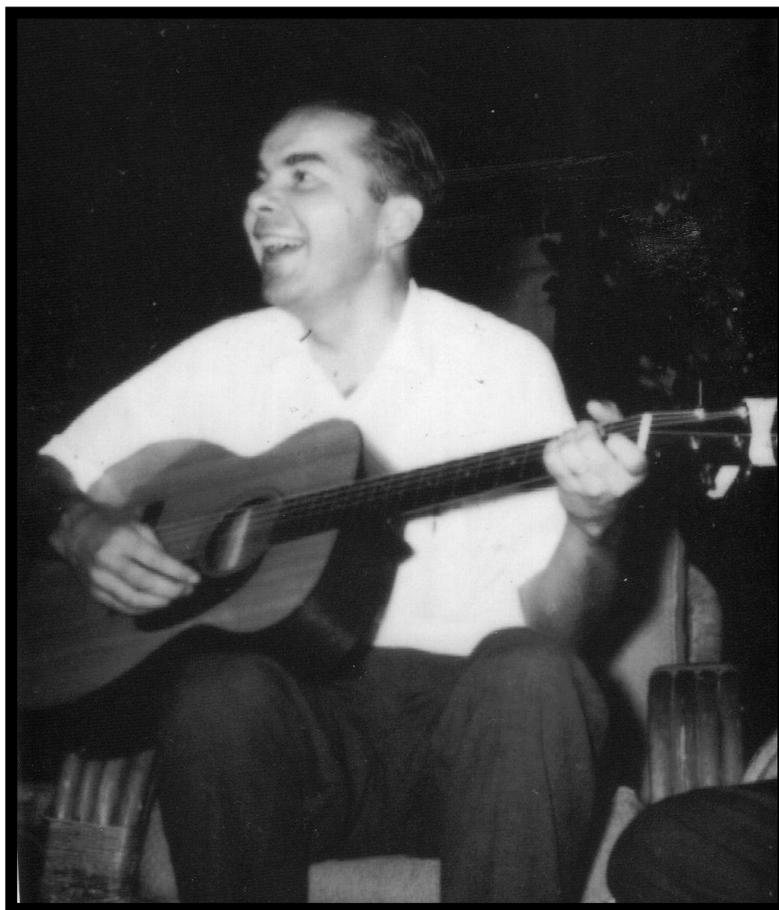


# THE INCIDENTAL SONGSTER



BY  
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*Our father wrote this musical autobiography over the last few months. It was simply his desire to reflect on the importance of music and various songs during his life. He didn't intend to do anything more with it than share it with his children, grandchildren, and friends. We reproduce it here to allow it to stand as his final written work.*

## The Incidental Songster

*In the early days of the Federal Executive Institute (FEI), the senior executives circulated a lighthearted commentary on both the staff and various parts of the FEI program including the Happy Hour. These comments were circulated among the executives in a tongue-in-cheek newsletter called the "FEI THUNDERGROUND." One issue contained the following comment: "Jim Roberts has the words to 50,000 songs tattooed to the inside of his eyelids."*

The number was a little generous and the location should have been pushed back several inches, but they do reflect my wealth of songs. They have usually been unrelated to my primary activity whatever and wherever I might be. It may be interesting to speculate on the sources of these songs.

Songs have always been a part of my life. Lullabies and nursery rhymes were many, and a surprising number lie in the inner recesses of my mind, only to get aroused and come to mind on strange and unplanned occasions.

### Childhood

The source of many songs was my mother. She picked up several while studying at Michigan State. Among the songs she sang were "Barney Google," "Pony Boy," "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines," and "A Co-Ed Leads a Sloppy Life." Fortunately, her education also included a summer session at "Bug Camp" which led to her discovery of Bois Blanc Island, in the Straits of Mackinac. Within a few years, Mother began taking the family to spend the whole summer on Bois Blanc Island, a verdant playground for a family of growing boys.



Summers on Bois Blanc Island in Michigan were a source of many songs and a few ballads. A few of the songs were Episcopal Church hymns such as "Onward Christian Soldiers" which in later years was too belligerent for my taste.



Many of the songs were sung around a bonfire. The bonfires, which have since been banned, served two important purposes: (a) they cleaned up the environment and helped rid the island of old furniture and (b) provided a way for the participants to sing old songs such as "Genevieve," "Kathleen Mavourneen," and "Sweet Adeline" with willing attempts at harmony. It was also a way to bring the summer "cottagers" and year-round "islanders"

together. Some songs were funny although I frequently failed to see the humor in songs like "Gasoline," which may have been written by and islander or cottager and produced much laughter, because it detailed how to start a car with a crank ("you gave the crank an

*awful yank*”). On the other hand, there were ballads such as “Home on the Range,” “Clementine,” and “When the Work’s All Done This Fall”.

Trips to the Island continued into the depression days of the early 1930’s. The depression led to a variety of songs such as “Halleluiah, I’m a Bum” and the “Big Rock Candy Mountain.”

### **Teenage Years**

As a teenager in the 1930s, having relocated with my family to Los Angeles, I was much involved in the labor movement, sparked in part by the depression. The labor movement in America accomplished a number of things, not the least of which was that it produced a lot of songs. A large number of these were parodies on familiar old songs. Two of my favorites were “ Joe Hill” (“*Joe Hill ain’t dead, he says to me, Joe Hill ain’t never died, where working men are out on strike Joe Hill is at their side.*”) and Pete Seeger’s “Talking Union,” both of which were well received and often requested.

My grandmother thought my tastes needed a little upgrading so she took me to a concert of songs of John Jacob Niles. Of the many songs he sang, my favorite was “Black is the Color of My True Love’s Hair.” There were many others.

My Uncle George introduced me to Gilbert and Sullivan through frequently singing the lyrics and bringing my recordings of the various musicals, including my favorite, “The Mikado.” This whetted my appetite for Gilbert and Sullivan, which served me well throughout my life.

### **The Army**

I enlisted in the Army when I was a freshman at the University of Redlands. Many of the songs in the army cannot be sung in mixed company. Many of the songs were taken from movie scores and/or stage productions. Sometimes words were added or the lyrics changed:

You’re in the Army now  
You’re not behind the plow  
You’ll never get rich  
from digging a ditch  
(usually “You son of a bitch)

Then there were bits and snatches that were critical of Army life:

The coffee that they serve you  
They say is mighty fine  
It’s good for cuts and bruises  
And tastes like iodine  
I don’t want more of army life.  
Gee Mom I want to go home.



After I got out of the service, I went to UCLA for a semester and got back to singing ballads and songs of protest. I also joined the American Veterans Committee.

## Harvard

A few friends argued against going to Harvard. The alternative suggestion was to put the guitar over my shoulder—and be happy. As one friend, Jack Spicer, stated his views “As you ramble through life, you will find that the three most overrated institutions are 1) Harvard, 2) sex, and 3) strawberry shortcake.”

I entered Harvard in February of 1945. I was classified as a provisional sophomore because of the courses I had taken at UCLA and Western Maryland College through the Army Specialized Training Program. Shortly after coming to Harvard, I joined the Harvard Glee Club. In the beginning I had the help of Norman Dudley who warned me that I either was singing an octave low, or I was trying to sing the melody in the bass section. Most of the things that we learned in the Glee Club were classical numbers, frequently in Latin.



During the spring semester, I went with the Glee Club to four or five women's colleges where we serenaded the co-eds. The real musical education, however, came on the bus trips between colleges. Many were songs from other colleges, including such favorites as the “Maine Stein Song” and the “Rambling Wreck from Georgia Tech.” On the bus, these and many other songs, had verses that seemed to be composed by whom ever was singing the song at the time.

Some of these songs were not too charitable to the institution we were on our way to visit. An example would be on our visit to Vassar, the song we sang on the bus ride there, included the lyrics “*My girl from Vassar, none can surpass her, she is the stroke on the varsity crew.*” At the time we sang it, it was meant in a slightly derogatory fashion, alluding to the girl's masculine ways (of course, nowadays, the stroke on the varsity crew would be hailed as a hero and an amazing athlete).

Most of the songs we sang had verses added while riding in the bus. The one song we always sang in its original form was “The Whiffenpoof Song” which was so good in the original that we were reluctant to modify it.

In 1946, the Glee Club had the opportunity to sing with the Boston Symphony under the direction of Serge Koussevitzky. In addition to classical music, we sang a collection of songs from Gilbert and Sullivan, the opening line of a song from “Yeoman of the Guard” is “*The prisoner comes to meet his doom, the block, the headsman, and the tomb.*” What made this particularly interesting was that the mayor of Boston, James Michael Curley (who was currently under indictment by the federal government for misuse of federal funds) was in the audience, but even he seemed to enjoy the song.

After graduating from Harvard with a B.S. degree in Government, I entered University of Southern California and began working on a Master's Degree in Public Administration. My non-curricular activities were connected with the American Veterans Committee, which had, as its slogan “Americans First, Veterans Second.”

I left USC after one year, without completing my Masters Degree, to go to the University of North Carolina and enter the doctoral program in public administration. A secondary reason for choosing UNC was that I wanted to experience life in a southern state. I did keep my singing through dramatic and musical productions, including Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado" and John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera." At the end of my first year in North Carolina, I married Anne, and we left for Sweden shortly thereafter. The visit was planned as both a second honeymoon and a chance to work on my dissertation on the political activities of Swedish civil servants.

## **Sweden**

Sometime before leaving for Sweden, Anne and I joined the World Student Federalists. In Sweden I joined World Federalist Organization. I attended a WFO meeting in Folkestone, England. While there, we elected international officers. I was elected the Chairman of the World Student Federalist. I was elected to this because I had the support of the American and Swedish federation, but also because on a road trip during the meeting we began singing Gilbert and Sullivan songs. The fact that I knew more lyrics to the songs was probably the biggest factor in giving me the votes of the British World Federalists.



My main purpose for being in Sweden was to do research for my doctoral dissertation but I frequently got sidetracked to put on a folk-song program at various locations in Sweden. At first, instead of folk songs, they wanted me to talk about life in America, and in particular, in Hollywood. These were not as successful as my folk-song sessions. I wasn't paid for this, but the U.S. Information Services would pay for my transit there and back, which I would exchange for two third-class tickets and take Anne along.

Singing folk songs was a two-way process thanks, in part, to the efforts of PerAxel Hildeman, which allowed me to learn a great many Swedish songs. After a few weeks, I also learned that "Helan Går" (a song sung while consuming akvavit) was the second Swedish national anthem.

The folk song sessions were very successful, especially when I could get the audience to participate in the singing. The folk songs were so popular in Sweden that when we took a trip to Holland, the U.S. Information Services officer, Merrill Miller, wrote to the Dutch agency and arranged for me to give a program at the Heineken brewery.

## **Pakistan**

When we arrived in Pakistan in 1962, the head of the U.S. Information Service was again Merrill Miller, whom we had previously met in Holland. Miller wanted me to sing folk songs around Pakistan. In support of that venture, he had the U.S. Information Service type up a folio of American songs, about 75% of which I contributed and 15% were

contributed by Barbara Boyer (the other 10% were contributed by Merrill Miller). Barbara and I together sang at various locations around Pakistan. We were able to go into a variety of places, where we were well received. Often we would be part of a larger program. For me one of the high points of these performances was performing before 300 Pakistani students and having them sing along to “Skip to My Lou.”



### **Family**

Another main avenue in my life to sing folk songs was during the childhoods of my three children. Each of my three children had their favorite songs. My son Eric loved “Summertime and the Living is Easy” (“*your daddy’s rich and your ma is good looking.*”) Mark, who often had tummy and restlessness issues as an infant and toddler, seemed to be soothed with a German folk song that roughly translates to “*I cannot march any longer because I’ve lost my little flute. But now I have found my flute and can go on marching.*” Mark seemed to like the steady rhythm of the song, although I can’t say it helped him in his later attempt to learn German in high school. My daughter Wendy’s favorite song was “Hush Little Baby” which contained creative questioning coupled with the reliance of a parent’s love and concern.

### **Nevada**

In Carson City, there were several people who enjoyed singing ballads. In Carson there were Tony and Ann Amaral, and Reno there were Bob Gorrell and Ann Howard, and members of the Dial Club.

At the 1967 graduation at UNR Keith Macy had the faculty march in to the tune of the “March of the Peers” from Iolanthe, again a Gilbert & Sullivan piece. It may be that Bob Gorrell and I were the only members of the faculty march who knew the words:

*“Bow, bow ye lower middle classes.  
Bow, bow ye tradesmen, bow ye masses”*

It may have been a protest against the President of the University, Minard Stout, who had upset the faculty and student body by firing a very popular professor, Frank Richardson.

### **The Federal Executive Institute**

Happy hour at the FEI provided many opportunities to exchange songs with the executives. One interesting session was when the FEI hosted a number of executives from Ireland. They sang Irish songs from both sides of the ocean. Some were sad, some political. My favorite was “The Vale of Tralee,” but the group like “Danny Boy.” The words were written by an Englishman and the tune is “Londonderry Air.” Still, it comes close to being the Irish national anthem.

After several sessions at the FEI, Anne and I took a trip to Australia and New Zealand. Again there were more songs. The main song was “Waltzing Matilda” which might be viewed as a national anthem.

Back home there were frequent reminders of other songs, like “Scarlet Ribbons,” “Woad,” “The Rose With a Broken Stem” and “Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve Seen” to name only a few. The list is endless, but all are songs that need no instruments except the human voice.



*The Road goes ever on and on  
Down from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road had gone,  
And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with eager feet,  
Until it joins some larger way  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then? I cannot say.*

*The Road goes ever on and on  
Out from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road had gone,  
Let others follow it who can,  
Let them a journey new begin,  
But I at last with weary feet  
Will turn towards the lighted inn,  
My evening-rest and sleep to meet.*

—J. R. R. Tolkien