

## LITTLE OLE OPRY ON THE BAY: The Beginning

In sharing the first 3 years of Little Ole Opry on the Bay, there are no programs from which to refer. So, I ease into our journey gleaning data from newspaper clippings, photos, old cassette tapes, and the memories of those who were there. After 34 years, memories can have a hazy glow to them, and not necessarily be as exact as peoples' minds & hearts tell them. And, as much as I respect the world of journalism, articles aren't always 100 percent in accuracy. Regardless of this somewhat imperfect remembrance, I ask you to take this journey with me, paying more attention to the inner essence of Opry than the expected perfection of a history textbook. This is about the 'heart' of Little Ole Opry, which encircles our casts, crews, and audience members. That 'heart' is as near to perfect as anything we care to hold close. Here we go, folks.....

"Everyone who knows Suzie, knows she 'shoots for the moon'". Daughter, Julie (Griffey) Schwab shared that statement with the Opry audience 30 years after Suzie (Walberg) Newton chased one of her dreams to Nashville, Tennessee. Carrying a country song she had written, Suzie saw no reason not to give songwriting a chance. You only have to believe, and take action. And, take action is exactly what she did, as she shared her song in "Music City". Meanwhile, where best to take a break? Grand Ole Opry, of course! With pure pleasure, Suzie listened to the music of Chet Atkins, & delighted in the antics of Minnie Pearl. Her imagination was further piqued. Eventually leaving Tennessee without a songwriting contract, Suzie came home carrying a gift of love even she wasn't aware of yet.

Being an active member of Little Theatre on the Bay at the Liberty Theater, she knew there was tremendous creative talent throughout the area. With Opry memories still vivid, Suzie pondered on an idea that kept coming to her mind. At that time, the theater was vacant during the summer months, so she approached the theater board for permission to produce a country music show. It was agreed that she would direct, produce, & assume all financial concerns involving the effort, including rental of the theater. Suzie quickly started off on her new journey with Assistant Director Bonnie Williamson, stressing they were ready to "create a show that was as close to the original as possible". Other production assistants included Jill Hanson, & Penny Ines that initial year, 1982.

First, the foundation...a country music band had to be secured. From the many groups playing on the south coast, Suzie approached a Coos Bay band, Bigfoot, who was actually playing in Port Orford at the time. Members included: Dave Andrist (drums), Jim "Spook" Flanagan (bass), Dave Ford (guitar), & leader, Fred Corbett (guitar/banjo), who as Suzie shared, "had the chatter and personality to keep the show moving". She was impressed with his "great banjo playing", which added the perfect spark to the dancers' music. The band brought in pedal steel guitar player, Jim Hooper, for 1982, & in 1984, Dwain Rayburn took that position. In 1983, Dale Wilson, from Los Angeles, played slide guitar, & Kelly Curtis helped out on lead guitar in 1984.

Suzie formed the Little Ole Opry Dancers, but in some publicity they were tagged the Little Ole Opry Cloggers. An ad in the newspaper brought dancers, from whom she selected 5 women & 4 men. Buying a pattern & fabric, Suzie had red gingham dresses & shirts made up for those dancers. Although, the Grand Ole Opry did not have an in-house dance troupe, Suzie had learned to clog, when she worked in the TV movie "The Blue And The Grey" in Arkansas. She felt "cloggers would add some excitement to the show". She served as choreographer, later bringing in Wendy (Bingham) Helling in 1984. Dancers during those 3 years included: Wendy Bingham, Tom Boynton, Carrie Brown, Linda Brown, Bonnie Chambers, Linda Chambers, Sherry Crossman, Darcy Culley, Tammy Culley, Mike DeLapp, Dan Holman, Victoria Keys, Don Middleton, Liz Nevin, Larry Waters, Jim Wise, with Leah & Mary Houghton joining the dancers in a 'specialty dance' in 1984. For each of the 3 years a different mix of these dancers whooped & hollered with

lively clogging. After the song “Will The Circle Be Unbroken” closed the show, dancers & band members would race past each other to grab any leftover hot dogs in the concession stand! It was one of the fun-filled traditions that began to bond the family of Little Ole Opry on the Bay.

Auditions for performers were Monday evenings, and folks who signed on for shows came from Coos, Curry, Josephine, & Douglas counties that first summer. The two initial nights drew over 50 performers. Some of the singers in those first 3 years included: Bobby Allen (Eagle Point), Arnie & Marie Arnold, Charlie Barnett, Tom Barnett, Wendy Bingham, Larry Bulaich (Grants Pass), Kip Carter, Al & Sylvia Cartwright, Carl Dean, Mike DeLapp, Fred Dickson, Les Engle, Jeanne Fender, Gene Gosney, ‘His Country’ (Christian group), Debbie Hubble, Kent & Suzette Hubble, Rose Jamison, Diane Johnson, Dave Kay, Tom Lamb, Marie Owings (Roseburg), Luke Parrish, Tony Perpich, Colleen Rayburn (Dwain’s wife), Josie Reid, Kathy Robinson, Debbie Rogers, Janet Smith, Mitzi Sturgill, Eudene Swindle, Richard Turner, Larry Waters, Danny Wear, & Wes Wear. And, remembering her Opry experience in Nashville, Suzie brought in a Minnie Pearl-type performer, Pat Eisenbarth Highland, as ‘Patsy Louise’ for the 1983 summer.

One might assume that Opry was an adult production, but that wasn’t the case. Finding no mention of youngsters during the first year, I can share of children’s participation in 1983 & 1984. From preschoolers through teenagers, Suzie & Julie welcomed the up-and-coming of Little Ole Opry’s future. Those I can mention specifically were: Tom Boynton, Darcy & Tammy Culley, Teresa Hallbach, Gary, Lauri, Leah, & Mary Houghton, Rachel Johnson, Nancy Joubert, Mandy, Heidi, & Christina Perpich, Byron Sherritt, Stephanie Smuts, & Steffe Way. In 1983, Tony Perpich treated the crowd to his young daughters one evening, and youngest Christina, who couldn’t have been more than 3 years old, made her presence known loud & strong. It is a precious memory, just one of many such family moments that spoke to our community.

There was one particular aspect of participation Tom Barnett is fond of recalling about that first year. He would pull on one of his finest country shirts, & head to the theater prepared for the “Best Shirt” contest. The competition added fun to the pre-show anticipation, but Tom recalled that when Fred Corbett announced the winner from the bandstand, it was generally fellow performer, Al Cartwright. Still, on occasion, it was Tom who smiled from the fanciest shirt.

Another very special part of Tennessee’s Grand Ole Opry was, and still is, their radio audience. So, Suzie approached local radio station KBBR in North Bend. Ron Nance helped set-up a spot on the corner of the Opry stage, where Michelle Collier Cooper, & Lyle Irons took turns as DJ. Because Suzie had the full responsibility of funding the show, she reached out to local businesses for their sponsorship. Thus, another group of folks helped to build the Opry foundation. Some supporters were: Calico Cottage, Cartwright’s Car Corral, Citizen’s Bank, Coos Head Builders, Globe Travel, Reese Electric, The Brass Rail & Strawberry Patch, The Film Factory, T-Shirt Express, & Walton’s Western World.

Being a bare-bones effort, multi-tasking had Suzie in constant motion. There was setting up concessions: providing hot dogs, popcorn, candy, & drinks. When Julie aided Mom in 1983, she too, learned the art of selecting the candies that would sell, knowing that “the smell alone would sell” popcorn, & there was a specific bun that attributed to the hot dogs magically disappearing. Freddie Booth worked the concession counter for the shows. Tickets & posters were printed, & advertising added the most to Suzie’s days. As she recalled, “I traveled all over the state to advertise on television & radio, to make sure we had lots of coverage. I bought lots of newspaper ads each week, and of course, KBBR advertised everyday per our agreement”. The one rehearsal was on Wednesday evenings starting at 7, or 7:30, & lasted “till we got it right”! Sometimes arrangements were made to accommodate conflicting schedules. Les Engle shared, “I remember meeting with band leader, (guitar playin’, banjo pickin’, vocalist) Fred Corbett, in the basement studio of his home to go over my proposed material. At the end of the session in the rather primitive

studio, I remember thinking, ‘That guy knows what he’s doing.... This is going to be fun!’” It was a testimony to Suzie’s instincts in selecting Fred’s band. All the work led to a different show each Saturday night at 8pm, opening on July 24, & closing on August 28. There were no reservations that first summer; \$3 tickets were available at the door.

During the actual show, Suzie ran the light board, with Bonnie Williamson & Joyce McInturff serving on stage crew. In 1984, brother & sister, Gary & Lauri Houghton were trained to, also, run the light board. Over those initial 3 years, Stage Managers included: Mike Anderson (1982), Roger Alby (1983), & Todd LaBounty (1984), while Dr. Ken Bunnell served as Backdrop Artist in 1982, with Josie Reid’s artistry highlighted in 1983/1984. Opry Photographers were Ward Robertson, & Dick Booth, who was President of the LTOB Board. Suzie ended up cleaning the entire theater after that first opening night, and “that was the straw that broke the camel’s back”! She immediately hired a high school boy for that chore, so she could catch her breath before preparing the following weeks’ show. As she expressed to me, “I bless those people who helped me run the show on opening night, & that first summer”. And, it was evident after each & every show, and throughout the 3 years. The entire cast would form a semi-circle in front of the bandstand, as Bigfoot played “Will The Circle Be Unbroken”. While everyone sang along, Suzie shared hugs and kudos with each individual performer.

Suzie’s daughter is the reason Opry continued after 1982. As the following summer neared, Julie approached her mother about the production. She received a firm, “No way. It was a one-time deal.” Suzie emphasized to me how Julie convinced her they’d start a tradition with Opry “by saying she would do a lot of the work....which she did”! So in 1983, Suzie continued as Director, with her daughter stepping into the Assistant Director position. Julie recalls how her mother “focused on the talent, band, and front of the house, while I did the rest. From making coffee for auditions, to editing the advertising, I learned the ropes of Opry.” She spent days in the ticket booth selling tickets, using the phone to coordinate advertising, ordering concessions, lining up auditions, scheduling rehearsals, setting up fittings for dancers, and anything else Suzie might need done. And, because shows had gone from Saturday nights only, to Friday & Saturday nights at 7:30, & Sunday afternoons at 2pm, each with a different line-up, the learning curve for Julie became even more time-consuming. Reservations were now available at the Box Office from noon to 6pm, Monday through Saturday. Admission had jumped to \$4. Performances were: August 5, 6, 7, & 12, 13, 14, and ended up being held over to include: Friday & Saturday nights, Aug. 19 & 20, and Aug. 26 & 27. The two women set a high bar for work ethic!

Now, there’s a great vision.....mother & daughter working together as a creative team. So began a tradition of families working together down through the decades of Little Ole Opry. And wouldn’t all mothers feel humbled if their grown daughter referred to them as “a real force when in the theater?” Suzie has a natural ability to nurture people in their talents. Debbie Hubble is an example still vivid in Julie’s mind. Debbie had a great voice, but was having some difficulty in performance. After about 10 minutes of Suzie’s guidance, Debbie “stole the show every time she was on stage“. After a name change, Debbie/Debra Jensen continued as one of the most popular female vocalists, & even became an Opry band member in 1986-87. A special Opry tradition....introducing unknown country talents into the spotlight.

Another favorite, who like Debra began his Opry journey during those first 3 years, was fiddler Gene Gosney. Audiences almost demanded he play “Orange Blossom Special” for every show. His gentle, humble demeanor endeared Gene to those audiences, & the family feel of Opry grew. Eventually, in future years, his wife, Esther, was equally embraced when she helped hand out programs for the show. A highlight developed when Esther was pulled onstage to waltz with Gene on their wedding anniversary. Close your eyes, & picture the scene. Gene finishes his fiddle tune, and Esther is brought to center stage beside him. An appropriate waltz begins, and bless his heart...that sweet, shy senior would guide his

long-time bride in a bee-line towards backstage! The audience fell further in love.

Meanwhile, Opry's status as a 'hit' held firm that second summer. But, as the third year loomed, Suzie's life became overbooked, and besides, she had not planned on this becoming an on-going production. So, Julie took over as Director in 1984, with her fiancé Todd LaBounty as Assistant Director. Much to the girls' delight, they called in Lauri & Mary Houghton to run errands with them, prepping the theater in ways like buying those special hot dog buns. But, it was preparing the show that seemed overwhelming those initial weeks. Julie remembered "I was amazed that each Monday there would be some of the same people wanting to participate again, and there would be new people." With gratefulness in her voice Julie shared, "I was lucky that Mom couldn't stay away for very long. She attended auditions, and I sat next to her, and listened to every syllable. She gave me great advice, and I was able to work some of her magic. Mom agreed that I had the right dynamics for a fun show, and she rarely showed up for the rehearsals." That 'vote of confidence' from Mom encouraged Julie, "I fine-tuned my organizational skills, my people skills, and my financial skills", while "I learned about my strengths as a producer, and a person." As it was, those long rehearsals were very productive, ensuring another sequence of sold-out audiences. Such is the education gleaned in the community theater setting.

Opry season that summer started July 7, & ran every Saturday night through September 1 at 7:30 pm. One Opry fan, Willie Hamilton, was photographed in The World newspaper, showing his collection of tickets for every show from the previous 2 years. He was awaiting ticket sales to start June 28. Reservations were available at LTOB Box Office from noon to 6pm, Monday through Saturday. Admission remained at \$4.

Another memory flooded forward, as Julie pictured those audiences, "I remember how the audience loved the music, singing, dancing & all the entertainment. I remember that they cleaned up the theater. Our other productions' audiences left programs & candy wrappers, but our Opry audience cleaned everything up. They were a dream. They loved us." In that moment, my own mind went back, & there I was helping in that clean-up. It became an involuntary action; you didn't even think about it. As family & friends awaited their particular performers to join them, somehow that practice had begun. But, isn't that what families do after a gathering? Everyone pitches in with the clean-up. Soon, others leaving began gathering up litter, as they all discussed that evening's show. Caught up in the visiting, even the performers sometimes picked up a handful, until everyone wandered to the lobby. When the theater's front door closed behind them, the building still rang with music, laughter, & that warm family feeling that community creates in its best moments.

From the very beginning, Suzie believed there was an audience. She told The World newspaper's Coast Life Editor, Katy Muldoon, "When Freddy Fender came here for an art museum benefit and 1,500 people showed up, and I only knew 18 of them, I realized there are a whole lot of people who aren't being reached." Even so, when that moment of truth arrived, Suzie "was scared to death no one would show up!" When she arrived at the theater an hour early on opening night, there was a line of people all the way up the hill, & around the corner. Many of those country fans had never set foot in the theater. It amazed Suzie, and she passionately exclaimed, "It was one of the happiest moments of my life to see those people!" Indeed, that first show in 1982 filled the 400 seats, & still, they had to turn 15 people away. Little Ole Opry on the Bay had exploded onto the entertainment scene in Coos County, and The World newspaper called it a "smashing success"!

For all of Opry's success, it was a huge undertaking. In particular, the initial year exhausted Suzie to the point that Julie shared, "it took her months to recuperate". But, Suzie had brought her vision to life in that darkened theater, it had claimed an audience, & with equal energy & passion, Julie had continued to nurture what folks had embraced as a favorite summer pastime. "Will The Circle Be Unbroken"?

Unbroken it is. When Suzie & Julie made the decision to offer the production to the LTOB Board after the summer of 1984, a tradition had, indeed, been born, and a phenomenon that would celebrate its 35<sup>th</sup> summer in 2016.

Written With Love and Gratitude to Suzie (Walberg) Newton and Julie (Griffey) Schwab  
By Martha Houghton  
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