete Seeger made up several years later). We then met with staff for further instruction, providing them with our kit of songs, dances, etc. so they could continue these activities with the campers after we left. Often we ended with swapping songs with staff, occasionally picking up new songs to add to our repertory.

Three documents have helped to jog my memory of particular events that occurred that summer:

- 1) The treasurer's journal (I was the group's treasurer)
- 2) A letter I wrote to my folks on July 22
- 3) Ricky Sherover's article "The Folksmiths: Eight Students Who Had Some Singing To Do," *Sing Out!*, vol. 8, no. 1, Spring 1958 (with a young Odetta pictured on the cover), pp. 16-21.

Here are recollections of some specific camp visits.

On July 6 we visited Camp Willoway in Bear Mountain, N.Y. Years later, I met Ben Koenig, an excellent singer/guitarist and for many years proprietor of the Country Bookshop in Plainfield, Vt. He reminded me that he was a C.I.T. at Willoway in 1957 and was tremendously influenced by our visit. He still performs "Tina," which he learned from us that summer.

On July 8 our destination was Camp Freedman in Falls Village, Ct. A number of years later, Sarah and I were at a weekend retreat and wondered why the venue looked familiar. The reason: it was the very same site that the Folksmiths had visited in 1957. It had changed from a children's camp to a camp for seniors and was also rented to organizations like the New York Pinewoods Folk Music Club and the Indian Neck Folk Festival for retreats. Naturally, Sarah and I had to do "We've Got Some Singing to Do" once again!

July 14-15 found us at the New Jersey Y Camps in Milford, Pa., where we were regaled by a multitude of campers singing "Hava Na Shira." We quickly appropriated the song for our repertory.

July 16 was a day of rest and folksinging at Camp Woodland, Phoenicia, N.Y., where Ricky had been a camper and counselor, and I would be on the staff in 1959-60 (see my column in the May-June 2015 issue of *Local Lore*).

We spent the latter part of July at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vt. There was a chamber music camp in progress which included the parents of an Oberlin classmate, Bill Hoover. With them was their younger son, Peter, who was about to enter Harvard University. Peter has since claimed that I was the first 5-string banjo player he ever encountered; he later went on to become a pioneer practitioner of the melodic clawhammer style (I certainly was not.) Pete helped us organize a concert at the college on the 27th, which netted us an extra \$17.40. And special thanks to Goddard students Nick, Al, and Carl for their crucial assistance in repairing our 1941 Plymouth.



Joe with banjo in Tenants Harbor, Me., ca. Aug. 6, 1957.
Photo by Peter Robertson (Joe's Oberlin classmate).
Guitarist is Ruth Blau (Ruth Weiss's classmate).

We also utilized this downtime between engagements to prepare two audition tapes of four songs each, which we recorded on our portable machine in a vacant science building. We sent them to Moses Asch of Folkways Records and to Kenneth S. Goldstein, who was producing folk music LPs for several

companies. Kenny sent an encouraging reply, but Moe agreed to record us. (More on this in my next column.)

In addition to camps, we performed at four resorts in Pennsylvania and Maine. At a July 11 Pocono Manor concert, I spontaneously came up with my first excursion into songwriting (for which I average about a verse a year). I was singing "Horse Named Bill" which ends with the lines "What can you do in a case like that / What can you do but stamp on your hat, or your toothbrush, or your grandmother, or anything that's helpless." Noticing that there were a number of blue-haired ladies in the audience, I quickly substituted "ping-pong ball" for "grandmother." I guess this was appreciated since, as Ricky recalled, one of the nice ladies "got us a place to sleep in the hotel by scolding the manager."

Four weeks later, our August 8 concert at the Newagen Inn in Maine garnered our largest "gate" of the summer: a whopping \$116.20 (just under \$14.53 each!). Our final engagement was on August 11-12 at Camp Fernwood in Poland, Maine. Was the summer then over for us? Not quite. Tune in to the next column for news of rehearsing at the home of Pete and Toshi Seeger, a Folkways recording session, and a fateful reunion occurring some 47 years later. And dare I ask, did we break even that summer?