

Rachael Stegner Sheedy Interview Wallace Stegner Documentary

Interviewer-John Howe

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

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

I remember him as my grandpa. People ask me that all of the time--what it was like being Wallace Stegner's granddaughter. You know, I remember playing darts with him and gardening with him and just going on walks and doing things with him as my grandfather.

Interviewer-John Howe

What kind of man was he? When you think of him, what kind of values and integrity do you think of?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Well, he was a very wise man. He taught me a lot about working hard in life and being a good person and always striving to be the best that I could be--better than the best. That was definitely a lesson I learned from him. He also taught me, or instilled in me a respect and a love for the environment and for taking care of it.

Interviewer-John Howe

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

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

I remember him as a kind man, very generous. He was very thoughtful. He was, you know I just think of him as my grandpa. He... I did fun things with him, played darts with him. You know he taught me a lot about gardening and about the trees and I learned... probably got my love of gardening from him just by following him around the yard.

Interviewer-John Howe

You were talking about his environmental ethic too in terms of learning about the environment. What did he teach you about the environment?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Well, he taught me to be respectful of the environment and remember my place in it.

Interviewer-John Howe

Let's start again. What kind of man was Wallace Stegner? What do you remember about him, his values and integrity and that kind of thing?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

I remember him as being very kind and generous. He was always very thoughtful of what I was doing. He was interested in what I was doing and how I was accomplishing things.

Interviewer-John Howe

What did he teach you about the environment?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

He taught me to respect the environment--to remember my place in the

environment, to take care of it really. I have a very fond memory of going on a hike with him, or we'd go on walks through the woods in Vermont on a trail called The Fairy Trail and he used to... on both sides of the trail was moss, very thick moss, and he used to tell me that fairies lived in the moss and that their babies were sleeping so you had to be very quiet when you walked through this trail, and he used to always turn to me and he'd say, "Shhhhh, don't wake the babies." And I think that was his way of getting me to listen to the sounds of nature and understand the beauty and the silence and the creatures that are out there.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why was Vermont so special to him?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

He had a lot of connections there. They had very good friends there that they connected with. Vermont was special to him I think because they had connections there with other friends. I don't really know other than that. I think he liked the pace there. It was different than in the West. It was... he never was on vacation. He always worked wherever he went, but it was... I think it was a slower pace, more relaxed for him when he was in Vermont.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you remember as a child about his work ethic and his routine?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Well, I always remember him leaving the house after breakfast to go into this study probably around 8 o'clock and then he would not emerge until about noon, and it was known that we were not to disturb him when he was in his study. He was very dedicated and... to that schedule. I never saw him break

that schedule. Even on the weekends he would go--not as long--but he would go in there and answer letters generally on the weekends for maybe an hour or two, but Monday through Friday he never broke that routine.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you remember about his writing study? What kind of a room was it? What do you remember as a child going in there?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

I remember his big desk with lots of papers, his typewriter which was old-fashioned with the raised keys on it. I probably... the thing I remember the most was the smell, the cigar smell which I just loved. It was sort of embedded into everything, and it was very cozy. He had a little wood stove in there and lots of books of course, and I remember the pictures. He had a picture of Dr. Seuss which I was always fascinated by as a child. Ansel Adams was on his bulletin board. I remember always looking at all his pictures and wondering who these people were.

Interviewer-John Howe

Describe your grandmother and talk about Mary Stegner. What kind of person is she and what do you remember of her in your childhood, and maybe her relationship with Wallace Stegner?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

My grandma was devoted to my grandfather. She had her own routine. When he would go to his study she had her routine in the house. She would make the bed. She would clean up the kitchen. She would play the piano for probably about an hour. She read the newspaper. She and I had some good times together. She had a great sense of humor. We used to read together. Every

afternoon I used to read the Laura Ingles series to her, and we used to have great fun doing that because I think I was maybe in fourth grade and I'd stumble on words and we'd howl with laughter. I don't know why, I guess whatever I said was pretty off and I just remember having really good times with her doing that.

Interviewer-John Howe

What are your memories of the Los Altos Hills home? Can you describe that and how you remember it?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Well I remember... I remember loving the area that it was in--the grounds, the big oak trees, climbing the oak trees as a child. I remember just liking... I liked walking around the yard with my grandfather and helping him. He would just, you know go exploring. We could go down on trails. They had a big meadow next to their house that I used to go out and explore in. It was just a fun place to be as a child.

Interviewer-John Howe

How has that area changed since? What do you think of the changes there?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Well, there's certainly more houses everywhere on the skyline and next to them, but I wouldn't say their property itself changed very much even as I got older. It still remained the same. You know, they added a pool. I think that was really the only thing that was drastically changed, but their property really stayed the same and they maintained it beautifully and I haven't been back since it sold just because I want to remember it the way it was.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do you have a favorite book of Wallace Stegner, and if so what is it and why?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

I do. I love *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. I was fascinated by the story. It was interesting to me just to learn more about my grandfather and his childhood from that book.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think about his literary legacy? What do you think it is and why do you think it's important?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Well, I think he has had a great influence on many people in bringing awareness about the environment and about conservation that maybe wouldn't have been there before. You know I don't often think about my grandfather as famous. I just think about him as my grandpa, and it's a... but I think he has brought a great awareness mostly on taking care of our planet and what needs to be done.

Interviewer-John Howe

What would you want people to know about your grandfather--maybe something you know that you would like other people to know about him.

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Well, I guess that he could just be a regular guy, you know he liked to tell jokes and pull some pranks and you know he was fun to be around. It wasn't all about lessons and advice. He was just a fun person to be with.

Interviewer-John Howe

Can you think of a favorite story or event, like Page told the story of going to the ball game. Anything you can think of like that when you were growing up?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

I do have a good memory of... I would go in the summers and spend a few weeks with them in the Los Altos hills and they would often take me up to Golden Gate Park and I would go horseback riding and then we would go to the Japanese Tea Gardens afterwards or we'd go on a picnic in Golden Gate Park and I remember him... He loved it there walking through the trails and spending time there.

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking about the sound of the typewriter, that you remember that story from when you were a girl.

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Yes, I remember being outside or helping my grandmother hang up the laundry, and his study would be, was right there in the courtyard, and I remember hearing the sound of the typewriter clinking away and of course the smells again of the cigar smoke, and it was a good memory.

Interviewer-John Howe

I'll re-ask you. You were talking about your memory as a child of listening to the typewriter. Tell me that story as to how that made you feel.

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Well, I remember being outside and hearing the sound of the typewriter going and it was a calming sound, you know, and I knew my grandfather was in there working away following his routine, and I just loved to hear the sound of that and

it was all really you could hear around the house. It was so quiet, but you could hear the clinking of the typewriter keys.

Interviewer-John Howe

What things did he hold most dear to him?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

As far as just anything? Integrity was important to him. He... of course his love for the environment and making sure that there is open space like he says in his wilderness letter, even though... even if we just drive to the edge and look in, that was very dear to him to have that part conserved in our world. I think family was important to him. I know he was very close to his mother, but I think my brother and I were important in his life.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think he would think about the current state of the environment? And what would be his advice?

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

I don't think he would be overly pleased with what's going on. He often found it frustrating. I know it seemed like it was an uphill battle, and I know he always worried that things were getting worse and not better. I think he would be impressed with how people are coming around and becoming more aware, and I don't know what his advice would be. I'm not sure what he would say.

Interviewer-John Howe

How did you learn of the death of your grandfather? How did you hear and from who and then maybe just describe a little bit the emotions at that time.

Rachael Stegner Sheedy

Well, I got a phone call late at night from my father who said that he had passed away from his injuries. It was devastating. I felt very close to my grandfather. I had just seen him. About a week before that I went and saw him in the hospital and I was pregnant at the time, and of course was hoping that he would be able to meet his great-grandchild, so it was very hard. It was actually very hard for me to talk about for a good year without falling apart.