

Wes Weddell
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Proposal for Spring 2001
Independent-Study Project

**Woody Guthrie 2001?:
Preparing a Musical Neo-History of Washington State**

Today, the drive from Pullman to Seattle takes about four-and-a-half hours to complete. Growing up in Pullman, my family customarily made it in six. While visually monotonous at times, the 290-mile drive is remarkable for the diversity of physical geography that it showcases—all within the boundaries of one state. Beginning in Pullman, one proceeds from rolling, tree-less farmlands to the barren ‘scablands’ formed when the ice dam containing prehistoric Lake Missoula burst and spilled vast amounts of water across parts of what we today recognize to be western Montana, Idaho, and Eastern Washington. The release of the colossal lake’s waters, which many think happened some forty times over the course of the different Ice Ages, was also responsible ultimately for channeling part of the Columbia River’s current course, the next notable landscape one encounters should she survive the scablands and ensuing stretch of irrigated desert. Once across the mighty Columbia, Interstate 90 begins an ascent through desolate sagebrush that gives way to the Wenatchee National Forest and culminates at Snoqualmie Pass in the Cascade Mountains. The ensuing descent becomes increasingly more urbanized until the driver is thrust straight into the maritime drizzle of urban Seattle. Should one continue west past Puget Sound, he would encounter the Hoh Rainforest on the Olympic Peninsula before finally arriving on the shores of the Pacific Ocean—quite a trek!

The people of Washington State exhibit similarly-great multiplicity, though those with a monocular vision of colored diversity might not accept such a contention at first

glance. In high school in lily-white Pullman, my friends and I used to comment that any given combination of us served as the perfect beginning to an unseemly joke: “So, a Mormon, a Jew, and an atheist are walking down the street...” Indeed, from the Cascade logging and mining camps of yesterday to Seattle’s present high-tech boom, Indian Reservations to government projects, Palouse wheat farmer to Wenatchee fruit grower, and on every road in-between, the people of the grand state of Washington represent a goldmine of primary historical source material. But while the stories of their families’ pasts constitute a vivid chapter in the history of Washington State, the stories of their own lives offer a unique illustration—a neo-history, if you will—of the diversity of experience found in today’s post-frontier Pacific Northwest.

THE IDEA

Over the course of my musical life—itself a varied and elaborate journey—I have often found myself enamored with *musical identity of place* in America. In Appalachia, for instance, one can find many detailed (and popular) musical descriptions of the rural, impoverished coal-mining lifestyle that came to characterize much of the region during the early- and mid-twentieth century. The “high lonesome” harmonies of bluegrass, accompanied by a banjo’s twang and the flutter of a mandolin, commonly recall for one images of coal buckets, railroads, roadside churches, and other hallmarks of Appalachia. In this manner, bluegrass music will forever be inextricably intertwined with the history and geography of Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia. The sea shanties of New England and gospel chorales of the Deep South exhibit similar qualities.

The Northwest—indeed, much of the American West—however, lacks such a clear and distinct folk-personality. In May of 1941, the Bonneville Power Administration hired Woody Guthrie on a thirty-day contract to write songs for a film about the Columbia River, which sports several BPA-run dams. While some of the twenty-six songs he produced for the project arguably lend the Northwest its most prominent folk-musical character today, the Oklahoma native’s songs deal mostly with the land (as was likely the request of the BPA), and not the people. As folk music is in essence music of the people, I wish to lend my talents and interest to expanding the base of Northwest folk music by writing songs about its present-day inhabitants.

THE PROJECT

As a devoted musician and budding historian, I am constantly looking for ways to unite my two passions within the realm of academia. Past efforts include a study of the presence of music in Japanese-American internment camps of World War II, an exploration American representations of the Vietnam War through music, and an essay researching the peculiarly-strong contributions of Great Britain to the defining of ‘American’ rock ‘n’ roll. I now wish to stretch my ambitions one step further by creating my own music-related course of historical study.

As described previously, the state of Washington is unique in the marked geographic, political, economic, and demographic diversity one may encounter moving from location to location. I wish to visit these diverse areas, investigate or research one or more matters of historical importance to at least one local resident (these could be anything from the Centralia Massacre to an amusing personal story from grade school),

and compose an original folk song based on the incident or individual. I intend to write at least one song per region, and I wish for these songs, when considered as a whole, to reflect the geographic, political, economic, and demographic diversity of the only state I have ever called home.

For the purposes of this project, I have divided Washington State into nine sub-regions along logical socio-geographic lines. Prior to visiting each of these areas, I will make note of my initial impressions, thoughts, and prejudices of the area (i.e. “Central Washington has a large population of Hispanic agricultural workers”) for later comparison. My goal for this project is not so much to present a fair and accurate portrayal of the *entire* character of each region—indeed, satisfactory completion of such an undertaking would likely require one academic quarter per region!—but rather to discover for myself one aspect of each region unfamiliar to me. Certainly, one could divide each of my nine sub-regions further, but divisions such as I have drawn allow for fuller exploration of each area, leaving open the possibility for more than one song to emerge from each amalgam of places, while refusing to limit the scope of the project to dealing exclusively with one group of people or another.

The Seattle Folklore Society, *The Seattle Times*, and public radio station KSER Everett have all expressed interest in following the project and receiving updates from my journals, and several concert venues throughout the state have indicated they would like to have me perform as I travel through. In addition, the Boston-area folk duo of Chris and Meredith Thompson—whose practice of creating songs from stories received from relatives they had stayed with as they traveled inspired me to further pursue my

ideas for this project—and folk singer Josh Ritter (an alumnus of the same pre-school day care center I attended as a child) have also lent support to my cause.

THE REGIONS

The following is a list of the nine regions to be used for this project, the counties encompassed, and a brief, by no means exhaustive description of some of the things that make each unique:

1) Olympic Peninsula

(Clallam, Grays Harbor, Jefferson, Kitsap, Mason)

One of the easier regions to define—the peninsula is separated latitudinally from the rest of the state by Puget Sound. It contains Olympic National Park (Olympic Mountains, Hoh Rainforest) as well ten Indian Reservations. Forks, near the Pacific coast, was the central hotspot for the timber/spotted owl controversy in the mid-nineties.

2) Southwestern Washington/South Cascades

(Clark, Cowlitz, Lewis, Pacific, Skamania, Wahkiakum)

Home to both Mt. St. Helens and the confluence of the Columbia and the Pacific Ocean; dramatic labor history in Centralia as well. Includes both Lewis and Clark Counties, a tribute to the expedition that reached its goal here.

3) ‘Pugetopolis’

(western King, western Pierce, western Snohomish, Thurston)

Another easily defined region—‘Pugetopolis’ describes the near-continuous urban expanse that ranges from Everett in the north to Olympia, the state’s capital, in the south.

Vast amounts of well-documented history here, so a good place to get creative. State Fairgrounds in Puyallup became Camp Harmony during the Japanese-American relocation efforts along the West Coast during World War II.

4) Northwestern Washington/North Cascades

(Island, San Juan, Skagit, Whatcom)

Area encompasses the brilliant San Juan Islands, North Cascades National Park, plenty of dairy farms, and the urban center of Bellingham.

5) Central Cascades/Central Washington

(Chelan sans Wenatchee, Douglas, Ferry, eastern King, western Kittitas,
Okanogan, eastern Pierce, eastern Snohomish)

Covers plenty of ground reaching from the Cascades to the Colville Indian Reservation. Home to both Mt. Rainier National Park and Grand Coulee Dam, “The mightiest thing ever built by a man,” according to Woody Guthrie. Much railroad and logging history also likely to emerge.

6) Central Washington/Yakima Valley

(Adams, Chelan: greater Wenatchee, Grant, eastern Kittitas, Yakima)

Centered on an orchard/agricultural theme. Large Spanish-speaking population in addition to the expansive Yakima Indian Reservation, which has put itself in the news recently for its decision to prohibit alcohol.

7) Northeastern Washington

(Lincoln, Pend Orielle, Spokane, Stevens)

More logging country, with wheat farming in the south. Upper-Columbia River, Spokane and Kalispell Indian Reservations, and urban center of Spokane—second-largest city in the state—also of preliminary interest.

8) Palouse/Southeastern Washington

(Asotin, Columbia, Garfield, Whitman)

Home sweet home: the ‘Pea and Lentil Capital of the World,’ known for its rolling wheat fields. State Penitentiary is in Walla Walla, while only one incorporated town lies in all of Garfield County. Currently a hotspot for the lower-Snake River dam removal debate.

9) South-Central Washington

(Benton, Franklin, Klickitat, Walla Walla)

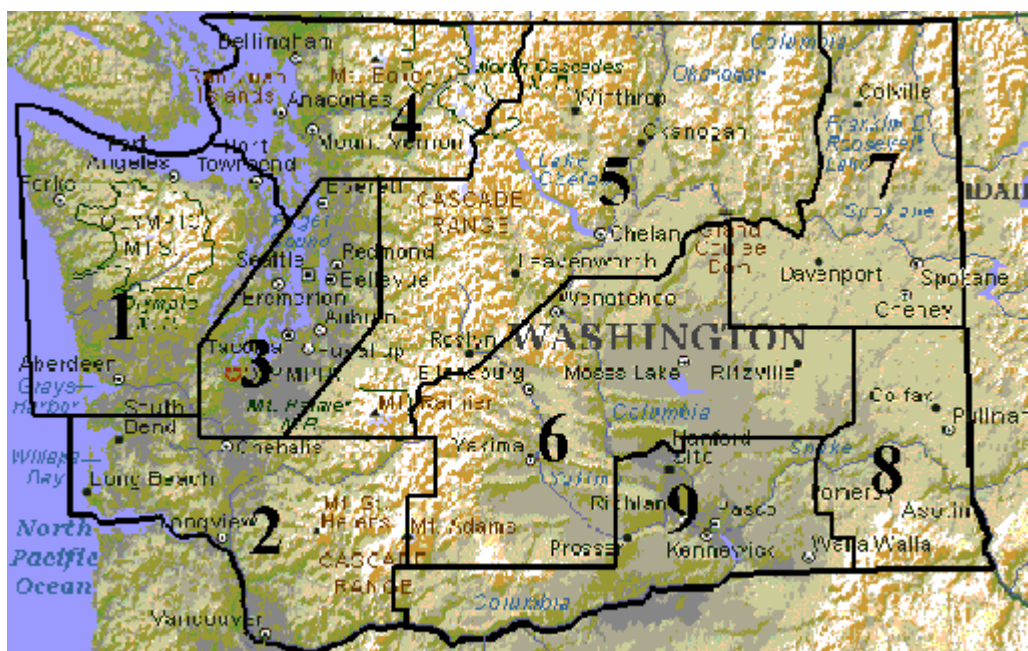
Home to Tri-Cities of Richland, Pasco, and Kennewick, and notable Hanford Nuclear Reservation, a principle source of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in World War II. A replica of Stonehenge overlooks the Columbia near Goldendale, which was a prime viewing spot for a solar eclipse several years ago.

IN CONCLUSION

In 1947, Woody Guthrie returned to the Pacific Northwest. He wrote to his wife Marjorie from Spokane: “I like the Pacific Northwest more every time I see it. The folks out here got a good shot of the old free and easy pioneer spirit in them. They still ride the tough grass and dig in the hills.” Now, more than fifty years later—and more than 100 years after Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed the close of the American frontier—I am interested to see what has become of the rugged individualists that so captivated Guthrie

and Turner. Most Westerners will agree that they are not like Easterners (or Californians, who are increasingly losing their ‘Westernness’—but that is another project entirely), but we tend to qualify this statement with what we are not instead of what we are. I want to know what we are—who we are—and thus I am heading into our midst to find us out!

Wes Weddell



<u>Map #</u>	<u>Region</u>	<u>Counties Represented</u>
1	Olympic Peninsula	Clallam, Grays Harbor, Jefferson, Kitsap, Mason
2	Southwestern Washington; South Cascades	Clark, Cowlitz, Lewis, Pacific, Skamania, Wahkiakum
3	'Pugetopolis'	King (western), Pierce (western), Snohomish (western), Thurston
4	Northwestern Washington; North Cascades	Island, San Juan, Skagit, Whatcom
5	Central Cascades; North-Central Washington	Chelan (sans Wenatchee), Douglas, Ferry, King (eastern), Kittitas (western), Okanogan, Pierce (eastern), Snohomish (eastern)
6	Central Washington; Yakima Valley	Adams, Chelan (greater Wenatchee), Grant, Kittitas (eastern), Yakima
7	Northeastern Washington	Lincoln, Pend Orielle, Spokane, Stevens
8	Palouse; Southeastern Washington	Asotin, Columbia, Garfield, Whitman
9	South-Central Washington	Benton, Franklin, Klickitat, Walla Walla