

Bob Keiter Interview

Wallace Stegner Documentary

Interviewer-John Howe

Bob let's start out by talking about The Stegner Center. Tell me what it is and what its purpose is.

Bob Keiter

The Stegner Center was created in 1994 shortly after Wallace Stegner's death in order to commemorate his life and also as an example or symbol of the West and the environment that was so much an important part of his life, his writings, his work. We designed The Stegner Center as a multi-disciplinary center to provide opportunities for teaching research and public education, and have invited a variety of writers, researchers, scholars, public officials, scientists and others to join us on a regular basis in public programs through symposia, lectures, conferences and the like, and also produced a variety of written products from and through the center.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why was it named for Wallace Stegner?

Bob Keiter

We named it for Wallace Stegner because his life embraced so many different facets of living in the West, ranging from knowing, working with, and writing about the people and the landscape, and the environment, and being an engaged citizen in the life of the West, and the various conservation issues and other issues that are so much an important part of living here.

Interviewer-John Howe

Describe Wallace Stegner's environmental legacy. Why do you think it's important?

Bob Keiter

Stegner's environmental legacy really encompasses so much that it's hard to capture in just a few words, but he played a role in many of the major issues of his day beginning with the Echo Park Dam controversy at Dinosaur National Monument where his writing helped to convince congress not to build that dam inside a national monument, to his penning of the "Wilderness Letter," which has become the seminal document in explaining and understanding the concept of wilderness and the need to protect wilderness. He served regularly in various capacities related to the environment and conservation of land and resources in the American West. His positions included a role on the National Parks Advisory Board that he was appointed to by the Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall. He also served on the Advisory Council for the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club and his writings--*The Hundredth Meridian*, *Angle of Repose*, and a number of other books really captured the essence of what it means to live in the West, and the challenges of living in this arid environment with such a spectacular landscape, but an environment that can only support a limited number of people.

Interviewer-John Howe

How important is Stegner's *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* to understanding water issues? Tell me a little bit about that work and why it's important.

Bob Keiter

Wallace Stegner's book, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, really serves as a seminal book in the development and understanding of the role that water and aridity play in the American West in terms of the need to conserve this scarce

resource, the sort of pressures that are put upon it, some of the early suggestions and proposals for ways to manage water, that unfortunately were ignored--those coming from John Wesley Powell--and Congress ignoring them and opening the door to development of what has become known as the Prior Appropriation Doctrine in western water law. Powell looked at water as more of a community resource that would be managed by the community, and he also argued, as Stegner recounts in *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, that the appropriate way to manage resources and communities in the West is on a water shed basis--that we need to be more ecologically sensitive in the way in which we live in this landscape. Powell advocated it. Stegner captured it, and Stegner's writing ability conveyed it to literally thousands of people who have followed, and that's an important part of the legacy that Wallace Stegner leaves us.

Interviewer-John Howe

You wrote a book called *Visions of Grand Staircase Escalante*, examining Utah's newest national monument. As you know, Wallace Stegner was instrumental in working with Stewart Udall in creating Canyonlands and Capitol Reef National Parks. Stegner reportedly wanted one national park encompassing what is now Grand Staircase. How important is his early influence in creating Grand Staircase National Monument?

Bob Keiter

It's clear that Stegner's knowledge of the landscape in Southern Utah played a significant role in the decision by Secretary Babbitt to recommend to President Clinton the creation of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Stegner knew that country. Stegner had written about it. Stegner had early advocated, in the "Wilderness Letter," that the desert landscapes in Southern Utah and the American Southwest be embraced in a preservation system. That had not been the case previously, with the exception of a few national parks or monuments in

that part of the world, and that's... I think that helps explain Stegner's influence in what eventually came to be The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. It's worth noting that Stegner was not the first to advocate a large national park in Southern Utah. Proposals for an Escalante National Park date back at least as far as the tenure of Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, who made that proposal during the 1930's when he served in the Franklin Roosevelt Administration. That did not come to fruition, but Stegner convinced, or helped to convince, Secretary Udall to create the Canyonlands and Capitol Reef National Parks, and that in turn helped to lay the groundwork for subsequent preservation efforts in Southern Utah that have ultimately culminated with designation of The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

Interviewer-John Howe

You also wrote, *The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem: Redefining America's Wilderness Heritage*. Wallace Stegner's "Wilderness Letter" describes the geography of hope. What do you think he meant by that?

Bob Keiter

Stegner's phrase, "the geography of hope" has been picked up by a lot of people, both who work in the world of conservation, and who are just citizens of the West to describe The American West--both the landscape here and the people here, their eternal optimism and the stunning features that one finds on the western landscape, and I think it's a combination of place and people, or place and community ultimately captured in the idea of a sense of place that links to Stegner's idea of a geography of hope, and I think in talking about a geography of hope he sought to convey the idea that this is still a relatively undisturbed landscape in many places, that the people, that our forbearers have had the sense to preserve parts of it, and that we need to exercise both wisdom and restraint in how we relate to the land, how we use the land, and the resources that are found on it.

Interviewer-John Howe

Stegner writes eloquently about Utah canyon country in the “Wilderness Letter.” Why do you think he cared so deeply about it, and more importantly, why should we?

Bob Keiter

The Utah canyon country was a special place to Wallace Stegner. The state of Utah was special to him, although he never really lived here after he completed his higher education other than a brief return to teach at the University of Utah. He regarded Utah as home. He knew the state. He knew it well. He knew many of the special places on the Colorado Plateau, across the canyon country. He found inspiration there. He thought that the American people would find inspiration there. He was attached to and attracted to the long vistas, the stunning red rock country, the sharp canyon walls, the deep hidden springs--the sense of awe that he writes about when he talks about the Southern Utah canyon country. It's a place that he says is of almost biblical proportions. He makes reference to Christ and his Disciples as traveling this type of landscape during their own biblical journeys, and that, he finds, corresponds quite closely with the idea of preserving these types of landscapes as part of our wilderness heritage.

Interviewer-John Howe

Did environmental giants like Wallace Stegner, David Brower and Stewart Udall have an affect on you?

Bob Keiter

Yes, they have had a decided effect on me, both in terms of my teaching, my research and my public service activities. In each case, Brower, Stegner, Udall

were engaged, thoughtful citizens seeking to make it better for future generations--sensitive to the people and the communities around them, yet convinced that conservation and the need to preserve some special places, and to live sustainably within the land and the resources that we've been provided here in the West were important, and their thinking, their vision, their writing, their actions all have contributed to the role that I have sought to play, and I should add, the role that that so many others, both in academia, in government, in industry, and the non-profit community have sought to play. They have been inspirations for several generations now, and it's my guess that they will continue to be inspirations for generations to come.

Interviewer-John Howe

As environment giants like Wallace Stegner pass on, can anyone take their place, and will they?

Bob Keiter

Stegner leaves large shoes to be filled by those who follow behind him, but he was particularly attentive to his role as a mentor, both to the students that he taught through the Stanford Writing Program, and to others who were involved in conservation, interested in literature, or just generally interested in the West, and he really helped to spawn several more generations of writers, of activists, of academics, of researchers, of public policy experts who have followed behind him. Few have the multi-talents that he did. He was historian, writer, essayist, teacher, mentor, conservationist, activist--all of those rolled into one, but many of those who followed behind have similar traits. Some of those who followed directly in Stegner's footsteps influenced in one way or another by him include, among his former students, Edward Abby, Barry Holstun Lopez. I'm drawing a blank here... beyond his students...

Interviewer-John Howe

Start that again if you will.

Bob Keiter

Stegner's legacy lives on in his students, his writing students from Stanford, some of those include Wendell Berry, Barry Holstun Lopez, and the late Edward Abby. His influence also lives on outside of the classroom if you will. They include such writers as Terry Tempest Williams, David Quammen, the academic and writer Charles Wilkinson, and a slew of others who carry the mantle forward, including such public officials as Bruce Babbitt who credits Stegner's *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* as one of the key influential books in his own upbringing.

Interviewer-John Howe

Bob tell me in your opinion, what would Wallace Stegner's view be of the current state of the environment?

Bob Keiter

I believe Stegner would be dismayed by our penchant for continuing to repeat the mistakes of the past. He witnessed boom and bust cycles on a regular basis across the West during his lifetime. He wrote about them, he lamented them, and since his passing we've witnessed, at least during the late '80s and early '90s, continued over-harvesting of timber, particularly of the Pacific Northwest. We've seen the draw on water continue at a rate that is excessive and unsustainable, and most recently here in the West, we see another energy boom just taking over the public lands without much thought about what the future legacy of this type of hardly restrained drilling and exploration will mean. It's a repeat of past mistakes. It's something that I think Stegner would lament based upon his experiences and observations. He also early on wrote about the

problems of pollution--the need to safeguard our air, our water, the places where we live, and although climate change was hardly an everyday word, at the end of his life I'm sure that he would find the fact that we have not responded more effectively yet to the challenge of greenhouse gases to be a major shortcoming.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think his advice would be in terms of solving some of these environmental issues that you mention?

Bob Keiter

Stegner would advise us that to solve the environmental problems that we face today, first we need to recognize them. We need to identify exactly what the problems are, and we need to address them collectively. Stegner had a healthy respect for community and the ability to collaborate and cooperate even among those who didn't necessarily agree with each other, and he would try to promote a healthy dialogue as a first step toward addressing some of the most pressing environmental problems that we have today. He was at least optimistic during most of his lifetime that we had managed to preserve and protect a good bit of the western landscape, and I think he would be hopeful that we would be foresightful and think about future generations as a vehicle for addressing today's environmental problems.

Interviewer-John Howe

What are the biggest challenges facing the environment from your perspective?

Bob Keiter

Probably the two biggest challenges today are a combination of population and consumption. We need to begin to address questions of population--what the

landscape and our resource base can sustain, recognizing that not only are we growing across the United States and the American West, but that population is substantial elsewhere in the world, particularly in Asia with India and China continuing to grow at great rates and putting a substantial demand on the world's resources. This not only contributes to greenhouse gas problems today, but it also contributes to depletion of water, energy resources, and other resources, and that sort of consumption is problematic, at least at the level it is proceeding at the moment.

Interviewer-John Howe

When you look at the life of Wallace Stegner, why is it important from your perspective? How should he be remembered and why?

Bob Keiter

Stegner's life is important because he had a vision of what the West might be, and become. He characterized it as the geography or the native home of hope, and he thought that this place, with the special scenery, the incredible vistas, the communities, and the optimistic people that inhabited it could, if they worked together and if they recognized the limits of the landscape, make this a special place, and he wrote movingly about how this might become a special place, and the need for us to look beyond our immediate needs and desires and to take into account future generations. He argued, before it was fashionable, for an ethic of sustainability, and that is perhaps his most important legacy.