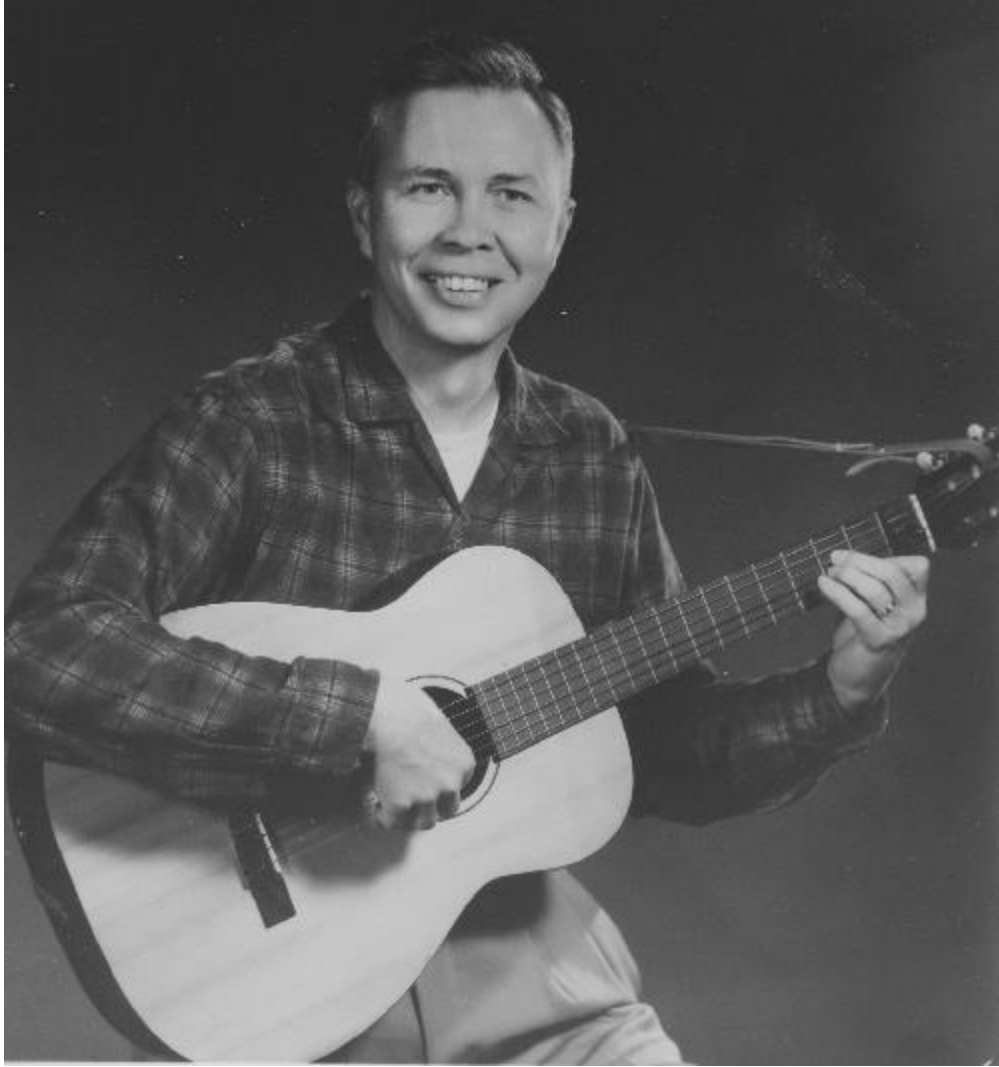




**SEATTLE FOLKSINGERS
THOSE WHO LED THE WAY
JOHN DWYER
By Bob Nelson**

In these articles titled “[Those Who Led The Way](#)” I want to bring to you the stories of folksingers who were very influential in the Seattle folk music scene of the 1950’s and 60’s. The first two articles presented [Walt Robertson](#) and [Don Firth](#). Here I present John Dwyer as I knew him.



John Dwyer (ca. 1960)

I met John Dwyer in 1962 when he was a librarian in the Highline School District. My wife was doing her student teaching at his school and soon she began bringing home stories about this marvelous man she'd met who, like me, loved traditional folk songs. Soon we were invited to his home where we met his family for dinner. It was just after we had finished our meal when John abruptly excused himself, saying he had to sing the children to sleep. Sure enough, we could hear him singing songs to children upstairs. What was remarkable was that he sang his children to sleep for a very long time, at least an hour. That gave me a tantalizing introduction to this incredible man.

The stories of John's enormous repertoire are legion. With the possible exception of Paddy Grabber, he had the most songs available in his memory bank of anyone I have ever known. He not only remembered every single verse of every song, but he also knew all the nuances of the songs' histories and variants. You only had to glance at the back of his guitar to see the list of song titles that completely covered the instrument. I remember that for a while that the list was layered in

overlapping pages.

John was a consummate punster. During any conversation, if he sensed a possible word game in the offing, his eyes would twinkle and a special gleam would appear. It would be doubly so if he could concoct a double entendre. Often would be heard some of the most outrageous puns ever let loose in North America. To challenge him in the game of punning was to risk life and limb.

And beyond that, he loved to get into singing duels, especially with the fairer sex. And before those duels, he likely would give you an argument that the female of the species WAS the fairer sex! He and Linda Allen used to spar frequently, all in good fun. I remember when once John and I drove down to Olympia to perform a concert together. Linda was running "Apple Jam", the popular folk house in the 1970's. As usual, we had our concert well planned and rehearsed. But early into the second half, John started to change the program by singing songs with a devilish chauvinistic point of view. I was pretty flexible and open to program changes, but as soon as he started singing some of these very pointed songs, I sensed what was coming. It was going to be a contest! I watched as Linda rose to the bait. I knew I was outgunned, and simply handed my guitar to Linda and went off stage and sat in the audience. Sure enough, she matched him song for song ... Oh it was great fun. When those two got going, it was best to just get out of the way.

I knew John for well over 40 years and of course he lived in many different homes over the years. But it was his last home on the beach at Priest Point that is best remembered as the house of so many hoots. And John was the perfect "hoot host", serving his famous 'beer bread', smoked salmon and home smoked cheese. He also shared his appreciation of "villi", which came from my own family's Finnish heritage. John and I also shared a passion for salt-water fishing. We often would jump into his very nice bay boat and zoom out to Mission Bar, anchor and throw "buzz bombs" at the salmon. Sometimes the salmon were so plentiful that they would jump into the boat and clean themselves. As I still live in the area, I can't drive anywhere north of Everett without seeing Priest Point and remember those many hours of fine song swapping and friendship. I also chuckle to remember the annual neighborhood work parties where friends and neighbors would drive backhoes and small bulldozers onto the beach. Then we would drag huge storm driven logs into piles and start our chainsaws. It was great fun and was always followed by food and songs.

In 1974, while John was being a librarian at Everett Community College, he approached me about teaching some guitar classes at the school. He had started a beginner's guitar class and soon I joined him on the music faculty. These classes quickly became very popular and we soon had to bring in several more teachers. After four years, the total staff of guitar teachers included Dave and Flip Auer, Peter Schwimmer, Julie Sakahara and Bill Mitchell.

It was about this same time that John began traveling to folk music sessions in Vancouver and Victoria, BC. It was there that he first participated in “song circles”. He quickly realized the potential and gathered his Seattle area friends to start the first [Seattle Song Circle](#). John’s steadfast support of the regular Sunday evening “Song Circle” established a tradition that continues today. No mention of John and the Seattle song circle would be complete without recalling John’s reaction when the book “[Rise Up Singing](#)” first appeared at song circles and hoots. He felt that the use of the book during song swapping sessions violated everything that was Holy about folk music. He and many others have felt that the book’s use as a crutch has forever changed the complexion of Song Circles.

During this time, we also produced [four annual folk festivals](#) at Everett Community College. These became three-day events with many workshops and concerts. Some of the performers that appeared during these festivals included Stan James, Linda Allen, Maggie Savage, Mike Marker, Peter Ludwin, Don Firth, Sally and John Ashford, Julie Sakahara, Peter Schwimmer, Rag Daddy, John Weiss, Frank Ferrell, Phil and Vivian Williams. It was all great fun and helped to recognize and build an interest in traditional folk music in the Snohomish County that continues today.

One time we were called upon to perform on the Everett waterfront as a commemorative plaque was placed in dedication of the [Everett Massacre](#). We sang some Wobbly songs, but that event was particularly moving as the last surviving Wobbly member of the event was present and told of the day the steamship Verona sailed into Everett Harbor carrying many Wobblies to their death.

During the bi-centennial year of 1976, John produced twelve monthly concerts for the [Everett Public Library](#).

With John’s full knowledge of history, it was only natural that he should write some contemporary songs pertaining to the history of our region. Two songs stand out: “[The San Juan Pig](#)”, and “[Notice To Mariners](#).” He also put the words of a poem by Emma Rounds to music: “[The Ballad of the Merry Ferry](#).” Linda Allen published these songs in her fine book “[Washington Songs and Lore](#).”

John Dwyer passed away in his beachfront home in November of 1997. To his honor, a special song circle was held at “Camp Long” in West Seattle. To say that it was well attended would be an understatement. The spoken and sung tributes to John went on into the late hours. It was clear to me that his reach was deep and his impact was immense.

There were two highlights of that gathering that stick in my memory. One was when the dreaded “[blue book](#)” was ceremoniously ripped up and thrown in the fireplace. That was a statement from all of us to our friend of many songs. There was an even more moving event that still brings a tear. As the circle of songs went around the room, it finally came to one chair. That chair held John’s guitar. A

long silence happened. It was a very moving tribute to a great folksinger that had just left us.

There was a quality about John's voice that I really enjoyed. It was unpretentious, strong, and I felt was uniquely suited to the singing of folk songs. And whereas many of the folk musicians of that time had egos to match their self-importance, John was clearly a person who simply enjoyed the music for what it was. He delighted in each and every song he knew, and he knew so very many. I can still see the gleam in his eye and hear the chuckle in his voice when he was able to supply the missing verse to song that someone less prepared had attempted to sing.

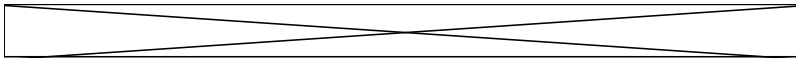
Following are five song selections from my archives that will bring you his voice again. You should be aware that these recordings were not made in professional recording studios, but rather were recorded on cheap tape recorders of the period in less than perfect acoustic conditions.

The first three songs were recoded in 1976 at a live concert at "Apple Jam". This was a popular folk house that Linda Allen managed in Olympia, Washington in the 1970's.

"Eggs and Marrowbone"



"The Sow Took The Measles"

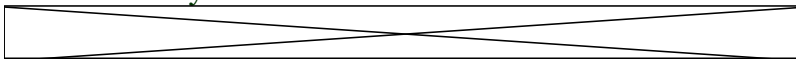


"Bow Down"



These last two pieces were recorded at a Seattle song circle in 1979. These two examples not only exhibit the power and strength of John Dwyer's voice, but also reflect the enthusiastic participation of the early Seattle song circles before the "blue book" was allowed to dominate the gatherings.

"Ben Backstay"



"Paddy Lay Back"



More songs and stories about John Dwyer are on the [Mudcat Forum here](#).

The telling of this rich and vital period of folk music in the Puget Sound region could not be complete with presenting John and Sally (AKA Pushkara) Ashford. I will close this series of articles with John and Sally in the next HOOT issue.

[Bob Nelson](#)