

Thanks for the Memories

Jean Matthews

Ed. note: To cap our 25th anniversary year, we invited the first editor of *The George Wright Forum*, Jean Matthews, to share her thoughts on the evolution of the GWS, starting with the creation of the organization in 1980. Jean edited the *Forum* throughout much of the 1980s, and helped set a tone of forthrightness and candor for the journal—one which we have tried to maintain ever since. Trained as a journalist, Jean worked as a newspaper reporter before beginning a government writing career in 1962. Initially a speech writer for Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall and Ladybird Johnson, she also produced several highly regarded yearbooks on the work and staff of the Department of the Interior. In the early 1970s, Jean began writing speeches for NPS Director George Hartzog and served on an environmental education task force that sought to integrate natural systems concepts into NPS interpretive media. Jean's idea to publicize the marriage of science and resource management came about in 1980 when she launched the journal *Park Science*, a project she oversaw until her retirement in 1994. A year later Jean was named a co-winner of the Society's highest honor, the George Melendez Wright Award for Excellence. As you'll see, although "retired," Jean maintains her passion for bringing the best science to bear on park management.

WHAT A RARE AND WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY—to walk down memory lane back to the days of the giants, when it was possible to start such an enterprise as the George Wright Society. These are the larger-than-life people who were not just “present at the creation,” but were responsible for what grew out of that moment.

I had been standing waist-deep in a veritable slough of despond, assaulted by one depressing message after another about what was happening to our nation's precious national parks, forests, and preserves. The *New York Times* was editorializing about the desperate efforts of National Park Service personnel to prevent our holiest places from being turned into cash registers. My depression had deepened so alarmingly that I had booked a four-day retreat at a Trappist abbey and was about to leave for it when Dave Harmon's invitation reached me: an offer to do a quarter-century backward look at how the George Wright Society began and what it

has accomplished. It seemed an opportunity I was in far too low a frame of mind to tackle.

I arrived at the abbey with the latest issue of the *Forum*, settled into my little room, and found the New Testament on the bedside table, open to a passage describing the voice of God, speaking to Moses from the burning bush. “Take off your sandals,” was God's command. “You are standing on holy ground.”

The picture that passage brought up was of Bill Brown at Harpers Ferry, after heading the director at that time, Ray Nelson, describe his vision of the national park mission. Brown's response was to rush up to the podi-

um and demand, “Where are my sandals?”

So much for “taking them off.” When holy ground is at stake, you put them on and get to work.

What transpired back then was only possible because we were backed by giants.

First, there was Stewart L. Udall, John F. Kennedy’s secretary of the interior. Udall had just read George Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature*—a 100-year-old classic that begged to be updated. Among Udall’s first acts as interior secretary was to bring Marsh’s case for environmental stewardship up to date. The result was *The Quiet Crisis*. It may have started out as “quiet,” but its gospel was a ringing challenge to take up a new task.

The call was for “an end to fragmentation” and presented a “whole earth” approach to stewardship. Udall’s vision and leadership naturally attracted the men and women who would begin to implement it, and the rest of the giants began to emerge. I was incredibly lucky to have a small part in the movement and to reap the benefits it afforded. Stan Cain, an assistant secretary for fish, wildlife, and parks, first made me aware that every action we take with relation to the earth has *effects*, and that “there are no *side effects*.” Bill Pecora, then director of the Geological Survey, introduced me to Loren Eiseley, whom Pecora described as “the scientists’ poet.” Thanks to Pecora, the speech drafts I wrote afterwards were laced with elegant Eiseley quotes.

And then came one of Udall’s truly inspired appointments—George B. Hartzog, Jr., one of the two greatest directors the National Park Service has ever had (the other being Stanley Albright). It was Hartzog who hired outstanding photographer Wayne Miller (who, along with Edward Steichen, helped create the famous exhibit “The Family of Man,” for which Carl Sandburg wrote a

beautiful prologue). Miller was not content merely to photograph the parks. He saw the possibilities for making them purveyors of environmental education, and set about devising such a program. (It wasn’t what Hartzog had in mind when he hired Miller, but Hartzog’s intuition told him the direction was right, and he backed the project to the hilt.)

This is the point at which I first remember Bob Linn—another of the top-flight people the new movement was attracting. Miller and his fledgling environmental education corps were meeting in the library at Harpers Ferry and attempting to recruit Linn into their ranks. “We want to use the national parks as classrooms to show park visitors the ways in which man and nature interact and work,” Miller said.

I still remember the bemused look on Linn’s face as he processed that information, finally observing, “I always thought that man was a *part* of nature.” I left that meeting with more speech draft material: man as a *part of*, rather than *apart from*, nature. It sounds pedestrian now, but at the time, what a concept!

Another player in the pantheon of those days was Ted Sudia. The latest *Forum*, which I had with me in the abbey, featured a piece by Ron Engel (of which more later). In it, Engel pays tribute to Tommy Gilbert (of Man and the Biosphere accomplishments, and the first president of the GWS) and Sudia, who did his level best to start an Institute of Domestic Tranquility, which he saw as encompassing the great natural areas, art, and the natural and social sciences.

Alas, some pieces of the future are too huge to be chewed and digested at the level of enlightenment where they are first introduced, and the Institute of Domestic Tranquility was one of those. But some are destined to survive, and one of Sudia’s ideas did

make it. The George Wright Society was Sudia's brain child, and he was lucky enough to birth it in a world where people like George Hartzog were available to approve of it, bless it, and help get it off the ground.

The first meeting of the GWS was in the auditorium of the General Services Administration, just north of the Main Interior Building in Washington, D.C. Among those present were Sudia, Linn, and the two generous daughters of George Wright, dedicated to establishing an organization worthy of their father. No one at that meeting could fully realize how important a mission the GWS would undertake, how impressively it would evolve, or how mightily it would be challenged as they days of the giants waned.

As the grand vision faded and the visionaries were replaced, Bob Linn never flagged in his determination to keep the Society on track and the *Forum* as a written record of its triumphs and on-going work. I remember growing anxious as the climate of stewardship slackened, and several times calling Linn and saying, "I feel an editorial coming on." He was ever the generous publisher and allowed me to rail against the stealing of our language and the subverting of its meanings. What had me up in arms in particular was the Sagebrush Rebels renaming themselves the "Wise Use Movement." That linguistic travesty was only the beginning, of course, and led increasingly to such misnomers as "Clear Skies" and "Healthy Forests." This deliberate bastardizing of language was more than "a cloud on the horizon no bigger than a man's hand"—it *was* a man's hand. And it meant no good.

A recent editorial writer in the *Oregonian* was appalled at the Forest Service putting out bids for helicopter rides around Mount St. Helens and predicted a flood of concessionaires peddling trashy souvenirs. A follow-up editorial in the *New York Times* detailed the

work of the wrecking crew and noted with great alarm the political "loyalty oath" the Park Service proposed to require of its top management. Where was the old vision of preserving our treasured natural and cultural heritage, perpetuating it, undiminished, for future generations? Why were our holiest natural temples being peddled to the highest bidders?

Today, the George Wright Society is carrying forward the use of parks and preserves as laboratories for scientific research into the natural systems of earth and how they work. We're building a future on the past, when we set ourselves enthusiastically to decipher "tongues in trees, books in running brooks, and sermons in stones"—to read the age-old wisdom of continuing creation. Today we watch while science is suppressed or ignored. Visitors to the Grand Canyon—that great testimony to evolution—are able to purchase pseudo-scientific readings in Intelligent Design, a.k.a. Creationism.

I see the George Wright Society more and more as a keeper of the flame, much like the monasteries that kept the light of learning alive through the Dark Ages. Our mission becomes more critical as the darkness deepens. Bob Linn's spirit is alive and well as the *Forum* continues to pursue scientific knowledge and make it available to park management—just as though the inmates weren't currently in charge of the asylum.

Reading the latest *Forum*, I was struck with its theme of geodiversity, a concept full of insight and promise. (My spell check underlines *geodiversity*—it's too new an idea to merit a word in my computer's brain, but the idea is now loose and researchers will run with it.) Congratulations to Vincent Santucci for a splendid issue.

Most important to me was Ron Engel's keynote address to the IUCN's last plenary