

## **Bruce Babbitt Interview**

### **Wallace Stegner Documentary**

#### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Let's start out by talking about the legacy of Wallace Stegner. When you think of Wallace Stegner, what do you think his legacy is?

#### **Bruce Babbitt**

I think Wallace Stegner explained the reality of the West not only to westerners, but to all of his readers in a really new and larger perspective that kind of got us past all of the kind of tintype stereotypes of Cowboys and Indians and bad guys and train robbers and all of the kind of mythical West. He presented the West as a real place populated by real people in the tapestry of daily life and history.

#### **Interviewer-John Howe**

How important was *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* to the West and specifically water use in the West?

#### **Bruce Babbitt**

*Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* I think, in many ways, was his most important contribution to understanding the West because it really kind of shattered all of this old kind of mythology of, you know, the sort of lone individual hero conquering the West and going back into the history of the 19th century of the scientists who went West he portrayed a much more complex picture of the role of society and governmental institutions, and of course the transformation led by John Wesley Powell who not only discovered and floated the Colorado River, but basically created all of the beginnings of modern government science with The Bureau of American Ethnology, the expansion of the Smithsonian, the creation of The United States Geological Survey. I think that period really was

the beginning of the government science, which has now flowered into everything from food safety to planetary exploration. It began with John Wesley Powell, and Stegner was really the first guy to bring that out and put it all together in a historical context.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Stegner writes of John Wesley Powell's reservation concerning using the Colorado River as an instrument of irrigation and development. What are the lessons in that warning?

### **Bruce Babbitt**

What Powell was telling us in his famous treatise on the arid lands was really something people didn't want to hear, and that was that the West is arid that there is a limited supply of water, and that it would have to be used thoughtfully and in a planned fashion. You know, the old kind of pattern of settlement that said there's room for everybody on every acre of land you can homestead, from wall to wall because there's enough rainfall was utterly obsolete and, you know in one of his most famous pronouncements he pinpointed the exact percentage of Utah that could be devoted to irrigation agriculture. I forget whether it was four percent or six percent, but he did all of the calculations, and you know 150 years ago he had it right. That is a reality that the West had been slow to accept. It's still kind of caught up in the myth of, you know, perpetual abundance. It's an important lesson--it's one that we have begun to assimilate, but by no means completely.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

What influence did Wallace Stegner's writing have on you and specifically your tenure as Secretary of the Department of the Interior?

## Bruce Babbitt

Well I remember the first time I read *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*. It was like somebody had sort of thrown a rock through a window and you could hear all of the old ideas just shattering across the floor in the face of a new reality. Now I re-read that book in the month before I came to Washington for its description of the need for planning. There's a real powerful sequence in there in which he talks about the irrigation survey. It was an incredible moment in which Congress had given him authority to do land use planning across the entire West--to basically withdraw from settlement of the lands that were susceptible of irrigation, to map them out and then to put together irrigation districts which would use water in a planned way. It was an amazing moment, and it all fell apart because you know once westerners looked around and said, he really intends to do this, you know all of the kind of individualistic westerners staking their own claims and making their own water grabs rushed back to Congress, and in that moment it was all over. I thought a lot about that as I went to become Secretary of the Interior and to try to extend the use of science, particularly in the creation of the biological survey, to use science to sort of plan a more realistic view of the landscape and to say well, then should we save? How can we settle or continue to populate this landscape, not just in a great relentless sprawling mass wiping out all of the resources and environmental values, but to do it in a more forward-looking constrained way? That's the big lesson that John Wesley Powell brought to my administration, the Interior Department, and of course Wally Stegner was the middleman who kind of took all of that body of learning and experience out of the 19th century and showed me what it meant. Wally wrote me a little note--actually it was a copy of *Beyond the Hundredth Meridia*--in which he had inscribed, which arrived in the mail in my first month in office, and it had an inscription which said, "Bruce I hope this book will inspire you to get on with cleaning out the Augean stables"--a wonderful sort of reference to Greek Mythology in which Hercules is confronted with the seemingly impossible task of cleaning up all of the refuse in this

particular agricultural myth.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Wallace Stegner worked closely with Stewart Udall and the Kennedy administration. How would you describe Stewart Udall and his legacy?

### **Bruce Babbitt**

What Stu Udall, among the many things that Stu Udall did, I think maybe the most important, is the way in which he jump started the next wave of environmental awareness in this country. If you think back to the 1950's and the context of those times, the environment had kind of fallen away. The New Deal was over. There was this famous Eisenhower Secretary of the Interior who came to be known as "Give-away McKay", because the Interior Department had become a place where the government was basically at hand to facilitate any kind of resource proposal relating to logging, mining, whatever, and what Stu did when he came in with JFK was succeeded him brilliantly. He had reawakened the nation to it's long, and by then much neglected tradition of bipartisan environmental concern, and of course Wally Stegner had a big hand in that because of his sense of history and his writing skill and his sense of poetry and vision, and it of course took form in the quiet crisis, but of course beyond that the creation of the national parks--the movement for national seashores, wild and scenic rivers--he surely... Stu that is, is surely one of the great figures in American environmental history.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Wallace Stegner was influential in the creation of Canyonlands and Capital Reef National Parks. He actually wanted a larger area protected, which eventually became Grand Staircase National Monument. Why is it important that this canyon country be preserved?

## **Bruce Babbitt**

Well a lot of us are obsessed with the Colorado Plateau. It's a subject that Stu and I and Wally Stegner and many many westerners all seemed to, you know, just be fixated on. There's a couple of reasons for that, one of course is the Colorado Plateau is by any measure the most strikingly beautiful and unique landscape on this planet, period. I mean there are a lot of lovely mountains, but at the bottom of it, the Alps, the Rockies, the Andes--they're all mountains that, to some degree, are an interchangeable experience. There are a lot of deserts on this planet. A lot of them are quite comparable. There's something absolutely different about the Colorado Plateau--this notion of all of this extraordinary geological sequence up to 7 to 10,000 feet--just sort of there in a layer cake, which has been filigreed and dissected by all of these canyons and life forms. There's nothing even remotely comparable. The second reason why we're all obsessed with it is that we now understand that to preserve wildlife and bio-diversity we need big spaces, but we can't protect and restore the diversity of life in postage stamp parks. Nature needs space, and The Colorado Plateau is a place where there is still a chance to preserve wild space and wildlife and bio-diversity on a really big palette of landscapes. If you think of how it all comes together in staircase fashion, and of course John Wesley Powell and Clarence Dutton and others wrote about this, you sort of stair-step from time from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon to the North Rim on up into the Mesozoic in Bryce, Zion, Cedar Breaks and all the way up onto the Utah plateaus moving up through geologic and biological time. There isn't anything like it anywhere else. If you start adding all of those places together and look at the way it has gradually come together in a mosaic of protected areas, we're talking about a landscape of five to ten million acres. There isn't any other possibility like that anywhere in the lower 48 states.

## **Interviewer-John Howe**

Wallace Stegner wrote his famous "Wilderness Letter" about a "geography of hope" and advocated wilderness preservation just to know it's there. Let's discuss the "Wilderness Letter" a little bit, and that concept and why it's important.

## **Bruce Babbitt**

It's a beautiful letter. It's an expression of an idea that really began with Aldo Leopold. If you go back and read the Sand County Almanac there's this wonderful phrase in which Leopold says, "Of what value are 40 freedoms without a blank spot on a map?" and it's just a wonderful idea. There is something about nourishing the human spirit by getting away from our own presence on the landscape back into a more pristine, diverse, functioning universe of wild places, and what I think Wally Stegner did in that letter was not invent a new idea, but rather give it a western and American context that fed directly into the debate over the national wilderness system legislation. I really think that you have to read the letter, not as something entirely new, but as a marvelous expression that was fed into a political and social discussion at exactly the right time. It was not only an important idea, but it was reformulated and put into circulation in a way that had tremendous consequences in the elaboration of a national wilderness system that is a fabulous accomplishment that is still under construction with more and more places in incremental fashion coming into wilderness under the umbrella of that legislation.

## **Interviewer-John Howe**

Wallace Stegner's writing demystified the West. What do you think he was trying to say, and what do you regard as the biggest misconceptions about the West?

## **Bruce Babbitt**

Well I've always tended to see Wally as a historian and scientist because, you know my own roots are in my own science education in my political life. But I don't mean to underestimate the literary side--Wally Stegner as novelist, because no question that his most profound elaboration of the meaning of the West comes in books like *Angle of Repose*, even more perhaps in *Wolf Willow* and some of the other writings of his early days in Saskatchewan. And again, what comes from those novels is the human dimension. Americans tend to see the West through the sort of two-dimensional stereotypes of John Wayne movies and all of that sort of thing. It's not real. That's kind of a social construct of another time, but he got behind that and portrayed real people, and the message of course is that the West... and Stewart Udall also has said and frequently written the West is not the product of a few, you know, gun slinging, larger than life heroes staring down all of the danger. The West is a tapestry of lives, of regular people--men and women and children and diverse ethnic groups all together on this landscape living out their lives and gradually building communities and presence on the land. It comes through I think really beautifully in *Angle of Repose*, I guess, is to me kind of the one that comes closest because it's really set in the Southern Rocky Mountains.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

What do you think Wallace Stegner's reaction would be to the current state of the environment?

### **Bruce Babbitt**

Well Wally Stegner began his career as a historian, and I think he would see this in a historic perspective and I think would recognize that Americans in terms of their culture and politics are an interesting set of historical experiences. Our democracy (and I think this is what he would say)... Our democracy is characterized in normal times by complacency, by complete complacency. Americans in normal times don't like government. They hate politics, and their

basic attitude is "leave us alone and let us get on with our lives." It's counterbalanced by this kind of cyclical capacity to come together, usually in times of crisis, and to rally and to kind of step up to the challenges. That's the history of the environmental movement. It really came together in a remarkable starburst at the end of the 19th Century, that's Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt... kind of fell back into the hands of the robber barrens in the 1920's, re-emerged in the accomplishments of The New Deal, faded away in the 1950's, came back in a real resurgence in the 1960's and '70s and we're now back in one of those flat kind of periods there... so apparent in American history, but during the flat period--the periods where we sort of lapse into a complacency, they always are, you know kind of temporary, and what you see is the resurgence begins out in the grass roots--the resurgence of environmental concern. You don't see it when the center's dead. You have to go out and look around, and you see it in resurgence of the local land trusts, of watershed councils--a lot of local concern, so obviously I'm reading a lot into what he would say, but I'm reading it as a function of his own history, so that's what I think he would say--he'd say, "Yeah, we've gone through a bad period. American history says it's ending. There are signs of a rebirth, of springtime out there on the horizon. All the more reason to get to work." In his words, "Cleaning out the Augean stables."

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Do you have a favorite book of his and why? Talk about it a little bit with *Angle of Repose*...

### **Bruce Babbitt**

Well I'm not a poet. I'm a politician with a lot of science grounding and interests, so you ask me to name a favorite book, I turn to the one that's influenced me most in the practice of my trade, and that is, without a doubt *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*. It just simply opened my eyes to the history

and reality and importance of government science in the role of regulatory institutions--The Geological Survey, the E.P.A., and in my own case, of land and resource protection tradition of the Interior Department.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Is there reason to expect a "geography of hope" as Wallace Stegner describes? What do you think is the...

### **Bruce Babbitt**

I just answered that with that long riff on history I think. Hope it was not too long, but that's kind of where we are.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

If you had to sum up Wallace Stegner's legacy, what do you think it is?

### **Bruce Babbitt**

Wally Stegner taught westerners to understand who we really are and how we relate to and what our ethical obligations are to the western landscape.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

We were talking about Wally Stegner's legacy. What do you think his legacy is and how do you think he'll be remembered?

### **Bruce Babbitt**

Wally Stegner spoke, of course to all Americans, but most directly to those of us who live in the West and he kind of picked us up and shook us by the scruff of the neck and said, look at your traditions and your relation to the land and who you really are, and what a wonderful, magical, multi-dimensional experience the western experience has been, and how it is we transform that into our own set

of ethical obligations toward the future.