

The Fayetteville Observer

Op-Ed: Sid Gautam - Kinder Spirit of Pete Seeger

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Sid Gautam

When musician Pete Seeger died last month, it triggered a host of memories, including the time he performed here in Fayetteville.

Growing up in India, I developed great reverence for rivers and oceans.

Whenever Indians go on a pilgrimage, they pay their highest regard and respect to the Holy Ganges and many other rivers in India. Interested foreign tourists also include a visit to the scenic high Himalayas that are sources of the Ganges and other rivers.

Lately, the interests of foreign movie stars and celebrities have shifted from the high mountains to quick visits to the historical banks of the Ganges - widely publicized as the famous "Ghats" in Varanasi.

When Roy Parker Jr. moved from Raleigh to Fayetteville to edit the newly created Fayetteville Times, I found him a great friend and teacher of the riches of the history, culture, and unbound natural beauty of this state. Words can hardly express my deep gratitude for his free and frank advice, counsel and above all encouragement in launching my public initiatives.

I discussed with Roy my less than satisfactory visit to the Cape Fear River with my daughter. We bounced several ideas to raise the profile of the greatest river in North Carolina. Roy was happy to hear my passionate views and suggested we get other interested people involved.

With his active help, the Cape Fear River Research Institute was established. Charlie Holt, J.W. Pate, John Mitchell and many other prominent citizens joined our efforts to create awareness about the longest river of North Carolina.

The year 1975 was a challenging one in the history of America. The frustrating, long Vietnam War ended in April. Strangely enough, entrepreneurial history was made by two young people, Bill Gates and Paul Allen, when they founded Microsoft in the same month.

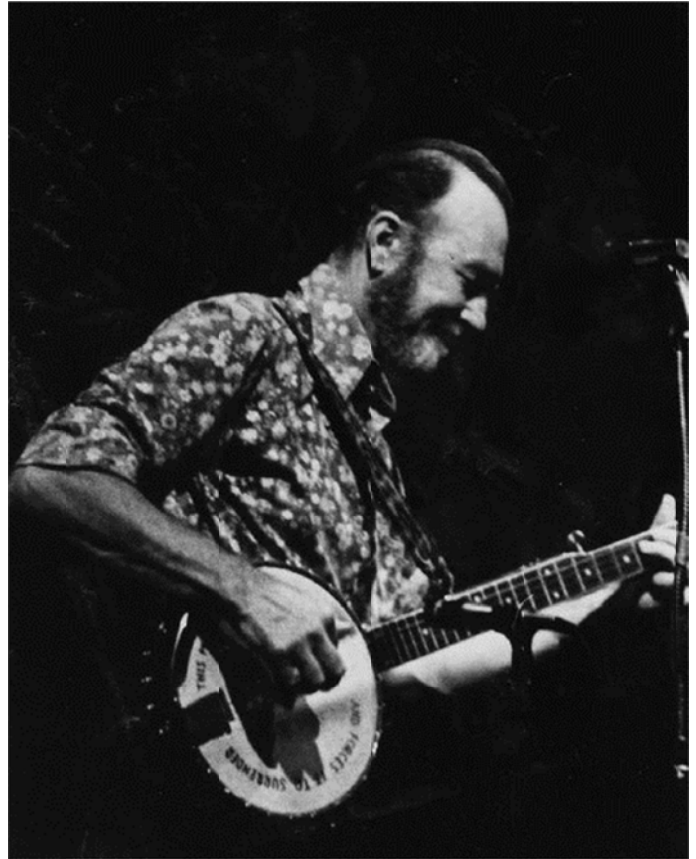
After completing the formalities of electing the officers and executive committee of the research institute, we started looking to organize a special meeting.

During that summer, I attended an environmental meeting in Washington, D.C. Folk singer and activist Seeger made a short but impressive presentation that included a couple of songs. I approached him after his presentation and invited him to visit Fayetteville to help our group promote awareness of the Cape Fear River. He accepted the invitation and promised to call me in the near future.

After a few months, he called and said he would be going to Atlanta to give a concert in November, and on his return, he could stop in Fayetteville. We invited several Methodist University students and other river enthusiasts, who joined us on a memorable canoe trip. More than 20 canoes followed Pete's leading canoe in the Cape Fear.

He invited my 9-year-old daughter to join him in his canoe. She enjoyed every song and still remembers Seeger's famous full-chested yodels. The institute organized a concert at the Little Theatre - now the Cape Fear Regional Theatre.

Little did I know the fame and popularity of Seeger and his songs. People came from as far away as Charlotte, Wilmington, the Triangle and many other cities in North Carolina. He had an uncanny ability and special appeal. Young people were singing, dancing and enjoying every song. There was so much energy, excitement and enjoyment in the audience. The Little Theatre



Staff file photo

didn't have enough room, so an overflow crowd was standing and singing in the lobby.

At his invitation, we visited his rustic home overlooking the Hudson River. Holding my daughter's hand, he showed us around and explained all about the river and surroundings. His wife, Toshi, prepared a simple yet nutritious and all-organic lunch. He told us several stories of his early career. He gave my daughter a hand-drawn picture of the "Clearwater" sloop that Seeger helped build and use in the battle to clean up the Hudson. She framed it and kept in her room.

Knowing my interest in teaching economics, he gave me his copy of British economist E.F. Schumaker's "Small Is Beautiful." His simple home had no trappings of modern, ostentatious living. He showed his skills and interest in woodworking and his deep interest and enjoyment of nature. His overflowing passion was to maintain and improve the cleanliness of the Hudson River.

During my subsequent visits, we participated in the activities aboard the Clearwater and witnessed his boundless energy and enthusiasm to involve thousands of people in the Hudson Valley. The Clearwater would sail to cities and small towns along the river to organize festivals and promote environmental awareness and a clean river.

Seeger reached out and touched the lives of millions of people. His call for environmental awareness will remain his everlasting legacy. We will never forget his affection, kindness and compassion for our family.

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