was about three or four weeks after their beginning while driving Frank home along the newly completed Congress Street Expressway, that I suggested we organize a school around him in which he would use the same dining room technique for considerably larger classes. I remember saying that he could reasonably expect an income of thirteen thousand dollars during the first year from the school and outside employment—a prediction which happily turned out to be accurate. Frank agreed, and the project was on.

A word about my hunch is in order. There was no doubt in my mind about the need and demand for good teaching in the skills necessary for the enjoyment of folk music. Hundreds of requests for me to teach adults and children had proven that. But, I felt that to command the respect of a class, a teacher must be a successful and active performer. I knew from a lifetime in music, that when a singer took on a full schedule of teaching individual students, he usually stopped being a successful singer. The demands of teaching a full schedule are simply too enervating to allow for the necessary energy and enthusiasm of public performance. So, if a workable class method of teaching could be devised, it would follow that a fine performer could teach three or four classes a week, make a sizeable income in terms of time spent, and still have enough time and energy to follow his career.

Using my studio in the old Immigrant State Bank Building as an office, I enlisted the aid of my friend and neighbor, Gertrude Soltker to help organize and administer the school. Press releases were prepared, announcements were made over WFMT, and a registration day was set for the first Thursday in December.

The opening ceremonies and registration on December 1, 1957, were a smash. Several hundred prospective students attended along with a fine representation of performers, leaders in the field of adult education, and Old Town notables. George Armstrong opened the proceedings with the rending strains of the bagpipes; Frank Hamilton gave a demonstration of his teaching method using our former Oak Park group as guinea pigs; Big Bill Broonzy performed one of his blues and, on the spot,

Frank reproduced Bill’s intricate right hand style in written tablature on a blackboard and then proceeded to play the guitar in a fairly exact rendition of Bill’s playing; we instituted our coffee break which has continued to be a part of every Old Town School of Folk Music class; we closed the evening with a songfest, and the school was on its way.

In the ensuing months the school expanded, and by its second year took on a schedule of classes which continued through the first five years. Namely: Tuesday and Thursday evening classes, eight to ten-thirty P.M. and a Saturday afternoon class for young people and adults, one-thirty to four P.M.

The concept of the school as a place where the learning process can also be a gratifying social experience has been most successful. From the beginning students were encouraged to help each other. The coffee break added to the social atmosphere, and the “second half” (during which all the students sing and play at their own level) has continued, through the years, to be a stimulating demonstration of the pleasure derived from people making music together.

The composition of the student body has always provided an interesting chemistry to the classes. Among our students you will find: office workers, engineers, psychiatrists, high school and college students, housewives, elementary, high school and college teachers, artists, priests and Protestant clergymen, nuns (Three years ago Ray Tate, our present Dean of Teaching gave a series of classes at St. Michael’s Convent where the nuns insisted on being considered as students of the Old Town School of Folk Music). We have salesmen, doctors, lawyers, social workers, firemen, photographers, a great number of advertising men, and recently several professional hockey players and their wives.

The enthusiasm of our students has been matched by the enthusiastic and generous support of the school by the professional folksinging community. Here is a list of singers and folklorists who have performed at the school without compensation or for extremely modest fees:

Pete Seeger Mahalia Jackson
Martha Schlamme Odetta
Doc Watson Jimmy Driftwood