

Joe's Jottings #6: Wither the Flowers? Part Two

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

In my last column (Local Lore, March-April 2015), I gave a history of "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" ("Flowers") through May 1960, when I had composed verses number four and five and repeated the first verse at the end, creating a six-verse circular song. This brings us to June 1960 (55 years ago!). On June 27 of that year, I began a two-month stint as a counselor at Camp Woodland in Phoenicia, New York. It was my second of two summers there. My duties included leading and teaching folksongs (seven hours a day!), teaching tennis, coordinating staff social activities, and leading hikes (the optimum position, especially for the uphill portions – no little feet in front of you). Early on, I taught everyone "Flowers," and they did indeed like it. I created some song sheets, including one for my six-verse version of "Flowers" (it was number "1960-9" in the series).



JOE HICKERSON - 1960

Toward the end of summer I conducted a survey of the camper's favorite songs: the top five were: "Dona Dona Dona," "MacPherson's Lament," "Flowers," "The Virgin Mary Had a Little Baby" ("Glory Be To the New-Born King"), and (tied for fifth place) "We Shall Overcome" and "We're Marching To Trafalgar Square" ("That Bomb Has Got to Go").

During the course of the summer, some talented C.I.T.'s and campers helped me come up with some additional verses, which were occasionally sung. These included: (for the sixth verse) "Where have all the flowers gone" / "Children have picked them every one," followed by "Where have all the children gone" / "Gone to Camp Woodland every one" ("Now they all have learned"). Other contributions were: "Where have all the people gone" / "The bomb has taken them every one" and "Where have all the counselors gone" / "Broken curfew every one."

On July 30-31 Pete Seeger made his annual visit to Camp Woodland. On the 31st, everyone assembled in the main dining room for a concert. As Pete was tuning his banjo on the front porch before the concert, a C.I.T. was leading everyone in folksinging. They started in on "Flowers" and Pete perked up – he had not sung the song since he introduced it at Oberlin College in February 1956 and recorded it for Folkways Records a few weeks later (it was not issued on an LP until early 1960). Then, when everyone started singing the fourth and fifth verses, he grabbed a pencil and a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote down the words as they were being sung. He then asked me where they had come from; I confessed that I had written them.

As sharply as I have recalled this incident, I could not remember anything about the subsequent concert, that is until I recently discovered that I had two tapes of the event that had been made by the Camp's music director, Norman Cazden. When I had the tapes transferred to a CD, I was astounded to find that Pete had invited me to lead everyone in "Flowers," which I gamely did. After hearing the fourth and fifth verses and the circularity of the song, he exclaimed, quite audibly, "Good God Almighty!"

But after that summer, where did "Flowers" go? Pete has said that Camp Woodlanders took it to New York City (where many of them lived) and sang it around Greenwich Village. I have heard from Woodlanders attending recent Camp Woodland reunions that they always gathered at Washington Square on Sundays after Camp let out. In August 2010 I received this recollection from a 1960 C. I. T.: "The Woodland crowd was large and we always attracted others who sang and picked with us." She reported that at concerts in the area by Pete and The Weavers, Pete "always knew we were around as we were not a quiet lot." And "Flowers" was certainly part of the Woodlanders active repertory after the summer of 1960.

I had no inkling of this activity as I continued my graduate studies in folklore and ethnomusicology at Indiana University. Then, during the fall 1961 semester I received a phone call from Pete's manager, Harold Leventhal, saying that The Kingston Trio had recorded "Flowers" and Pete had urged that I be included in the song's copyright as author of the fourth and fifth verses. Harold sent me the necessary contract, which I signed and returned to his publishing company, Fall River Music Inc. I received my first payment in July 1962 covering the January-June 1962 period; it was \$128.10. As I recall, I used it to buy a second-hand blue four-door Triumph sedan from a used car lot in Bloomington.

I started hearing the Kingston Trio's recording of the song at the beginning of 1962. It sounded quite a bit different from the way I had been singing it. Of course, I was curious as to where they had learned it. I interviewed Nick Reynolds of the Trio at the February 2004 Folk Alliance conference, where he told us that the Trio first heard Peter, Paul and Mary (PP&M) perform the song at a small club in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the Fall of 1961 (they "traded" "500 Miles" and "Lemon Tree" for it). But how did the song get to PP&M? It would seem that Peter, Paul, and/or Mary heard the song and learned it sometime during the Fall 1960 - Fall 1961 period in New York City. I have asked Peter Yarrow and Noel (Paul) Stookey if they remembered the circumstances under which they first heard the song. Neither one could remember. I never got a chance to ask Mary, but she seems the most likely to have heard it, since she had lived in Greenwich Village most of her life and been part of the folk music scene there.

So, when PP&M began to prepare for concerts in 1961, with the assistance of music arranger Milt Okun, a somewhat altered version of "Flowers" became a part of their repertoire, and then that of the Kingston Trio. The Trio were the first to record it, in December 1961. This was released as a single on Capitol Records which hit the Billboard "Hot 100" charts on January 22, 1962, and resided there through April 21, peaking at #21 on April 7. It was included on their LP, *College Concert*, which appeared on the Billboard LP charts from March 10 through November 10, 1962, peaking at #3 April 28 - May 5. Meanwhile, PP&M's version appeared on their first Warner Brothers LP, which charted from April 28, 1962, through September 12, 1964, peaking at #1 October 20 - November 24, 1962, and again on October 26, 1963. It appeared on the Kingston's LP, *The Best of the Kingston Trio*, which charted June 16, 1962, through June 6, 1964, peaking at #8 on August 4, 1962. A single by Johnny Rivers charted for four months in 1965-66, and then on an LP for six months in 1966-67. Flatt & Scruggs' bluegrass LP version charted for three weeks in 1968.

But what about top-selling recordings of "Flowers" from Germany and Japan, and its use as a protest/peace song in Vietnam and Northern Ireland? These and other blossomings of the song, far and near, will be explored in my next column.