

"A Gathering of the Elders", April 15-17, 1988, Holden Arboretum.

Transcript of an Interview with Ruth Melvin.

Interviewer: Jesse Dobbs

Interviewer: This is Ruth Melvin, Ms. Ohio [a reference to Frank Knight's introduction before presentating her with the 1988 Liberty Hyde Bailey Award]. First could you give us a little background--where you were born, where you went to high school, that kind of thing?

Ruth Melvin:

Yes, I'd like to. I didn't have a chance before! I was born on a farm in Wayne County, Ohio, the eighth of nine children; of parents, both of whom studied to be teachers. My mother, with nine children, didn't have a very long career in teaching. In fact, she and my father met in the first school where she taught. They were married shortly after, and the children came pretty fast.

My father went on into the business world, but at one point decided that wasn't for him, and he went back to his fathers farm. From that time on, until he became the postmaster of our town, he was in the farming business. He had a great appreciation for soil, and the seasons, and the way things operated, and I think that's why he had to go back to the farm--he didn't like the city life. This was a strong influence on me. I remember one time we were driving along in a horse and buggy, and he got out, and went to a field next to the road, and picked up a clump of mud--dirt. He rolled it in his hands, and said, "That's good soil." I was very young when that happened, but I have never forgotten it. I think I have had an appreciation of soil and its sources, ever since.

One of my best childhood memories is the fact that I spent a great many hours roaming along the woods and a stream that ran through our property; sometimes with my brothers and sisters and cousins, but sometimes by myself, with the dog, and loved doing it. I think I began then to appreciate the trees and flowers. My first camping experience was in a sugar camp with my father, when he was sugaring off (for maple syrup), and I was only six years of age.

Interviewer: Now this is in Wayne County?

Melvin:

In Ohio, yes. Then later we moved to Medina County, because my father and mother felt the school system in Wayne County was not adequate for their children. So we moved to a better school program, and it was a very good one. It happened to be in a town where there was a big insurance company--The Ohio Farmer's

Insurance Company, and that helped support the schools in a way that a small town [normally] would not have. So I felt I had a good high school education, and I took the courses which stimulated me--the physics and the chemistry, and the biology, and was often the only girl in the class.

Interviewer: Do you have any memorable teachers, and maybe some specific lessons you'd like to share with us?

Melvin:

I think that was the reason I liked physics and chemistry, and science in general, was the fact that it answered so many questions. The science teachers that I had in high school were not outstanding in my mind, but my great love in that school environment was my English teacher. I developed a great appreciation for literature and poetry and Shakespeare, which has [been] an enduring force in my life. When I went to college, I went into geology. I think I remembered the soil, and the rocks in the stream; the different kinds of rocks--some of them rounded and some of them in flat layers. I think I wanted to know why things were that way. So I started in the geology course, and I found the professor a kindred soul, who was a very strong influence on me. I took the first course, and I would go back to him, and he'd say "Well, I think You'd like to take this course; and so before I knew it, I really had major hours, and he became my mentor, and my friend.

Interviewer: Now who was that?

Melvin:

Dr. Lewis G. Westgate, at Ohio Wesleyan University. There were several other professors that were important, but he was of major importance. I had a philosophy professor that I also enjoyed a great deal; he wasn't too much in tune with the natural world, but tied all living into the philosophy we were getting. One of the things this professor [Dr. Westgate] did, in addition to teaching geology, was to teach a course in natural history, and in that he reflected his own caring about the total environment, the total world in which we lived. I began to develop a really deep appreciation which I had always had, but hadn't valued it before.

After college, I was married, and I planned to pursue a career, but it was at the end of the depression, and jobs were scarce, and I was married within a year or two, and started having children, so there wasn't very much opportunity to develop a career. It wasn't until after the children were all in college that I really went back to teaching geology and natural science.

Interviewer: Were there some books and written materials that most influenced your views on nature study?

Melvin:

Yes there was one that I remember in particular, and that's Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold. Being a mid-westerter, I wasn't as exposed to Liberty Hyde Bailey (as the rest of the American Nature Study [Society] people) and E. Laurence Palmer, or even Anna Botsford Comstock. I have some of their books, but the influence was not quite as strong as Aldo Leopold. Wisconsin was my second state; I mentioned yesterday, that I had taught there, and we have a cabin up there, and have vacationed there for forty years. So it was easy for me to accept his teachings, his land ethic impressed me as something very important. I remember reading Thinking Like a Mountain-- I often think that we need to have many more people who can think like a mountain. As I get older, I am impressed by the fact that mountains have been around a long time, and that's one reason why older people have a consciousness that is hard to get when you're younger.

I remember when I read Silent Spring, in the sixties, and I was impressed with Rachel Carson, and then John Muir. I read many nature books--I read Peter Kalm, and John Bartram's books, Edwin Way Teale, May Theilgaard Watts as they came along.

Interviewer: You have a big interest in geology. Is there any of those kind that really sparked your interest?

Melvin:

Yes. Of course the emphasis in those books was not geology, but I read Darwin's Origin of Species and another book about him--he was a geologist too, and he relates all aspects of nature to geology, which I thought was very fascinating. There is John Muir's love of Yosemite, a tremendously inspiring geologic area. Textbook pictures of Yosemite with its U-shaped valleys, its glacial landforms had always excited me, but to see it right there before you, and take photographs of it was just tremendous. I'm sure there are others that don't come to mind right now.

Interviewer: I'm not sure how much you want to talk about this, but "Where do you think the hotbeds of action in our field in the early part of the twentieth century were?"

Melvin:

Well I think I have to admit that a lot of the hotbed of action passed me by until I came to the point where I had the children pretty well along. There just isn't time to think about some of these things while you're taking care of six kids. My husband, as a geologist, was away a great deal, so their backgrounds of experience depended on me. So we did a lot of camping, and introduced them to the natural world; they went on geology field trips before they could walk, as you can imagine. But as far as the environmental field, I wasn't really into it very much until about 1967, when I started writing A Guide to

Ohio Outdoor Education Areas". I became very much interested in environmental education--not just the geology, but the total ecological field, and I started teaching at the Audubon Camp in '67. That was an experience that brought home to me many of the environmental problems, and the importance of tying them together, and have everybody working together for the total ecological consciousness. I thank Audubon a lot for that kind of experience.

Interviewer: Now you mentioned this book--would you count that among the contributions to the field that you're most proud of?

Melvin:

Oh, I've had a lot of recognition for that; in fact, I think it spurred me on to do more things that I otherwise would've--

Interviewer: What other kinds of things?

Melvin:

Well, then I did another guide. See this is about seven hundred areas in Ohio that can be used for environmental education. My husband was state geologist, had taken me to a lot of these places; and I had grown up in an area where there were some. And yet, the big experience was gathering material on ecological standpoints, with basic geology--I'm the only one who ever does that, as far as I know. But I gave that kind of information, which I think has been very helpful, and I've had a lot of accolades for it.

And then the second book was recognized by U.S. E.P.A. [Environmental Protection Agency] for its influence on environmental education. I've made some other contributions to books--we have what we call Ohio's Natural Heritage, and I wrote some of the environmental concerns in that. There were much more eminent geologists in the state who wrote the geology, but I did do some of the environmental writing--mining, and mineral resources that deal with geology, and are at risk with the present environmental situation.

I never have gone into writing, as I really wished to do. I'd like to do some kind of autobiographical material, that expressed some of the things I've been thinking all my life, but I haven't done it yet! I'll have to get around to that someday.

I think, as I told Frank Knight, the Ohio Alliance for the Environment has been one of my great contributions, because there were two groups really, that started: the Ohio Environmental Council, and it's still a very viable group, and is doing a great deal of lobbying. But I was a person that was dedicated more to education than to action, and besides, I was married to a man who was a little more conservative, and he was in a public position, and he didn't really want me to be too outspoken on

environmental matters.

We had a meeting of people who were interested in having an environmental education group, and I felt that was my stronger area, and so we organized the Ohio Alliance for Environmental Education, and I was one of the incorporators of that, and a president, and have been in that organization (longstanding) and it's doing so well, and making a real impact I think, on Ohio, at the present time. Of course, I've been active in Audubon, and done a lot of teaching for them, not only leading field trips and doing conference work, but teaching in the summers at the Audubon camp, in Wisconsin. There are four of them around, but this one's been discontinued, in the last couple of years, partially because the National Audubon Society couldn't support it, and the enrollment wasn't great enough to guarantee it's success. But it had a great function, because a lot of people went to that one, from the mid-west, and that's where the mid-west geology was, and the mid-west birds, and plant life, and it was also close to the northern hardwood--white pine and hemlock forests and it was really a tremendous learning experience. But unfortunately it's been discontinued.

Interviewer: Okay. "What current approaches to nature study are most exciting to you today?"

Melvin:

There's really only one approach, and that's getting in there, and experiencing it, and then passing it on to other people, and I think the only thing that's going to save our planet is to have that process emphasized more strongly. Teaching is a tremendous field, and we need to have more of it; but we need more people with the right attitudes to be teaching the nature study subjects. I have a pretty strong conviction that the best way to do this is to require teachers to have a basic understanding of at least one of the disciplines. Mine are geology; there are people that have had botany, and people who've had animal life, and people who get astronomy. The fields are so interlinked, that you really can't get one without being exposed to the others. So if you're well grounded in one of the disciplines, and can help others to understand how that's related to the others, and to understand that you have to care; express your caring by doing something about it, then I think we'll begin to have more impact.

I'm concerned that American Nature Study Society hasn't expanded more than it has, because it has so much potential, and having worked with Audubon for a good many years, I realize it's partly that Audubon started with this tremendous zest, because of the destruction of the birds. American Nature Study Society has been going along on this pretty even keel, in all the facets of nature study. I think what we really need to do is to bring that kind of an attitude of concern and appreciation into the life of

teachers.

I'd like to say that it really begins at home, because I think it does, but we are not seeing parents who are devoting that much time now to their children. And the economics of the situation is such that both father and mother work, and there just isn't time and energy to devote to it. I'd like to see more--I think you learn much more at your mother's knee than you do at other places, and basic human attitudes begin before you're three years of age. So that a lot of this begins very early, is very difficult to pick up later. I really feel, in my own case, and most of my children's--and most of the experiences I've had have shown that family life is very, very important, and that's one of our big problems in our society.

Interviewer: You've maybe answered some of this, but "What are we doing right, and what should we do to improve the nature study profession?"

Melvin:

I think I have covered that pretty much. I would like to see more emphasis on having concepts introduced early in the life of the child, and that stems largely from the home, although there are other places now--day care centers, and church related groups can do a great deal to help. I think it has to go into the training of teachers and to the college curriculum, and then the selection of teachers into the school system. I have a feeling that teachers are born, not educated. That it's basic human attitudes that come out in teaching, and do the youth, do the children the most harm or the most good. With six children in various school systems all through the countryside, it's been my experience that a poor teacher can do a great deal of harm to a child. Not permanently, if you have other counterbalancing influences, but the selection of teachers is a very critical thing. Our whole economic system is not giving teachers the recognition and the credit--the economic stability that they need to make this a great profession. So if nature study could help with the field of education in general, I think it would be a great contribution. And that's where this early training comes to our children.

Interviewer: So you don't think we're really starting early enough.

Melvin: That's my contention.

Interviewer: It seems like a lot of environmental education starts at fifth or sixth grade--

Melvin:

That's better than nothing, and I've seen kids get very turned on. In fact, when I was teaching at the Audubon camp,

there were people on the verge of retirement, or early retirement, seeking new interests. They could get very tied into nature study at that stage in life, because there was a void there that their occupations had taken up to that time, and now they were ready for a new interest--but that's not a usual thing; you don't get those kind of people in the general public. They're sorted out when they go to a camp like that for a learning experience.

But that's another thing that disturbs me. I know a lot of people, much younger than I am, who have stopped learning; and that's a tragic commentary on our civilization. I know there are things that cause it, but it seems to me such a waste. Then there are others who are capable of doing more than they are given the opportunity for, so we really need to involve seniors in more activities where they can express themselves. I've given talks in rest homes, or retirement homes where people really get turned on. They get birdfeeders out, and spend time on the grounds; usually they have good grounds where they can watch birds, and feed birds, and they really get quite excited about it. More of that we can do the better.

Interviewer: Someone else had mentioned something similar to that.

Melvin:

I tried to get a grant--I went to the White House Conference on Aging, in 1970, and I tried to get a grant to do nature study with senior citizens. I don't know if I didn't write a good grant or what, but I never got it. Besides I was involved pretty strongly at the time in teaching, and I loved the college level youngsters. I've done a lot with grade schools in workshops, but I haven't taught in grade schools, and I must say, the most fun has been with the talented kids in recent years, because they're so motivated, and it's easier to inspire them to learn more, and to appreciate the geologic significance that passes over a lot of kids.

Where is it going in the future? Well, until we get a change of administration, and a change of general attitudes around the whole country-- We made a lot of progress after 1970, in getting in at every level of government. Then when Reagan came in and we had this cutoff of funds, cutoff of people, personnel, and-- [the] basic attitude of exploitation, and economic advantage--I think it has permeated the whole culture that we're in, but I don't see much potential in what we have running for president at the present time. Al Gore has mentioned, a couple of times, some environmental concerns, but he's the only one I've heard. They may be there, but they aren't coming to the forefront.

Interviewer: Isn't that kind of reflective of our society?

Melvin:

Yes, the fact that so many people have endorsed--and still endorse Reagan; after all the things that have happened, over 50 percent of the people still believe in what he is doing. But that seems largely economic, and they attribute to him a sense of economics that I don't think he has. I think a lot of it has been through Volcker [former Chairman of the Federal Reserve], and the other agencies, that have reduced the inflation rate. Yet, in spite of that, this build up of the debt, has been, and will be a burden for many years to come.

Interviewer: If you could be granted one final wish for the future of this field, what would it be?

Melvin:

Well, I think I've already said it. I would hope to introduce into the college curriculum, either a requirement for a basic understanding of science, which is expanded to include an appreciation for the total environment; a change in attitude toward living on this earth. With concern and understanding, teachers can and do reveal basic attitudes about the environment whether they are teaching biology or English, and these attitudes are incorporated into a child's life.

Interviewer: I have a kind of follow-up question, related to what you were saying in the Seventy Fifth Anniversary Issue [of Nature Study]. You made an interesting analogy with Leo Buscaglia. I thought it was an interesting connection--

Melvin:

That is my whole religion, is this philosophy of love, and I think that's why I believe in a God, and of Jesus Christ as an embodiment of a God that created this earth. I don't think it happened in a few years--I have a very broad view of what the biblical message is, but basically this is love of self, love of other people, and love of the world in which we live. An appreciation of the earth.

Interviewer: It seems like, looking at that, we're expressing hatred towards the earth, or fear--

Melvin:

That's right. Geologists are famous for exploitation, but I have been exposed to a different concept. I think this is due largely to my geology professor, who had this deeper appreciation for the way the world is put together.

Interviewer: It went beyond geologic facts.

Melvin:

Yes, knowing where the oil and gas is, and where the coal



fields are, and where you look for gold and copper, and that sort of thing, which is pretty much the geologic economic field.

Interviewer: Now you were saying earlier, that he had this course in natural history. What was that like?

Melvin:

Yes, he taught that in addition to regular geology curriculum. It was a survey of all the disciplines and their interrelationships. Mostly, as I remember, it was an appreciation of the things we were looking at, seeing and-- he liked trees and plants. He'd take me out--I was working on the microscope in my senior year, usually late in the afternoon. He would take me home, at the same time he would leave the office. We'd drive up around so we could see the sunset. Wonderful memories to hold, an appreciation of the whole natural world.

Interviewer: Now this is Dr. Westgate?

Melvin:

Yes, that's right. It was strange when I went down to sign up for my first geology course. I was passing a whole bench full of boys that had already finished their enrollment, and it was down toward the building where I had to go. One of them said, "What are you doing down here?" I said, "Well, I'm going down to sign up for a geology course." And one boy said, "Oh, you don't want geology, that's one of the hardest courses in the university!" And I said, "Well, I didn't come here to avoid hard courses." And one of them said, "Well, the professor is very hard", and he said, "He's an old bear." I said, "I think that doesn't worry me." And another one said, "Well, he hates women!" I said, "Well that does it, I've got to find out who this man is that hates women." He didn't hate women; what he disliked about women was that they'd take this required course in science, and didn't put their heart in it, didn't really study, or didn't care about it. That was an indignity to him, and so that was one reason why we became great friends.

Interviewer: Well, that kind of thing still goes on, where people take courses for the wrong reasons.

Melvin:

This is what I'm thinking of--teacher training. When I was teaching at Capitol University, where I had students who were required to take an introductory course in geology, and a second course in geography, and I was teaching both. It was great, because here I was, incorporating in my geology, some of my own thinking, and they appreciated it. This was what teachers really need--an understanding of the field. Capitol eliminated that, and they eliminated it not too long after I was through teaching, and some of my students came to me, and said they had gone to the powers that be, to fight to retain it, because they felt it was

an important part of their teacher training. But it's gone, and I thought that was so exemplary that they had those courses required by teachers at that time, in the early 1970's. There may be some other kinds of courses that they could be persuaded to introduce that would do the same kind of thing.

Interviewer: Is there not enough interdisciplinary stuff going on? Too much specialization?

Melvin:

I think that's right. When I was teaching at the Audubon camp, that was one of the big problems. People would say they'd had courses in geology, but they couldn't understand it, because it wasn't tied together.

Interviewer: One my first course... at a college of forestry, was a one credit course that involved reading and reporting on Sand County Almanac.

Melvin:

Oh, how exciting! When I had twelve grandchildren, my husband and I conceived the idea of having a grandchildren's camp. He'd been an Eagle [Boy] Scout, and I had been camping all my life, and we lived out on a metropolitan park reservation at that time. We decided to have a grandchildren camp, just to bring the twelve to our home; and we had to put up tents--we didn't have a house big enough. But the requirement was that their parents read Sand County Almanac, and eventually then, the children were required to read it, as they grew older. So I think it was a great introduction. It's an easy book to read too; it's not a strictly scientific treatise.

Interviewer: Even though he was a scientist; but he had that talent to talk to everyone.

Melvin:

That's one of the things I have against geologists, is that they coin (and other fields do too) a language of their own. All the terms that are so difficult, even after having had a lifetime of geologic study; I read an article in Geotimes or something, and I have to go back and get my geologic dictionary, and look up terms that relate to other terms. They could have used the more general term, with maybe a parentheses of a refinement, that they wanted to emphasize, and still make it intelligible to the laymen, yet scientific enough for scientific use. Why do we tend to do that? The medical field does the same thing.

Interviewer: That's what our field is about, is interpreting all the specialities in a language anyone can understand.

Melvin:

I think that's right--that's a good point. Leopold had a knack of doing that. I recently read Muir's My First Summer in Yosemite--the first trip he had made to Yosemite. It was too flowery for me, but I think it was a sign of the times--it was the beginning of nature writing, at least for him. His other writings were not quite so flowery. So you can go to both extremes, it seems to me. There were a lot of good things in it anyway, and I enjoyed reading it.

Interviewer: Did you have anything else that you wanted to--

Melvin: No. I think I've said plenty; more than I thought I would.

Interviewer: Good.

[end of taping]