

Gathering of the Elders, April 15-17, 1988

Transcription of prerecorded tape prepared by the panel member.

Reynold Carlson:

It is intended to provide brief answers to the questions raised for the panel at the meeting of elders in the month of April.

The first question has to do with the teachers and specific lessons that we learned from them. I should like to mention three individuals. First, Dr. Harold Child Bryant; Dr. Bryant was the founder of the interpretive program of the National Park Service, and he had established the Yosemite Field School for the training of park naturalists. I had the privilege of attending that school, in 1931. Dr. Bryant had certain field techniques. I remember his comment that "Everyone should learn to read the trailside like an open book." But this did not just mean identification; he was very much concerned with the interrelationships of all living things, and interrelationships to climate and to the geological environment.

Another person from who I received a great deal of benefit was Cap'n Bill Vinal. Dr. Vinal, in 1934, had been chosen to participate in a training program for people in the Works Progress Administration who had been employed in city park and recreation and youth programs with emergency money. Institutes were planned by the National Recreation Association for major cities in the United States. Dr. Vinal started this program, but planned to retire to go back to his teaching at Western Reserve University. I was invited to take over when he left. I spent almost a month with Dr. Vinal in attending some of the courses as he gave them, and then, later, taking over.

I think Dr. Vinal is known for his Socratic method. Dr. Vinal did not tell people very many specific things about the environment. But he asked questions and tried to get people to pool their information and eventually try to come up with the answers. He did have a great deal of what we might call efforts at speculation when he took people on field trips.

The third person I would like to mention is Dr. L.B. Sharp, of National Camp. Dr. Sharp had started the program for teachers interested in the outdoor education field at the New Jersey camp, and credit was given by New York University to those who wished to receive it. Dr. Sharp was concerned, as a person, with the solving of problems in the out-of-doors. I can remember again and again his coming up with problems, asking the group to give consideration to how the problems might be solved. He also had a very strong conviction of the importance of being acquainted with the natural processes of life, and he believed that all people

who taught in the outdoor education field should be so informed.

The second question deals with books and other written materials that influenced my thinking. I should like to mention a few of these, including the writings of John Muir, such as, My First Summer in the Sierra, as well as his journals. I grew up in the west, and worked a good deal in the Sierra Nevada that had been his home territory. Freeman Tilden was another person from whom I got considerable help in his book, Interpreting our Heritage. Henry Thoreau's, Walden, and Henry Thoreau's Journal. I should also mention were sources of a great deal of information. And, Aldo Leopold's Sand County Almanac I thought expressed a very important point of view about the environment. I would also like to include Anna Botsford Comstock's Handbook of Nature Study. My experience had been in the west, and when I first came east, I had to get a new orientation to the natural surroundings of the east.

Question three deals with the hotbeds in the early twentieth century in the field of nature and outdoor education. I think of the park interpretive and naturalist program that began about 1922 as one of the very important fields of development. Next there was the organized camping movement, that had started before the twentieth century, but its big development came in the nineteen tens, twenties, thirties, and that included a very definite nature interest. And of course, the nature study movement coming out of Cornell University, the Rural School Leaflets, and the various training programs were very important as the hotbeds in the development of the outdoor field.

Some of the milestones might be thought of as, first, the organization of the American Nature Study Society; then, the beginnings of the school resident outdoor education program in the 1940's; and, of course, the beginnings of the National Park Service interpretive naturalist programs that we have mentioned previously.

The fifth question deals with, the contributions each of us feel we have made to the field of outdoor education. I would list, first, my relationship to the development of the Bradford Woods Outdoor Education Recreation and Camping Area, of Indiana University. This piece of property was given to the university back in the early 1900's but it was not until 1951 that we found out at last that this would be available to be developed into an outdoor education center. I should also like to mention the fact that the Association of Interpretive Naturalists was formed at Bradford Woods. The naturalists had been invited to Bradford for workshops, and in the late fifties they came up with a proposal

to develop an organization of naturalists, which was the forerunner of the National Association of Interpretive Naturalists.

I would list the following people as the top people in the field. First, Dr. Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell University. Dr. Bailey had a great deal to do with the beginnings of the Cornell program. Second, E. Laurence Palmer, also from Cornell, who was responsible in part for the Rural School Leaflets and for a great many of the workshops and programs carried on at Cornell. And of course, Anna Botsford Comstock, particularly for her Handbook of Nature Study, and the promotion and work she did for school nature programs. And Dr. L.B. Sharp, the developer of the outdoor education programs and the training program at New York University. And then Dr. William G. Vinal, because of his leadership training and particularly his work with teacher groups throughout the United States.

Question seven; What experiences in our childhood influenced us in our direction in life?

My father was very interested in the out-of-doors; and when I was a boy, way back in the ages of only seven, eight, nine and ten, he began taking us on camping trips and walking and hiking trips in the mountains of the Sierra Nevadas, and of the Coast Ranges in California. He had a tremendous interest in outdoor living, and also to some extent, in the environment. I also remember one of my elementary school teachers with a strong interest in the out-of-doors that managed to capture the imagination of many of the children in her class.

Question eight asks about the approaches to nature study that are operating today.

I am somewhat familiar with Acclimatization. I do not know too much about the Project Wild or [Project] Learning Tree. Yet I think all of them do make a contribution in that they have endeavored to provide a particular approach to the out-of-doors, in an effort to capture the imagination of the people who participate. I should say, however, that many of the program activities that are recommended in these programs are often activities that have been conducted by other people for many years but have not been formulated into a complete program approach.

Question nine asks "What we are doing right, and how we should improve our profession?"

I think we are doing many things quite well. I think the big problem is that we are not reaching large segments of our population and that we are not having the impact on teacher education particularly, that we need to have. In my opinion, the need for the various outdoor related fields are more important than they ever have in the past. We very much need an expanded program on the part of schools, on the part of camping groups, on the part of volunteer agencies, and on the part of public park and forest and resource agencies that would provide an opportunity for a larger percentage of our people to become acquainted with the problems of the out-of-doors. We need many more actual learning experiences in the outdoor environment itself.

We need the cooperation of a wide variety of organizations. I do not think our state parks are providing the kind of leadership that is needed--particularly in assistance to elementary school programs. I do not think that many of the other agencies, such as the Soil Conservation Service and the Forest Service are doing all that could be done to promote the field. I am one who believes that all education related to the out-of-doors ought to include some practical field opportunities that bring people in direct contact with the environment.

With the tremendous population growth in America, the urbanization of culture, and the lack of outdoor experiences for a tremendous number of children and young people, we find ourselves with many, many serious environmental problems and population problems. Offering additional opportunities for children and young people to become acquainted with the environment it seems to me is one of the surer ways of giving protection to the environment in future generations.

If I could have one wish for what we should do in the future, it would be for the expansion of field teacher education in the whole outdoor field. It would include the field of nature, but also some of the skills in outdoor living, and a direct approach to the field of conservation activities in the out-of-doors. It is hoped that at some time, the schools will assume this major responsibility that is so important to the future of America.

[End of taping]