

Fergusson Award, the highest honour awarded by the BC Teachers' Federation.

Phil Thomas' interest in folk song began in the mid-1950s during the early years of the folk revival. Inspired by such singers as Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, Phil took up the banjo and began singing folk songs. The revival in Canada at that time was essentially an "echo" of the revival happening in the United States, and the repertoire was predominantly American. The absence of Canadian songs as well as his contact with Edith Fowke and her song collecting in Ontario inspired Thomas to begin collecting in B.C.. For nearly thirty years Thomas spent his summers traversing the province collecting songs. In the late 1970s this collection was consolidated, catalogued, and housed in the Aural History Archives of the B.C. Provincial Museum.

With his wife Hilda and two others, Thomas founded in 1959 the Vancouver Folk Song Society. He served many years on its Board and was made a Life Member in 1975. His connection with Dr. Fowke led him to join the Canadian Folk Music Society in 1970 and to begin serving on the Society's Board in 1971. He served on that Board until his death, and was made Honorary President in 1999. He had given presentations, performances and workshops in B.C. folk song at a variety of festivals (nota-

bly at the Spokane World's Fair in 1974, at the first and third Vancouver Folk Music Festivals in 1979 and 1981, at Expo 86 in Vancouver, at Folklife in Seattle and at Toronto's Mariposa Festival in 1982), on radio and TV shows, and at conferences of music educators. He was honoured at the May 2004 Northwest Regional Folklife Festival as the Pacific Northwest's most prestigious collector.

The folk songs of British Columbia reflect the diverse cultural and occupational heritage of the Province and the daily life of its people in a form that remains accessible to this day. Thanks to the work of Philip J. Thomas, current and future generations of British Columbians will continue to sing and hear those folk songs, and through the songs they will understand the lives of the people who created them and the places that formed their lives. Every B.C. schoolchild who sings about the Kettle Valley Line, the Fraser River Gold Rush or the Cariboo Road owes a debt to Phil Thomas; so too do the loggers, farmers and fishers, and the urban dwellers of Vancouver and Victoria who know how their predecessors lived through their songs. Members of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music will be the first to recognize his tremendous contribution to preserving and disseminating our common heritage.

Phil Thomas – A Personal Memoir

Rika Ruebsaat

I first met Phil Thomas in about 1961 at the Vancouver Folk Song Circle—a local twice-monthly "hootenanny" founded in 1959 by Phil and his wife Hilda. I was a pimply thirteen-year-old who sang German folk songs with my family and American songs from the folk revival by myself. I remember this tall, bald man with a long-necked banjo singing "The Banks of the Similkameen" or "The Kettle Valley Line", songs from a landscape I had grown up in. It was the first time I had ever heard such songs—until then all the music I had ever heard came from somewhere else. I would like to say that the scales fell from my eyes and that I began singing B.C. songs, but that did not happen until years later. In the early days Phil was just a somewhat eccentric part of my musical landscape.

In the mid-1970s I "discovered" Canadian folk songs and remembered this unusual man who sang these hokey songs. I spent many days ensconced in

Phil's house surrounded by piles of books, records, papers and musical instruments. Going to Phil to collect songs for my repertoire was somewhat akin to a novice going to Buddha for tips on how to become enlightened—I was totally out of my depth. The sheer volume of material was overwhelming. I suspect that at that time his collection of traditional song was unsurpassed by that of any library in the country.

In a sense, Phil has been my teacher ever since. His sensibilities about song and its connection to the social landscape have informed the musical work Jon Bartlett and I have been doing for over thirty years. Our relationship with Phil was not always easy. As an autodidact who had broken new ground in the area of folk song, Phil could get cranky and possessive about his material. There were occasions when the three of us paced around each other in his cluttered kitchen, waving our arms and shouting at each other.

Phil was an elementary school teacher, and when Jon and I went into teacher training in 1981 we went to Phil for guidance. Phil had been teaching since the early 1950s, had received a B.C.TF award for outstanding teaching and had very strong opinions regarding curriculum and pedagogy. Once again I was the novice visiting the Buddha and once again I was totally out of my depth. As I gained experience I began to understand something of what Phil had tried to communicate, and he eventually became a sort of super-ego. Whenever I had one of those “Sit down, shut up and colour” days at school I could feel Phil breathing down my neck.

Phil didn’t mentor me because he especially liked me—he was compelled to do so. He was compelled to communicate his vision of what he thought teaching and singing should be. Teaching was a calling to Phil, not because he was selfless and philanthropic, but because he looked at the world and shouted, “Look at this! Isn’t this wonderful/amazing/fascinating?” The world was always an infinite source of wonder to him and he never tired of revealing in it. Lying on his belly in the dirt, as he might, watching a centipede negotiate an unstable pile of sand, daily practicalities would be forgotten (often, I’m sure, to the exasperation of those he lived and worked with).

During my second teaching practicum, I taught in the classroom Phil had vacated the year before when he retired. One of his ex-pupils exclaimed to me,

“You should have seen this classroom when Mr. Thomas was here. It was completely full of stuff. There was junk everywhere. It was EXCELLENT!” Phil must have given successive generations of fire marshals heart attacks. His house and three garages were full of “stuff” which he saved for possible artistic or teaching projects. You could never get a ride with Phil because his car was always full to the rafters with more stuff. He used real materials in his teaching, never kits or units developed by someone else. He worked from first principles, always asking himself, “What is this really *about*?” For example, while teaching a unit on birds, when he wanted to communicate “birdness” to his pupils, using rulers clamped between his outstretched fingers as flight feathers, he stood on a table and made the sounds and movements of an eagle about to take flight. When researching the background to a logging song for his book he covered every available surface in his house with books, pamphlets, union newsletters and the like, to find the meaning of one technical word known only to loggers of the 1920s.

Phil never stopped trying to convey his enthusiasms. During one of his long tirades your eyes might begin to glaze over; you would feel a ray of hope when he you finally heard him say, “Well, anyway, the point is...” But those of us who knew and loved him knew those words were simply the prelude to yet another half-hour of talk.

Remembering Phil

Judith Cohen

In the many years Phil and I were friends and colleagues, my daughter, then a small child, and I stayed several times with him and Hilda, finding our way around and through the books, instruments, recordings, paints, things for children to play and learn with (not simply “toys”), more books, instruments, recordings... and friendship, laughter, and ongoing discussions. Phil would occasionally stay at our place in Toronto, usually prefacing these very welcome visits with, “well, I could stay at a hotel, but your place is much more fun!”. He would arrive with camping plate and cutlery, some culinary treats, and, of course, a banjo.....

