

Marion Stegner Interview

Wallace Stegner Documentary

Interviewer-John Howe

Marion, tell me what kind of a man Wallace Stegner was. How do you remember him and how would you describe his personality?

Marion Stegner

Well, he was the great mentor of my life. He helped me to form... Well, for me he was a very kind man. He cared a lot about me. I cared about him, and he was a great mentor to me. He always encouraged me to go into my studio, even if I had nothing to do, and just sit for three hours if I had nothing to do in order to get into the rote of creation. He was always very supportive of me, and he was a good man.

Interviewer-John Howe

You said he was a kind man.

Marion Stegner

He was a very giving person to me. He was very patient and he was a great listener. He went out of his way to spend time with me, and I felt he was a very good friend along with being my father in law, which is unusual.

Interviewer-John Howe

You were talking a little bit about his environmental work. How do you think he should be remembered in terms of the environment? Why is his legacy important in terms of his environment?

Marion Stegner

He touched so much things of the environment. He brought people's awareness to national parks. He brought people's awareness to the water problems of the West. He was tireless in his demands that people look and see and listen as to what was really going on in the world and what was going to happen if we did not face these things head-on.

Interviewer-John Howe

What kind of grandfather was he to Page and Rachael?

Marion Stegner

He was a wonderful... while he was a wonderful grandfather, he was very attentive. He cared a lot for the children. I think he skipped a generation. He wasn't quite the father he might have been, but he was a great grandfather, and he spent a lot of time with them, and my son just adored him, and of course carries his name too, so...

Interviewer-John Howe

In Page's new book of letters he has a couple that were written to you. You probably know the ones I'm talking about, but basically what he was saying is they wanted to keep you in the family. What did you think about when you read that?

Marion Stegner

Oh, I was very pleased because I had no intention of dropping them as my in-laws. I'd been married to Page for 25 years and I have my children with him and... (interruption)

Interviewer-John Howe

We were just talking about those quotes and the letters. Tell me how those

letters make you feel and also more important, what kind of man wrote them?

Marion Stegner

Well, a man who cared a lot about me. I think he was very unhappy about the divorce. He was very sad (interruption)

Marion Stegner

Well, those quotes touched me deeply--touched my heart. He's a man who cared a lot about me and about who I was and about my future, and I come from a very warm, loving family--a big family, so to be included this way from a man who only had one child, it was wonderful. It was wonderful, and he cared a lot about keeping the connection going, and I cared a lot about it. I didn't want to lose touch. Mary was a little different, but Wally was someone I really felt an affinity for and with.

Interviewer-John Howe

We interviewed Stewart Udall a while ago. Tell me a little bit about Wally's work, if you remember the Kennedy administration and Wally's role in it. What do you think about that time?

Marion Stegner

In those days I was a young mother and I was living... Wally went to Washington and I didn't pay a lot of attention to what was going on in those times. I learned later, and of course as I read Phil Fradkin's book, I understand the import of those months, was it six months or so that he was in Washington, and clearly they were very important months, and very forming in terms of Glen Canyon and the... am I right? Glen Canyon I think.

Interviewer-John Howe

You lived through those times in the '60s with Wally and his students at Stanford, especially the turbulent times there. Talk about them a little bit and maybe how Wally reacted to the '60s and how he felt about that.

Marion Stegner

The '60s were indeed a wild time and there was a lot of drug use and students were pretty much off the wall, and I believe he really disapproved of most of it. He had students with whom he had difficulty with, and the parties that we went to were always certainly full of marijuana and punch that was boiling up green and purple, and brownies that were well laced, and I don't think he wanted anything to do with it. It was beyond his belief system that this could be going on.

Interviewer-John Howe

In that era he seemed to have some issues with some of his students like Ken Kesey and others. Talk about that just a little bit and the why behind that.

Marion Stegner

Well I think Ken Kesey said that the difference between them was that... I think the difference between Ken Kesey and Wally was that Ken liked marijuana and Wally liked bourbon. I think that's what Ken said years ago, and that was their major split. And I think they knocked heads. They probably had a good deal of likenesses in some respects with their work, and they just locked horns, and that was never... I don't think that was ever resolved in Ken's life, though I think he came to respect him. I think there was a respect between them, but they didn't like each other very much.

Interviewer-John Howe

Any other of his famous students you could talk about from that era?

Marion Stegner

Well there was Ed McClanahan. He used to wear capes and swoosh into class (laughs), and then there was wonderful Wendell Berry who just was a... probably one of his most prized products, students. There were so many of them, it was remarkable that he had such a wagon train of extraordinary students at that time, and many of whom have gone on to make great successes out of their lives.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do you remember Tom McGuane from that era?

Marion Stegner

Not well. I knew who Tom was, but I didn't know him well

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me about Vermont and Wallace Stegner. Why was Vermont so special to Wallace Stegner?

Marion Stegner

Wally was always looking for his sense of place that he never had as a child--he never had in his lifetime, and Vermont, when it was introduced to him, Greensboro especially when it was introduced to him, I believe became his sense of place and he could relate to Saskatchewan. He could relate to where he grew up, which is the place he spent the most time, which was only six years, I believe, of his life. And he liked the people, and he liked the capacity to live the way he wanted to live without people leaning over his shoulder and looking over his shoulder.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why do you think of a man so identified with the West would choose to have his ashes spread here in Vermont?

Marion Stegner

The West was indeed very important to him, but I think his ashes being in a place where the people he... some of the people he cared most about in the world lived, and I think he just wanted to be amongst them, and it continues to be his sense of place. In fact, I think he wrote... when he wrote that piece called "A Sense of Place" which... Vermont plays a part of that piece.

Interviewer-John Howe

Describe the Vermont farm and why that was important in his life.

Marion Stegner

I don't know what farm. Are you referring to the Northern? The very early-on one? Which I know very little about! I don't know much about that.

Interviewer-John Howe

What about the cottage?

Marion Stegner

Well, the cottage was built when my son was a year old, so we brought the beams from the farmhouse over to the Baker Hill location, and that was built as a typical Vermont farmhouse because it was built with the beams from the farmhouse so it had a specific shape to it, and everything was done by hand. They mixed the cement by hand, they... I think he was in his element. He loved to build, as does Page.

Interviewer-John Howe

How would you describe Page's relationship with his father growing up?

Marion Stegner

I would say their relationship was not very good. I don't think that either of Page's parents, either Wally or Mary, had much room for a child. They were so close to each other that there wasn't a whole lot of opening. Page was born with a broken leg, which they didn't know about until he was about two years old, and then he was in a brace for seven or eight years, and I think that was hard for the Stegners. I think Wally then, everyday as I understand, he would help Page put the brace on after his nap and that was sort of his way of being closer to his son. It was a hard go, and I think all the Stegner men have trouble.

Interviewer-John Howe

Marion, tell me a little bit about Wally's writing routine, at least when you would visit or be around him. What kind of routine did he keep when he was writing?

Marion Stegner

Wally's routine was very strict. He would go out in the morning by eight o'clock I believe, and he would come back in for lunch about 1 p.m., and that was his routine pretty much every day, which is probably why he told me that was the routine to follow that would best allow you to create, is to get into that habit of going in everyday to your study, no matter what... if you had nothing on your mind to do, to just go in and... and that's what he did. He was very structured in that sense.

Interviewer-John Howe

How did you learn of his death? How did you find out?

Marion Stegner

I learned of his death through a phone call. I was staying with my son in Truckee and we were having breakfast, and I was just telling my son of nightmare I'd had where a car was coming straight for me and I turned my head suddenly to the left and said, "No!" and woke myself up, and I was in tears, and the phone rang and they told us that Wally had been in an accident in Santa Fe and that it didn't look fatal, but he was not in great shape, and I went out soon after with my daughter. We went to Santa Fe to see him, and he was pretty banged up.

Interviewer-John Howe

What was your reaction to his death?

Marion Stegner

Oh, it brings tears to my eyes. It's hard to talk about. I was really shocked. I can't talk about it. I felt like I lost a really major person in my life, which I had.

Interviewer-John Howe

Let's start again...

Marion Stegner

I felt a huge loss at the time of his death. I thought that I'd lost one of the major forces of my life, and my instant reaction was to go north of Santa Cruz up to a beach that's little frequented and I walked for about three or four hours with my dog and that was part of the healing, I guess--process. But he was a big loss in my life. He was a bigger loss to me than my own father who died many years before.

Interviewer-John Howe

What would you consider his greatest accomplishment?

Marion Stegner

Well, I think one of his greatest accomplishments was sticking with what he believed in--was sticking to the... he used to say that just to do, to pick two things in your life, two things you cared about, and really work for those two things. If you saw one to fruition you would be lucky. And he just stuck like glue to his care for the environment and what happened in the world, and he never deviated from that path, so I think that, more than all of the books he wrote, would be my idea of his greatest accomplishment as a person.

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking just a little bit about the relationship Page had with his father and mother, and that he sometimes felt left out. Maybe you can tell me that story.

Marion Stegner

Wally's relationship with Page, I would say, was very academic and they could meet on an academic plane, but they couldn't meet from the heart, and as long as... and I think that's why Page became a writer--to be accepted by his father, and it was a way he could be... they could speak the same language, but there wasn't a capacity to show love. I never saw them hug each other. I never saw any physical affection, and I think Page always felt he was not good enough--that he couldn't live up to this standard that was set by his parents for him, so it was tough. It was a tough relationship. But they got together on the *American Places* book, and they did well with that. As long as they were dealing with academic issues they were good, but it never got to the point where one could say, "I love you."

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me a little bit about Phil and Peg Gray and the influence they had on Wallace Stegner's life.

Marion Stegner

Well the Grays, they met in Wisconsin. Do I have that right? And then the Grays went to Harvard. Phil Gray went to Harvard and that's where... and Wally was also at Harvard that year, and they introduced them to Greensboro, and that was a mighty... a very big influence. And they became very tight friends, and I was not really part of that until I married Page. I didn't know anything about it because they kept to themselves and they had their own little group, as it were. So I'm curious myself as to the relationship. I don't know that I've ever really known the truth about that relationship.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do you have any favorite story about Wally that you could share with us? Any anecdote or moment that you can remember that you think is especially poignant?

Marion Stegner

Well, I think if you were to ask him about the environment today he would say... he had a favorite saying, "What's not good for the bee, cannot be good for the beehive", and that pretty much would sum up what he would say about what's going on today. He had little sayings for many things but I don't remember a lot of them.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do you have a favorite book of his, and if so why?

Marion Stegner

I very much like the book *The Spectator Bird*. I also liked *Angle of Repose* for obvious reasons--because of the West. I think *The Spectator Bird* is beautifully written. His construction... his language construction is sparse and clean, and I think it spoke to some of his life. Each book he wrote spoke a certain amount of his life to me, but I would probably choose that book, and I believe it won a national book award.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk about Wallace's parents just a little bit, in terms of George and Hilda. Describe George if you could.

Marion Stegner

Wally spoke of his father maybe twice the whole time I was married to Page and it was with a venom, absolute venom. He detested his father, and I don't think that's too strong a word to use. His mother he adored, and I think through his mother he became very... he was very gentle with women, and she died of cancer, and he was with her and his father was not. His father was a total ne'er-do-well--a very angry person, and he didn't want anything to do with talking about him.

Interviewer-John Howe

What kind of influence did you think George had on Wallace?

Marion Stegner

I think the influence probably, my guess would be... at first it was his mother I think that let me... that saw the talent in the man. She saw a great talent in Wally, and I think he was determined not to follow in his brother, excuse me, in his father's footsteps.

Interviewer-John Howe

Once again... How did George affect Wallace Stegner?

Marion Stegner

He created anger in his life. George was angry. Wally was angry with George, with his father. His father was a very unloving, unaffectionate person who was not a good father, was not a good role model, whereas, he adored his mother. And his father was rather terrible to his mother from what I can gather. But I think the overall affect was that Wally was determined to make his life a very good one, which he did.

Interviewer-John Howe

What did it mean to you personally that Wally kept you in the family after your divorce from Page?

Marion Stegner

Oh, it meant the world to me because I had no intention of giving up on them, and it meant that the door was always open and I could call them whenever, and it really substantiated my feelings of friendship and love and family, and that meant a lot to me and it still does.