

Page Stegner Interview

Wallace Stegner Documentary

Interviewer - John Howe

Let's start out by talking about Wallace Stegner. What kind of a man was Wallace Stegner? How do you remember him?

Page Stegner

Boy... why didn't you ask me this about a week ago so I could have prepared an answer? What kind of a man was he? Honorable, decent, you know I can't answer that question.

Interviewer - John Howe

Let's start out by talking about what kind of man was Wallace Stegner? How do you remember him?

Page Stegner

Well, that's a very complicated question, but I suppose the principle thing I remember about him growing up was his absolute sense of discipline and dedication to work. I mean he had his routines and he varied from them very little--out in the study by eight in the morning, 7:30 maybe, uninterrupted until lunch time, and then he would do either university work or work in the garden or whatever, but every day was pretty much the same. He was very, very disciplined, which is one of the reasons he turned out so much stuff.

Interviewer - John Howe

What do you think his literary legacy is? How would you describe it?

Stewart Udall

Well what do you mean by literary legacy?

Interviewer - John Howe

His body of works in terms of his books and things, or maybe about his reputation. How do you think people thought of him?

Page Stegner

Well, you know, it's a guess, anybody's guess, but my experience of it since his death is that it has grown enormously.

Interviewer - John Howe

What kind of father would you describe him as? Talk about your childhood a little bit. How did that go?

Page Stegner

I'm going to turn out to be your absolutely worst subject. I don't know whether I want to talk about that. I mean I'll talk about it, but I don't know whether I want it for posterity. How do I deal with that?

Interviewer - John Howe

That's a pretty personal thing. Any anecdotal materials?

Page Stegner

Well you know my father and I had a fairly prickly relationship until I was at least in my early 20's. We didn't get along very well because I was uncontrollable and, you know Peck's bad boy, and I didn't take instruction very well and he didn't take contradiction very well, so we had a difficult time of it until I was about 20, and eventually, through a fairly checkered academic career, wound up at Stanford and you know kind of got my own life together and began to see

where I was going and do things that finally he approved of instead of everything that he disapproved of.

Interviewer - John Howe

How did his early life affect his writing?

Page Stegner

Well, he has written about that in many different ways. It certainly provided endless material. In the subject of the first major novel that he wrote, *Big Rock Candy Mountain*. *Wolf Willow*... I mean there are a lot of his major works that have to do with early childhood in Saskatchewan and growing up kind of a wild savage as he put it. He hated his father of course bitterly, and loved his mother, and was, by his own admission, a kind of mama's boy, and I think his affection for his mother and her nurturing of him gave him the kind of insight that so many of his female characters have in his fiction.

Interviewer - John Howe

What can you tell me about George Stegner? What is your opinion of him? Any stories you can tell about that?

Page Stegner

Well, no, because he died long before I was born, so all I know is anecdotal and not much. He was a boomer, you know a booze runner, speakeasy owner, always looking for the fast buck, the free lunch, and a - but my father never... I think I heard of George Stegner maybe two or three times in his life, and then only to sort of mutter something behind his breath. He never talked about his family, or you know his mother, his brother, anything. It's almost as if the Stegners had no family. There were no antecedents.

Interviewer - John Howe

Did he ever mention his mother Hilda Stegner?

Page Stegner

No. He wrote about her. He wrote a wonderful piece to my mother much too late in that collection *Where the Blue Bird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* and she is, of course, a character in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* as is George, but outside of his fiction writing he didn't talk about family, his family much at all.

Interviewer - John Howe

Talk a little bit about Eastend. What kind of influence do you think that had, and Saskatchewan and sort of the new frontier.

Page Stegner

Well, again all I know about it is what he's written about because again he never talked about it except in his writing. *Wolf Willow* is the portrait of those years, and some of the stories in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* that were stories before they were incorporated into the novel take place in Saskatchewan in Eastend. Obviously it was a tremendously formative experience those years on the, what were they--five, six years? A particular time in your life when things are imprinting themselves.

Interviewer - John Howe

How about Salt Lake City? How do you think that influenced his writing and life?

Page Stegner

Well, Salt Lake... he always said Salt Lake was the first time he ever had a real sense of belonging somewhere--community, and lived there of course longer

than any of the others. I think there were only four or five years in Saskatchewan and one year in Great Falls. Great Falls, he discovered there were flush toilets for the first time, and then they moved to Salt Lake, and I guess for the next fifteen years and all the way through college Salt Lake was a tremendous influence, although he wasn't Mormon, he was very much... what do I want to say? Impressed by, or influenced by I guess more than anything else. That sense of community that you get.

Interviewer - John Howe

Obviously he wrote a couple of books on Mormon country and *The Gathering of Zion*. How did the Mormon culture influence him in Salt Lake City?

Page Stegner

Well, I think that the Mormon culture influenced him in the sense that it was the first time he ever was around a culture--that was cohesive. And that sense of community that is incorporated in everything to do with Mormonism was profoundly attractive to him all of his life.

Interviewer - John Howe

You talked about it just a little bit earlier. Tell me what his writing routine was like. You mentioned that he was very disciplined. Tell me about his day in the Palo Alto home. What was his writing routine like?

Page Stegner

Well, my recollection of it, as I said in the introduction to the collection letters, is you know, we got up at 6:30 and I did my Chopin preludes, and he made breakfast and then he went to his study and wrote letters, usually just to start, as he said, warming up his fingers, and then he'd get to business on whatever it was he was writing. And then he would stay in his study uninterrupted from

about eight in the morning until one in the afternoon. That was pretty much every day, all the time. The University... if he was teaching at the same time he would do that in the afternoon.

Interviewer - John Howe

Talk about Stanford just a little bit. What were those days like to be at Stanford in the Creative Writing Program, and if you want to talk about your own experience there that would be great too.

Page Stegner

Well, the joke is almost everybody who is anybody in American letters contemporary went through the Stanford program and it is true, there were an awful lot of them. Kesey wasn't actually a Fellow. He was in and around the program, but not a Stegner Fellow, which is a misconception. I was not a Fellow, but I was there at the same time. I was getting a PhD in American Literature and I took one or two writing courses, but I really didn't have much to do otherwise, but over the years there was an endless parade of great writers that went through there--Ed Abby, as you mentioned, Ken Kesey, Ed McClanahan, Tom McGuane gosh, you know the list goes on and on.

Interviewer - John Howe

What kind of a teacher was Wallace Stegner?

Page Stegner

Well, I don't know. I did take a class, a literature class from him. It was a big lecture course and it was a good course, I mean, he was a good lecturer. But it was one of those classes where, you know there are 120 people in it and mostly you worked with T.A.s and the lecturer came in three times a week and pontificated and then left, so I remember the lectures being engaging and

interesting and I remember him trying to give me a B in the course, which is... I guess that story has been told more than once, and his T.A.s overwrote him and said, "You know you're being excessively hard on your boy," so he shaped up and gave me an A which I deserved by God.

Interviewer - John Howe

Talk about the times of the '60s there and the turbulence there on campus. How did that affect Wallace Stegner and his relationship with some of the students like Ken Kesey, and even other people like Gary Snyder?

Page Stegner

Well, I left Stanford in '63 so I kind of missed the height of the Vietnam protests and, you know, shutting down on the campus and so... but the answer to how it affected my father is it drove him absolutely nuts and he could not make an association between one's objections to Vietnam and burning down a campus. He didn't think that was a proper form of... whatever. What's the word I'm looking for? It doesn't matter. And he resigned. He decided that he'd had enough and teaching wasn't much fun anymore. Students weren't really interested in learning anymore, and he had better things to do and so he resigned his commission and indeed he did have better things to do because a lot of the major works--*Angle of Repose* and *Crossing to Safety*, those were written after he left Stanford.

Interviewer - John Howe

We were talking about the resignation about the resignation and what was happening on campus at that point. Why did he resign and how did he feel about what was happening on campus?

Page Stegner

Well, as I said, I wasn't there. I had left Stanford in '63, but I think basically he was sympathetic to the protest and the anti-war sentiments. He agreed basically with what the students were feeling. He just didn't agree with the methodology. He didn't think that setting fire to Wally Sterling's library was a very useful form of protest and he also, I think, felt that education for at least those years had gone by the boards, and he had better things to do, books to write, and teaching was not much fun at that point and so he resigned.

Interviewer - John Howe

Talk a little bit about the Palo Alto Hills home when you first moved there, and I understand you were saying when you first moved there you couldn't see a light. Tell me about what that was like then and maybe you can contrast it to what it's like now in Silicon Valley.

Page Stegner

Well, they moved out to Page Miller Road I guess around 1950. I have forgotten exactly the year he built the house and moved out there, and it was very remote. There was nobody around. You'd look out at night across the hills and you wouldn't see another light at all. I think they paid something like \$5,000 for five acres of land and built a house there for \$20,000 maybe in 1950. They sold off pieces of it, several chunks of it over the years, but now it's all grown up and every hill has a new McMansion on top of it, Italian villas abound and there is very little open space left, at least down at that level.

Interviewer - John Howe

You know when he wrote the wilderness letter and talked about the geography of hope--how did he come by a conservation ethic? What do you think he meant by "a geography of hope?"

Page Stegner

Well, the conservation ethic I think goes way back to when he started writing his PhD thesis or was it an M.A. thesis, I forgot, on Clarence Dutton. Then he got interested in Dutton and then subsequently John Wesley Powell which led finally to the book, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, and Powell's whole notion of aridity in the West, and was part of my father's direct experience, one thing just kind of added, piled up on top of another, and then he got asked by Dave Brower in the Sierra Club if he would edit a book called, *This is Dinosaur* back when the Feds wanted to put in dams in Echo Park and Split Mountain Canyon, which would have flooded Dinosaur. And he got involved with that project and editing a book which was co-written by a number of people and sent to every member of congress opposing basically that dam... those dams, and was the sub-cause of its defeat.

Interviewer - John Howe

Can you talk at all about the Sierra Club controversy at that time resulting in the ousting of David Brower and what his role in that may have been?

Page Stegner

Well, I don't really know much about that. I know that there was a faction in the Sierra Club that felt that Brower was over-stepping his bounds as Executive Director and was leading the Club in directions they didn't think it should go and jeopardizing its tax-exempt status and so forth, and authorizing book publications that the publications board had not authorized. He just kind of, I guess as I said, overstepped his bounds and Ansel Adams was I think one of the major--in ousting. I don't really know very much about that whole...

Interviewer - John Howe

Can you talk about Ansel Adams and your father's relationship? Evidently they

were great friends.

Page Stegner

He and Ansel Adams were great friends and Adams lived in Carmel, and they would see each other periodically socially and then my father did several introductions to Adam's big portfolio's that the New York Graphic Society published, so there was some interaction professionally, and they were both of course major conservationists, so they had a lot in common and were very close friends.

Interviewer - John Howe

We were talking about Stewart Udall and how he came across the wilderness letter and eventually became part of the Wilderness Act, some of that language. Tell me about how you remember Stewart Udall and his legacy.

Page Stegner

Well, I never knew Stewart until my father got in a car wreck in Santa Fe, which ultimately he died of and I met Udall when I was here on that sad occasion several times, but prior to that he had simply been a name, of course, and a major player in the environmental movement and somebody my father admired tremendously, which is why he, I think, agreed to go back to Washington for as long as he did. Being a bureaucrat and a Washingtonian was not, I think, what my father thought of himself as being, and he always talked about himself as a reluctant environmentalist, not that he didn't believe entirely in the causes, but he wasn't much of a joiner, an activist. He called himself... he told Tom Watkins he was a paper tiger, type written on both sides or something. The "Wilderness Letter" I think that he wrote, as I said, because Dave Pesonen and asked him to make some comments on the uses of wilderness that inspired that whole piece, which Udall I gather picked up somehow, maybe Pesonen gave it to him or I

don't know how he got it, and he used it as a speech in San Francisco. He substituted his own speech, as I understand it, with that letter and that was kind of the beginning of that whole...

Interviewer - John Howe

You talked a little bit about what happened with the accident at the end and your mom staying at Stewart's house. What happened at the end? Just describe the accident for me and what happened and the aftermath.

Page Stegner

The accident itself?

Interviewer - John Howe

Yes.

Page Stegner

Well they were here for a... I think a Western Booksellers Association meeting where they were giving some kind of lifetime award and he was driving home on the way back to his hotel in Santa Fe from the... I think either from somebody's house where they had been to dinner, or from the meeting itself on the old Taos Highway which at that time ran up through the north side of Santa Fe and joined the major highway to Taos. It's all blocked off now. You can't go through it. And he just... it was dark. It was night, 10 o'clock at night. He pulled out in front of a car that he didn't see and got t-boned and that's how that happened. He wasn't really... you know the odd thing the wreck itself was not what killed him, he was here in the hospital for, oh, gosh, almost two weeks and it was complications, you know developed in the hospital--respiratory issues that finally did him in. It wasn't the wreck. The Udall's of course were enormously generous and took my mother in and, you know Stewart just took charge of

everything. He was terrific. He took the whole Stegner family in at some point. We were all here for... in and out of Santa Fe for a period of several weeks and the Udall's just made their house available and they were great.

Interviewer - John Howe

Let's talk a little bit about the Vermont farm. How did that come into being? How did Wallace Stegner acquire it, and what did it mean to him? Especially the landscape of Vermont.

Page Stegner

He first went to Vermont I think in 1937. He was teaching at the University of Wisconsin and met the people that became his lifelong, or my family's lifelong friends, the Grays, Peg and Phil Gray. Phil Gray was teaching there. They were both in their early teaching careers, and the Grays had this wonderful place, they said, in Northern New England and Vermont, and the Stegners must come and visit, and so the Stegners being poor and having no other activities to deflect them, went to visit the Grays, and that was the beginning of it. I think they went almost every summer for, I don't know, how many years. Maybe they went earlier than 1937. They bought a farm there, a 100 acres plus or minus in North Greensboro Vermont for \$600 in 1937 or 1938 and started to restore the old farmhouse that was in pretty bad shape, and we were there, I guess or three or four summers before WWII put an end to it. Gas rationing meant they couldn't go anywhere, so they didn't go up there for three or four years during which time the porcupines ate the house basically. They ate the cellar stairs off and the upstairs stairs off, and they got into the walls and they ate all of the insulation. They destroyed the place. We eventually took all of the major posts and beams out of it and pushed the whole mess into the cellar hole and set fire to it and burned it. The State Forester was there with his pistol--shot something like 86 porcupines as they emerged from this flaming... it was not Stegner's most environmental moment (laughs), but anyways that was how that started. Then

we took the... I took... I was in my early 20's in teaching skiing at Stowe in the winters and I... in the fall, and started building the house that they then built right out of the town of Greensboro, which was their summer home until he died.

Interviewer - John Howe

Why do you think a man of the West, especially as Wallace Stegner is kind of remembered, why did he want to have his ashes spread in Vermont do you think?

Page Stegner

Oh, I think... you know everybody wants to know why the quintessential westerner wanted his ashes in Vermont? He liked Vermont obviously not just because of its bucolic environment, but because it spoke to him somehow of his early days--a kind of fierce independence of the Vermonter, and yet the kind of tight-knit community that is interdependent in so many ways, and I think... we'd been an itinerant family for all of our lives in a way. The one place we always returned to--my children always return, is Greensboro, Vermont, so if you're going to have a tombstone or a headstone and you want somebody to come over and snuffle into his hanky over it, that would be the only place. But I think, you know, there were multiple reasons probably, but even though he lived in Los Altos Hills, you know, for almost fifty years somehow. It's such an intransient world in California that I'd suspect thinking having your ashes spread would be unappealing. You know that house in Greensboro is going to be there another 100 or 200 years just the way it is right now.

Interviewer - John Howe

What did the Pulitzer Prize mean to him? He won it for *Angle of Repose*.

Page Stegner

Well, I can only imagine that he was extremely pleased. I wasn't there. I wasn't around. I was teaching in Ohio at Ohio State, I think, at that time, or maybe I was in Ecuador. I was in the Peace Corp for three years living in South America I think when *Angle of Repose* got the Pulitzer. Oh I'm sure he was delighted, but I wasn't there to witness the grin on his face.

Interviewer - John Howe

What was your reaction when you looked at the way that the book was dedicated and it was dedicated to you?

Page Stegner

I think I said, "Thanks Pop!" I don't know. I was touched I guess. I think that's maybe the only book he dedicated to me. And then I proceeded to put it in my... I was in... That's right... when it came out I was just leaving for South America. I was the Deputy Director of the Peace Corp. in Venezuela and then in Ecuador for a period of three years. So we were leaving and my father gave me this book and I saw that it was dedicated to me and I was touched and I thanked him and then I put it in my suitcase and then, I think, three months went by before I got it out and read it, and then sent him a hasty letter saying, "I am so sorry! My apologies for the delay."

Interviewer - John Howe

When he declined the National Medal of the Arts, what do you remember about that time, and his reasoning behind that?

Page Stegner

Well, I know about that only from his letters--the letter he wrote to the woman. I think her name was Houston, I've forgotten, saying that he would not be there for that ceremony, and it was a protest against the Bush Administration's

attempt to control artists and the direction of the arts, and he found that form of censorship unacceptable, even though he himself was not directly affected by it. I think he got more mileage out of refusing the medal than he would have gotten if he'd taken it.

Interviewer - John Howe

What do you think his opinion would be of the current state of the environment?

Page Stegner

Well, I think he would be pretty hopeless. I think it would be the geography of hopelessness, although we have only a few more months to endure the Bush attack and onslaught on the environment, and hopefully things will change, but certainly there's nothing that's gone on in the last eight years that would have given him or any of us any reason to think humankind has got a long future.

Interviewer - John Howe

Talk about your mother just a little bit. What kind of woman was she, and how do you think of her?

Page Stegner

Well, she was one of those women who decided that her husband's talents were so great that she made a conscious choice to devote her life to being his helpmate, you know. She didn't have a career of her own. She was actually a fairly decent painter, not that she did much of it, but she had some little gift that she would have liked to have pursued, but she never did. She never had a job. She took care of Wallace Stegner and saw that his lunch was on the table, read his works--was his general sidekick. That was her general role in life, and I think there were times, a few times you know, when she probably resented that, but overall it was a conscious and deliberate choice.

Interviewer - John Howe

Let me ask you one more time. What do you think his greatest accomplishment might be or his legacy? Any thoughts on that as to what you think his legacy is as a writer, conservationist, teacher?

Page Stegner

Well, he was, you know, he was the last renaissance... well not the last, but certainly... Uh, I can't really think of anybody quite like him. He was, as you say, a major novelist and short-story writer and a historian and a biographer. About the only thing... and a lot of advocacy journalism of the highest quality. I think the wilderness letter probably is, you know, one of the most profound and greatest statements about wilderness that has ever been made, so there are all of those things. Combined with the teaching and the development of a writing program that produced, over a period of years, a great many major writers. That's quite a lot to have accomplished in one lifetime.

Interviewer - John Howe

We were talking about favorite books. What are your favorite books that Wallace wrote and why?

Page Stegner

Well, I have several favorite books I guess. *Angle of Repose* I think is one of the most interesting and complicated novels about the West and the East-West past-present issues that are distinctly western. It's a marvelous novel, and I think it will endure. It will be a book people read a hundred years from now if people still read books a hundred years from now, but in a way I guess my favorite favorite is *Wolf Willow*, which was a memoir and a history and a story. The story, "Genesis", which is that novella at the end of *Wolf Willow*, I think is

one of the best things my father ever wrote.