

Gathering of the Elders: April 15-17, 1988

Transcript of a prerecorded tape.

Phyllis Ford:

Cliff [Knapp], this is Phyllis Ford, responding on your tape. This is going to be late in reaching you, because today is March 30, and you asked for this on March 31. It will be in the mail on March 31. I have my responses to your eleven questions, starting with question one.

Who were some of your memorable teachers and what are some specific lessons you learned from them?

There were probably several types of teachers who were memorable to me, starting with a fourth grade teacher who introduced our class to Junior Audubon Clubs, and the multiplicity of birds in our neighborhood, and that's probably what started my interest in bird watching. And some other teachers who influenced me most were probably English teachers. Outside of the elementary schools and high schools, my two most memorable teachers were Cap'n Bill Vinal and Rey Carlson. I have responded at some length to the things I gained from Cap'n Bill, so I'm going to spend most of my answer to this one on what I gained from Reynold Carlson.

Initially though, you should know that when I was a junior in college, Cap'n Bill mentioned the name of Reynold Carlson, and called him "Mr. Camping USA." At that time I was so impressed with everything Cap'n Bill said, that I paid very close attention to what he said about Rey Carlson, and made up my mind right on the spot that I would go to Indiana University, and do my doctoral work under Reynold Carlson. For some reason, I knew at that time that I would go on to a higher degree, and I wanted it to be under Reynold Carlson.

The things I learned from Carlson were quite different from those that I learned from Vinal, because Mr. Carlson introduced me to the literature of the field of the out-of-doors, whereas while Vinal introduced me to the handbooks, and the identification books. But Mr. Carlson introduced me to such writers as John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Edwin Way Teale, Donald Culross Peattie, George Perkins Marsh, Carl Schurz, and many others who wrote about natural resources. The other thing I learned from him was a rather calm, and beautiful way of life, and if I have time at the end of this tape I'll give you a couple of examples of what I mean by this. Mr. Carlson had a way of introducing people to the out-of-doors which was nonthreatening, and very interesting. I had a student one time who told me that after he'd had Mr. Carlson, he couldn't even see a leaf falling without stopping to watch it. I want to

spend more time on this toward the end of the tape I think.

Question two, "What books and other written materials were most influential in shaping your views of nature study?".

When I studied under Cap'n Bill, we used Anna Botsford Comstock's Handbook of Nature Study as a text, and I still have that text, and I still use it occassionally. I think it was a rather holistic approach to nature study, because the questions, the answers, the content had to do with the interrelationship each item that she discussed with many other items. Another text which we had, that I kept for many years, was E. Laurence Palmer's book, The Fieldguide to Natural History. I said I kept it for many years; I gave it away to somebody-I think it may have been a member of my family. And I missed it so much that I had to go repurchase it, and at the time I was looking for a new E. Laurence Palmer, I found out it been revised and enlarged, so I don't have my original one. I wish I did if I could only find out who I gave it to, I'd ask to have it back. But that was a good book, because it was a book of identification of many, many things we could find in our area, which was of course, at that time, Massachusetts.

Those two books, and the Field Guides to Natural History, the ones that came out before the Peterson series, were influential. I still have E. Schuyler Mathews' book of Wildflowers, and use that quite frequently. I eventually bought every book in that series, and then went on to buy every book I could find in the Peterson Series. It was the Peterson Field Guide to the Eastern Birds that we used in our ornithology classes, and that started me collecting books in that series. So between the Comstock, the Palmer, and the two identification series, both the field book and the field guide series, I had a very wide collection of things related to nature study by the time I was a senior in college.

Cap'n Bill was able to get us some autographed books. I have an autographed book by E.L. Harbin, which is the Fun Encylopedia. But another autographed book that I treasure very much is Moosewood Bill's Trees of the Eastern United States and Canada. Moosewood Bill's real name of course, is William Harlow, and whenever he autographed a book, he drew the leaf scar of the Moosewood, which is also known as the Goosefoot Maple. I was very fond of the Goosefoot Maple, because we had so many of them in New Hampshire. So Moosewood Bill's signature, signed Moosewood, followed by the drawing of the Moosewood leaf scar, was always something I felt quite emotional about, I guess. It

really meant, to me, something that this man was a real person, a person who could identify with the trees.

At the time that Cap'n Bill was able to get Moosewood Bill's texts for us, he never told us that the books had been dedicated to "William Gould Vinal, Nature Guide and Friend." As a matter of fact, I don't think I realized that until after I had graduated. I treasured the book because it was an autographed copy of a tree book. I had started collecting tree books about that time, so here was another book about the eastern trees that I added to my collection. I never looked at the forward-- I looked at the various species of trees.

I think I mis-spoke a little earlier on this tape, about the handbooks. The first set of handbooks I had were called, Field Book Series; this is the Fieldbook of Wildflowers, Fieldbook of American Shrubs, and so forth and so forth. These are published by Putnam and Company. The second set was the Field Guide to something or another; and that was the Peterson Series, and this is the Houghton-Mifflin Company.

In terms of books that influenced me from Mr. Carlson's teaching, as I said earlier, those were books written about the United States. I took a course in reading from him, when I think I read about fifteen books in one summer, and that started me reading more books. I can remember the books I read that summer included: Allen Eckert's, The Wild Season; Rachel Carson's Silent Spring; Marston Bates The Forest and the Sea; several things by Ernest Thompson Seton; several things by Rene Dubos; certainly several books by Sigurd Olson; some things by John Kearnan; by Donald Culrose Peattie; Edwin Way Teale. I had Thoreau before, but I probably read Thoreau again that summer, and as I said earlier, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold.

Since that time, I have read The Journals of Lewis and Clark several times, and Powell's Exploration of the Grand Canyon, and I probably can't remember exactly which books I read because of Mr. Carlson's immediate influence, and which books I read because of his continued influence. But between the collection of identification books that I started under Cap'n Bill, and the essays that I read, when I was studying under Rey Carlson, I have what I consider quite a natural history library. As I'm looking forward to retiring now, and getting rid of my books, I have definitely decided that none of those books that I mentioned, none of the books in my natural history or in my reading about the outdoors will be any of the books that I will leave behind when I retire. These are my most valuable books.

The question number three, "What were the 'hotbeds of action' in our field in the earlier part of the twentieth century?"

I can think of several. One of course, was the hotbed of action started by John Muir, with its accompanying action by Gifford Pinchot between preservation and conservation. I think another hotbed of action early in this century was probably related to social welfare, with the arrival of many youth agencies in the United States, and social service organizations. The playground movement of the United States starting in the early twentieth century and culminating in its probably strongest area in the 1930's or so. The ideas of Aldo Leopold for wilderness as something other than economic use; as the use for recreation. So I think the hotbeds of action in our field in the early part of the twentieth century were those led by Luther Gulick, John Muir, Joseph Lee, Aldo Leopold.

What were some of the milestone events that shaped the development of our field?

Your definition of our field includes nature study, camping, outdoor education, conservation education movements. And I think the milestone events that shaped the development of all of these things were some political actions, and some politically motivated actions. I think one of the things that really shaped the development of our field must have been the wilderness idea, promulgated by Aldo Leopold about 1924 with the concept of wilderness as part of our culture. Also, at the same time, the development of an understanding of the totality of ecology, so that we stopped studying individual identification topics, and thought more about a holistic understanding of things in the out-of-doors. Certainly the development of the youth camping movement, and the outgrowth of all that, which was public school camping, or outdoor education itself were milestone events.

Your next question is, "What contributions have you made to our field that you are most proud of?"

I'm not sure. I like to think that I have influenced many people to have a new appreciation for the out-of doors, to look at the out-of-doors with new eyes, with a total understanding; with the understanding that they can appreciate and enjoy the out-of-doors without having to know all the scientific background of each species. I like to think that I have influenced other people to go into natural resource oriented work, and I know that is the case with maybe half a dozen. But I like to think that some of my writing has been a contribution to the field. I like to think that some people are interested in my hierarchy of teaching in the out-of-doors, starting with art forms, and

going to a philosophical perception. I like to think that I will continue to write- I've just done a chapter on Aldo Leopold and a chapter on John Muir to be put into a book on pioneers in recreation. I hope that will be a contribution because I feel it's a gap in our recreation literature that very few times are people who have worked with natural resources recognized as pioneers in the field of recreation. So I hope that will be a contribution. I don't know what else. I'm still trying, I guess.

Who are the top five leaders in the field, and how are their impacts still felt today?

I identify four top leaders in the field of outdoor education. For me to put in a fifth would be an inconsistency, because for years (years and years and years, I guess), I have said there are four leaders in the field of outdoor education. They are: L.B. Sharp, Julian Smith, Cap'n Bill Vinal, and Rey Carlson. I put Rey last because he was the youngest of the others, and I think he was influenced by them; I'm not sure he influenced them as much. But I do know that he did influence Cap'n Bill Vinal, who gave him lots of credit. Their impacts were felt more by their actions, and not by their writings. Their actions, their philosophy, their charisma, their contagious ways of teaching, the lives that they led, in terms of doing as they taught. Their impacts are seen across the country-- many, many people who have been involved in the nature study movement, or outdoor education, studied under these people, can talk about these people, knew about these people. So their impacts are more personal, probably, than we see among any of our leaders today.

Number seven, "What experiences in your childhood influenced your direction in life?"

In the first place, I was brought up during the depression of the 1930's. My parents were interested in the out-of-doors; they were interested in the natural resources and cultural resources in the Boston area. We had a great many family experiences, which included visiting arboreta, going to the National Forests, going to museums, going to concerts. We moved to the country, because it was less expensive to live there. And the place where we lived had a lot of trees, we raised our own vegetables, we raised chickens. We went camping--my parents belonged to the Appalachian Mountain Club--we went camping and skiing.

It was part of every child's enculturization to go to youth camp, so I was sent to a Girl Scout Camp when I was eleven. Then when my younger sister was eleven, she was sent to camp too, and

I decided I had to go again. So that summer, I picked strawberries, and baby-sat until I had enough money to go to camp for two weeks. Then I couldn't leave camp willingly, so I sold one of my war bonds [World War Two Government Bonds] to my older sister so I could go to camp for a third week. That displeased my parents very much, but it pleased me greatly, because it gave me three weeks at camp. I think this combination of a family that was hard working, but enjoyed both the out-of-doors and Boston culture, and living in the depression really influenced my direction in life. I said to my mother one time, "I guess you regret that you ever sent me camping", because I got hooked on it and I never stopped. And she just smiled and said it was all right with them.

I would also have to mention the Girl Scouts that influenced me. Also the fact that I learned to swim in Walden Pond, and I grew up in the town of Lincoln, which is next to Concord. Flint's pond, which is mentioned in Thoreau's book, "Walden", is now Sandy pond, the town water supply in the town of Lincoln, where I grew up. I was introduced to Concord authors in English classes, and when I was going to high school I thought every youngster in the U.S. read at least one Concord author a year. It was quite a cultural shock for me to leave that area, and find out that the rest of the country didn't really know who Concord authors were. I had some very good teachers who influenced my direction in life towards reading, writing, observation, and encouraging me to go onto school and to keep studying.

Question eight, "What current approaches to nature study are most exciting to me today?".

Really, the most exciting thing today is related to the international aspect of ecology. For example, we know now some of the international ramifications of cutting forests and the impact it would have on such things as, lets say the monarch butterfly. We know the monarch butterfly migrates to South America, where it winters, and then returns with its young to the northern hemisphere. Any time we have logging, which destroys the wintering grounds of the monarch butterfly we could in fact, destroy the entire species. Consequently, we have to understand that what we do in other countries may have an impact on what we have here today.

We could show this with other things. We can show the international impact on forests of acid rain; on fish by pollutants in the water, and so forth. Another approach to nature study that I find very exciting is the entire ecological approach. I have watched a progression of nature study, where years ago, probably before my time, we used to collect

everything. Then when I started out in 1944, I was a nature counselor in a summer camp, but we were identifying everything. Then during the--oh let's say the fifties, maybe into the sixties, we were experiencing everything; we were feeling, and touching, and smelling it, and so forth. I think today, we have moved beyond all those, into understanding the interrelationship of things, and the fact that rather than identify it, or collect it or just plain touch it, we are to help people understand how one thing relates to another. The idea (if you understand some of the basic laws of ecology, and the necessity for quality and quantity of soil, water, air, and light) that different plants, different animals live in different life zones, or create/form different ecosystems. And I think this ecological understanding is much more valuable and much more exciting than just identifying things.

Question nine, "What are we doing right, and how should we improve the profession?".

I feel pessimistic about what we're doing right now. I feel we aren't doing enough. I think that the nature study or the outdoor education or the environmental education movement was slowed down, in some cases, to a dead halt. So I think we need to do more, we need to do more with children. I am appalled at the number of elementary classes, whose teachers know nothing about natural resources, or natural resource education. So children are going through school not understanding basic outdoor biology. I think our children know more about computers and chemistry, than they do about "the basic stuff that the earth is made of", as one of our forefathers would have said.

I think we need to do something politically, probably--and this is getting into question ten, "Where do you see the fields of nature study/camping/outdoor education/conservation education going in the future? Will they become more or less important?"

I think it depends on us as leaders; I think it depends on, the people we elect in government. I can see very little governmental support for natural resources, or natural resource education, or conservation or preservation or even understanding anything about what goes on in the world around us. I think this will become more and more important as people become less and less enchanted with the idea that everybody is supposed to make a million dollars before they retire.

Question eleven says, "If you could be granted one final wish for the future of this field, what would it be?"

My wish for the future is that somehow or another,

everybody could be educated to a commitment to the idea of perception of natural resources, in lieu of a perception of consumption. I find more value, to individuals, in terms of what it means to one personally to perceive what is there in the out-of-doors; rather than needing to use the out-of-doors to develop strength, or to develop group processes, or just to use the the out-of-doors because it is a thing to do. So consequently, my wish for the future is that we would have a commitment to perception in lieu of our obvious interest in consumption.

I have more space on this side of the tape, and I said I would say a couple of things about Rey Carlson that I remember. There are two things that explain the kind of teacher he is. One of them takes place in the summer of 1958, at Bradford Woods, at Indiana University outdoor education site, where a small class of students was sitting around--just finishing dinner. And Rey got up and said, "I am going to go check on the Kentucky coffeebean trees. I'm going to leave after supper, if anyone would like to go, you're welcome to come with me." Well, of course, people wanted to know what is a Kentucky coffeebean tree? Why do they need to be checked on? Where is it?; and so forth. To all of these questions, Rey said, I'll see you at 6:30. So, at 6:30, a group of us assembled on the porch of the Manor House, and there was Rey, ready to go to see the Kentucky coffeebean trees. Well, it was a considerable distance, so he piled us in his car, and we took off through the woods to a place where he could park his car, and we began walking. At that point we knew better than to say, "Where are we going, and why?", so we just followed him. At one point, we came to a stream, which was swollen with recent rains, and it was so deep that we couldn't cross it without getting our feet wet. Rey looked around, and found a sturdy stick, placed the stick in the middle of the stream, and sort of pole vaulted his way across, taking the stick with him. And walking off through the box elder and other things, till we could hardly see him. We called after him, "Mr. Carlson, Mr. Carlson, you've taken your vaulting pole with you!" To which he responded, "Yes, I have", and walked on, leaving us to find our own way across the creek.

When we got to the Kentucky coffeebean trees, we stopped, and at that point he told us what they were, why they were important, why he had an interest in them. Now this was a type of-this is a way that he taught. He wanted to pique peoples's curiosity; I think he was exemplifying one of the best techniques of the National Park Service interpreters at this point. He piqued our curiosity, he knew that we wanted to learn more, but that the most we could learn would be from first hand experience; to have to see the trees, to touch them, to be where they grew, and so forth. So this sort of teaching by piquing the curiosity, and then leading people on (only those who really wanted to learn) is

an excellent example of his teaching technique.

The other thing I remember most vividly about him, was in the early days of the Bloomington, Indiana, Outdoor Education Program. There were a group of teachers who started an outdoor school, which was to be a one week experience for fifth graders. And they thought they had done everything right; they got the schedule, and the meals, and the staff, and the program, and the equipment; and because this was their first experience they were quite nervous about it being a success. One day they heard that Reynold Carlson was coming to visit the night before the camp was to open.

I was there as a visitor that time, and I was able to witness the nervousness of these young teachers. They just weren't quite sure what was going to happen. It was as if the Almighty were going to descend upon them, and do a great evaluation. Here was Reynold Carlson, the most learned person in outdoor education, the country's leader, and he was going to visit their program before it started. And they just wanted to know if they were going to do everything right; were they going to pass his approval, and so forth.

In those days, he had a Volkswagon Beetle, and you know how those things sound when they go up a hill, they're quite discernable from a distance. So they were waiting in the dining hall, and they heard the Beetle approach. [They shouted] "Here he comes! Here he comes! Here he comes! Here he comes! And they assembled outside the dining hall, and I'm sure their knees were knocking and their teeth were chattering. They had never met him, they didn't even know what he looked like, but they just knew he was going to come up this hill in this Volkswagon Beetle. And he drove up, he stopped the car, he got out, looked around, and said, "Isn't this a beautiful place?!" In those words, he dispelled all the nervousness, all the fear. I could almost hear the group sigh in relief and say, "What a marvelous man. We're going to do all right".

But it was that way of making people feel at home, feel comfortable, and feel that they were doing the right thing that has endeared Reynold Carlson to me; and given me an example of how I wish I could teach- but I'm not that kind of teacher. But, because he did that, I think he has made me aware of a good way of helping people feel less nervous about what they do.

The third thing I remember about Reynold Carlson is a very short saying of his, that he says over and over again as he walks, as he drives, as he looks at something. He says, "Now here's something interesting." And people stop to find out what

it is that is interesting. Every time, it is truly something that is interesting. Something he has observed, something he wants to share with people. As I go through my studies, as I go through my own world (I travel from place to place), I find myself looking around, to see if I can find things that are just plain interesting.

This concludes the tape. As you can see, or as you can hear, I didn't say much about Cap'n Bill, but you have that on tape, and you have the printed interview [Camping Magazine, January 1988]. So I think you can take any information on Cap'n Bill from that material. I'll bring my autographed copies of books from Cap'n Bill with me, as, momentos. It will be good to see you in April, and I hope this reaches you in plenty of time to do something with it.

[End of tape]