

Richard West Sellars

Interview by Lu Ann Jones

Santa Fe, New Mexico

November 7, 2014

Background: This oral history interview serves two main purposes: to document closely the origins, research, writing, and consequences of *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997; 2009), and to create materials that are useful for development of online courses about history and historical thinking for the Academy of Cultural Resources. Jones and Sellars had addressed these topics via a telephone conversation earlier in the fall of 2014, and they decided to flesh out the discussion when they could talk face to face. To expedite processing of the interviews, Jones made a detailed summary with selective direct quotations. For more detail researchers can consult the audio files.

Update, April 2018: Sellars passed away on November 1, 2017. His widow Judy Sellars graciously read and corrected the detailed summary of the interviews and Jones has incorporated those changes.

### **Audio file 001**

Richard West Sellars provides full name. He worked in Southwest Regional office October 1, 1973 until March 8, 2008. Spent his career in Santa Fe, except when, as a temporary/term employee, he was working out of the Denver office and going to places like Shenandoah and Buffalo River.

### **Audio file 002**

Lu Ann Jones introduces the interview, taking place at regional office in Santa Fe. Interview will focus on key episodes in his career, especially focusing on research and writing of *Preserving Nature in the National Park Service: A History*. RWS agrees to the interview.

RWS describes origins of *Preserving Nature*. He started to work on the book in the fall of 1988. At the time he was chief of the Southwest Cultural Resources Center, which

included historians, archeologists, historical architects, and so on. He was restless for something else but did not want to leave Santa Fe.

Meanwhile, Austin Chase came out with a book, *Playing God in Yellowstone*. The book was very critical about what the NPS had done in Yellowstone. The NPS Washington office planned to write a response to the book, and gave historian Harry Butowsky only four months to prepare a response to a book that had been the subject of a cover story in *The Atlantic* magazine. The book had received a great deal of national visibility. It was a “crazy idea” that NPS could respond in four months.

Several regional historians, he among them, were criticizing the plan and saying NPS should not be doing the response in that way. RWS and his wife were driving home from Cheyenne, WY, in the summer of 1987, and they started talking about Chase’s book, its impact, and Harry’s assignment. His wife, Judy, said, “Why don’t you see if you can get that assignment for long enough to do a credible, thorough job?” They discussed the idea during much of the trip home. “The very next day I went in, notes in hand as to what I wanted to say, and met with John Cook,” regional director at the time. RWS told him that he’d like this project and asked for two years to complete it. “Frankly, I knew I was lying through my teeth about the two years, and John thought for just a few seconds and then a smile broke out on his face and he said, ‘Let’s go for it.’” John gave him support in terms of salary and some travel, but most importantly he provided “political cover.”

RWS went to Washington and discussed the book project with people at higher level, who gave the okay to pursue it. He spent the rest of the 1987 summer reading books about the Park Service. Some of them were good and some were not so good. What books did he depend on most? “I’m always more attracted when I’m involved in scholarship to books that involve critical analysis. There were at the time so many books that praised the National Park Service without really giving a lot of thought to what they were writing about.” He largely dismissed those books, or found little worthwhile information.

LAJ asks how you tell when there is critical analysis. RWS says “you can tell by the tone of the book, in a way. If it’s glorifying the National Park Service or the national parks

themselves or the leaders of the National Park Service. Mather and Albright were set up as heroes. They deserved it. I think Albright was the finest bureaucrat we ever had as director, just extremely smart and politically savvy. So I wanted books that would tell me about these people but not just glorify them.” RWS selected books and read portions of books—he used indexes to find portions of books germane to his research. By late 1987 he began to draft an article on what he had found.

He served as acting superintendent at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park through the spring of 1988 and continued his reading that summer. His wife was a librarian at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, and she took a year’s leave without pay so she could travel with him. “That meant an awful lot. In the first place, it was companionship. I can get very lonely on the road by myself. In the second place, she’s a librarian and was also doing archival work for the museum here in Santa Fe.” They left Santa Fe the latter part of September of 1988 and drove to Harpers Ferry, where they began their research. At that time the booklet that the National Archives put out on its collections on the parks indicated that there were 2,500 feet of documents dealing with the national parks. “That’s a half a mile, and I could not quite read all of those much less write about them and make sense of them.” So they began work at Harpers Ferry which had archives and many books about the Park Service, “to get our feet wet in researching and working through this topic.” That was a good idea; got him “on the ground.”

Moving back and forth between the National Archives and Harpers Ferry, they continued their research efforts until mid-December, when they returned home for a month. Dick finished his article during this time. Back in Washington by early February, he had an interview at the DOI building, with Ted Sudia, Chief Scientist for the NPS. Sudia didn’t show up. His wife was at the archives working. RWS went by the Public Affairs Office and introduced himself to someone there. He met Duncan Morrow, who asked him what he was working on. RWS told him about the project. Morrow appreciated the articles that RWS had published. Prior to this, RWS had published short articles on the Park Service. Morrow asked if he had anything for publication now, and RWS said he did. Morrow didn’t even look at the article; he offered to call the editor of the Outlook section of the Sunday *Washington Post*. The editor asked for them to Fax the article over. The editor

called back in about 15 minutes and said they'd take it. RWS felt like he was walking about four feet off the ground. The editor said they'd have to wait until they had a space in which it would fit. The article did not come out until April, 1989.

LAJ asks what the thesis of *Playing God in Yellowstone* was and what about the book distressed the Park Service enough to want to write a response to it. RWS says the book was very, very critical of the Park Service. "The book was, in my opinion, not a good book at all. In fact I never finished reading it. I read about sixty or seventy pages of it." "He was working with a devil theory, and the Park Service was the devil. I did not think it was honest and fair writing and judgment." But the book had made a big hit, and the Park Service wanted a response. RWS never saw *Preserving Nature* as a response to *Playing God in Yellowstone*, because he wasn't going to address a book he considered so flawed.

Why was it flawed? RWS says it was "mainly that his writing was so thoroughly heavy-handed—I didn't really check out his sources that much—it was what he wrote down and his unabated criticism of the Park Service, which was doing good things, but he was focused on the failure of the Park Service to do certain things."

What kinds of complaints was he making? RWS does not remember the specifics, but that he was "very turned off by the book." He doesn't mind criticism at all; in fact, he's written a lot of articles that have been critical, but constructively so and honest. But Chase's book "didn't seem to me to be honest." Doesn't remember the details. But around page 65 of the book he decided he'd had enough and to read anymore would have been a waste of time. The book had a great title and that helped it gain attention; it was better than the title his own book would have, some nine years later, he thought. Chase's arguments were simplistic, without recognition of the extent to which humans in general alter the environment; it's not just that the NPS alone is guilty of this.

RWS refers to *Preserving Nature's* bibliography for secondary sources he consulted.

He had started writing during off hours in 1985. On the weekends he would find himself with nothing to do. Park Service is not strongly connected to Santa Fe, and he doesn't go to church or belong to men's clubs. He didn't know many people, so the weekends "were

downers, in a way.” As he traveled through the parks on business or pleasure, he’d been taking notes on 5 by 8 cards about what he saw and what he liked or disliked. He thumbed through those notecards one afternoon in January, and he pulled out the “marble arches” of Gettysburg; the name had long fascinated him. RWS called them the granite arches, but that was a put-down by Park Service people who were not really into the Civil War. He wrote on that topic. The editor of *History News*, the magazine of the American Association of State and Local History, published the piece, along with a companion piece that covered other parks. The articles came out in 1986, his first publications on national parks. Mary Maruca was editor of the *Courier*, internal publication for the Park Service, and she started publishing some of his articles. He also published in *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Denver Post* and so on. Later he produced two pieces on Elvis that appeared in the *Washington Post*. One article suggested that the Belt of Orion be renamed the Belt of Elvis. Those were a lot of fun. Elvis was great to write about because you could put in lyrics from one of his songs to spice it up.

RWS thinks that the track record he had established publishing articles might have made John Cook more inclined to support his research and writing for book. They also knew he could do critical analysis.

LAJ says it’s fascinating that after a summer of intense reading of secondary sources that he could get the general arc of the story. How would he describe the arc of the story?

RWS says that at that stage he had begun to realize that the Park Service founders had established the national parks primarily for scenic purposes and not for preservation in a scientific way. They were primarily interested in scenery rather than scientifically based preservation. So the parks had gone along with landscape architects, because of the importance of their work to make sure that the park’s work was compatible with the scenery. That all went out the door with Mission 66, including the beautiful rustic architecture in some of the parks. Landscape architecture was particularly important, especially during the first half-century. It was the most powerful single profession in the Service. Regional directors were also powerful and had come out of green blood jobs, but so far as professional work goes, other than regional directors and so forth, the landscape

architects were quite important. RWS realized that with George Wright began the first steps toward the inclusion of science as a tool for managing the parks. But then with his death in 1936, it slowly faded and almost vanished. World War II came along and then Mission 66 after that. A revival of interest in scientific management came out with the Leopold Report in 1963 or 1964. RWS was seeing that arc. He wasn't trying to follow his initial article but the book simply came out that way.

LAJ says her colleagues asked about his initial research topic being quite broad and so how did he begin to see that main thread.

RWS says “one key to that occurred in Harpers Ferry when we were first doing research. We happened to get there on the last day that the archivist was going to be stationed there. She was moving elsewhere. But we used her as much as we could and got as much information out of her as we could. She was very helpful.” In the basement of the building, there was the original archive, and included in that was an entire wall with various and sundry scientific reports on snakes, on bears, on trees, and so on. “I thought, I can't read these and I won't understand it if I do. What am I going to do? I really had a moment of panic there. Then I realized, wait a minute. It's management of the park and what they do with these things, these recommendations, and how much attention they pay to them. I'm really writing about the Park Service, the way they manage the parks. Maybe they used these science reports; maybe they didn't. That told me I wasn't going to have to read these biological reports, which I couldn't understand much of anyway. Instead I was going to be dealing with management. In the National Archives, the archives I focused on most of all were from two sources: one was the directors' papers and the other was the wildlife division papers. . . . Out of the 2,500 feet of archives we could narrow it down quite a bit.”

RWS would go through the documents. Archivists would bring them out from the stacks of the National Archives and he would go through them. His wife did most of the copying, but she is very bright and got to know what he was doing almost as well as he did, so “that was another big advantage—in the research, in the writing, and in the polishing of that book, she was always there and she was interested in the project and

really committed to it.” She returned to her position at the museum after a year of helping with research.

LAJ says that people who don’t use archives have a hard time understanding what archives are and how valuable they are. Can he explain how those records got to the archives?

RWS says he doesn’t know exactly. LAJ says there’s a records management protocol. RWS makes the point that the sources he was using were correspondence or white papers that laid out the views that might counter other views in the Park Service, “but these documents showed the point of view from the Park Service leaders about different projects, different directions they might take. So that the wildlife division papers were often quite different in tone and direction than the director’s papers.” Before the passage of environmental legislation in the 1960s and 1970s, they had a system when they were developing parks--the regional director and the superintendent of the park and other planners would go out to the park and look around. They would issue a “Record of Decision” that the maintenance facilities will go here, the visitors center will go here, the headquarters here, and so forth. There was no requirement that the NPS undertake archeological work or historical studies of the houses they might tear down. That kind of correspondence was in there. The director’s order would summarize the decision. It didn’t have to go through Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act because it didn’t yet exist.

LAJ says archives are often very rich because there was lots of back and forth that was documented. LAJ asks if he talked to archivists at the National Archives that could guide him through the vast collections. RWS says, “Absolutely. I could not have done without them. The archivists knew where the archives were. They were filed with numbers and letters and so forth. They could sometimes tell me, ‘You might consider this,’ or ‘This box might be helpful to you,’ based on information they had. So they would . . .

### **Audio File 003**

. . . bring them out and we would make the decision as to what we wanted. The strength depends to a great deal on the original source material that I used. The words of Park

Service leaders and so forth, in writing, in 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s, so you get the points of view that they had. And these are written down so you can't say that Conrad Wirth didn't say that when there's a paper signed by Conrad Wirth, or any other director, assistant director, or regional director. . . . Using those documents, memorandums or letters and various and sundry white papers and overall reports on a program, that's all in writing" and represents what people thought and how it changed over time. "You can just trace the evolution of and the changes in park management thinking based on the original materials."

There weren't many existing interviews he could use. And he didn't conduct more than fifteen or twenty interviews because he didn't have support for transcribing. When he did do interviews he and his wife both took notes and if the person said something particularly important he would ask them to repeat it. In one memorable interview, Howard Stagner, an Assistant Director in Park Service in the 1960s, emphatically said the Park Service did not support the Wilderness Act. He was close to Conrad Wirth and George Hartzog and knew what was going on. But the documents were the most important things to RWS. There were some interviews with Albright that were valuable, plus Albright had written a couple of books that were valuable. Albright had co-authored several articles that came out in the 1960s, one that everyone was reading when RWS was a seasonal in the Tetons and everyone was talking about.

LAJ says many people would probably be surprised at the Park Service's initial response to the Leopold Report and the Wilderness Act.

RWS agrees and he brought that out in the book. He came to Santa Fe in 1973 and the year before, President Nixon had signed Executive Order 11593 insisting that federal agencies follow the mandates of the National Historic Preservation Act, enacted in 1966. The Park Service wasn't the only agency avoiding provisions of the act, "but here was a preservation agency that wasn't paying attention" to the provisions. The Park Service was hiring historians, historical architects and archeologists. There was Section 106 that gave them a certain amount of authority. They were under the direction of "green blood types" who had been rangers in the parks and moved to superintendent and regional offices, "and here we were Levis and beards, kind of a grungy bunch, who suddenly were

taking over—not taking over, by any means, but suddenly had a voice in things, a stronger voice than they wanted. So that was a major conflict not only for cultural resources but also for science. Before I started writing this book I thought science had probably had it a lot easier, natural resources had probably had it a lot easier than the cultural resources people. But the book showed me, no, no, that was not the case. They had a traditional horseback way of doing things. Riding out to the parks, making their decisions, not having to do 106, not having to do an environmental impact statement, but just ‘Dammit, do it!’ So it was an entirely different system. Also, it was the hippie era and some of these people looked pretty grungy, but they were as smart as could be. So that was going on in the Park Service.”

“And the wilderness thing was kind of far out: ‘We’re already doing a good job’ is what they thought.” Later on he was on a national wilderness steering committee for about five years, “and I could see very much that culture of doing it ourselves and doing it our own way was very strong in wilderness management, or the lack of wilderness management. That cultural thing had kept on going.” That was in the latter part of his career that he made these observations; he wrote an article about attitudes toward wilderness management for the George Wright Society.

LAJ says his comments are really fascinating. On the one hand, one of the messages of *Preserving Nature* is that the green blood way is being decisive and here are scientists or historians or archeologists who have to think about things a little bit, a more deliberative culture. Has the Park Service been able to blend those cultures successfully, or do they continue to arm wrestle with each other?

RWS says he’s been out of the Service for some years and wasn’t involved in management very much from 1988 on, when he began researching and writing *Preserving Nature*. But he has his doubts about the wilderness program, still, and its genuine support of that program. Doesn’t ask the details, but he picks up little bits of information here and there. He’s skeptical, but “I’m kind of a natural skeptic, which is good if you’re a historian. Prove it to me is what you’re asking. But again I go back to using the authentic documents from those periods. I was holding those very same papers that Mather and Albright and others had held in their hands, but it was 50, 60, 70 years

later and I was looking at them in the context of what happened then and later on. Again, the importance of archival research and critical thinking is very high because it locks it in as much as possible. Now historians will come along and do good work and criticize this book and take it on here and there, but I haven't seen anything so far.”

RWS says the book might have brought a shift in thinking about what the Park Service is and what it does. But he had thought all along, until he started on the book, that the science and natural resource people were in the driver's seat and the cultural resource people were not. For one thing, there were only two scientists based in Santa Fe, but they were under the associate regional director for operations, which is a more powerful position within the culture of the Park Service, and cultural resources were under a planning and cultural resources assistant regional director, a weaker position. RWS had figured all along that natural resources personnel had more authority, like the associate regional director himself. But they didn't, as he pointed out in the book.

LAJ notes that RWS went to certain parks to do research—to use their archives. But from looking at the park itself and its natural resources, was the environment itself part of the primary document? Being able to see the landscape he was writing about?

RWS says it was so far as his descriptions, but not nearly as helpful as the archives. When he was doing archival research in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Park Service records management was very bad. At Everglades archival material had been tossed into a store room, completely unorganized, and were next to impossible to work with. People who managed archives often had archives and records management as secondary assignments, and lacked training and understanding. This included even Yellowstone NP; some records were in the desks of employees, scattered about the park. Or maybe people had taken home the records; there was no accountability. Now Yellowstone has a very good archives building and library, so it's much more professionalized. He doesn't know about the rest of the Service.

RWS had very good support from a librarian as well as a historian in Yosemite, who pointed him toward documents and told him he needed to look at certain things. That was

one of the parks where he got good cooperation. He did in most parks, but Yosemite was an outstanding one.

“Again, it really is important to dig out the documents and so forth to give you the mindset of any particular period you’re writing about.”

RWS and his wife traveled to 40 states. Some of the park archives were disappointing. They interviewed a retired biologist who had worked in Yellowstone and was rude to them, even refusing to answer questions, so after about 15 minutes RWS concluded the interview. Some interviews were very enlightening, but they didn’t always work out. And interviews were hard to use because he didn’t have them transcribed.

“The single most valuable collection of papers that I ran into was at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California at Berkeley. It was before the museum was rehabbed; it’s really quite nice now, but at that time their papers relating to the Park Service were in a small office where there were a lot of pickled frogs and snakes on the shelves. There was a Xerox machine and a cabinet full of original materials. A number of early natural scientists for the Park Service, including George Wright, had trained there, and then they had their headquarters there on the campus. It was almost as if I would pull out an entire folder of documents relating to the 20s and 30s and so forth, primarily the George Wright era, then hand them to Judy” to photocopy the entire folder. It is a great collection that is still there, but in a better space and better organized.

LAJ remembers her own time in the archives: you make a lot of notes, Xerox all those copies, and now you have to synthesize them and do something with them. When you got to the stage when most of the active archival research was over, then what? Or were you trying to synthesize all along, trying to put sources in conversation with each other as you were doing the research itself?

RWS: “I very much was synthesizing this and my wife helped me quite a bit with that as we discussed these things all the time on the road, there in the archives themselves— ‘This really fits in.’ ‘This is a very important document.’—and why. So I could see that the arc of that story, I could follow it and get more detail. I did not write this book with reference to that article; it was with reference to the documents.”

LAJ refers to one of his articles she was reading in which he said something like, following what the documents tell you, listening to the evidence. That's important for people to understand. You go into the archives with an idea of what you think the pattern of the story is, but it's really important to be open to changing your mind.

RWS agrees. "It's as if the documents were talking to you. A voice from the 1920s or a voice from the 1940s and so forth. But it's in writing; it's in hard copy, and it's hard to deny. One thing I did, the book is often quite critical of the Park Service, but much of that criticism, or the majority of it, comes from within the park service, as one group would criticize [what another group was doing]—mainly the scientists and people interested in natural resource management on a scientific basis would criticize, or vice versa, they would get criticized from above. There was also—as the rangers were losing power that comes with all the environmental legislation, the situation of, these people were being hired like myself and scientists. There's another factor in that—the Park Service was vulnerable to law suits if it didn't follow the legislation. Now, I did not get into that aspect of it but I knew it was a factor all along. The NPS could be taken to court, particularly on the natural resources that was a factor more than cultural. I'm not sure. But there were these laws—not only these scruffy, bearded people that were trying to tell the regional director to do this and do that—that's an overstatement for effect, but there was a potential for litigation."

LAJ notes that one thing that's important for people to understand is the importance of having someone to listen to ideas, to play devil's advocate, to listen to writing. Maybe a spouse, or find a "partner in research so that it isn't isolated. It might look like we work in isolation, but historians don't."

RWS says acknowledgements in book make clear how much he relied on many people. He relied on John Cook giving him political cover; Jerry Rogers working on finding money for travel. "It's a whole combination of things, but you have--. I came home when we finished the research—we finished the research travel in September of '89. I had this mass of papers, so I had to separate them into decades and topics and so forth and start going through them and seeing what they said and making notes on them. That began to fill out the story. I wrote an introduction and then I wrote the first chapter but it wasn't

working out, somehow or another, so I jumped to the second chapter, and then I kind of began to catch on.” He had filed his documents by type—mammals, for example, or fish concerns or forests. People in the Park Service who had oversight over the forests were called foresters at the time; they had gone to forestry school and that was not a preservation background at all. That was something that was criticized in the 60s and 70s and changed. He had divided his files into certain topics and arranged chronologically. He’d marked them up in red ink if what was said was very important. “There was plenty of criticism in the Service itself so that, again, I didn’t have to just have to criticize the Service myself so much. But quite often I could use the documents.” There was a dispute that went on in the Great Smoky Mountains and he had documents that revealed the mindset of people who were supporters of science and those that weren’t.

LAJ says it’s important for people to realize that you might write for a while and then realize that this isn’t the story I thought I was telling, or I’ve got to start over again. I’ve got to revise or step back. Especially people who don’t do history for a living assume that you can just write the story—that it’s easy, that the story line is immediately obvious. Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn’t, or the writing strategy itself is a different challenge, even if you’ve got the arc of the story, actually doing the writing is another challenge.

RWS: “Let me say that I did have readers. One, a fellow in South Carolina, Jay Shuler, who worked for the Park Service, I always dreaded opening the envelope. He would do it in red ink and it was as if the pages bled. When I would open it there would almost be a little anger in me, and then I’d say, ‘Calm down. I’m in control. I can either accept what I think is valid and reject what I don’t. But I had a number of readers. Bill Brown was another reader for me. There were several others. And Judy read it. I might add that after the page proofs came out from Yale Press, I read the book entirely four different times. Twice out loud, checking things and making some last-minute changes.

But when we finished the research and came back I had this mass of materials and I had to get them in some kind of order, chronological order to some degree, but . . .

**Audio file 004**

. . . also by topic. “It was scary at first.” He had not used a computer for typing before, but he did after he wrote the first 50 pages in long hand. Then he converted to a computer, so he worked in WordPerfect, “a gem” of a word processing system. After he entered the 50 pages of long hand, he “never looked back”

It was a matter of getting familiar with what’s there, it’s sequence, and it’s being aware of what’s coming up down the line.

“The documents kind of lead me through my work. As I form a story it’s based upon what people have said.”

In writing articles since he retired, it’s the same way except the writing is shorter.

“The Park Service has what I think of as the coquina syndrome. There was an interpretive sign down at Saint Augustine, Florida, Castile de San Marcos, that said coquina was a type of stone that was used down there for construction quite a bit. The interpretation said when the cannon balls hit the stones the stone just kind of absorbed them and made the walls even stronger. (laughs) In many ways the Park Service takes criticism. The cannon balls come in and make us stronger and more resistant. The coquina effect. I’d heard about that before. There was someone in one of the classes I taught at Harpers Ferry who spoke about that. She had been stationed down there. I thought, this is too rich.”

(laughter)

LAJ notes that RWS had related before that he had started writing shorter pieces that were building blocks of the book. Began to give papers at conferences. Can he talk about that—it’s what historians do and as a writing strategy?

RWS says he met a fellow at a conference in Nebraska who gave him advice: write about what was interesting and important. He was a Pulitzer Prize winner and so had some license to say that.

LAJ says she’s most interested in writing strategy for *Preserving Nature*. How do you make the writing manageable? You can’t envision writing a 400-page book all at once. You have to envision chapters or an article. If you write something short, you get

gratification along the way, and shorter pieces also gave the opportunity to get feedback before it becomes a book.

RWS says he had an idea about what happened—the story--when he started writing the book. There was one chapter that he had trouble with so far as whether it should be one chapter or broken into two chapters. “I think I outlined the book early on as to what the chapters might be and what they might cover, and I think that held pretty well. So maybe I was using the arc of the story a fair amount.” Had trouble with chapter dealing with the time and period around World War II and Mission 66 and the Leopold Report later, and before that the death of George Wright and the consequences for the science program. So the science program was “personality based” and when Wright was killed it was not institutionally based, so that was an important factor. He could see where there were some landmarks along the way that would make good starting points and stopping points.

RWS did something in that book that is not generally done in histories—but the last paragraph in the original book is a statement about how if the Park Service is serious about scientific natural resources management then it has to institutionalize it so it doesn't rely on a particular director, or associate director for science; it's built into the institution. He could see that; Wright's death is a good example.

LAJ asks when he got a sense that *Preserving Nature* was going to really matter. LAJ reminds RWS that the Academy for Cultural Resources History Initiative has a module about why historical thinking matters. How did it go from being a book to making a difference in policy?

RWS could see the interest being generated as the chapters came out. He had some of them published—one that dealt with the Mather era came out in *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*. Another chapter appeared in a forestry publication. The *Washington Post* piece came out early on. The *George Wright Forum* published “The Wright Era” in three different sections. That created a lot of interest, especially among the people who were members of the George Wright Society. The book's findings and the articles began to build momentum. RWS began to get real support from people like Bill Brown, an extremely bright person who can be very critical. Brown was one of the most articulate

persons RWS has ever met and was the person who hired him. About a year after RWS first came to Santa Fe, Brown transferred to Alaska and RWS became regional historian. Brown still lives in Alaska. So he was supporting the research and findings. Brown is close friends with Deny Galvin, who was NPS deputy director at that time. Mike Soukup was the NPS associate director for science.

At a 2000 conference of superintendence, the book was front and center. RWS began to sense that the book was making a difference. This meeting happened after the Natural Resource Challenge launched.

RWS says Mike Soukup called a meeting of scientists or natural resource managers in Portland in 1997 (?) and that was the first time he ever made public his views about making the book mean something to the Park Service and change something in the Park Service. RWS's chief recommendation was that they get green blood support because that's where the power was in the Park Service—and still is, basically. Without them you're going to lose. Another important factor was that Bob Stanton [then the NPS director] was supportive of the book. RWS felt that superintendents and regional directors' buy-in was critical to success of book, because it needed to be not based on personality or one person's work but needed to be institutionalized so that it is continued generation to generation. RWS assumes the Natural Resources Challenge money is still coming in.

LAJ asks RWS to describe the Natural Resource Challenge? What difference did it make? What would someone see in a park as a result?

RWS says people might see the same kind of scenery in general, but the wolves might have come back or certain kinds of threatened plants might have come back, certain birds because of certain habitat damage over the years. There might have been restoration. People wouldn't really notice so much. There is sometimes a contest between science and scientific management and scenery as to what has to be done. They're both very important. If they weren't scenic parks and the Park Service hadn't drawn people in with the scenery, the whole national park idea would have collapsed early on. But they were hugely successful, and they were hugely successful because they were emphasizing these

are beautiful places and they should emphasize the beauty of these places, because that draws them in. But the NPS has these massive parks in many cases and quite a number of small ones that have some ecological integrity and that needs to be maintained. Visitors often would not be able to tell a park had changed a lot.

RWS was in the Tetons last summer for a family wedding, and he had been a seasonal ranger there in the 1960s, and there are definitely some changes. But most of the changes he would have noticed (and he's not a biologist) would have been the buildings and so forth themselves; like around Jenny Lake there's a good bit of change there. He was told the grizzly bears had moved. When he was working there, they had come down from Yellowstone only into the northern part of the Tetons. "I stayed away from there when I was hiking, believe me." RWS was told that the grizzlies were now south of Jackson itself. He would not have known that; he didn't run into any grizzlies, and he did hike down there some. He doesn't think the general public would be that much aware of these issues, but it doesn't mean that they are not ecologically important.

LAJ asks if more scientists were hired and the Inventory and Monitoring system begun? RWS says yes to both. Created CESUs that create opportunities to cooperate with universities; quite a number of scientists hired permanently by NPS. Natural Resource Challenge as a name not used much anymore. RWS says the Natural Resource Challenge "seems to have changed to some degree the culture of the National Park Service. I think people are coming in and rising up to the superintendents or chief rangers on up to regional directors, they're keenly aware of these things. I think maybe that's helped some with cultural resources as well." But there has been some sharp criticism of the wilderness program from a Park Service person who used to be stationed at Santa Fe in the National Parks Traveler.

LAJ asks an obvious question for a historian but perhaps not for learners for History Initiative courses: How would he describe historical thinking and history and why is that important to the National Park Service?

RWS: It's important for the Park Service because of some of these books that I talked about that are not critical of the Service or did not give critical analysis. That doesn't

mean they're after the Park Service; it means they're glorifying the Park Service. The Park Service is made up of human beings and it's flawed here and there, but it has a history to it that these people, new hires coming into the parks and central offices are unaware of and they need to know what the purpose has been and how it's changed over time. So that's where historical writing can guide people." Different parks have administrative histories, but many are not effective because they're not analytical. They give dates, but "to get into the bowels of the story and to analyze the direction things are taking and what changes were made and which changes failed, those kinds of things can enlighten a person. I would have been a lot better off if there had been something like this for me to read regarding cultural resource management." He left the Park Service having done two chapters on the history of cultural resource management, both of which have been published. RWS plans to complete that study when he finishes his autobiography of his Park Service career.

RWS thinks critical analysis—which doesn't mean harsh criticism necessarily but a look at the good and bad aspects. What succeeded? What didn't succeed? What wasn't a good program or were flawed? How did we get to where we are now?

LAJ says critical means asking questions and looking for the answers and coming to the most honest conclusion you can, based on the evidence.

RWS adds: "And knowing the questions to ask. A lot of times those will arise during the research. Oh, my gosh, did this happen then? It must have affected that later on. I made I think four trips back to Berkeley to do research because at that time the university did not have its campus-wide archives and collections in order, and I found, for example, the Starker Leopold papers, Aldo's son. He wrote the Leopold report almost single-handedly and shoved it down the committee's throats. (Laughter) His papers were in the School of Natural Resources offices. I got permission to go in there. They were in cardboard boxes shoved up under a table in an empty room. Anybody could have come along—a janitor could have come along—and said these need to be tossed out. But the Bancroft Library would not have known that. The people at the Museum of Vertebrate Biology would not have known that."

Three of the first four Park Service directors were graduates of Berkeley.

LAJ notes he had to go back to archives because new questions arose during the writing. RWS: “That’s right. Absolutely. For example, I guess if I had been told that the Starker Leopold papers were there during my first visit I would have gone over and looked at them. But I could certainly do a much better job of sorting through them and getting the better documents to Xerox knowing that much more about the previous history of what had happened. Again, the strength of this book rests largely on the original sources that I used.”

LAJ says the discussion is fascinating. RWS has suggested that the thinking comes out in the writing. LAJ’s coworkers asked her to ask RWS how thoughts become words on the page.

RWS: “I think sometimes in my mind and sometimes on paper in doing those chapters or doing the writing I’m doing now. I list ideas and events and so forth that I think are part of one chapter or part of a unit of some sort and then I begin to think about how the story line goes and its beginning, its middle, and its end. As I write I’m looking harder at those documents than I did maybe in the first scanning of them. I’m looking at them more closely. Then I realize, wait a minute, this document I’m writing in the 30s really reflects something that was said in the 20s, so I sometimes go back or make reference to it. So it’s a matter of in the writing I’m doing a lot of thinking and rethinking of the storyline and what happened and what’s important. Then some of the readers would say, you should address more and sometimes I would do that, probably most of the time. But the writing process is always for me a thinking process. I am a slow writer because in part I don’t know exactly where I’m going and as I write I realize that the story is taking a slightly different direction than I thought it would. That has certainly been the case with some of these articles I’ve written since I’ve retired.”

### **Audio file 005**

RWS says that’s the reason he’s a slow writer and why it took him nine years to complete *Preserving Nature*—writing and thinking go hand in hand. When Yale University Press accepted the book, regional director John Cook was very pleased.

When the article on the Park Service came out in the Sunday editorial section of the *Washington Post* in April of 1989, he had told only Mary Maruca (sp?) of the *Courier* that the piece existed. She might have read it for him. But he didn't tell anyone in the regional office or in Washington, because they might get nervous. The article was published on the weekend, by chance, between the directorship of James Michael Ridenour and William Penn Mott. The outgoing director was waving the article around at a reception they had for the new director, "You ought to see this! You ought to see this!" (Laughter)

RWS did call John Cook the night before the article was published. When RWS said he "wanted to talk to you about something," Cook said, "Sellars, what are you up to now?" (Laughter) Then RWS got a call from Ed Bearss, then chief historian of the Park Service and a good friend, and he said, "The shit has hit the fan. The shit has hit the fan. But it's a great article." RWS knew he was taking a risk but "I didn't want the bureaucracy meddling with what I was saying. I knew it was a good article. I had faith in it. But Ed's response was just marvelous."

LAJ asks if Bearss might have caught some flak. RWS said no one was going to do anything to Ed because he had taken too many congressmen and senators on his Civil War tours, but there was a possibility he would be criticized.

*Wilderness* magazine asked to reprint the *Washington Post* article, and they did a beautiful job with great photographs.

RWS knew he was taking a chance and he talked it over with his wife and she said, "Let's go for it." RWS didn't want to run the risk of review and higher ups making him delete portions and chopping it up. He felt like the article had good authenticity. Mary Maruca advised him against showing the article to anyone in Main Interior. She was a good advisor on matters like that.

[LAJ asks if we should take a break. We agree we'll head to lunch. RWS, LAJ, and Sam Tamburro, cultural resources, IMR, go the lunch at one of Dick's favorite restaurants, a soup place.]

**Audio file 006**

LAJ has asked about change as result of historic preservation and environmental legislation of the 1960s and 1970s.

RWS says that was “perhaps one of the most important transition periods in Park Service history because it meant that we had to pay much, much closer attention to what we were doing with historic structures and what we were doing with natural features as well. . . . I would say in looking back over the entire history of the Service, it’s had more impact on the way the Service manages things.”

RWS gives example of the LBJ Birthplace at the national park in Texas. The original home place had collapsed and was in disrepair. It was torn down in the 1930s. When LBJ was president he rebuilt the birthplace as a guest house. He worked with an architect and they rebuilt the birthplace. The park later on wanted to take the birthplace down. It had grass, a modern kitchen, and an interior wall where historically there had been no interior wall. The park was getting ready to take the building back to what it looked like in 1908, when LBJ was born. That would have meant a dirt yard, removing the modern kitchen, etc. The proposed changes were fought over for two years. RWS opposed changes; the superintendent supported. He doesn’t know how the staff felt, but they had to support the superintendent. What the Park Service was dealing with was the only reconstruction done of a president’s birthplace, done under the direction of a sitting president. Had it not been for the more stringent acts, “we would have lost the integrity of that place. The integrity dated from 1965 or 1966, rather than 1908.” This is a good example of a decision that would not have only gone through the regional office had it not been for historic preservation legislation. RWS thinks the superintendent dragged out the decision, thinking the historians and cultural resources personnel would go away. Now the LBJ site brags about the reconstructed birthplace and its uniqueness.

LBJ’s birthplace got saved because Ed Bearss (well-liked by LBJ and Lady Bird) got word about possible demolition to Lady Bird. She said the birthplace would be torn down “over my dead body.” Her opinion “stopped it cold. It wasn’t that the park gave up on the idea; it was that the former first lady said, “No, you won’t.” That’s an example of

consequences of the National Historic Preservation Act. That's an example of the mindset after Section 106 and the NHPA. "Policies be damned if the superintendent wanted it that way, prior to these acts, including the natural history." The NHPA was a major turning point, perhaps the major turning point, in Park Service history.

LAJ asks if he felt like he was coming in with a cohort of people hired after NHPA and other conservation and preservation acts.

RWS says, "We were aware that we were intruders, in a sense, in a traditional system. We were also aware of what the act said and also aware of President Nixon's 11593 Executive Order, to get these things done and survey these sites." To tell the truth, before he came to the Park Service he had never heard of the Historic Preservation Act and he had received a doctorate from a good university. The universities just did not study historic preservation at that time. Historians and historical architects were coming in all around the Service; he was part of that although he didn't understand it until later on. He was standing outside in the hall waiting for his professors to decide the defense of his dissertation, the last step in the doctorate, and while he was waiting he got a call from the Park Service, offering him a job. Right after he accepted the job, the professors called him in and told him he had a degree. Within five minutes, remarkable change. Universities did not pay attention to a historic preservation until much later, when they saw there were careers.

LAJ and RWS discuss the cultural resources study group that he helped start in Santa Fe. It was comprised of himself and two bright protégés--Dwight Pitcaithley, who later became chief historian of the Park Service, and Jane Scott, who had degrees from Yale and had been an interpreter at Mesa Verde. They were all curious about what they were doing and the underlying rules. They set up a brown bag arrangement where they would meet and talk. They'd read a chapter of the management policies and discuss, because they didn't know everything the Park Service did. The discussions got into their minds the main issues. They went through management policies chapter by chapter. The group grew to six or seven people and then ended up with about five members. It lasted until Dwight and Jane left. The idea was to learn during the job, on the lunch hour. A couple of times those discussions went on until 2:30 but they dealt with what they were doing, and

that was important. It worked very well. It was a turning point for him because the study group was related to two things that made his career more enjoyable—teaching he did at Albright Training center and at Harpers Ferry where he held cultural resources courses. He conducted 11 or 12 courses at Harpers Ferry in the 1980s and 1990s. He got the background to teach through the bag brown seminars and then felt like he could move into teaching.

RWS asked for a teaching assignment and he got it almost instantly because Albright needed a teacher just as he expressed an interest. He was interested in policy. He never felt he was particularly good at administrative tasks. For budget he had people he trusted working on that. He was much more interested in policy. Cultural resources policy excited him and he enjoyed sharing it with other people. He held a one-week teaching course on cultural resource management at Albright and Jane and Dwight were two of the people that he brought in for the whole week. By that time Jane was in Denver and in law and Dwight was in Boston.

Teaching gave his career a lot more variety. He was invited to teach at Oregon State and then at the University of Oregon. He still belongs to a reading group and now is reading Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. Among members of the group are Dwight Pitcaithley; Jane Scott; Laura Feller, former staff historian in Park History Program; and David Harmon, director of the George Wright Society. He thinks the brown bag learning could be done widely in the Park Service. Current group meets via conference call because they are widely separated geographically.

LAJ asks RWS what regional historians did when he held the job.

RWS says the regional historian dealt with parks about what to do about certain structures and sites. As regional historian, he could talk to the superintendent and was more confident. He also dealt with the Section 106 process. He discussed issues with the associate and regional director. Then he became chief of the cultural resources center and that gave him more visibility in the Service and he got more teaching requests.

RWS and teaching—soon after he taught at Albright he was invited to fill in for someone at Harpers Ferry Center and the cultural resources management course was very

successful. There were international people who joined the course. He'd also bring in university professors on occasion. Deny Galvin taught for him some, on budget issues. But the things that made his career interesting and satisfying were the teaching and the writing and the big writing assignment. He looked for new assignments; wasn't passive but sought them out.

LAJ says she often asks interviewees to name people in the Park Service that they came to admire, who they thought exemplified the best in the Park Service.

RWS laughs and says he has to think. Yes, there were. He really felt the cultural resources personnel he knew in the regional office were very good and very dedicated, and they were fighting an uphill battle to get programs established. Dan Lenihan, who was head of the Submerged Cultural Resources Unit (SCRU Team) was breaking new ground for the Park Service. He worked out of Santa Fe, all around the country and even one of the people with him was a consultant after work on the *Titanic* was completed, for some museums in England. Dan worked a good bit in the South Pacific, and he worked a lot on mapping the *USS Arizona*. Santa Fe was at 7,000 feet, yet conducted the underwater archeology program. Those were people he admired. He thought they had some very good regional directors. John Cook was a strong regional director and was certainly good for him. Bob Kerr and Lorraine Mintzmeyer.

#### **Audio file 007**

Mintzmeyer first female superintendent, RWS thinks. Joe Rumberg another good regional director; he supported the creation of cultural resources center in Santa Fe.

As he thinks about Park Service historically, RWS is particularly impressed with Horace Albright, who lived to be in his 90s and was exceptionally bright. He also admires his successor who was there during the Depression, Arno B. Cammerer.

LAJ asks RWS to identify some of the missed opportunities when the Park Service could have gone in a different direction.

RWS thought at one time that the Park Service would not grow once more, but he's pleased that the system is diversifying. Lowell is a good example, among many. John

Debo's work at Cuyahoga, using old farm houses instead of tearing them down. RWS says some parks worked better than he thought they would—for example, Jean Lafitte in New Orleans, which does good job with culture.

Another person RWS admired was Bill Brown, who hired RWS. He left Santa Fe for Alaska and spent the rest of his career there, and it was where he wanted to be. He also admired Deny Galvin's work—straightforward and “bright as can be. He knew what was right and what was wrong, and knew it pretty clearly.” Galvin was very supportive of Natural Resource Challenge and key to getting it done, as was Mike Soukup, associate director of natural resources. Galvin and Soukup convinced Bob Stanton to see the potential of *Preserving Nature* to influence policy. RWS also admires Bob Stanton as an African American coming into the Service in the 1960s.

LAJ asks another question related to online history course—how are history and historical thinking valuable to people beyond cultural resources.

RWS says people who come to Park Service come from all sorts of backgrounds. When RWS came to Park Service he knew little about it. Courses in historic preservation are especially important. He knows how ignorant he was when he came into the Service, although he caught on to it quickly. It's important that people understand policies and the various ways that the agency is honoring those policies. It's good for people to know the value of original places. RWS wrote an article about how the protagonist in “The Trip to Bountiful” valued the farm house where she was born; no other house in the world would mean as much.

RWS says he did an interview with someone from Harpers Ferry Center about *Preserving Nature* a number of years ago.

RWS hopes the Park Service Centennial offers the chance to introduce more people to the Park Service. He himself was 27 years old before he really understood what the Park Service was, even though he had traveled and had visited national parks. People know what the parks are but not what the National Park Service is. He suggests that the Park Service should promote maps of the park system to convey the breadth of the system and

to inform the public of its reach. The Park Service is popular in some ways and unknown in others ways.

LAJ asks RWS to complete the oral history legal release form.

[End of interview]