

"A Gathering of the Elders": April 15-17, 1989

Transcript of a prerecorded tape, prepared by the panel member.

Helen Ross Russell:

I was very fortunate in my parents. I can remember running into the house when I could hardly run, to tell my mother exciting things, and things that scared me like the cast cicada shell down in the orchard, which I said was like a monster. And the day I discovered my shadow, and tried to get rid of it. My father took us hiking as we grew older, asked constant questions, and answered our questions with questions.

I lived on a farm, and in the early years of my life, my father farmed. I had a perfectly miserable high school science experience, but it couldn't turn me off. I was completely hooked by the time I got to high school. At West Chester College, I had Thelma Greenwood for my biological science teacher, and she continued the kind of thing that my parents had done, challenging us with questions, occasionally going out in the field. I dedicated Ten Minute Field Trips to her, so you know how I felt about her.

Later, when I got my Bachelors degree from Lebanon Valley College, I had Prof. Derickson, who had earned an honorary degree from Johns Hopkins University. Which meant, in his day and generation, a high degree of recognition. Prof. was a Renaissance man; we did a great deal of field work. When I went to Lebanon Valley I went as a special student. The ruling said there had to be eight people in a class for a class to run. But if there weren't eight people, the professor could choose to run it, and he would be paid eight dollars per student. Prof. ran a class for me alone, for one year, and the next year for two of us alone. In turn, Dr. Bender ran chemistry for five of us, for one whole semester, and then the next semester for three of us. Dedicated men, these. Prof. Bender's chemistry always involved a great deal of geology, and a recognition of the properties of the earth.

Then of course, I was fortunate to go to Cornell. I got to Cornell at the peak of the--just as the real movement was beginning to slow down. I had Eva Gordon, whom I would place right on top of the list of people who not only taught, but by their life and their concern for students were a real role model. I had Walter and Minnie Muenschler; Minnie never taught, but I stayed with her one summer when Bob [Russell] was working on courses at Cornell. We did a great deal together, because she was into herbs. But, again, her relationship to other students was a kind of thing that had a great deal of impact.

Then of course, I had E.L. Palmer. I had the privilege of

visiting in [Liberty Hyde] Bailey's house, and [James] Needham; a whole lot of very very important people. Important because they had an impact on other people. A.H. Wright was still at Cornell when I got there, but left shortly thereafter.

As a child, I read [Ernest Thompson] Seton, much to my father's displeasure, because he considered Seton a nature faker: Gene Stratten Porter delighted me, and again, did not measure up to the high standards of literature that my father considered right. When I got older, I discovered a retired teacher who lived about a mile from us. I used to hike down and visit her, and read Anna Botsford Comstock's, Handbook of Nature Study. She had taken a course from Anna Botsford Comstock. Many many Sunday afternoons I visited Miss Elisabeth, and she talked and told me stories, and let me read her Handbook of Nature Study.

It's hard for me to say where the hotbeds of action were in the early part of the twentieth century, because even though I'm among the eldest of the elders, I wasn't there in the early part of the twentieth century. When I finally had saved a thousand dollars and was ready to go to graduate school (so that I could learn more so that I could write), I asked at the Audubon Camp for some place that would give me the kind of expertise that the three people on that Audubon camp staff had. I went to Dr. Nichols first and he said, "There are three places in the United States that will give you field work: one is Cornell University, one is Michigan (and I imagine that's Michigan State University at that point in history), and one is California." And he said, "Go talk to Dick Weaver, he graduated from Cornell." So I talked to Dick; Dick referred me to E.L. Palmer. I wrote a letter for admission, and was ultimately admitted.

These were really exciting years for me. While I was at Cornell, Paul Sears came to speak. Now E.L. Palmer required all his student not just to take biological science. You could not graduate with an E.L. Palmer degree if you had not had things like physics, and chemistry, and geology. In other words, at no point was it a straight biological science degree. Paul Sears came up from Yale, and he was in charge of the Yale program, which was innovative, and I think, very very important. Because Paul Sears' students were not only required to take the things that we were required to take at Cornell, they were also required to take economics, and sociology, some of the things in the field of political science. I think it was the first time when people began to look at it and say, "Hev, this is more than just the natural world: this is the whole interwoven world."

I think perhaps in terms of what I'm most proud of, is what I've done with people. When I took Frannie Ludwig to visit Cap'n Bill, I summarized it at that point, and I said to Cap'n Bill, "We're a network, we're a team. You've done a lot for me. Frannie is interested in the field because she has grown up with me, and we're a network, and as we pass from one to the other, there are people who continue behind us, because of what we put into it." Frannie Ludwig is one of the people I'm very proud of--proud to have her as a friend. A young friend--she was seven, when I was thirty seven. I used to take her field tripping, and she decided this was for her.

There are a number of students that I've had over the years who have gone into the field. And perhaps this is the most important thing we do. The influence we have on other people, in one way or another. I think my Ten Minute Field Trips (right now it's in the process of being republished), will probably be a little bit like Anna Botsford Comstock's Handbook of Nature Study; something that teachers go back to time and time and time again.

The top five leaders in the field are again hard for me to answer. I think, in all fairness, we should recognize the fact that very commonly, it is said that Bailey founded the American Nature Study Society, and that's NOT true. If any one person founded the American Nature Study Society, it was Maurice Bishop, who wrote--who started the Nature Study Review two or three years before the society. When he did it, he got a group of people together from all over the country from all fields. The Nature Study Review had on its staff; geologists, physicists, and somebody who was outstanding in the farm movement, Liberty Hyde Bailey. They were leaders in different aspects of nature study.

And after two years, Maurice Bishop wrote an article that said, "Are people interested in a society?": and you know the rest of the story. The time for them to meet was set up at the AAAS [American Association for the Advancement of Science] meeting. They had a good turnout, and they elected Bailey president, they elected Maurice Bishop secretary. He stayed as secretary for quite a number of years, not only doing the secretarial work, but editing the Nature Study Review. Many people on his original board served in offices in American Nature Study Society over the years. The concept of the broad base was there--it was there with Bailey, but it was also there with Maurice Bishop of Columbia University.

Certainly, a lot of the impact continued to be Cornell, because you had Anna Botsford Comstock, and Palmer who, of course, studied under Comstock. His Cornell Rural School

Leaflets, just as the Nature Study Leaflets before them which were done by Anna Botsford Comstock had a tremendous impact. And by Uncle John Spencer, who went out to the schools with Anna Botsford Comstock, and by Liberty Hyde Bailey. We included some of this history in the last copy of the journal, "The Write Stuff".

There is no question about the impact of my parents. Today, it's unusual to have parents have that kind of impact. I was very pleased and delighted to have a parent at Manhattan Country School come to me and say, "My daughter (age five) and I were walking through Central Park, and she said, 'Mother, I know a great deal about nature, and I owe it all to Helen Russell. And I am going to teach you everything that I know.'" It was a nice compliment; not just because I got credit for teaching a five year old, but because the five year old was going to pass it on.

I think one of the positive things are nature centers. Sometimes I'll say, "One shot deals can't do very much," but on the other side of the ledger, sometimes one shot deals do turn whole lives around. Certainly we increase the opportunity for children to see the natural world. But even more important to me is getting out there to where they are. Because unless they know that the natural world is on their doorstep, even in their houses, we are not going to save it.

I am not sure, just where we're going in the future. Certainly, if we are going to survive, concern for the environment had better become more important than it now is. I think that, like it or not, we are in this world of computers, of tape recorders, of television, of radio. I had a phone call this week from somebody, asking me if I would be on a program for--the radio station operated by the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. The station is doing a series of programs on nature in the city, because they think it's important that people who are living in the city have some sense of what is there. They asked me if I would be there for the session on animals in the city. This is nature. It's exciting; we're using modern techniques to reach a lot of people. These same people are being constantly bombarded by all kinds of trivia, of very destructive things. I think it's very exciting that the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the big Episcopal headquarters of New York City--who last year at this time was doing a program on the homeless and who got a lot of word out, and created a lot of understanding, should say, "This spring, we need to do programs on the natural world."

Many people--amazing numbers of people, watch National

Geographic programs, and some of the similar ones, which are very good. But, they go away with--very often, with an "Ain't nature grand?" feeling, and with a feeling that nature is something out there. It's in Australia, it's in the gorges of Ithaca, it's on the prairies, but it's not here, and it's not me. It's not me in any respect. It doesn't touch me, I have no effect on it, and if I am concerned, there is nothing I can do about it. Unless we turn our media around, and use it to supplement these other things, or use it woven together, not one or the other, but working together, I think we're in for a great deal of trouble.

At one time, I worried that humans would not survive. Sometimes I think we don't deserve to.

[end of taping]