



June Newsletter

Sad News

John 'Peter' Clark III, food expert and friend to folkies, dies at 73

WRITTEN BY MAUREEN O'DONNELL POSTED: 06/08/2015, 06:31PM



Peter Clark passed away yesterday. He was an AIChE Fellow. Over the years, Peter gave a number of presentations to the Chicago Section – most recently last September. He also chaired sessions for the Chicago Section Symposium and the Midwest Regional Conference.

In lieu of flowers the family asks that donations be made to the Oak Park-River Forest Food Pantry where Peter served on the board for many years. With his customary generosity and spirit of service, Peter donated his body to Rush Medical School so the service will not be immediate. Date and time are yet to be determined.

A memorial mass is planned at 10:30 a.m. Saturday June 13, 2015 at St. Giles Church, 1045 Columbian Ave., Oak Park. Burial is private.

Hobo hieroglyphics used to help itinerant men figure out where they might find work or a meal.

In the Great Depression, hobos drew symbols on mailboxes and fence posts that told other vagabonds whether the homes they were approaching had a kind lady inside, a vicious dog or a man with a gun.

A little guitar was etched in chalk outside Peter Clark's Oak Park home. Musician John Flynn sketched it to let the world know that Mr. Clark and his wife, Nancy, were friendly to traveling folk singers, said Rich Warren, host and producer of WFMT's "Midnight Special" program and the station's "Folkstage" concerts.

Mr. Clark, often a benefactor for "Folkstage" shows, hosted musicians and singers in the spare bedrooms of the home he shared with his wife. Sometimes, performers stayed on for a week or so after gigs, because the Clark residence — filled with warm wooden accents and a comfortable, lived-in air — seemed to encourage songwriting. Occasionally, the Clarks invited friends over for "house concerts" in the living room.

Mr. Clark died June 4 at Rush Oak Park Hospital at 73.

Among those the Clarks hosted was Ronny Cox. The actor portrayed a talented picker in the "Dueling Banjos" duet in "Deliverance," a movie that might as well have put "evil" into the phrase "forest primeval." His character traded guitar licks with a banjo-playing backwoods boy in the 1972 classic of violence and vengeance.

"Peter Clark is truly, was truly, one of the great unsung heroes, especially for those of us in the folk music field," said Cox, taking a break from filming "Married" for FX. The Clarks "have been such supporters of music, and of all the people I've known in the folk music world, I don't know of any who were as valuable and dedicated to this community."

Mr. Clark was so self-effacing, others didn't realize he was often the benefactor behind a concert, "because he was working as a volunteer, just licking envelopes," Cox said.

Still, “I count myself among the fledgling folkies,” Cox said. “Coming from the world of films and television, oftentimes, there’s some resistance — ‘Here’s another actor who thinks he can sing.’” The Clarks appreciated him right away for his music, he said. “Peter and Nancy were able to get past that.”

When the Clarks met Cox and his wife, Mary, “I had never seen ‘Deliverance,’” Nancy Clark said. But Mary Cox had a Ph.D. in chemistry, and Mr. Clark had a doctorate in chemical engineering. The Clark home had Native American rugs and pots, “and Ronny’s from New Mexico, and that clicked,” she said. “And they were very much readers, so we sat around the kitchen table and talked about books.” Cox entertained the couple with stories about filming “Deliverance,” Nancy Clark said.

Peter Clark used to joke that musicians had “frequent stay points” at his home. The couple hosted many other performers, including Greg Greenway, Claudia Schmidt and Connie Kaldor, Warren said.

“It was my home away from home. It was like a retreat center,” Greenway said. “He and Nancy, without them, much of what I did in Chicago would not have been possible. Dinner would go on for three hours, because we would just talk and talk and talk, just the things he and Nancy had seen. They were so well-traveled, and he was an engineer who had flown all over the world to help in the manufacturing of food in rising economies.”

Mr. Clark also volunteered to pick up artists at the airport, transport them to gigs and sell CDs after shows.

“He was an enormous help to WFMT,” Warren said, “because we don’t normally pay [for] hotels for the artists — we just give them a fee.”

Mr. Clark wasn’t trying to get close to fame. He loved the music, but “It wasn’t just the music,” Warren said. “He loved the people who made the music, so if he could help out a struggling performer, that gave him joy.”

“It’s the words, the story,” in folk music that touched him, Nancy Clark said.

When “Midnight Special” needed volunteers to catalog folk songs for its library, Mr. Clark was one of the first to sign up for data entry. “Here’s a guy with a Ph.D., sitting, typing clerical stuff,” Warren said.

The Philadelphia native earned a bachelor of science degree at the University of Notre Dame and a Ph.D. in chemical engineering from the University of California in Berkeley, where he met his future wife. He worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and ITT Continental Baking Co. and taught at Virginia Tech. He wrote columns for Food Technology magazine, authored books and consulted in developing countries on food production, friends said.

He was tireless in working to feed the hungry, Flynn said. "Peter shared with me his deep passion for a Catholicism expressed in service to the poor and marginalized. He once took me with him to volunteer at a Chicago-area food bank."

Mr. Clark also is survived by a daughter, Hannah; a son, Shannon; his sisters, Mary Elizabeth Clark, Teresa Trudeau and Victoria Clark Kauffman; his brothers, Mark, Louis and Jimmy; and three grandchildren. A memorial mass is planned at 10:30 a.m. Saturday at St. Giles Church, 1045 Columbian Ave., Oak Park. Burial is private.

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