

# TWENTY FIVE YEARS OF THE SEATTLE STORYTELLERS GUILD

## Part I - The Early Days

*by Virginia Rankin*

Clare Cuddy arrived in Seattle in 1979 with a vision and a mission; she wanted to start a storytelling group, and to promote storytelling as an art form for adults. She put up flyers everywhere: schools, coffee houses, museums, libraries. Never averse to dipping into her own pocket, she placed an ad in a weekly paper looking for people interested in storytelling.

Her most brilliant strategy was to offer a storytelling class at the Experimental College at UW. She saw it as an effective way to get people involved because they “are making an investment in the art that can’t be achieved by just sitting and listening.” Once the Guild was founded in 1982, class tuition also covered participants’ dues.

One of those first students declared, “We all grew up together.” They were all, including Clare, under thirty. Early Guild members recall Clare as a go-getter, a risk taker, a champion of storytelling. She never thought, “Will we fail?” She never asked, “Will we lose money?”

Donald Braid, a young physicist with an interest in folklore, became part of the group. Early board members paint him as a complicated person, apparently combining the dreamy and the practical. They agree he had “a passion for storytelling,” and “inspired people to work with him.”

Donald had strong opinions and strong ethics, and these apparently made him both a driving force and a braking one as people tried to hammer out a mission statement. Everything was decided by consensus back then, so it’s amazing to hear the story of the lengthy discussions, and then look at the single, clear paragraph the Guild’s founders struggled to compose.

The mission statement became part of the 1982 articles of incorporation making the Guild a non-profit organization. Incorporating was necessary if they were going to apply for grants, and useful because it brought tax-free status. The consensus process was valued, despite the difficulties it sometimes caused, because when a decision was finally reached, everyone owned it.

Long time Guild members probably recall Story and Snack at Naomi Baltuck’s house. It was part of what Cathryn Wellner describes, along with the Experimental College classes, as the “connective tissue” of the Guild. “You showed up, you became involved, you were put to work.” The early public face of SSG was the monthly Sunday night performance at the Boiserie coffeehouse in the Burke Museum on the UW campus.

The UW also provided fertile soil for storytellers. Merna Hecht remembers how Spencer Shaw’s storytelling class generated excitement among his young students the Library School, Mae Benne taught a highly regarded children’s literature class, and children’s theatre was important in the Drama Department.

NAPPS, the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling connected Seattle to the national storytelling scene. Tellers who moved to Seattle from other parts of the country already knew about SSG. Seattle tellers recruited real stars to come and perform to packed houses. Jay O’Callahan, Jackie Torrance, Donald Davis, Laura Simms, and Diane Wolkstein all visited during the early 80s.

Thanks to the sources mentioned above for all the time they took to bring this period to life for me. And thanks also to Pat Peterson and Cherie Trebon for helpful leads.

