



Woody Guthrie, [Ivar Haglund](#), Pete Seeger, [Terry Pattus \(SeattleMet\)](#)

THE RED SCARE AND SEATTLE FOLK MUSIC

The Dark Side

by Bob Nelson

Born in 1937 and raised in the Seattle area, I've been blessed, or perhaps cursed, with a rich heritage of local lore. I am also plagued by still having an excellent memory. I remember major events that impacted my childhood as well as my community. For instance, I remember when my father introduced me to [Ivar Haglund](#). I was ten years old, and we often visited with Ivar when he first opened his small aquarium at Pier 54 on the Seattle waterfront. Dad and Ivar would often disappear into his small office and share a shot of whiskey.

I remember my father holding me on his shoulders at the King Street station as we watched Harry Truman campaign for the 1948 Presidential election. I remember when the brick wall of Highline High School collapsed during the 1949 earthquake and killed five students. I also remember when Dave Beck, the Teamster Union leader, was brought down by the [McClellan Committee](#) and went to Federal prison for Union corruption. This was just after my father built a home

for Dave Beck. On and on, my memory still functions.

And I also remember that very dark political period we now call "[McCarthy Era](#)." I witnessed some of the effects of the local communist witch-hunts. Here I want to share some personal stories of folks I knew and respected, who were damaged by that drunken Wisconsin senator, Joe McCarthy, in the early 1950s.

THE TEMPER OF THE TIMES

To understand the "Red Scare" you need to remember history. During the depression of the 1930s, there were few jobs, no money, and despair was everywhere. People became radicalized and many joined radical political groups, seeking any kind of potential improvement. I think there were some 38 political parties in America by 1938: [The Bund](#), The Socialist Party, The Republican Party, The Democratic Party, [The Klu Klux Klan](#), and yes, [The Communist Party](#).

During World War 2, Communist Russia was our ally. My father worked at Todd shipyard during World War 2 repairing Russian ships. But after the allied victory and Stalin dropped the "Iron Curtain," our relationship with Russia changed from reluctant allies to avowed enemies. It was then that our government started re-educating us: Communism now was a bad thing. The entire government propaganda program kicked in, and we learned that to be a communist, even if you only flirted with party membership in the thirties and had since resigned your party affiliation, made you a "PINKO." A "RED." You were now SUSPECT! You were now part of the "RED MENACE." With this new and negative energy, along came the House Un-American Activities Committee ([HUAC](#)) and in Washington state, the "[Canwell Committee](#)."

I never ran into a person who could even spell the word communist until I was sixteen. It was 1953, and I become active with the "Seattle Folksinging Society." We were a great group of plain folks, mostly families, who met once a month at Eagleson Hall YMCA. in Seattle's "U" district to share an evening of singing. Mostly homegrown musicians and folkies, we enjoyed traditional folk music of the world.

I started dating a girl who was a strong song leader in the group. As we got acquainted, I learned that her mother was "Pearl Wanamaker," a powerhouse in Washington State politics. As State Director of Public Education, she was in a political struggle for her life. Her 'sin' was not that she was accused of being a communist, but as State Superintendent of Public Instruction, she was defending a teacher who was accused of being a Communist. It was a costly stance for Wanamaker as [she lost the next election](#).

About the same time, [Walt Robertson](#) organized a small concert for himself and Pete Seeger at a sorority house in Seattle's University district. Walt and Pete gave a memorable concert that was well received and is still well remembered. Walt also offered Pete a place to crash on his houseboat on Lake Union.

This was a time when Pete was blacklisted from performing on any national stages or venues. He had testified before the HUAC, and they didn't like his attitude. As punishment, word went out to everyone in the entertainment industry not to hire him. Pete was having a hard time supporting his family.

At this time Walt, who was raised a the Quaker, had Contentious Objector status with the draft board. Two weeks after Pete's departure, Walt received a letter from the draft board informing him that his C.O. status was cancelled and he was to report immediately to Fort Ord, California, for basic training in the U.S. Army. It was clear to everyone that this was political retribution for supporting Pete Seeger.

As The Seattle Folksinging Society grew in size, we started attracting more attention. Soon our membership approached one hundred. We became known to traveling folkies who might land in Seattle for a few weeks. We saw the likes of Pete Seeger, Eric Sackheim, Roy Guest, Doc Watson, and Guy Carawan. And soon we also drew the attention of the FBI.

THE FBI AND ME

By the time I was seventeen, I was elected President of our music group. This was an office in name only, as I was really just one of a growing number of young and energetic lovers of the music. As President, I think my only real function was to get there early and make sure the chairs were set up. I was a figurehead, and like many figureheads, I became a target.

My political naivety was shattered one evening when at the close of a singing session, I was handed a letter by an FBI. agent directing me to call the Seattle office the next day and make an appointment for a visit. I dutifully went there for the meeting, far more curious than frightened. After an uncomfortable waiting period, I was escorted to an office and introduced to a man who didn't smile. In fact, he never smiled once during the entire interview. When I was seated opposite him, he opened up a manila folder on his desk and silently read it for a while. Then he looked at me and said: "We know all about YOU. You're the President of the Seattle Folk Singing Society." When I didn't respond, he repeated: "We know all about YOU. It's right here in your file!" I said: "Oh."

After some further attempts to intimidate me, I asked him why he wanted to see me. He said that I was the leader of a Communist front organization, and he wanted me to "go to work for him." I asked what he meant. He explained that he wanted me to continue in my leadership role and to supply him with the membership list of our group. He also asked me to keep him informed about new members and any subversive activities I was aware of. This was pretty scary stuff for this seventeen-year-old kid still in high school.

I told him that I'd get back to him after I thought about it. He gave me his card

and told me to call him. I went home, discussed this with my parents, and threw the card away. I never heard more from them for another year. Some time later, I learned that the late Don Firth had the identical experience.

The Seattle Folksinging Society kept going for about another year, but as very real threats of Communist witch hunts continued, our membership dropped dramatically. By now people were being fired, both from the Univ. of Washington and jobs in the Defense industry. People simply became very afraid to meet monthly and share songs. Sadly the group finally disbanded.

THE LOYALTY OATH

As I approached graduation and my eighteenth birthday, I had to register for the military draft. A close family friend was a Major in the 50th General Hospital, stationed at Fort Lawton. I was at sixes and sevens then about what to do with my life. I knew I wasn't ready for college, so I followed his advice and volunteered for the Army.

Joining the Army was not an easy thing in 1955. After passing the physical and mental exams, you had to sign the "[loyalty oath](#)." This official signing happened at Fort Lawton on a Saturday morning. I remember that the form was three pages long, and included a two-column listing of various Seattle organizations with a box beside each name. We were instructed to check any boxes of any organizations that we ever had any contact with.

I went merrily through the list and checked a half dozen boxes: "Seattle Labor Council," "Committee to Protect the Foreign Born," "Committee to Overturn the Smith Act." On and on. After the papers were collected, a lieutenant came and led me to a small room where a Captain was seated. He had my form in front of him and was reading it. He asked if this was my signature and I verified that I had filled it out. He then stood, told me not to go anywhere, and left the room.

He returned with a Major who questioned me further. After more questions, I explained that my contact with these groups was all about music. I was hired as a singer to entertain one Friday night a month at the Seattle Labor Council meetings. They paid me five bucks and gave me a spaghetti dinner. I joined The Committee to Overturn the Smith Act, because that was Cecelia Corr's group and she played a Clarke Irish Harp and sang in Gallic. On and on. He then asked me what kind of songs I sang. I gave him a chorus of "[Oleanna](#)" and "[Marching to Pretoria](#)." He asked my why I sang those Communist songs. I said it was because they had the best songs. He was not impressed.

I was dismissed and told to go home and someone would be in touch with me soon, and they were. Two days later, my parents heard from several neighbors that two FBI men in blue suits were canvassing our neighbors and asking all about me, my politics, and was I really a guitar-toting Communist?

I must have passed muster because shortly after that I was inducted into the Army.

I had one final incident where the U.S. Army expressed its unhappiness with my liberal associations with suspect folksingers. After serving my first term in the active duty Army, I was assigned again to the 50th General Hospital at Fort Lawton on Active Reserve Status. During this time, I made friends with some officers who were creating a new type of Army unit. I expressed interest in perhaps joining this group, but after a background check, I was denied an application. In 1961, the F.B.I. was still unhappy with my folk-singing associates.

While my personal experiences during the “Red Scare” were certainly minimal, I did witness events that were not nearly so laughable.

In 1957, I witnessed another very poignant example of the terrible harm that this black period in U.S. history caused. I was at a hoot in Seattle where the host was an older man named “Ray.” During a lull in the music, we got to talking about Pete, the blacklisting, and the Communist witch-hunts that were happening. He became very nervous and invited me into his private office. He then shut the door and told me his story. He lowered his voice to a whisper and became very nervous. In the early ‘30s, he, like so many other desperate people during the depression, had briefly joined the American Communist Party. Now he was terribly afraid that his past association would become known and he would lose his retirement benefits as a nuclear physicist. During the World War 2 he worked on the Manhattan Project. I still remember the awful fear I saw in his eyes.

COULD THIS HAPPEN AGAIN?

You bet, and it already has. You only have to go back to the year 2000 when President Bush appointed [John Ashcroft](#), Attorney General. During his reign, he went on national television and strongly suggested that, yet again, we become vigilant and spy on our friends and neighbors for signs of suspicious activities. Out of this scary retreat back to the dark days came a wonderful song written by John McCutcheon titled “[I Want To Be A Spy](#).”

A final note that you might find interesting: about ten years ago I was remodeling our family bathroom. I decided to wall paper the walls with something different, so I filled out the required forms under the freedom of Information Act, mailed my \$38 to the Seattle FBI office, and requested a copy of my FBI file. I was planning on papering my walls with the report. Something about viewing this vital information on my bathroom walls struck me as a possible useful function of the paperwork, especially in the bathroom. After several months with no response, except for my cancelled check, I found out through private sources that my file had been destroyed. It seems that President Carter decided that those old FBI files were no longer useful to anyone. I requested my money back ... guess where that got me!

[Bob Nelson](#)