

# Biographical Introduction

BY ELANOR O'BRIEN

One of the things I miss most about my father is that I can no longer call him up and ask him a question. I think most people who knew Pat are familiar with this phenomenon: one could call him, anytime, and ask any question, on any subject in the world. And he would answer. At length. Even if his answer was a guess, it was a pretty informed guess. It made sense. So, what to do with all the questions I have for him now?

Douglas Alton Smith, in his tireless efforts to produce several memorial issues of the *Journal* dedicated to Pat's teachings, had a suggestion for me: ask friends and family of Pat who may recall what Pat himself said to them. In particular, Doug's wish was to learn more about Pat's own experience with tendinitis, which inspired Pat to develop ways of teaching guitar technique to players for better hand health. So I began an informal research project.

Everyone with whom I spoke noted that Pat didn't talk much about his own hand issues. Dr. Frank Wilson said of Pat, "He alluded to it, then he moved on." My impression is that Pat was more interested in learning about the way to teach each individual player, now, in the present moment, how to heal, than in revisiting his own past issues. My Dad was a pretty present-moment kind of guy. And who among us is very enthused to revisit a painful experience in our lives?

Many of us know a little something about how Pat came to decide how to treat himself after developing hand problems. I heard him say that part of his reason for taking on the job himself originated in his working-class, Catholic upbringing. "I was taught to say, 'mea culpa,' it's my fault, it's my problem, and it's my responsibility to find a way out of it," Pat said. Pat also quoted his father as saying, "Allergies and divorces are for rich people; we can't afford them." So in his family one would be less likely to consult an outside "expert" to solve one's problems. The idea of outsourcing this important job seemed impractical, expensive, and beside the point. "I'll figure my way through this." Pat knew there was something about a modern classical guitar

technique he had learned that must have been wrong, because it was hurting his hand. He could sense the origin of the problem, and chose to approach it directly rather than to operate through a middleman.

Not to mention the fact that the remedies recommended by middlemen seemed questionable. One of the “solutions” recommended by physicians was steroid injections to reduce inflammation in the hands. Pat recognized that this would reduce his pain, but by removing the symptom of pain, he would no longer be able to discern what motions he was using that were harmful and hurtful. So much for steroids.

Another option recommended was surgery . . . again, expensive, but also, if a player persisted in a harmful technique after the surgery, how would the problem be solved? Yet another recommendation was to rest and not play for a while. But once playing resumed, where was the proper technique he needed to play well and in good health? So much for experts.

The rest of the story is familiar to many. Pat chose to educate himself about the anatomy of the hand and the proper mechanics for play. And, to quote my Mother, “Once he saw that he could help himself out of this problem, he decided he should try to help others do it too.” Those of us who knew Pat know that his capacity for learning was vast. Owen Middleton, a composer and guitarist who met Pat when they were both teachers at the Hoff-Barthelson School of Music in Scarsdale, NY, said, “It wasn’t anything that he had to work at. He had a determination to dig out all that information because it was so important to him.” But when it came to training himself, “He [Pat] was a tireless worker, he practiced all the time, he soaked up all that information, and he never forgot anything he learned.”

So I haven’t enlightened anyone with any new information concerning Pat’s hand problems. What little he said about them, he said openly, so it is pretty common knowledge. But still I am grateful to Doug for encouraging me in this project. I got to talk with old friends and with family about my Dad. What could be better? I may not have learned anything new or surprising about Pat’s tendinitis, but I learned that the Back Alley Boys, a bluegrass band in which Pat played with friends in high school, played to five thousand people at the Flushing Pavilion at the 1965 World’s Fair. I learned that the band had gigs all over New York City almost every weekend. I learned where Pat bought his first lute, used, from Bellmore Music on Long Island. From one of Pat’s lectures that Doug transcribed, a story of my four-year-old self, asking my father a question, greets me today. One

of our friends still wears a scarf Pat wove for him. I treasure all of these living connections to my father.

The poet Jim Wrathall said, “They say that every time someone dies, a library burns down.” I am grateful to everyone who has been working to preserve Pat O’Brien’s library of work for future generations of players. This is exactly what he would have wanted.

With much love and appreciation,  
Elanor O’Brien