

## **Joe's Jottings #5: Wither the Flowers? Part One**

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

In my November-December 2014 column on Pete Seeger and Oberlin College, I suggested that I might elaborate on some of the history of the song, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." This is my offering on that subject.

Pete Seeger has told us that he composed the first three verses of the song in an airplane on his way to do a concert at Oberlin College. His inspiration for the text was in an English translation of *And Quiet Flows the Don* (Tikhiy Don), a novel by the Russian author Mikhail Sholokhov which was first published in Russian in 1928-32 and translated in 1934. On pp. 20-21 of Stephen Garry's 1934 translation, the text of a song fragment is given as: "And where are the geese? They've gone into the reeds. And where are the reeds? The girls have picked them up. And where are the girls? The girls have taken husbands. And where are the Cossacks? They've gone to the war." On the plane, Pete came up with his English paraphrase and added the phrases "Long time passing," "Long time ago," and "Oh, when will they ever learn?" to make a song of three verses. He also came up with a tune, which Ernie Marris later identified as based, in part, on an Irish-American song from the Adirondacks which Pete had recorded on a Folkways LP. Pete's verses included: "Where have all the flowers gone," "Girls have picked them everyone," "Where have all the young girls gone," "They've taken husbands everyone," "Where have all the young men gone," and "They're all in uniform."

When *Sing Out!* magazine published Pete's version in their December 1961 – January 1962 issue, they offered a free subscription to any one who could identify the original song. The winner was A. L. Lloyd, whose offering of a Russian transliteration and English translation with ten additional lines was published as "Koloda Duda" (a woman's name) in their October – November 1962 issue, with some corrections in their February – March 1963 issue. The December 1962 – January 1963 issue included a Yiddish text and translation

for the song sent in by Ruth Rubin that she had found in a collection made in White Russia, with references to versions in German and Ukrainian. And to round out their presentation, this issue also included a recent Russian translation of Pete's text, taken from Jerry Silverman's *Russian Songs* (New York: Oak Publications, 1966). The song was also included on an LP by Theodore Bikel and The Pennywhistlers entitled *Songs of the Earth* (Elektra EKL 326, EKS 7326).

In 1977 I received a communication from Prof. Dietrich Gerhard of Hamburg, Germany, concerning his researches into German and Russian precursors of "Koloda Duda," or at least the "Flowers" aspect of it, with references as far back as ca. 1750. I do not know if he has published his results. I do know that there is an 1882 sheet music for a song entitled "Wo sind all die Blumen hin" ("Where can all the flowers be gone"), published in Boston in 1882. But more on German versions later. Now, let's get back to Pete Seeger at Oberlin College.

Pete Seeger held his first four concerts at Oberlin College during my four years there as a student. I wrote letters to my family in New Haven, Connecticut, after each one.

Thankfully, my mother saved the letters. According to my letters (and a ticket stub and some flyers), the four dates were April 1, 1954; April 22, 1955 (this one was recorded); February 11, 1956; and October 20, 1956 (my 20th birthday). I attended the first one, assisted Stephen Lee Taller in organizing the second, and was in charge of the third and fourth. Each concert took place in a separate academic year, so the 2/11/56 event was during the 1955-56 year (my Junior year). As you can imagine, I was very busy that evening (over 850 attendees, including the College President), so I missed much of the nuances for the program. But I do remember Pete singing a new song he had written on the plane and taped to the microphone. The song escaped my attention at that time. But others remember the incident, and at least one remembers it was "Flowers." Pete has said that a few weeks later he recorded it for Moe Asch with some other short pieces, but it wasn't released until early 1960 as part of a medley on his Folkways LP FA 2454, *The Rainbow Quest*. In recent years I had occasion to search the Folkways archive with my former intern and the archive's director, Jeff Place. We located a folder for the LP project, but it gave no

mention of the date of recording. (The LP is now available on a custom CD version of the LP. The song is also available as a separate track on Pete's 1998 Smithsonian Folkways CD, *If I Had a Hammer: Songs of Hope & Struggle*).

1959-60 was my third year in graduate studies in Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University (Bloomington). I was doing a fair amount of folksinging on campus, as well as a folk radio show on WFIU-FM, and selling Folkways LPs on campus. I obtained *Rainbow Quest* in early 1960 and immediately added the three verses of "Flowers" to my repertory (that's all Pete wrote!). Pete sang it *tempo rubato*, without a regular rhythm, and used an arpeggio banjo accompaniment. I found myself using my instrument of choice, guitar, with rhythmic strumming. My small audiences liked to sing along on my songs, and this was no exception. But the song was over just as people were getting into the harmonies, so I repeated the three verses a few times to satisfy the communal *gemutlichkeit*. I was also thinking ahead to the summer, when I would be folk music counselor at Camp Woodland in the Catskill Mountains of New York, but I figured we needed a longer version. So, late on a Saturday night in late May 1960 (most likely ca. 4:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning), after all-night singing in my apartment at 509 East Cottage Grove, while walking a half-block to a bakery to buy some freshly baked glazed donuts, it occurred to me how to add verses bringing soldiers to graveyards, graveyards to flowers (that's all I wrote!) and adding the first verse to the end to make a circular song of singable length. I figured the campers might enjoy it that way.

Did the campers and staff at Camp Woodland enjoy the song that summer? What happened when Pete Seeger came to Camp in August for his annual concerts and heard us singing it? And what happened to the song after that? Stay tuned for "Joe Jottings" in the next issue of *Local Lore* for a continuation of the "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" saga!