

# The Folk Process with Bill Alkire ~ “You Can’t Talk with the Radio Playing”

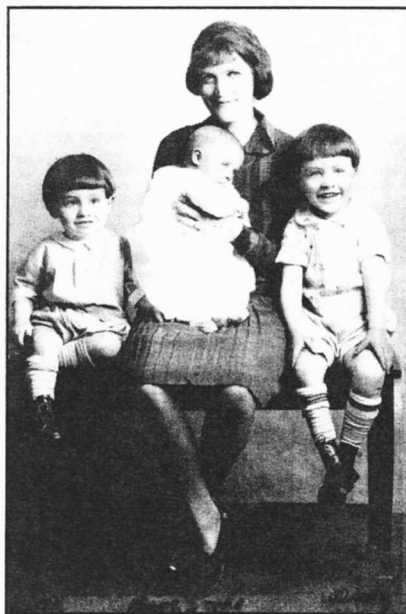
by Susan English

Mother was deaf, but she could still read music. It was just lucky she had learned to play the piano before age sixteen when she lost her hearing to scarlet fever. I like to think she was lucky to marry my father, although that was a challenge for a young, sophisticated woman raised in Columbus. I remember the day a door-to-door salesman came to our house in the woods in central Ohio. I was my full height by then and tried to run him off, but my brother Dave said, “Let’s give him a try.” That salesman sold my mother her first hearing aid.

On holidays all the relatives would gather around the piano and sing. There were strong differences in the family regarding politics, but singing was something we could all agree on. Mother played or Dad chorded, and later my brother Dave played the piano or guitar. It wasn’t just old timey music. Sometimes Mother got sheet music for popular songs from the radio or movies like “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.”

There was a lot of Irish and Scottish in both my parents’ families — the Alkires, Ritchies and Days — though the Pontius side came from Alsace-Lorraine and there was some Native American in the family too. I think they came from a musical and rhythmic culture, all of them. The eastern panhandle of West Virginia is full of Alkires today. A bunch of them moved to Kentucky sometime before 1799 when they got acreage in Ohio for their service in the Revolutionary War. They settled in Madison County, south of Columbus.

I know that Grandpa Alkire played the fiddle, and so did Uncle Parker. Aunt Polly was a great singer — mother’s older sister who never married. Mother’s father was a professional musician and had written some music. I know he also sold pianos at one time. In my father’s younger years he actually performed in minstrel shows wearing black-face, but that was a different time and



Bill (far left), Dave and Dick with their mother; photo courtesy Bill Alkire

place. Dad sometimes sang songs in French or German. He had learned French and German in World War I, probably so he could get acquainted with the young women there. He couldn’t understand why we didn’t appreciate these songs.

Dad was a bridge builder. You can imagine what kind of personality it took to supervise a hundred rough-type men: pretty smart and authoritative. “Dave, you sit at the piano,” he would say in a commanding voice. “A little louder on that tenor, Dick.”

There were three of us boys — Dick, Bill, and Dave. Dick, the eldest, had contracted polio as an infant. I remember his being in and out of the hospital quite a bit, and he often wore a cast or brace on his legs. Dave, the youngest, was very close to Mother. I felt that she actually babied Dave, although Mother was warm and affectionate with all of us. Even when we were full grown men visiting our parents, Mother would tuck us in at night. I was the middle child and I always wanted to do stuff with Dad. Maybe I wanted his approval and was willing to work for it.

Because of Dad’s bridge building, we moved quite a bit. In fact, I changed schools eight times before I entered high school. One place we lived, when I was in the first grade, we were renting a large house. Dad had quite a few friends, and I remember moving out the furniture on Saturday nights and having square dances.

The square dances were pretty much an adult affair. There would be about two sets, with my father dancing and calling. That’s probably where I learned my first square dance calls — from my Dad. There would be musicians, such as a fiddle, guitar, banjo and bass, or whoever showed up to play. The men guests dressed up in three-piece suits with white shirts, ties and shined shoes. The coats would come off after a while. Women wore dresses, whatever was stylish at the time. The refreshments were, of course, something we kids appreciated — homemade ice cream, cake and so on. There was definitely no alcohol. That was for public places, where people sometimes got rowdy. Square dancing for us was a private family activity. I remember later in high school, when Dave and I got our first gig calling a public dance, how my Daddy had a cat fit.

Dad prompted the way you might an Appalachian big set:

Give your partner one more whirl,  
And don’t forget your corner girl.

Naturally there was no amplification. He called dances

like Uptown-Downtown and a visiting square he called Reel-a-Reel to the tune Comin' Round the Mountain which was a big favorite of his:

Opposite right go once around,  
Partner by the left as she comes down.  
Opposite lady one more time,  
Partner by the left.  
Circle up four.  
Leave them there, go on to the next.

My Dad was big on having everybody moving, which was unusual for a caller in his time. "You don't want people standing around," he later told me when I started calling.

And while the people danced, they clogged. Dad called it jiggling. I think it was a basic shuffle-step rock-step or a fast two-step or polka step. Years later, when I was in college putting on the Ohio Folk Festival, we had a group of older square dancers come in from Delaware County. They clogged right through their performance, and Dad said, "That's the way we used to dance."

I was a closet tap dancer. I would have loved to take lessons, but that's not what young boys did back then. Instead, we did all the things that boys do. It seems like we were always riding our bicycles — Dick could keep up with us on bicycles. We were big fans of the radio program "The Lone Ranger," and we would hop on our bikes and call out "Hi yo, Silver, away!" We had a small barn behind the house with a cupola that became a fortress. It's amazing we didn't hurt each other during our battles. I did get hit in the nose once playing baseball at the American Legion park and have had a deviated septum ever since.

When Dad was away on a job, we got fairly wild and aggressive running around with neighbor boys. Dad had warned us to always keep kerosene far away from a fire, which really piqued our curiosity. So, once we set up a can of kerosene with a long string for a wick. We lit the string and ran and hid behind a big tree, waiting for the can to explode. Instead, we heard voices hollering and realized we had caught the grass on fire. The men who came over to put out the fire gave us a good balling out. Anyway, we proved to our satisfaction that kerosene near a fire wasn't going to explode immediately.

A swimming pool was built in Marysville when I was probably seven or eight, and we boys all took lessons. A fellow by the name of Johnny something, he was quite a hero because he taught us swimming. I remember his talking me into putting my head under the water. One summer we earned our membership by pulling weeds from the lawn outside the pool. I'm not sure how we paid the rest of the time. I know that Dick had a paper route.

Another radio program we liked was Major Bowes, which was something like a talent show. In our back yard, we would often set up a make-believe stage and invite the local kids to perform. If the performance wasn't good, the gong would go off. This was one of our earliest coed activities, since we allowed girls to join in on Major Bowes.

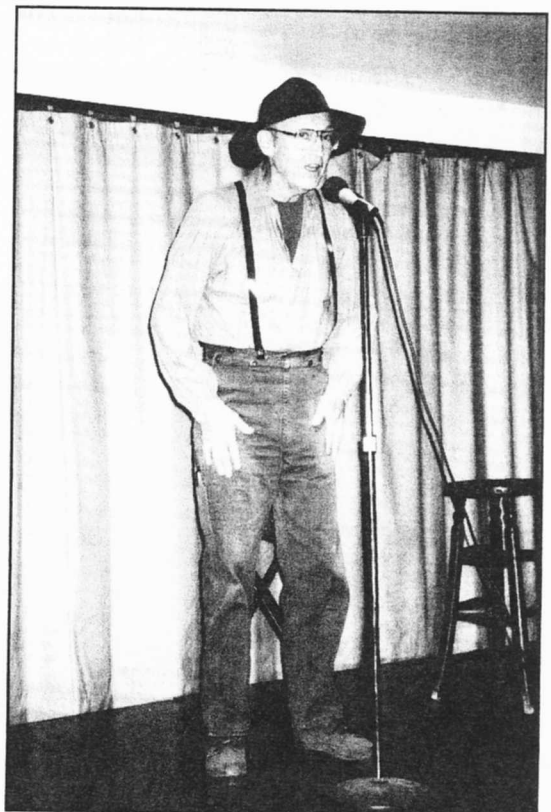
Actually we didn't listen to the radio all that much

because we turned it off the moment Dad came home. "You can't talk with the radio playing," he used to say. Dad read lots of adventure books to us, like *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Kidnapped*. I picture him in an overstuffed chair with a kid on his lap and one on each arm of the chair. Mother read aloud to us too, plus reading by herself just about every book they had in the local public library.

Wherever we moved, we three boys were always up singing in front of a church group or PTA meeting at school. I'm not sure how they found out about us. I suppose it's because we were always singing, on the school bus and everywhere. Mostly it was silly songs. I have always been a shy person, but I got used to being in front of people by singing. Later Dave and I did a lot of singing in college. That took us to the Ted Mac show, where we did a yodeling duet, The Renfro Valley Trail. But that's another story.

© 2001 Susan English; used with permission

*Bill Alkire has led dances and workshops for groups from Alaska to Denmark, including Dancing Bears in Alaska, Bay Area CDS, Chatco Rec Lake in Idaho, Folklore Village in Wisconsin, American Week at Pinewoods, Mainewoods Folk Dance Camp and the Silkeborg 1994 Spring Dance Festival in Denmark. He has served on staff multiple years at Berea College Christmas Country Dance School, Buckeye Leadership Workshop, Great Lakes Recreation Lab, Kentucky Summer Dance School, Cumberland Lake Dance Camp, Terpsichore's Holiday and Oglebay Institute Folk Dance Camp. Bill is founder and artistic director of the Cedar Valley Cloggers in Wooster, Ohio. As a retired director of community mental health, he sees dance as a key to good mental and physical health, and to strong organizations, families and communities. He is married to contra dance caller Susan English.*



Bill Alkire today; photo courtesy himself