

Lynn Stegner Interview

Wallace Stegner Documentary

Interviewer-John Howe

Lynn, lets start out by talking about Wallace Stegner a little bit. What kind of a man was he? How do you remember him?

Lynn Stegner

Well, I remember him as a renaissance man, and as a gentleman--a real, a genuine gentleman--someone who paid a lot of attention to his conduct, not his behavior, but his conduct. He really thought about, you know, how to be a good citizen of his region, of a dinner party, of his family, and he was chivalrous with women, and particularly with Mary and with me, I think eventually because he learned quickly that I had had a kind of rough childhood and he was... had a great deal of empathy for that, and in fact, one day I found out that Wally and his brother Cecil had been in the same orphanage that my brother and I had been in 50 years later, which was an interesting and comforting connection for me.

Interviewer-John Howe

Obviously his early childhood had an impact on him. You alluded to it a little bit. How do you think that made him feel to be put in the orphanage there for a while? I think it was two years if I remember right. How would you parallel that with your own experience?

Lynn Stegner

Well, in those days children ended up in orphanages not just because they didn't have parents, but because they were called "economic orphans." You

could leave off your children if you couldn't afford to feed them, and you know it's a beautiful orphanage. It's still there. I actually took my daughter back last May to look at it, but it's still an orphanage, and orphanages are lonely places, and I don't think it was as lonely for Wally because he had his brother and it's a Catholic orphanage, so the boys and the girls had to be separated, so I never saw my brother when I was there, but Wally did get to stay with Cecil in the same dormitory, and I think that's what comes through in Wally's fiction is just the loneliness of Wally's childhood--of moving around, of never being able to keep friends that you make, and I think that's why those years in Salt Lake were so important to him because he could go... I think they're called wards, the Mormon wards. He hung out at the wards with kids there and he made a lot of friends, and I think that was why those years were... I think they were his favorite years of his childhood in terms of social connections.

Interviewer-John Howe

Can you talk of his early years and how much you know of his mother and father George and Hilda and what kind of impact his parents may have had on him.

Lynn Stegner

Well, obviously he was very close to his mother, and I think that's why he was so affectionate and protective of women--of his wife and of me and his granddaughters. You know he had a difficult relationship with his father because his father was a difficult man, and someone who didn't pay much attention to being, as I said earlier, a good citizen, responsibilities, and he really wanted to make a quick buck and that just rubbed Wally wrong. It rubbed his personality wrong and his father abandoned his mother, and so I think Wally spent the rest of his life trying to make up for that to the women that he knew.

Interviewer-John Howe

Did I understand that you were in the same orphanage as Wally had been?

Lynn Stegner

Yeah. One day I was serving him lunch and I tried to give him some tomatoes and he said he didn't eat tomatoes, and I said, "Ah, my brother doesn't eat tomatoes either." And he said, "Why?" and I said, "Well because every day at the orphanage they gave us tomato sandwiches," and he said, well they did at the place that he and his brother were, and it ended up that we were in the same place in Seattle. It's the only orphanage there, or it was at the time.

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking about Wallace Stegner's literary legacy. What do you think his legacy is?

Lynn Stegner

Well, asking about Wally's legacy, and I'm going to steal a little from Wally right now. I guess it was Richard Etulain asked him how to describe the region, the West as a region, and he said, "The West is many regions, and trying to describe it is a little like trying to wrap your arms around five watermelons." So trying to describe Wally's legacy is like trying to wrap your arms around five watermelons because he has legacies in four or five major areas of study: enterprise, endeavor, history, fiction, conservation, etc., and I think I guess the underlying conceit of all of that is that he cared. He taught us how to care about literature, about our culture, about the land--not just caring about it, but taking care of it, and in a way that it might not be too late. You know that's a tiny part of an answer to a big question.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think he would think about some of the environmental issues of

today?

Lynn Stegner

Well, his point of view would not be quite hopeless, but I think he would begin to feel a little desperate about things because it's not just that things are changing in the West, it's just that the rate, or environmentally it's the rate of change is increasing at such a speed that we might not be able to catch up with it. It's like running downhill to catch yourself before you fall, you know I'm not sure that we can, and I think he would be more worried than he was when he was alive.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk about his love of the canyon country, especially of Utah and the Colorado Plateau. Why did he have such an affinity for that landscape?

Lynn Stegner

Well, I think it was just imprinted on his eyeballs, that landscape and that canyon country, the Great Basin, the West. California is really west of the West and the Great Basin is what I think Wally regarded as the West and I mean he cared about it in the way that we each come to care about the place that we are personally imprinted on and by, and he felt identified with it. You know he often said that, you know "You learn to stand in a wind leaning into it a little bit, and to squint your eyes against that kind of steady light", so I think it was just the place that he felt most himself.

Interviewer-John Howe

Let's try that one more time. Why did Wallace have such an affinity for that landscape?

Lynn Stegner

Because he grew up in it and he felt most himself in that landscape. It was the place that imprinted himself on him as a youngster, as he said you know, “You learn to stand braced into the wind and to squint your eyes against that steady light”, and in the way that we all come to feel ourselves to be in one place and not another, that's the way Wally was about that landscape, and particularly Utah because the geography... it's geography you can see. It's the literal earth, and it's not just the earth as it is today. It's as it was going back centuries because time is visible in those cliff faces and in those canyons and that's something you don't see in the East, for instance, because it's ground down and it's covered with foliage, but you can see the land there and the history of the land there, and of human occupation as well.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me about Mary Stegner. What kind of person is she and what kind of influence did she have on Wallace Stegner?

Lynn Stegner

Well Mary's a very strong, proud woman. She has always had her own opinions and I know Wally appreciated that. When he was working on a manuscript, for instance, he'd have her take a look at sections of it when he finished because, as he said, “The best editor is your divorced wife.” Well he wasn't divorced from her but, in other words, he wanted harsh criticism and he wanted strong criticism, candid criticism, and he always got that from Mary, and she was a good reader. They were a real team you know. When she had some health issues, he liked being there knead... he would come in at lunch and knead bread for her because she always baked her own bread, and for many years she did, and she had some trouble with her arms after she had some surgery and he came in and did the heavy... the small muscle work as he called it. So they were, you know they were... they had a symbiotic relationship after, (I don't know) 60 years of marriage.

Interviewer-John Howe

Wallace obviously had a pretty... his upbringing was maybe not the best. What kind of father was he?

Lynn Stegner

That's a complicated question. He was an excellent father in that in he had a great outline of what was important in terms of raising a child in this world-- teaching them to be responsible citizens. He had a bit of a temper. He was conservative, and I don't mean politically. I mean he was conservative in terms of behavior and if you have a strong-willed son, the inevitable clashes are going to happen and he was that way. I mean, I think some of his male students had father-son relationships with him and Wally had trouble with strong rebels and I think Page was quite a rebel, but you know Wally... there was a line, and if you crossed it there were consequences, but there weren't permanent consequences. He was very steady in his love and in his support.

Interviewer-John Howe

How did that relate to the '60s at Stanford and his writing students. How did they relate to him and how did he view that turmoil, if you will, on campus?

Lynn Stegner

Well, I think he sympathized with the guiding principles, if there were any, of that '60s movement, but he didn't like their methods because, as I said earlier, he was conservative and he felt that things should be done in an orderly and sort of legislated fashion. Change needed to be legislated, not just grabbed, and he felt that it was destructive to the... the movement was destructive to the University and a great institution, and he had real problems with the lawlessness and the kind of cavalier rebellion. It wasn't that he didn't think that we--all

young men and women--needed to rebel against the earlier generation. It was just that he felt the methods were destructive.

Interviewer-John Howe

Let's talk about Eastend and how did that affect his writing and his life? I'm talking about the end of the frontier period if you will.

Lynn Stegner

Well, the Canadian prairies were like a dream that never really got to quite awaken--that is to say that it was a civilization that, you know like a child born with a fatal gene you know, it wasn't ever really going to make it because the changes were happening so quickly. The combines came along with rubber tires and put out the smaller farmers and so Wally was in Saskatchewan when that frontier was ending, and so there was a kind of a mortmain that was laying over that land like a shadow and you couldn't... probably you couldn't help but feel it if you grew up in it. At the same time, the land was the land and it was a... it is, it was a beautiful... and as he used his words, "a sensuous place for a boy to grow up and a no better place for a boy to grow up in terms of really getting to know a place and its plants and its smells and its seasons", and there isn't any better place to grow up if you have that kind of opportunity as a youngster, to really know a place authentically, and he did.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk about Salt Lake City in his years there. He always considered Salt Lake his hometown. Why? Talk just a little bit about his years there and his formative years.

Lynn Stegner

I don't know as much about Wally's Salt Lake City years as I'd like to, but I do

know that just at the age when children really start needing a social holding environment more than a physical holding environment, that was when they landed in Salt Lake City, and so it just fit with his own personal evolution beautifully because the wards provided a place for him to meet kids and, you know it was a clean, vibrant city and you know he said it was the first place he got to use a flush toilet and saw lawns and that sort of thing, and it was for him exciting, social--to go from the prairies, which are very lonely and a kind of interior landscape on a hugely external landscape, this Salt Lake City constituted his social evolution or the beginning of a real strong social evolution and a sense of his place in the culture itself and in society.

Interviewer-John Howe

How did he become a writer, and what was his writing routine like?

Lynn Stegner

That's a good question and I don't know.

Interviewer-John Howe

Maybe you can tell me from your experience teaching creative writing. Is that something that can be taught and what's his method of doing so?

Lynn Stegner

I don't think Wally thought, and I certainly don't think that you can teach creative writing--literally teach it, but he did believe, and I do too, that you can create an environment in which you facilitate existing talent and you help students learn craft, writing habits, discipline--that sort of thing, and you know where a manuscript is straying off course, where a point of view is distorting a story...
(interruption)

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking about creative writing and whether you think that is possible to teach and what Wallace Stegner's may have been like.

Lynn Stegner

Well, I know that Wally felt he wasn't really teaching creative writing or fiction writing. I know that he felt he was more of a facilitator--that he was a guide and that particularly with his... (interruption)

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking about creative writing and how that can be taught, and maybe you can allude to some of his famous students as well, and how that program changed even after he left.

Lynn Stegner

Well, as I was saying I don't think Wally thought that you could teach fiction writing or creative writing directly. I think he felt he was a guide or a facilitator, and that they weren't quite teachers, and the students weren't quite students, and he did get a real splendid batch of gifted writers after the war that went on for a couple of decades, and it could be that he just got lucky, or it could also be that he had a nose for talent, and I mean he had people like Robert Stone, Ken Kesey, Merrill Joan Gerber, Ernest Gaines, Wendell Berry, you know. There were a few after he left--Scott Turow. I'm not sure if Scott was there when Wally was there or it was just after but when Wally left Stanford, there just seemed to be the same cornucopia of fantastic writers coming out of that program. It also might be said that when that program was started there was only one other significant writing program in the country and that was at Iowa, and so that could be part of why there was such a dense population of what came to be nationally reputed writers, and there are of course dozens and

dozens of writing programs now, so the wealth is spread.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think about the legacy of Stewart Udall and Wallace Stegner's role in the Kennedy administration, especially in terms of the creation of the national parks? When you think of Stewart Udall, what do you think of?

Lynn Stegner

Well, Stewart Udall is one of the most authentically decent human beings I've ever known in my life, and talking to him is a little like talking to, you know, God's right-hand man. He's just so solid and caring and steady in that caring, and he and Wally recognized in each other something similar--that deep abiding love for the land, and it was a real match made in heaven, those two, and the work they did to... especially with Canyonlands for instance, and putting together these last little bits of the national parks and I wish I knew more about the work that they did. I know that I enjoy it every day. I'm an American citizen.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk about Wallace Stegner's theme of demystifying the West. I'm talking about the way he wrote as compared to say Zane Grey. What was Wallace Stegner's vision of the West?

Lynn Stegner

De-mythefying the West I think might be more accurate because he felt that the classic Zane Grey Western, Max Brand, etc. had its place and it was part of the romance of Manifest Destiny, etc., but at the same time it sentimentalized the West and Wally had a real aversion to not taking the place and its conditions--the condition primarily being aridity--seriously, and that was what *Angle of Repose* did was it said this place has certain inalienable conditions and one of

them is aridity, and he didn't want us to--us as a country--to think about that place in sentimental terms or mockish terms because it trivialized it.

Interviewer-John Howe

How did he feel about winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Angle of Repose*?

Lynn Stegner

Well, I wished I'd been there. I actually have the Pulitzer Prize, the document, in my study. I think he would have felt gratified, particularly because it came about two-thirds of the way what was already a magnificent career, and I think he felt, not overlooked by the eastern literati, but at least, you know, not paid enough attention to, and that book and that prize came at a time when probably he needed that kind of big step.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why do you think they did that--the eastern establishment that were somewhat minimizing of what they considered to be western writer? I'm talking about the criticism in The New York Times and others.

Lynn Stegner

Yeah. You know I think I tend to be maybe a little more generous in thinking about why the East did neglect, not just Wally, but plenty of western writers, and I think it was just that they didn't understand the West. They saw it as the territories, you know, and not quite where serious cultural things were happening, and without the East realizing it, the West was growing up and had grown up, and so had it's writers and it's writers and it was time to pay attention.

Interviewer-John Howe

When you saw the inscription to Page on *Angle of Repose*, what were your feelings?

Lynn Stegner

I was very happy that he had dedicated that book to Page and maybe there's some kind of (*inaudible*) thing about East-West, father-son, older culture, younger culture. Who knows.

Interviewer-John Howe

When he declined the National Medal of the Arts, tell just a little bit about that. Why do you think he did that, and what was his purpose in doing so?

Lynn Stegner

Well, I remember when he did that. We were all in Vermont that summer and Wally was very unhappy with the way that the Bush (first administration), Bush was imposing some subtle forms of censorship on national art funding, including The National Endowment for the Arts, and Wally of course disapproved of that in spite of the controversy about people's work like Maplethorpe's work, and so he didn't want to encourage... by accepting that award he didn't want to encourage the administration into thinking that what they were doing was acceptable. It's not acceptable, and art needs to be free and Wally believed that and so he... and he was in a position at that time... he had become a kind of national icon, literary icon, and so he was in a position to make a kind of statement, a public statement that he hoped might have some affect on the administration. He didn't do it just for himself. He did it with the hope that they would, people would stop, wake up a little and say wait a minute, these funding agencies shouldn't be contaminated or politicized by this kind of behavior.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk a little bit about his love for Vermont. For a man that is associated with the West, why did he love Vermont so much, and why did he choose that to be his final resting place?

Lynn Stegner

Well I think he felt that Vermont was and is parts of Vermont a lot like the West was, and the West changed and is changing... (interruption).

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking about Vermont and why he had such an affinity for Vermont. For a man of the West, or so closely identified with the West, why do you think he loved Vermont so?

Lynn Stegner

Well, there are a number of reasons why Wally felt a close affinity to Vermont and one of them is that it doesn't change very quickly--the little village where he and Mary had a summer camp, as it's called, is pretty much the same as it was fifty years ago, with a few summer cottages added, and it's a 220 year old community and it reminded him of some of the places in the West. He also appreciated the sense of both independence, self-reliance, and cooperation. In Greensboro, Vermont he wrote some stories, for instance, "Saw Gang", where he tried to embody the sense that certain jobs can't get done unless everybody's working together, and that was another aspect of Vermont that he loved. I think also in his life it was the most stable place he'd been. They'd been going for... well since Page was three years old so, 65, 69 years.

Interviewer-John Howe

When you think of Wallace Stegner and your own work, how does Wallace Stegner influence your work?

Lynn Stegner

Well, coincidentally I have a lot of the same writing habits that Wally did. I like to work in the morning. I work almost every morning four or five hours. I'm happy in a rut, a work rut, and I didn't need that part of... many lessons I learned from Wally in terms of the writing life and the work because it was natural to me.

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking about the influence that Wallace Stegner had on your work.

Lynn Stegner

I think the most important thing that I learned from Wally, and I learned it very early with regard to writing, came about when he read a first draft of my first novel, and he said that there was a problem with the point of view, and that I needed to change the point of view from first person to third person, and I was devastated because it was a 500 page manuscript and I was going to have to go back and start from scratch, but I subsequently learned how critically essential coming up with the right point of view is in terms of finding a reliable narrator, or an unreliable one, as the case may be depending on what story you want to tell, and following it through to the end, and it has since become... actually my specialty is teaching workshops that focus on point of view.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think is his greatest accomplishment? What do you think he should really be remembered for?

Lynn Stegner

The first thing that comes to mind when I think about Wally and his greatest accomplishment, is simply the life that he lived and the example that he... I don't

know if it was intentional or accidental, but just the example that he provided the rest of us, and his work, the bond he made with his work, with his family, with his culture, with the land that he grew up on and in. I guess that's what I'd say.

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking about the influence that Wallace Stegner had on your work and writing.

Lynn Stegner

The most important first and abiding lesson that Wally gave me with regard to my work was having to do with point of view and this came about when I finished the first draft of my first novel and he read it and said, "There's something wrong with the voice" and that I was going to have to change... because I was too close to the subject, I was going to have to shift from first person to third person, and over the years I've learned that point of view really is the first and most systemically important decision of any writer when he comes, or she comes to start a project, especially a novel, and it... because that decision shapes not only how the story is told--who tells it, but what is told. For instance, if a story is told in first person, that character has no access to the thoughts of other characters, so it hobbles the narrative, and that hobbling is part of the storytelling, so that's something that Wally... it was a great gift he gave me. I think the other thing that I learned was not to get too excited about what I was working on... too proud of what I was working on... that I would always be, and we would all always be perpetual students. I go through the manuscript that he read and there would be a faint in pencil, "ok" next to something that he approved of or thought worked, and otherwise, you know just a lot of ways to improve the manuscript--to make it the best that it could be. No excess praise. In fact, he was quite chary with praise when it came to reading manuscripts. It was all about the work and what had to be done to bring it up to snuff.

Interviewer-John Howe

Lynn, I believe you were talking about Wallace Stegner and his role, for lack of a better role, as the father you needed.

Lynn Stegner

Yeah, I didn't have much of a father by any stretch of the imagination actually, and Wally was aware of that, and I think he ... I think he was very pleased to provide that kind of presence in my life, and in fact we got... Page and I were married at Mary and Wally's summer camp and it was a very small ceremony with just... I think there were 12 or 13 people, and I was a little ashamed that I didn't have any family there, and I didn't have a father to give me away, and Wally was sitting outside with me. Everybody was inside, and he and I were sitting outside before the ceremony and at one point he stood up and said, "I think it's time to go in", and he put his arm out and I took his arm and he walked me in and he gave me away, which was just about the nicest thing he could have done, and nothing was ever said. It was just perfect.