

Irene Hoge Smith

Me and Pete at the Lake

Pete Seeger is here for the whole week. Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Unitarian family camp. Always the first week of July, Independence Day and fireworks and the best, best time of the whole year. I'm almost nine, in the fourth-fifth grade group even though I just finished third. Pete Seeger is here because he's blacklisted and doesn't have a job. Blacklisted is kind of like bullying.

Everybody loves Pete Seeger. I feel like I know him because I can sing the words to most of his songs. Not just the baby ones like *Abiyoyo* and *Foolish Frog* but also *One Man's Hands* and *Banks of Marble*.

I'm always trying to get close to Pete (everybody calls him Pete) without being too pushy or show-offy. It's almost time for supper and I'm running back to the cabin to change after Junior Swim, but I slow down when I see Pete sitting under a tree with his banjo. A lady with cameras around her neck says, "Hi, there! Can you come over here? We need a picture of Pete with some children, would you mind helping out?" She's taking pictures for *Sing Out!* Magazine and maybe we will be in that monthly collection of new and old folk songs.

Would I mind? My bathing suit is wet and I don't have a t-shirt or even a towel, but maybe Pete will ask my name and then he might sing *Goodnight Irene* just for me. The grass is scratchy and it's cold in the shade. I don't care.

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It took me more than fifty years to get my hands on the picture.

I'd always remembered that we did eventually get the copy of *Sing Out!* with the Seeger-and-children scene. My mother had subscribed to the magazine and would have been amused and pleased when she learned that the Lake Geneva photograph was going to be on its cover. But between the time that the picture was taken and when I eventually saw it on the song magazine, everything had changed. I dimly remember seeing the cover photo, but I also remember that it was disappointing, or confusing. I couldn't remember if the problem was that I wasn't in the picture, or that I *was*, but by then nobody cared.

I was fourteen when my mother left, and it was as if she had taken my own past with her. My father didn't want to talk about her, about the divorce, about the life we'd lived before, and bit by bit I myself gave up

trying to remember any of it. I tried not to think any more about the Unitarians, about an old folk song magazine, or about her. It wasn't until I was an adult, and Seeger had become a sort of national treasure, that I began to think that my early experience might have had some value. If he came up in conversation, I might mention that I'd grown up with his songs, met him when I was a kid, had my picture taken with him, and that it was on the cover of a song book. After a while I added that he sang *Goodnight Irene* to me. The fantasy became a story, the story a memory, and it took a long and complicated time to unravel the wish from the truth. (He sang *Irene* that week, but not to me; he sang to us that afternoon, but not that song.)

Searching for the Seeger photo began as an attempt to bring into focus the Lake Geneva family camp experience. I was working on a memoir and wanted to find at least a few happy memories to lighten what threatened to become a dense and loss-filled narrative. I hoped to reclaim some positive understanding of my mother, to recall what we had in common once and what, if anything, there might be of her that still exists in me. I thought the Seeger week at family camp might anchor those memories. But I didn't know which year it had been, had no records of those trips, and couldn't narrow it down.

Even before the divorce we'd moved nine times, and it's often been impossible to pin down where we lived and when. I do know that we started going to Lake Geneva after we moved from California to Michigan at the end of 1954. That means that the first summer at family camp could have been 1955. And I know that our father went to Washington after Kennedy came in, and that our last trip to Wisconsin was the week they told us about the divorce. That would make July 1961 the last time we went to the lake.

My parents' custody struggle wasn't so much about which one wanted me and my three sisters but about who would have to take care of us. First we lived with our father, and then with our mother, but suddenly she was gone back to California and we girls were crowded into our father's apartment in Washington. She took a single suitcase, and everything she left behind in Michigan was thrown out before renters moved in. Records, books, her autoharp, photographs. All the copies of *Sing Out!*

I spent a long time trying to find some history of what I remembered as the annual Midwest Family Conference, and couldn't quite believe that nothing seemed to mark what had been the happiest times of my childhood. The Unitarians stopped going to Lake Geneva after more than sixty years

there, relocated what they now call the Summer Assembly to the Ozarks, and seem to have no collective institutional memory predating the 21st century.

Various correspondents were friendly but not able to help—The Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society “doesn’t have any archive materials on UU camps;” the college that had hosted summer camps at Williams Bay “spent some time searching for the information you are looking for, but unfortunately we were not able to find anything.” Every time I hit another dead end I regretted the wasted hours, tried to give up the search, but could never permanently set it aside. I looked online for photos of Pete Seeger, and found a CD called *Abiyoyo: Story Songs for Children*. The album art shows Seeger sitting under a tree with four children, but the photograph is very small. I couldn’t tell if it was from Lake Geneva, and I didn’t think I was in the picture. I set the project aside again.

Then I discovered that *Sing Out!* is still being published. There’s a website, a history, back issues for sale—but only as far back as 1967. I wrote to see if someone might help me find the cover that I almost remembered. The publisher replied, said they did have back copies at their office in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, asked which one I was interested in, how I intended to use the photo, and what resolution I needed. *What resolution, indeed.*

I explained my sentimental quest; he was not particularly moved. He needed a date, didn’t want “to go through an entire decade worth of magazines to try and find what you’re looking for.” I contemplated a trip to Pennsylvania, then decided that would be silly.

To this day I have never found a reference to Seeger being hired for a Unitarian summer conference, although many accounts mention that during the blacklist decade, when many performance venues were closed to him, he taught and performed at various summer camps. I did learn that he’d appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee in August 1955, and that he’d refused to give them what they wanted. “I am not going to answer any questions as to . . . any of these private affairs,” he had testified. “I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this.” Unlike many others forced to appear before HUAC, Seeger did not claim the protection against self-incrimination offered by the Fifth Amendment. He simply refused to testify further, and as a result was indicted in March, 1957, for contempt of Congress.

Maybe that's what brought things to a head, I decided. Perhaps it was that summer that the Unitarians gave him a gig, that he sang all week long, and that I sat there with him in the cool shade of an oak tree?

At a Christmas party in 2012 I met a couple introduced to me as "old folkies," and told my story of Seeger and the lost picture. The wife said I should contact the Library of Congress, and in January I sent a query to their American Folklife Center. One of their researchers was willing to go to the stacks, and responded almost immediately. "We have a full run of *Sing Out!* on our shelves . . . I just flipped through the early years, and found the picture you describe." She'd located Volume 11, Number 1, published in early 1961.

I was almost there. I found a seller of used music, ordered the back issue for only twenty times the cover price, and in another week I held in my hands a fifty-one-year-old copy of *Sing Out!* Five by eight inches, 96 staple-bound pages, the cover printed in black and red, with the picture I recognized immediately. Along with that recognition, though, came the remembered disappointment. I'm not in the picture. It's just Pete, his banjo, the tree, three children and part of a fourth, from the back—an arm, left leg, some hair, and just the edge of a striped swimsuit. I'm not there, or maybe—and then the bit of striped fabric made me remember something else.

I don't have many family snapshots, so it didn't take me long to find, among a jumbled collection in a shoebox, one marked "Irene and Sally at Lake Geneva, 1957." Two children on wooden steps squint into the sun—my two-year-old sister all blond hair and sweet smile, me grinning, hunched, hair dripping, almost visibly shivering. And there was the striped bathing suit. It had been blue and white, I remembered. I couldn't have worn it more than one summer, and now I was sure that the year of Seeger at the lake had been 1957.

I didn't make the whole thing up, it wasn't a dream, Seeger had been there and I had been, too. I put the magazine on my bookshelf, the snapshot back in the box. No one besides me would know that I was really in that picture, but I was finally sure, and thus was satisfied.

Or so I thought.

But it wasn't enough. I evidently wanted a picture I could show people, like that little girl who had been so desperate for attention, caught in the fantasy that proximity to a good and beloved figure might mean her own life counted for something. Finally, it occurred to me that the *Abiyoyo* CD cover might be another shot taken on the same afternoon at Lake Geneva. I retrieved the image I'd saved, zoomed in to a larger but less

distinct view. The child near the center of the group had darker hair than I expected—mine had been somewhere between dishwater blond and light brown, but in the shade, and perhaps damp, it might have looked like this. And the striped bathing suit was definitely mine. Now I remembered the photographer circling the group, taking shots from different angles. What convinced me that I was looking at a picture of nine-year-old me was the child's self-consciously attentive face, the expression that said, *Here I am, I am listening to Pete, singing along, looking the way I'm supposed to look.*

I re-saved the image, and thought I was done. I worked on other things. But perhaps because I still couldn't find out anything about the family camp, I decided I wanted to have that *Abiyoyo* CD for myself. I ordered it, got it, looked at it. Showed it to my grown children and my husband. I put it on my bookshelf next to the copy of *Sing Out!* That would finish the project, certainly.

Except it didn't. Just before Thanksgiving, almost a year after getting the CD, I decided to look for the original vinyl record from which it had been mastered. One copy was for sale from an online seller. It was expensive but I ordered it anyway. It arrived in time for a music party, in time to frame and hang on the living room wall, to share and remember.

Thanksgiving. Christmas. The new year.

On January 28, 2014, Pete Seeger died. He was ninety-four, I was sixty-five, and I couldn't really believe either number.

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Why did it take me so long to track down the picture? Why did I search and stop over and over? I couldn't convince myself that it was worth the trouble, but I couldn't give up. No one else remembered, no one seemed to want to, maybe I was making too much of it. The uncertainty was so basic—did any of this happen? How do I know? Was I there? Did I exist? Do I? All those questions were confounded by the family that split, the mother who left, a mirror so broken that I couldn't find myself in it.

I felt trapped in an endless and seemingly-hopeless quest, unable to stop myself from returning to it over and over. Searching. Feeling something important is missing, imagining that it might be found, looking, not finding, repeatedly frustrated. A familiar process, one that brings on an equally familiar malaise comprised of sadness, hopelessness, aimlessness, not knowing what to do with myself. The searching itself, I finally recognized, was grief.

* * *

A widower, stock-still on the street, stares at the back of someone he knows is not his dead wife but from whom he cannot wrest his eyes. A

child in a wartime hospital asks over and over for Mama, goes to the door, the window, looks out, asks again. A wild goose searches for its lost mate, calling out endlessly, then falling silent with exhaustion until, in spring, its calls start up again. Along with denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance, the irrational involuntary search for the lost love is part of the universal experience of mourning.

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At first I thought I was trying to find a picture. Then that I needed to pin down which year it was that Seeger had come to Lake Geneva. Probably what I really wished for was a kind of time-travel. I'd been searching for Pete, for my mother, for a lost past. He's gone, so is she, and the picture on the album is all that remains of those Lake Geneva summers. But I know, finally and for sure, that I was there.

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