

## **Phillip Fradkin Interview Wallace Stegner Documentary**

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Phillip, lets start out by talking about what kind of man was Wallace Stegner?  
How would you describe him?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Wallace Stegner was a man of many parts. He was a man who not only mastered the art of writing novels, but also nonfiction work. He was a teacher of many famous writers and other writers, and he was an ardent and active conservationist. In terms of the personal side of Wallace Stegner, he was a man of incredible scruples. He was a man who had a code of behavior that he learned on the American frontier of the American West and he was a man who was never quite in charge of himself in terms of his personal "angle of repose." He was a man who hated his father and who had an obsessive love for his mother and who felt guilt for both of his parents, and who went through life with a fair amount of success.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Tell me about his childhood. What was his childhood like?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Stegner's childhood was an exercise in change, in transience, in movement. He was born in Iowa. The family took him to the Puget Sound area. They moved to Eastend, Saskatchewan. From Eastend they moved to Great Falls, Montana and then to Salt Lake City. He grew up gradually in all of those places. He learned about the frontier in Eastend, Saskatchewan. He learned about failure when the family homestead failed and the drought that devastated their wheat

crop, and he was a child who memorized things, who had a great mind and an abusive father and an over-loving mother. Over-loving--that's a bad term.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Tell me about George Stegner. What kind of man was George Stegner?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

George Stegner was the boomer who appears in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and other Stegner works of fiction. He was one side of the American West. He was the side that... the great get rich side. He was also the side that had a huge physical presence. He was the kind of father who couldn't love his children. Wallace Stegner had an older brother. Both of them grew to hate their father because he was abusive. He beat them up and one time he pushed Wally's face into some excrement as punishment for not making it to the bathroom. So Stegner hated him.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Talk about his mother a little bit - Hilda. What kind of mother was Hilda Stegner?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Hilda was a loving, perhaps overly protective mother, certainly when Wally was younger. Hilda had a great deal of sweetness about her. Hilda had a husband who was a wild card who she could never tame, who came and went and who she had to follow to various places in the American West, and Hilda took a loving... took loving care of her son--her scrawny, cry-baby wimpy son named Wallace Stegner.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

And how would you describe Cecil Stegner?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

It's hard to describe Cecil Stegner, his older brother who was two years older, because not much remains in terms of description, but he was - he was the tough boy. He was the jock. He was the guy who protected, to some extent, his younger brother, particularly when they found themselves in an orphanage at an early age, and he was the man who went on to master various sports and show Wally what could be done in terms of a physical presence--of how one got popular in a physical way in terms of sports, and Wally caught on quickly and played basketball and tennis and in that way became part of the young set in Salt Lake City.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Talk a little bit about the Seattle orphanage. Why were the boys put in that and what kind of affect did that have on Wallace Stegner?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

The Seattle orphanage was Wally's first clear memory and he was four years old and his brother was six when their mother Hilda had to put them in the orphanage because their father, George had disappeared, probably to Eastend, Saskatchewan and their mother was working in a department store, so she couldn't take care of the children, and she put them in this orphanage run by Catholic nuns in Seattle, and it was a devastating experience for a young child, and it was one he never forgot.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Talk a little bit of the Eastend of Stegner's youth, and I'm talking about it still being the frontier if you will.

## **Phillip Fradkin**

Eastend, Saskatchewan was the frontier in 1913 when Wallace Stegner arrived in a stagecoach. It wasn't even a town. It was barely a settlement. The railroad had just arrived there, and Wally's first sight of the first person in Eastend was the Mountie who came out of the station there and paraded around in all of his glory. It was prairie. It was the same prairie of Montana, of North Dakota. The boundary... the border had no meaning. They crossed it in any way they wanted to which was a great asset to George Stegner's bootlegging activity, and it was a place of refuge, Eastend. In summers when they went out to the homestead site on the border, that was where they were exposed to the four winds and the skies and the weather that just beat on them.

## **Interviewer-John Howe**

Talk about the Stegner homestead some miles from Eastend. What was it like?

## **Phillip Fradkin**

The Stegner homestead, some 40 miles from Eastend, was quite different. It was exposed. Eastend was down in the valley and the winds pass overhead. The homestead, 160 acres with another 160 acres attached to it, was right on the border, and it was a rolling, gently rolling tree-less prairie in which the wind, predominantly from the Northwest, blew across. There were thunderstorms. There were gophers. There was a tent, then there was a shack and an outhouse, and a reservoir and little else.

## **Interviewer-John Howe**

What was the journey like from Eastend to the homestead, and how did Wally and the family make that trip?

## **Phillip Fradkin**

The Stegner family journeyed out to the homestead on the border once a year in early summer, and they returned in early fall. The first couple of times they went out was in a buckboard and a wagon hauling all of their gear. The last two times when they went out was in automobiles, and it was an all day journey in a buckboard, half a day journey in a car because it was rough and tortuous. It was difficult to find your way because there were no fence lines or anything to follow, and it was a journey back into time--a journey from civilization into the lack of a civilization, and it was those two types of places that had a long lasting affect on who Wallace Stegner was.

## **Interviewer-John Howe**

Describe George Stegner's bad luck, especially in those crops--his wheat crop and his potato crop that burned. How did that affect the Stegner family?

## **Phillip Fradkin**

George Stegner, the father, was always one step behind the main chance. There was a wheat boom on the Saskatchewan prairie. He had one year in which he profited, the other years the crops failed, either because of drought or pests. He raised potatoes. He stored them in the cellar of the local hotel, and the hotel burned to the ground. He was a bootlegger with some success in Great Falls and in Salt Lake City where he served liquor in any number of residences that the Stegner family had, and he also owned a casino in Reno, and various mining ventures, and he was what was typical and is typical to this day in the West--the man, or in some cases the woman nowadays, who is looking to make a lot of money in a short period of time--the boomer.

## **Interviewer-John Howe**

Describe his bootlegging business and the trips that he made in delivery.

## **Phillip Fradkin**

The bootlegging activity started taking liquor North into Canada because there was a prohibition in Canada, and then things turned around and there was prohibition in the lower 48 states, so he was ideally situated on the Canadian border. He knew all of the trails. There was no border. The family shopped at a small store just across the border in Northern Montana, and Stegner had a car whose springs had been beefed up and in which Hilda had fixed up a dummy to look as a woman did so it looked like a family was crossing the border, so there was less chance of what few revenue agents were out there stopping him. He never was stopped that I'm aware of, and he was quite... fairly successful in taking his liquor from Canada into the United States, and later importing during prohibition, from Southern California into Salt Lake City.

## **Interviewer-John Howe**

Talk about the Stegner family life in Great Falls... kind of the first city that Wallace Stegner inhabited.

## **Phillip Fradkin**

Wallace Stegner at the age of ten, I believe, when the family moved to Salt Lake City, was a rube in all senses of the word. He had never seen a green lawn before. He had never seen a flush toilet, and he marveled at the way the water turned around in a cyclonic action. He had never seen a hardwood floor, in which he skated across in his stocking feet. He had never seen an electrical outlet in which he stored his coins and got the, literally, shock of his life and almost the end of his life, and then when he went to school, to impress the kids he dressed up in his Canadian outfit--leather pants and elk moccasins and a catalog-bought sweater and was the laughing stock of the school. It wasn't a great way to start off in Great Falls.

## Interviewer-John Howe

Why were the Stegner's always on the move?

## Phillip Fradkin

The Stegner's were on the move because they were a typical western family. A typical western now moves a lot. The four people in this room have moved a lot from different places. I've come from New Jersey. The outstanding human characteristic in the American West, as I've discovered from writing 11 books about it, is transience, and the Stegners were of that ilk. They moved. They were looking for something. They were looking for economic stability. They were looking for a home. They were looking for a place that they could settle in, but George Stegner was not the type of person who liked to settle, so he moved and the family moved, and they moved constantly across the West.

## Interviewer-John Howe

Describe the exploratory trip West that the Stegners made to Salt Lake City, and how it affected Stegner's view of the West?

## Phillip Fradkin

Well, from Eastend to Great Falls was one journey, and what Stegner found in Great Falls was the first signs of civilization. What Stegner found a year later, in 1921 when the family moved from Great Falls to Salt Lake City, was first of all running water in the mountains between Salt Lake City and Great Falls, and also a national park. They went through Yellowstone. He discovered a different kind of landscape, a different kind of terrain, and the fact that there was running water just amazed him and he later wrote a story about it which was very powerful because I think it influenced him later in terms of his concern about the aridity of the West and how that comes across in *Beyond the Hundredth*

*Meridian.*

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

How did Stegner meet and marry Mary Page?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Mary Page was working in the library at the University of Iowa and Wallace Stegner met him while he was working on his PhD there. One of his roommates introduced him, and from that moment on, Stegner who had a lot of girlfriends before then, had only one woman in his life, and there's this amazing correspondence that takes place, not only with Mary Page, but with his two previous girlfriends, and Stegner's not a very open person, but that correspondence, which I use a fair amount in the book, really shows who he was. He was unsure of himself. He had guilt, but he also had a drive to succeed and he had a great appreciation for women, and Mary Page became his wife for 58 years. It was a marriage of... that had many complimentary things going for it. She was his editor. She was the person who fended off people. He was the wage earner, and they were life mates for that period of time. Although, and I've talked with his students at the University of Iowa and Utah, every woman who was in his class fell in love with him.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Talk a little bit about Juanita Crawford. Who was she and what kind of influence did she have on him?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Who are you talking about?

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Oh, Juanita Crawford—Nola in *Recapitulation*. She was a sexy woman and she lived with (I can't remember her name) who later marries Edgar Snow, and these two women from Southern Utah, one remains in Salt Lake City... (interruption)

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

We were talking about Juanita Crawford...

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Juanita Crawford was one of his early loves before he meets Mary Page, and she's at the University of Utah living in Salt Lake City working, and she's a wonderful, sexy, young woman with whom Stegner has a love affair. The problem is he goes back to the University of Iowa to continue work on his Doctor's degree, and one of Stegner's friends takes up with Juanita and marries her, and Stegner comes back and is devastated, and his friend was working in the same linoleum store where Stegner worked and he raged in there and was going to try and beat him up but his other friends hustled... Marv Broberg I think his name was, outside back. Stegner never really forgets her, and there's this wonderful reminiscence by her daughter of this man coming to visit the house some 10 or 20 years later and asking for her mother, and this very romantic, momentary embrace, this conversation, and the daughter feels that it's Wallace Stegner, and he leaves and the next thing the daughter knows is she takes her father Marv to one of Stegner's lectures at the University and Marv tells Wallace Stegner that Juanita has died, and Stegner says, "I know," and there's this sense of completion, but she was a Salt Lake City girl who roomed with another woman who eventually married Edgar Snow and had quite a career in communist China and came back and wrote a number of books about her experience--Peg Foster I believe was her name.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Describe the death of Hilda Stegner and the affect on Wallace... and her statement to him at her death.

### **Phillip Fradkin**

So Hilda Stegner in the 1930's, early 1930's contracts cancer and begins to die. George Stegner can't deal with this and begins to leave. Wally comes home, leaves the University and nurses his mother in Salt Lake City, and as she dies she tells him, "I want you to be a good boy, Wally", and Wally never feels that he's either answered his mother, or cared for her enough, although he was beyond being a dutiful child, and for the rest of his life he feels guilt about the fact that he hadn't loved his mother enough and shown it enough, and he tried to exercise his skill in a story that he writes called, "A Letter to My Mother Too Late" but it doesn't quite work, so he lives with that sense of guilt, and that's one of the reasons why he never quite reaches his "angle of repose."

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

And talk about George Stegner's death. How did that happen?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

George Stegner wrote Wallace Stegner at the University of Iowa asking for money every once in a while, and Wally, who had very little money had a wife and didn't have much income to spare, sent his father some money. What happens is that Stegner was at the University of Iowa giving a talk when Wilbur Schramm, his former roommate and Director of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, comes up to him and whispers in his ear that your father has died, and Wallace Stegner comes back to Salt Lake City to the screaming newspaper headlines that his father had shot a woman with whom he had been having an affair and then shot himself in a sleazy downtown hotel, and Stegner really never addresses that issue that I was aware of, but it must have been incredibly

traumatic because here he comes back to where he had been accepted, where he had lived, where actually he had taught at the University, and for two or three days those headlines screamed that really cheap killing. It must have been something that stayed with him for the rest of his life.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

How did Stegner become a writer and eventually found the creative writing program at Stanford? How did that start?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Wallace Stegner began his career as a writer in Great Falls where a teacher praised him for something he wrote. He followed that up in Salt Lake City in high school writing a couple of stories that appear in Salt Lake City newspapers and when he goes on to the University of Utah, he gets some assurance by Vardis Fisher that he can write. He takes one of Fisher's courses, and from there on he's sort of hooked. So he gets his big break, teaches at Bread Loaf, teaches at Harvard, teaches at Stanford, moves to Stanford in California in 1945 and gets another big break because the brother of the chairman of the English Department is a wealthy Texas oil man who has a literary interest and who funds the Stanford Creative Writing Program which begins in 1946 and spawns this incredible number of very talented writers, and Stegner headed that program until actually 1969. He remained in that department until 1971, when he left Stanford University.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Talk a little bit about the Palo Alto Hills home--how it was built and what it looked like in that era.

### **Phillip Fradkin**

The Palo Alto Hills home in Los Altos Hills was on a hilltop in which there was no surrounding human occupancy. It was almost wilderness, and they rode their horses from Los Altos hills over the coast range to La Honda where there were no fences. They built a house... began the construction in 1948, actually Mary did. Wally was at the Huntington Library researching *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, and it was a beautiful home. The problem was the architect built the heating system in the roof so most of the heat was lost. It later leaked, but it was in the style of the Eichler homes--post WWII, a lot of open windows, a lot of open flowing space, and a lot of views of trees and the meadow and the surrounding hills, which were uninhabited. It was, as Wallace said as he drove up there, there were only a couple of pig farms on the way, and there was little less at the end of the 1940s, but soon the developments encroached and hemmed him in.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

What does the area look like today? How has it changed since that time?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Originally the Stegners had seven acres. They sold some of that off, and when the house was sold in the early part of this century, there were only two and a half acres and impinging on that was a number of huge homes. For this man who had been raised on a limitless prairie and in the frontier village, he wound up in his last years in the midst of Silicon Valley and all the craziness of that. It was an experience that he found hard to take.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Describe the Vermont farm. How did Stegner come to love Vermont and consider it refuge?

## Phillip Fradkin

Stegner first stumbled on Greensboro, Vermont and Caspian Lake in 1937 when he taught at Bread Loaf Writers Conference and he visited some friends there--the Grays, who are the Langs in *Crossing to Safety*. What Vermont was and why he sought it in the later years of his life was... It was a place of refuge from the madness in the American West, not only in Silicon Valley, but in Phoenix and Salt Lake City, Denver--the growth of the sunbelt cities in the late 1970's, 1980's and then the exponential growth of Silicon Valley in the 1990's, and New England came to him to symbolize the frontier that he was brought up on. It had a code of behavior. It had a past in which was venerated, and New England had a landscape that quickly regenerated itself, and all of these things were absent in the West, so his place of refuge--the place that he sought only in the summers, because it was too cold in the winters in New England, and when he died he had his ashes scattered around his cabin in Greensboro, Vermont and that's where his remains are today... Not in the cemetery at Four Corners, where Mary erected a small marble gravesite, but up by his house with a view over Caspian Lake and these trees, which he had to constantly clear away so that he could have a view of the lake, but in which the ferns and the jopat weed and everything else kept springing up in a way that seemed eternal to him.

## Interviewer-John Howe

Describe Stanford in the 1960's in the turbulent times. How did that generation affect Stegner, and what was his view of it?

## Phillip Fradkin

Stanford after WWII was a wonderful, exciting place for Wallace Stegner, and then through the years he became involved in a lot of academic infighting, which he didn't like, and in the late 1960's it turned into a place he couldn't tolerate. It was a place of revolution. It was a plywood University, he said, because in fact

the windows were smashed so frequently during the disruptions of those years that they never bothered putting glass up again. It was where rich kids, rich students disrupted classes. They didn't honor the education that Stegner, during the depression years had sought so avidly. It was a place that he wanted nothing more to do with, and so he left in 1971.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Describe his conflict between Ken Kesey and some of the students and why is there sort of a lingering resentment about Stegner?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Well, Stegner didn't get along with all of his students. He got along with most of them, and people like Wendell Berry and Jim Houston and Evan Connell, and any number of students with names that didn't reach the heights of American literature, who wrote him letters afterwards, really indicate the vast number of his students who really appreciated the education that he gave them. There were a few who were wild cards. Among them was Ken Kesey, and Ken Kesey and Stegner tangled when Kesey gave an interview which said, in effect, that Stegner was no longer a valid writer because anyone who taught that many students would get too greater sense of their own importance. It was a damaging interview, and Kesey knew he had said the wrong thing, and so they never really reconciled because Stegner has this streak in him of obstinacy--of anger. It's an anger that travels with the whole Stegner male line of the family from his father four generations onward, and he had it in abundance just as his father did. If you crossed him once, he crossed you off.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Isn't there a faction at Stanford that wanted him removed from the head of Creative Writing--they thought he was old fashioned at the time?

## **Phillip Fradkin**

Stegner believed in realism in terms of writing. In other words, you wrote from your experience. He couldn't deal with concept of experimental writing. It was a little bit too far out for him and it wasn't his kind of writing, although styles in American literature have come around to that again, but in the late 1960's there was this whole surge of experiment across the whole spectrum of the American experience and he was viewed as somewhat of a dinosaur at that time, and there were other people on the Stanford faculty who coveted this program that he had established, that had independent funds and was not dependent on the University, and he had to fight to retain it, and he was a very good academic infighter.

## **Interviewer-John Howe**

What kind of boy was Page Stegner and what was his childhood like?

## **Phillip Fradkin**

It was difficult being the son, or if there had been the daughter I suppose of Wally and Mary Stegner, because they had a very tight relationship in which Page never quite fit in. Page remembers his mother as someone who did not nurture. He remembers his father as the parent who nurtured, but being the child of Wallace and Mary Stegner was not an easy thing for Page to be and it wasn't easy because of the type of person that he was. He had an independent streak and it wasn't easy because of the times, 1960's, and so Page grows up trying to be the diametric opposite of who his father is, and the interesting thing is that he winds up being almost a carbon copy of his father. He lives, as I talk now, in Salt Lake... in Santa Fe, where his father died. He tried living... he bought a home in Salt Lake City. That didn't work. He founded... or he didn't find, but he was the head of the Creative Writing Program at the University of

California at Santa Cruz, so what Page does in his 19, 20's is a huge flip-flop. He becomes an academic. He becomes a writer, and he's no longer the rebel that he felt he had to be when he was a youngster.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Tell that story about Page and Wallace Stegner and the grades and all that with the TAs. Do you know which one I'm talking about?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

I do. Page spent two years at The University of Colorado, got good grades, shaped up, got admitted to Stanford, got his Bachelor's Degree and then worked toward his Master's and his Doctor's Degree, and he took a course from his father, a writing course, and he did a number of papers and his father gave him a B, and the TA's (the Teaching Assistants) went to Wallace Stegner and said, look if you add up his grades, he really deserves an A, and Wallace Stegner thought about it and changed the grade to an A, and I think the message there was that with a B there was room for improvement. With an A it was an indication that there was none, but he stuck with the A and he did well. Page did well in terms of his work at Stanford, and he went on to teach and write.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Didn't he also have a story where he decked a student who was critical of his father?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Yes. There was a party at Stanford and a student began bad-mouthing Wally and Page decked him, and if I'm correct in the way Page told the story, the student wound up in the swimming pool. He also, when he was at Santa Cruz--

and I just talked with the professor who actually was a friend of Pages, when the professor bad-mouthed Wallace Stegner when the both of them were in San Francisco, Page took off from the restaurant in his car and let some time go by before going back and picking him up. So Page had a temper just like his father, and he was loyal.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Talk about Stegner's view of teaching, especially compared to writing. Why did he want to teach and why did he retire early?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

All Wallace Stegner wanted to do was write and to write novels--fiction. He was drawn to non-fiction mostly because it touched on various conservation issues in the West and provided extra money as did his short stories, and now I'm losing the gist of the question. Try again.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

How did Stegner view teaching and why did he retire early?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

All Wallace Stegner wanted to do was write, specifically novels. He viewed teaching as a way to gain an income, to raise his family, and to provide a minimal amount of support for his writing, but his real love was writing novels. Nonfiction came later. He left Stanford because he couldn't deal with the student unrest, and also because he wanted to devote all his time to writing. He thought he only a few years left to live. He was in his early 60's and his very helpful agent, Carl Brandt got him a six book contract with Double Day which came close to equaling what he was making at Stanford, so the ever frugal and watchful Wallace Stegner who knew what The Depression was like and closely

regarded his financial situation, judged that he could make the jump into full time writing, and I think it's a jump, I think, from which we've all profited in terms of what he turned out in the last 20 years of his life.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Describe his writing routine. How did he write and what was his day like?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Wallace Stegner wrote the only way you can write and that's with a tremendous amount of self-discipline. I know that myself, and I know that from the writers who are my friends. His routine--seven days a week when he wasn't traveling, and if he was teaching or even if he wasn't teaching, was to get up around seven. He would make breakfast and serve Mary her breakfast in bed. Mary had a lot of problems with imagine illnesses and was a hypochondriac, and so Wally took very good care of her because he was very cognizant of what he thought he hadn't done for his mother. So he would go to the writing studio in the Los Altos Hills home, which was a separate studio--separate structure. He would smoke a cigar and he would warm up typing two fingered because he had lost a finger in a boyhood accident, on his Remington typewriter. He was very frugal. He had elite type because it's smaller than courier and he had the margins as wide as possible to use up as much paper, and he typed on both sides of a piece of paper, and he would begin working in the early morning and work through until about noon where he would quit. He would change clothes. Mary would feel him lunch, and he would usually be on the Stanford campus at one o'clock if he was teaching at that time. He always taught half time. He never taught full-time because he needed to write, so sometimes he was writing, sometimes he wasn't writing. The rest of the day was teaching, office hours, came home, had dinner, corrected or read manuscripts, and then they went to bed.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Why did the New York or eastern establishment seem to be highly critical of the western writer like Wallace Stegner?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

When or why?

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Why.

### **Phillip Fradkin**

The eastern publishing establishment, which he derisively called "headquarters" meaning the Boston-New York access, I think was prejudiced against Wallace Stegner as it could be accused of being prejudiced of other western writers because they don't understand what happens out here. It's a different place, with the exception of Los Angeles and Film Land, which sort of appeals to them, they can't deal, or they don't understand how landscape determines who we are, and I have to say that we, including Wallace Stegner and others who write in the West, are somewhat paranoid of the eastern writing establishment, but on the hand, the eastern writing establishment, as in that famous New Yorker cover, is very provincial and can't see West beyond the Hudson River. So Stegner got some very laudatory reviews from the eastern publications, but the New York Times Book Review deals him a number of cruel blows.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Tell me a little bit about the controversy over *Angle of Repose* and the Mary Hallock Foote issue.

### **Phillip Fradkin**

I can, but do you want me to explain those cruel blows first?

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Sure.

### **Phillip Fradkin**

OK... cruel blows... The New York Times Book Review did give Stegner some reviews in his early years. There was no review for *Angle of Repose*. After it won the Pulitzer Prize, the editor of *The Book Review* at that time, John Leonard, wrote a column saying the book did not deserve the Pulitzer Prize. When Stegner won the National Book Award in 1977 for *Spectator Bird*, there had been no previous review in *The New York Times* for that book. After the award was announced, the story in the next day's *New York Times* said that the award was for a book about old people written by an old man, and the jurors were of a similar age. In 1981 in *The New York Times Magazine*, there was a story about the "writers" of the Purple Sage, and Wallace Stegner was named the dean of such writers. The problem was that in the caption showing a photograph of Wallace Stegner--he was identified as William Stegner--to which Ivan Doig, another western writer, rejoined that in fact West of the Hudson River he was known as Wallace Stegner. So for those reasons Stegner, who again never forgot a slight, never forgot what *The New York Times Book Review* had done to him, so that ends that. So we go into the plagiarism?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

I'll try to keep it simple and short. The only stain--and I question whether it is a stain--

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Just start that over if you will.

## Phillip Fradkin

The only stain of any importance--I don't really know if it is a stain, but I leave it up to the reader's discretion to make their own judgment--is the question of plagiarism involved in *Angle of Repose*. The plot and a lot of the text was taken from the writings of Mary Hallock Foote, a fairly well-known illustrator and writer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Stegner was asked by the Foote family, the granddaughters, not to identify who her grandmother was. The granddaughters were given the chance to read the manuscript, but passed on that, and what happens later and what people question is the scenes involving possible adultery and affli-cuide of the death of the daughter due to an imagined love affair between Mary Hallock Foote's stand in the novel--Susan Burling Ward and a young geologist. That controversy has bubbled along in a fairly low level since the mid-1970's, and what I try to do in my book is, for the first time, to give all aspects of it, to use all the documentation, and arrive at a decision in which people will be able to make up their own minds. That's as simple as I can make it.

## Interviewer-John Howe

How did Stegner become a conservationist? What was his relationship like with David Brower and The Sierra Club?

## Phillip Fradkin

Wallace Stegner, as I call him, was the reluctant conservationist, because in fact he was dragged into it by his mentor, Bernard DeVoto, a Utah native who had gone East and wrote a column for *The Atlantic Monthly* called, "The Easy Chair", and in the mid 1950's DeVoto passed on his torch of conservation and Wallace Stegner gets involved, first of all in the battle to save Dinosaur National Monument. The problem there arises that David Brower of the Sierra Club in a

trade-off gives up dams in Dinosaur National Monument for Lake Powell and Glen Canyon Dam at the upper end of The Grand Canyon, and it's a decision that Brower regrets for the rest of his life. Stegner tells him he's wrong because Stegner has gone down the river--gone through Glen Canyon, seen what it was. Brower hadn't, and that's one of the major mistakes in Brower's life, and in the history of the Sierra Club. Stegner was an ardent conservationist. From the local level, in terms of transmission lines in Los Altos Hills, growth... subdivision growth to state-wide issues like Redwood National Park and to national issues like the creation of the national parks--Canyonlands, upgrading of Arches and Capital Reef and he worked as an aide to Stewart Udall and was chair of the National Parks Advisory Committee and on the Board of the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Societies. It was his letter, the "Wilderness Letter," that was responsible in a large part, for Congress passing the Wilderness Legislation.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Talk about that legacy between Stewart Udall and Wallace Stegner's influence on him.

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Stewart Udall had a history in Utah and the American West because his grandfather... his great-grandfather was Lee of the Mountain Meadows Massacre fame, and Wallace Stegner, he had this history, this background in common and so they remained friends ever since they met in 1960 up to and including when Stegner died in Santa Fe, and Stegner works for him for three months, helps him write his book, *The Quiet Crisis*, helps him later in terms of passage of the Land and Water Conservation Act and helps him with the passage of the Wilderness Bill, helps him in a number of ways when he's chair or on the committee for the national parks, and one time does not do what Udall would have wanted him to do and was asked to do by President Johnson, and that was create the home site of Lyndon Johnson as a national historic site

before Johnson died and before he had any claim to any historical relevance at all. The way they get around that is, the committee that Stegner's in charge of does not pass that recommendation and Udall does not mention it to Lyndon Johnson.

### Interviewer-John Howe

How important was *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* to the history of the West?

### Phillip Fradkin

*The Hundredth Meridian* is the single most important book written about the American West. Through a biography, through a history of a landscape, Stegner gives us an idea what an arid land is like, and he does it in a very readable and a very tangible way. He does it by starting with an adventure story of John Wesley Powell's story journey down the Colorado River, ending it up where it deserves to end, where everything is decided after you've visited the landscape, and that's back in Washington because, in fact, there is so much federal land and water out here, and he brings that sense of aridity into that book and into the consciousness of readers very vividly, and interesting enough, the book had its genesis when he was at the University of Utah and he banged his finger in a door hurrying to class. He had to go get it fixed. He missed a test. The geology professor told him to become familiar with and write a paper about Clarence Dutton who has done a wonderful work of prose, *The Grand Canyon*. Stegner discovers a scientist writing with a great fluidity, flow of prose that teaches him how to write, and from Clarence Dutton to John Wesley Powell is just a small step. He takes it in increments from the mid-1930's to the mid-1950's when he finally publishes the book, but when he does, it comes out as a masterpiece which exists to this day, and which the reader's of *The San Francisco Chronicle* voted the Outstanding Nonfiction Book of the 20th Century.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Tell me what is Wallace Stegner's vision of the West and how did he come by it?  
I'm talking about more of a sense of community rather than the lone cowboy.

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Exactly. Wallace Stegner did a great deal to demythologize the West--to give it a sense of vivid reality, to give us a sense of the real place in which we live, and not this land where a lone gunman riding a stallion conquers everyone and settles the land and it's cities grow. What Stegner learned primarily in Utah but elsewhere in the West was it was groups of people acting as a community, as a whole which was responsible... who were responsible for, in fact, the growth of the West--the "taming of the West", the civilization as we know it of the West, and you can question whether that was a good thing, but there was no way of stopping what Manifest Destiny let loose. There was only a way to appraise it in a realistic manner, and that's what he did through his life, and it's one of his great legacies I believe.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Tell me about the end. How did he die?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Wallace Stegner in the Spring of 1993 accepted an invitation to the Intermountain Bookseller's Convention, or annual meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and he flew there and rented a car and after some function in the early evening he and Mary were on their way back to wherever they were spending the night, and he made a turn onto a highway without looking and another car coming from the left smashed into the driver's side of the car injuring Stegner. He was taken to a hospital and I think approximately ten days later died of complications of injuries. The death has a terrible irony because here's a person

who is the spokesperson for wilderness, for a purity in the West, for a lack of automobiles, for a lack of over-civilizations, and yet here he dies in this manner, which is so unlike who the person was and so accidental, and because he had many years of productivity left. So tragic.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

As a man deeply associated with the West, why did he choose Vermont as his final resting place?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Vermont was the antithesis of what the American West had become, and that's why he chose it as his final resting place. It was a land that quickly regenerated itself. It was a land that had codes of behavior which he was used to from his frontier upbringing. It was a land that had a discernible past that went beyond a mere 100 years, and had a past that people revered. It was a land that had all those things that Stegner had come to treasure as a youth and held in great esteem through his whole life, and it was no longer the West that held him. It was the East and Northeast--Vermont in particular, that gave him a sense of the continuity that we lack so much out here in the American West.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

What do you think Wallace Stegner's legacy should be? How should he be remembered?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Wallace Stegner's legacy is threefold and I don't think that a lot of people recognize the fact that there were three aspects to who he was, and I try to emphasize it in the book and I give equal amount of space to each, and if you ask me which I thought was his greatest contribution I couldn't tell you, but first

of all... (interruption)

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

How should Wallace Stegner be remembered?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Wallace Stegner's legacy... well he didn't have one. He did have... Wallace Stegner's legacy... he didn't have one. He had at least three, which is why I call him unclassifiable. You just couldn't put him in one niche. He was first of all a writer, not only of fiction, but also nonfiction, history, essays, biography, and he was a teacher of writers, and he was a conservationist and activist, so I can't think of anyone else in the United States in this nation, and particularly the American West, which I'm fairly familiar, who combines all of those three aspects--who carried them out in such excellence, and I can't think of anyone who had a larger influence on who we are in the American West and who we are in terms of other people understanding who we are than Wallace Stegner, and in that way his legacy has many different aspects and continues to this day, as I discovered when I traced him back to Canada, to New England, to Utah, and to California, his trail is everywhere.

### **Interviewer-John Howe**

Tell me about Wallace Stegner's legacy. How should he be remembered?

### **Phillip Fradkin**

Wallace Stegner's legacy... his legacies. He had three different complimentary legacies that he left us. He was first of all a writer of fiction and nonfiction, equally adept at both. He was a teacher and an excellent teacher of many excellent writers, and he was a conservation activist. This is why I think of him as unclassifiable. I can't think of anyone else in this nation's history who in

those three ways crosses those borders with such ease and has such an impact, and I think all of those who live in the American West now and are... live elsewhere in this country but are trying to understand who we are out here and who they are, I can't think of anyone else in those three ways who has had a greater impact.