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Celebrating Woody Guthrie

By **Angela Decker**

For the Tidings

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This year marks the 100th birthday of folk singer Woody Guthrie. Fans across the nation are celebrating the man who wrote "This Land is Your Land" with poetry readings, concerts and plays.

In the Rogue Valley, Camelot Theatre is honoring Guthrie with its production of "Woody Guthrie's American Song," a theatrical piece opening Aug. 10 that uses Guthrie's writing, music and art to depict his life as a vagabond, activist and a sort of historian of the dust bowl era and the Great Depression.

While doing research for a recent article, I picked up the book "Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie," by Ed Cray, and discovered many reasons to celebrate this gifted man.

There are loads of books about Guthrie, but Cray's, published in 2004, is arguably the most detailed, partly because he had access to the Woody Guthrie archives, a collection of the singer's letters, songs, poetry and artwork housed in New York. Cray also interviewed more than 70 people who were close to Guthrie. The result is a poetic portrait of a man whose music chronicled an era of desperate poverty and radical change. Cray brings Guthrie's world vividly to life, often through Guthrie's own writing.

Guthrie was born in Okemah, Okla., in 1912. Although he grew up in a middle-class family, his fortunes changed dramatically by the time he was 13 years old. In a short period, his entrepreneur father lost his fortune, the family lost their home to a fire, his sister died in a freak accident, and his mother was institutionalized. A teenaged Guthrie and his siblings were left to fend for themselves. He took on odd jobs and played harmonica and guitar on the streets, in bars, and in brothels to earn money for food and shelter.

Eventually, Guthrie left Oklahoma and lived as an itinerant worker, all the while writing and singing about the people he met and the awful poverty he witnessed.

Cray's description of the dust storms that sprang up as a result of droughts in the American prairie lands in the 1930s is heartbreaking and scary. Cray writes of a particularly violent storm in Texas in 1935, "It suddenly loomed, towering three, four, five thousand feet into the sky, rolling steadily onward. The sky turned black as night. [People] remembered, 'You couldn't see your hand in front of your face.' Nothing was more frightening than that first half hour of darkness."

Cray quotes Guthrie's writing about the storms' effect on people. "Only thing that is higher than that dust is your debts. Dust settles, but debts don't."

While Cray clearly admires Guthrie, the book is definitely not fawning.

He discusses Guthrie's personal life, including his three marriages, and emphasizes that Guthrie was not an easy man to live with. Guthrie was a restless man who struggled with alcohol and emotional problems, and near the end of his life had violent outbursts because of the Hutchinson's disease that eventually would kill him in 1967.

During times of great despair, Guthrie's work shined a light on injustice and his songs lifted people's spirits.

"Ramblin' Man" is both a biography and a history of American life from 1912 to the 1960s. Mostly, though, it is a portrait of a man with strong convictions who spoke for people who had no voice and no power in America.

Guthrie's story, like his music, is honest and hopeful. It's an ideal story for today, as we face many of the

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same issues Guthrie sang about: economic hardship, drought and social inequality.
Guthrie's life reminds us that we all have reason to hope and a voice to demand change.
Angela Decker is a freelance writer in Ashland and can be reached at decker4@gmail.com.

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