

Carl Brandt Interview Wallace Stegner Documentary

Interviewer-John Howe

Carl, let's start out by... tell me a little bit about Wallace Stegner? What kind of a man was Wallace Stegner? How would you describe him?

Carl Brandt

Well, I knew him best as a professional writer. My concern with him was always to try and make his work go the way he wants it, he wanted to do to try to be helpful. We all are concerned about having our clients eat and that's central to my concern, but one of the things I liked about him so much is that he was the consummate professional. He did everything that he needed to do in order to do what he really wanted to do, which was to write fiction. I know he cared a great deal about the conservation world, but it was not his first love.

Interviewer-John Howe

Let's talk about his legacy. What do you think his legacy is? How important is his writing?

Carl Brandt

Well I think there are a number of things...

Interviewer-John Howe

Start that for me one more time.

Carl Brandt

Well, I think his legacy is multifaceted, if you will. One part of it is simply the school of writers who came out of his class and training, and who were inspired

by him and learning their profession from him, and they're going to be around for a while, and they're probably going to have their followers, so there is almost a pyramid of written legacy as it were. I think that some of the fiction will last for a long time--*Angle of Repose* certainly, *Crossing to Safety*, maybe *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and then there is the conservation world--*Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, some of the work of Devoto which has been so important. There are people who had been involved in saving the West--which sounds rather pretentious, but nevertheless--who really were inspired by Wally, and it was Wally who got them on it.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk just a little bit about *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Tell me about its literary importance.

Carl Brandt

I'm not a literary critic, so it's hard for me to come solemnly into that.

Interviewer-John Howe

Well even how it came into being, and a little bit about its importance.

Carl Brandt

It came into being because that's what he felt he had to write at the time. Nobody said, Wally, go write a book about that. He just wanted to write it, and that's what he did, and again it created something of a stir. I think people were surprised by it. It was, in many ways, original, I think, and it helped make his name. It helped build an audience for him, and that was important.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me where the name came from.

Carl Brandt

I don't know the answer to that. I think there was an old poem, or maybe an old folk song. I think at one point I did know, but I'm sorry to say I don't remember.

Interviewer-John Howe

You talked about just a little bit that Stegner's Creative Writing Program at Stanford was responsible for a generations finest writers. Why was it so unique and successful, and how did that tie into Wally's own personality?

Carl Brandt

Well, I think it was successful because it was disciplined. It was not as indulgent as so many of the writing programs are these days. I think part of that was because Wally was older. He was accomplished, and he kept working all of the time so that the writing program was part of his life, but it was not the central part of his life, which I think gave him a good sense of distance from the students and what they were doing. They got the benefit of his advice and his dispassion, and that's very valuable to a writer I think.

Interviewer-John Howe

Describe the turbulent times at Stanford in the '60s and how did Wally react to that, especially in terms of some of his students.

Carl Brandt

Well, he was appalled. He really... having come up through the remains of the depression and having to fight for every bit of his academic training, and I think having to work so hard to get where he did, what he regarded as the self-indulgence and laziness of some of the students out there just drove him crazy. He was basically polite about it because he was very polite man, almost always,

but he hated, just hated it.

Interviewer-John Howe

Can you talk about anyone in specific like Ken Kesey? Did he talk about Ken?

Carl Brandt

He did, but not to me.

Interviewer-John Howe

Some have said he seemed a reluctant teacher, preferring to write. Is that true, and if so why?

Carl Brandt

I think that's true because all Wally ever really wanted to do was write. It was his central force of his existence, but again as I say he was a professional. He was a man who did what had to be done in order to do what he wanted to do, and he was aware of what had to be done, and he had, I think, found the teaching something he cared about because he cared about writing and he thought that he could be useful to the training of the young and they would be better writers as a result of the program, and it beat working in an insurance company.

Interviewer-John Howe

East Coast critics seem reticent to give Stegner his due, especially the New York Times. Talk about the East Coast critics a little bit, and why - I'm talking about some of the instances where they misspelled his name a couple of times and things like that. Why do you think that was, especially with the New York Times?

Carl Brandt

I think there is a certain reluctance in the literary world of New York to accept that good things were happening out in the West. We're not talking 30 or 40 years ago. That has changed a good deal in recent years, but possibly because the east coast was in love with the south and southern literature at that time, and when they ventured forth from New York City there was Faulkner, there was Penn Warren, there were all those wonderful people down there, and so somebody like Wally just seemed that much further away and he didn't write about cowboys with six guns and... you know it was before *McMurtry*. It was just... he was unique and they didn't get it. I think it's as much that.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk a little bit about Stegner's vision of the West--demystifying the West if you will, and his West was not the West of Zane Gray for example.

Carl Brandt

No, it certainly wasn't. I think that the writing of the *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* was absolutely central to his understanding of the West. When he realized that there wasn't any water out there and that so much was myth--it's not just the cowboy myth with the six guns, but the lush land that would absorb anything and everybody was also a myth. And then when he realized that people found there was so much money in the myth and would sell worthless land, he was appalled again, he just... I think by the time he died, he was really disillusioned by the whole West, and the fact that he chose to be buried in Greensboro is to me an enormously telling thing, you know, for a man who was supposed to be a true lover of the West and it so... Greensboro was his final home.

Interviewer-John Howe

Let's talk just a little bit about the Pulitzer Prize for *Angle of Repose*. Tell me what his reaction was to that.

Carl Brandt

I was not all that close to him at the time, so I can only report second-hand. Of course he was pleased and excited by it, but he was so angered by the response of the *Times* to that award, that he thought it was just a continuation of what had gone before. I think it turned it a little sour for him, as well it might.

Interviewer-John Howe

He also turned down the National Medal of the Arts at one point. Talk about that a little bit and maybe the rationale behind that.

Carl Brandt

Well, I think he was so appalled at the government's approach to conservation and land use that he just felt it would be improper for him to accept it, and Wally... he had a real sense of what was proper, I think, and felt strongly that there are things that you do, and there are things that you don't do, and that was one of the things that you don't do--accept honors from people who are trashing the things you care about, which is not a bad position. A little old fashioned but...

Interviewer-John Howe

How important is his conservation legacy and why do you think that is?

Carl Brandt

Well he was one of the two or three articulate spokespeople for a land ethic. There was Rachael Carlson, a different kind of... Ed Abby, the (who else?), there are so many others--the Muirs so that... but he also had the ability to move in

higher political circles than some of the others. He was able to reach Babbitt. He was able to get involved with the government at a reasonably high level, and have some affect on what was going on. I think it almost reached to the point where if you're not involved in work of that kind, or are at least sympathetic to it, you haven't been paying attention, and Wally made us pay attention.

Interviewer-John Howe

You knew Wallace Stegner for many years. What did he mean to you personally?

Carl Brandt

In many ways he was sort of a model. He was in his mid-eighties, sixteen or seventeen years older than I am, or was, and there are not that many men who you say, yes I would like to be like that.” I mean I could never be a writer. It wasn't that part. It wasn't the accomplishments. It was the character, and we had a fair amount of correspondence. Often we made each other laugh, which I greatly enjoyed. It was something successful when I was able to do that, and again I learned so much from him, not directly, but sort of indirectly--sort of the way one goes about ones life, and he was marvelous.

Interviewer-John Howe

How did you hear of his death and what was your reaction to it?

Carl Brandt

I think it was Mary who called me. I'm fairly certain, and I don't believe it, appalled, sad, in a way I guess glad that it happened reasonably quickly. If he had to go it was not two years of cancer or dementia or whatever, but just generally, you know, there was a hole in life because he was still busy working. He was hard at it, and I think that he rather resented it that he had to go down to

Santa Fe and go through those motions of the awards. He really wanted to work. He had the list of things that he had to do and... again, but what a great way to go--to be so involved and so filled with one's work and one's life and one's wife and...

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think Wallace Stegner was the most proud of of all of his accomplishments and family? What do you think he himself was most proud of?

Carl Brandt

Oh, I think without question the fiction. Again as I say, it was central. The fact that he could do that and do it continuously and get it published and get it read and get people paying attention to it was central. I think he liked doing the good work for conservation. He liked all of that, but in the core it was back in that studio running the fingers.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me a little bit about his writing routine. How did he write? What was his day like?

Carl Brandt

I have to take that from Fradkin, or you should take that from Fradkin because he did his homework and I know he worked in the morning and I think he went back and worked in the afternoons some but... but he did work every day. That I do know.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you miss the most about him?

Carl Brandt

What do I miss the most about him?

Interviewer-John Howe

Correct.

Carl Brandt

Oh, his existence. The world was a better place when he was around. My world was a better place when he was around. I say a mentor... that's heavy handed, which is an example. I also miss the work. I had a lot of fun working with him. We did good things--at least I think we did.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do you have a favorite story or any anecdotes you could tell us about Wally?

Carl Brandt

Not really. I mean he was not... he wasn't somebody about whom I think one generally told stories. He didn't live that way. He didn't tell stories about himself very much. He's not an anecdotal character.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me a little bit about his integrity and honor and code if you will. What kind of values did he live by?

Carl Brandt

He was old-fashioned in the sense that he believed that you worked for what you get and that honor comes from the work that you do, that keeping your word is really important, that paying... I'd say paying the bills (I'm not talking

about writing the checks for the heating), but paying your obligations to other people was very important. Loyalty was important. The good old-fashioned values. And he really believed in them. That's one of the things that offended him about the wild days at Stanford in the academic world. There were people who just weren't "paying their bills" and weren't aware of the lack of what they themselves by not "paying the bills" and by not thinking that way.