

Gathering of the Elders, April 15-17, 1988

Transcript of a prerecorded tape:

John Gustafson:

This cassette tape is being recorded on March 17, 1988, in Homer New York by John A. Gustafson, treasurer of the American Nature Society and former president of the society, and former editor of Nature Study. It is response to a request by Cliff Knapp at Northern Illinois University, to answer some questions which he poses with regard to the history and impact of the Nature Study Society and the nature study movement. I will respond to the questions as given.

First question: Who were some of your most memorable teachers and what were some specific lessons you learned from them?

I would imagine that the most important in my career was Doug Wade, and that's interesting, because Doug was not a formal teacher in the usual sense. He was a college naturalist at Dartmouth College when I started college there in 1943, and was hired by the college to do extracurricular work--he was not to teach. They gave him a studio, and lots of equipment, and gave him pretty much free rein as to what he did with his time. He developed many extracurricular programs: trips, birdwalks, nature walks of various kinds, activities at his shop, trips away during vacation times and all that.

It was Doug's influence which rekindled in my life the strong interest I had in the outdoors and the natural world. Being a city boy, bred in Boston, I didn't have a great deal of experience in nature, natural things, so when I went to northern New England, this was a real eye opener and one of the joys to me. Doug was influential in guiding me to Cornell, when I graduated from Dartmouth. Then I went on to Cornell to study for a doctorate under E.L. Palmer and Eva Gordon; both of these persons were very influential in my life. Both of them were more oriented towards science education, in the sense that they were attempting to upgrade the content of school science work, to get it back into the real world with field trips and hands on experience and hark back in their own teaching, and their own lives to Liberty Hyde Bailey and earlier to Louis Agassiz and some of the giants of the nineteenth century.

Another person that influenced me a great deal, but under whom I never had any formal instruction, was Cap'n Bill Vinal--William Vinal was well known of course in nature recreation circles. As part of my doctoral research, I interviewed him on a number of occasions; and over the years spent time with him, so I got a good feeling of his approach,

his Socratic method of teaching, and asking questions, and also the very important ability to capitalize on teachable moments that come our way. When you are out in the field, you have to be prepared for the unexpected, and you had to be ready to use these unexpected things to full advantage. Bill Vinal was an expert at that.

He tells the story once of being with a group of school teachers at some workshop down in New Jersey I believe, and Bill Harlow, Moosewood Bill, was with the group. And they were sitting around the campfire, in the evening, and Capn' Bill says, "Moosewood, whistle up a Screech Owl. Of course, he didn't know if there were any Screech Owls around, or whatever, but Moosewood obliged by doing some Screech Owl whistles, and then in just a very few seconds, someone noticed a a little Screech Owl had flown up and perched in a tree overhead, in the light of the fire. And he kept on whistling, and before you knew it , he had a whole row of Screech Owls staring down at the group around the campfire. Well that kind of almost miraculous ability to influence and use nature was something which Bill Vinal was a past master at.

Another person that was very influential in my early teaching days was a professor at Cortland College State University of New York, named Harlan Metcalf. Gold Metcalf was another recreation specialist, a person with a tremendous empathy with people. He gave you the feeling that you were the only person that was important when you were talking with him, and he could listen, and direct your thoughts. He was great for using natural materials and crafts in various kinds of field activities. He was a fantastic person to meld together the scientific, factual side of nature study, and the recreational and therapeutic side of it.

I should go back a bit, and talk about Eva Gordon. I am sure other people will make a comment about her. But after Laurence Palmer retired, and left me in the middle of my doctoral program, Eva Gordon took me on. That was a very wonderful thing for me, because Eva was a kind of empathetic person who really made you feel that you were somebody that she really cared for. It was her influence, her lifestyle, her attitude, her sensitivity to scientific accuracy, and also to teachability at the teaching level and so forth that was very significant. It was to Eva Gordon that I went--some years later, after I was out of college for awhile--along with Verne Rockcastle. I remember going to her house a couple years after she retired to talk about the Nature Study Society, and the direction it was taking, and to make a couple of decisions which I think were very important, and to which I'll refer to later on.

The second question is, " What books and other written

materials were most influential in shaping your views of nature study?"

Well I'm sure that in my older days, the literature was mainly related to field guides of one kind or another. The early Putnam books on wildflowers and so forth were quite important to me when I was in high school and first years of college. Then, of course, Peterson's series certainly filled a big void, and were very important; Dick Pough's books on birds as well. Dick is another person I've gotten to know personally, and who has had tremendous impact on the field in general. Laurence Palmer's Rural School Leaflets and the outgrowth of all that, his Fieldbook of Natural History, certainly is a resource of tremendous value. I never got into Anna Comstock's "Handbook of Nature Study" all that much; I didn't teach at the lower levels and so it was not something that took shape in my own life. But I'm sure that was a very important body of material.

Through Doug Wade I got to know about Aldo Leopold, and then the "Sand County Almanac" and the other Leopold books were published in the late 40's. That had tremendous impact on my philosophical orientation with regard to nature study and conservation. Another writer that has had tremendous impact on me is Robert Frost--don't usually think of Robert Frost so much as a nature study person, but his poetry, dealing with natural subjects, contains a great deal of ecological insight. He happened to be the poet-in-residence at Dartmouth when I was there. He and Doug Wade and I and others would meet together and explore the ecological implications of his poems. I think that because Frost is of such international stature that there's an impact in terms of nature study and conservation attitudes which is far greater than perhaps we'd realized.

The third question is, "Where were the 'hotbeds of action' in our field in the early part of the twentieth century?"

Well certainly, Cornell stands out as the center of nature study activity at the turn of the century, largely because of Liberty Hyde Bailey, and Anna Comstock, and the others in the nature study movement, and rural school movement at Cornell, However there were people in other places; University of Chicago, and in Michigan, and other spots around, but certainly Cornell stands out among all of them. The type of thing going on in those days was an attempt to strengthen, especially in the small schools and the elementary grades, science teaching. So nature study was an attempt to get away from anthropomorphism, and book work, and get back to what Louis Agassiz called "Study nature, not books". He wanted us to get back--and with hands-on, and feet-on-the-ground sort of activity, in order to help people appreciate the natural world, as well as understand it.

I think that Bailey developed that philosophy more than anyone else that I know of, in that he very clearly stated that the purpose of nature study was not to be another science teaching movement, just teach necessarily to teach factual information, or to produce research scientists. But it was to put every person into a sympathetic contact with the natural world, so that an understanding and a rapport with nature would be developed; and that would lead to good conservation, and good science teaching, and good science. So I would say that Bailey set the philosophical tone for the nature study movement clearly in his writings at the turn of the century. His "Holy Earth" and the Nature Study Idea (published before the Nature Study Society was founded in 1905), were instrumental in the development of the nature study idea.

The fourth question is, "What were some of the milestone events that shaped the development of our field?"

Well, I think I've alluded to some of those. Certainly the start of the publication the Nature Study Review, which I believe began around 1900, or even a little earlier, began to give a voice to people in the nature study movement. That was a big turning point because it brought together many people in this field, and gave a common voice for publishing and sharing ideas. Also of course, many of these people were science oriented, and they were affiliated with American Association for the Advancement of Science [AAAS]. So it was just a natural outgrowth of their interest in the AAAS that the American Nature Study Society would be brought together at one of the AAAS meetings in 1907. And the subsequent founding of of the Nature Study Society which dates back then to 1908, right at the turn of the year, was a milestone.

The publication milestones have been interesting and rather sketchy. The Nature Study Review continued until about the time of the first World War--then I guess it was a casualty of the war. After the war, the American Nature Association began publication of Nature Magazine and the Nature Study Society for many years had a section in each issue devoted to Society news and business. Nature Magazine gradually evolved its point of view, and began to get out of touch with things. Shortly after the second World War, it was merged with Natural History, which was the American Museum of Natural History publication, and so it in effect ceased to exist.

In the meantime, Dick Weaver, had been active in the Nature Study Society; he was one of Palmer's students, and later went on to be a predecessor to Doug Wade at Dartmouth College, as college naturalist. Dick Weaver was a very energetic man and took the bull by the horns, and really pushed for membership in ANSS. He had the membership up well over a thousand there for awhile, in the late thirties/early forties, and put out a mimeographed

newsletter. Then, after the war was over, that was taken on by Stan Muliak, in Utah, who began to have it printed as a nice little slick newsletter. That went along until the early sixties, when I, along with some others, decided that maybe we needed to give our members a little bit stronger deal for our publication, and we began to publish what has now become Nature Study, a full fledged journal. Then, sometime later we brought back again the other newsletter type of thing. So right now, we have the journal Nature Study, and the ANSS News as two publications of the Society.

Now all along, through all of this evolution of the Nature Study Society, there were these other related interests and groups forming. In the thirties, Conservation Education Association was founded; later on the environmental education organizations would come along, outdoor education programs. It always seems to some of us that maybe we're reinventing the wheel. But if you look at how these organizations have worked, you'll notice that there's a slight nuance of difference--there's an emphasis that's important. So although many of the members belong to some of these same groups, and there is an overlap, nevertheless I think they each perform a useful function.

Recognizing that, in the early seventies there was an attempt (I think spearheaded by the American Nature Study Society--I remember I went down to CEA meetings in Louisiana around that time to bring a proposal for some kind of consortium of conservation education and nature study groups) to get a little greater unity to what we were doing. I think that idea was picked up by others, and then, eventually, around 1974, the Alliance for Environmental Education was established, with ANSS as one of the charter members. And we have continued to provide very visible, and I think effective, leadership to the Alliance, and the many many organizations that it represents, numbering total membership, if you add them all up, of maybe fourteen/fifteen million members.

Question number five, "What contributions to the field are you most proud of?"

Well, I thought about this question. I think about the up front positions I've held, and I'm certainly glad I was able to serve as president of ANSS, as president of the Alliance for Environmental Education, other such very visible things. But I think that the contribution that I'm most proud of, or which has had more meaning in my life, now that I'm looking back a little bit from a perspective, was something that was almost serendipitous in how it came about. Back in the late sixties, I was asked to participate in a conference at Antioch College, Glen Helen, in outdoor education and outdoor recreation. My wife and I went down, and we spent a long weekend there. When I got

there, I was asked if I would like to lead a field trip. I had not been scheduled to do that, and there were a lot of people leading field trips at that conference, people like Cap'n Bill Vinal, and E. Laurence Palmer and some others I imagine were there. So I thought to myself, "You know there's been a lot of the stop, look, and listen type field trips, all through here. Maybe these folks need something a little different."

I guess, mulling around in my mind, was an idea that I thought I would now try out. I had brought along with me a paperback pocketbook of Robert Frost poems. Sunday morning I got up and scouted around the natural area there, to see if I could find situations which would be illustrative of some of the poems that Frost had written. His poem about the woodpile, or about the mending wall, or about stopping by the woods on a snowy evening. Now some of these are winter poems, and this was in May, so they weren't all that appropriate. But, in any case, I did find situations in which the poetry could be read, and be meaningful. So when the group gathered for the field trip that I was leading, I set a couple of ground rules. I said, "Now look, we're going to walk through the woods, I'm going to stop every now and then and read something, and then we'll move on. And I'm not going to discuss it, and I don't want you to talk; I want you to be absolutely quiet, and we'll just let the natural environment speak to us. Then every now and again, I'll stop, and I'll read, and then we'll move on without any comment."

Well we did this, and it went smoothly enough. I had, of course, no idea how this was coming off; I told people not to talk, and they didn't, so I really had no feedback. The trip was over in an hour or so, and we went on our way, and then come noontime, at dinnertime, people were given a chance to get up and say something that meant something to them about the conference. And this lady got up, and she said, "Oh, I've just been on this most marvelous field trip", and she went on and on, raving about this Robert Frost field trip. Of course, I was real pleased, and with that encouragement, I've worked on that format, and have used it quite a number of times.

I think it does something which expresses my personal, and very deeply held philosophy, and that is; that unless we strike a chord with our emotional lives, we're not going to put what we know, in the way of scientific facts and scientific philosophy, to work. It's not going to make a difference in how we live unless it grabs us emotionally too. So I think it's an important component which Bailey, certainly, had in his writings, and which others have had as well--Leopold especially. So trying to put that into a format that works was a real contribution to our nature study teaching techniques.

The sixth question deals with the top five leaders in the

field, and how are their impacts still felt today.

I guess I've mentioned a good many of these already. Certainly Bailey, and Leopold, E. Laurence Palmer, Cap'n Bill Vinal, maybe going back to Louis Agassiz if you want to, earlier on; Eva Gordon, all those folks (and then more recently Doug Wade and Bill Stapp) certainly are giants in the field of nature study and conservation education, and whatever. And these people still, through their students and their writings, have an impact on people to this very day.

The seventh question, what experiences in your childhood influenced your direction in life?

Well, as I mentioned earlier, I was born and bred in Boston, Massachusetts, in a city environment. I think the major influence in my life was my grandmother, my father's mother. We lived in her house, and for awhile, when I was young, she had a garden, and she was quite willing to let a five/six year old tag along, and try his hand at planting and weeding. I just had a very strong affinity to the natural world, and especially the plants. So when I got into high school, I was well into learning the wildflowers of the area, scouting along the Muddy River in downtown Boston, the Fenway and so on, after school.

It's interesting I never really knew one bird from another, until I went to Dartmouth, and Doug Wade took me on some bird trips. Birds of Boston were mainly pigeons and sparrows, and I never did get to know them at all. But my grandmother's influence was certainly very, very important. I don't think I really had too much other encouragement in natural history fields, or science--my parents were not into that, and so it was limited until I really went on to college, and got into Doug Wade's program.

The eighth question is, "What current approaches to nature study are most exciting to you today?"

Well, I certainly think that the approach that Helen Ross Russell takes to nature study is extremely exciting, the whole matter of the teachable moment, ten minute field trips, urban nature study. And then the Nature Study Society, because of our long history of having our annual meetings associated with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and those were almost always in the big urban areas, and was always in the winter time, gave us a chance to emphasize that you could teach nature study in the city. The cracks in the walls around the schoolyard pavement, the sky overhead, so many other things.

I remember such a memorable time when Laurence Palmer was

giving a talk at the AAAS meetings, and he just hauled everybody down on the steps of the hotel, and proceeded to talk about erosion and water and the impact of rain and soot and all the other things that were happening right there on the front steps. A person with the depth of scientific information that he had could just keep you spellbound with that sort of thing. I don't think it was intimidating to the point where people say, "Well I can't do anything like this." But, I think he set an example and an encouragement to us, to do that as much as we could.

So I don't know if the the current approach is any different than it's ever been. We need to keep people in contact with the real world, the natural world, and we have to work for preservation and conservation. But we're essentially an educational organization, and we need to take all these barbarians that are born every year into our society and our country, and get them to understand that they're a part of nature, not at war with nature.

The ninth question is, "What are we doing right, and how should we improve our profession?"

Well I think that when we are doing our thing, and doing it well, we are doing the right thing. The major improvement I see is to do more of it, and to get our message out a little more effectively, through publications, and through workshops, and through whatever means are available. I also think we need to make opportunity for younger folks to move in. I remember how startled I was twenty years ago when Verne Rockcastle said, "We ought to get some young people in"-- he was in his mid-forties, and I was in my late 30's. And he said, "We need young people in this organization", and I thought, "We are the young people here". But he was right, we need to grab the imaginations of our college educateds, and get them moving into an understanding of the desirability to teach, and to inspire people. A great deal of it is inspirational. The essence of nature study is almost a spiritual essence as opposed to factual essence, and I think those two things need to be constantly looked to.

The tenth question, "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?"

Well I don't know if they will become more or less important. I guess our preoccupation with economics, and politics, and global conflict, and so forth, with famine, and desertification-- all these big, big issues, may cloud what we're trying to do, and it seems that maybe we're just plodding along, trying to get one on one to understand the natural world, and appreciate it, and use

it better, is a losing game--and it may be. But it's not less important because of that. I think we need to continue to encourage people to use the natural world. I've been so encouraged by the trends in our schools, in many of our schools at least, to use outdoor education, environmental education as a means of getting parents and teachers, kids away from the campus and out into the natural world, so that they not only build relationships with each other but also bridges to the natural world that sustains us. It's a tremendously important thing to do, and the magnitude of the work should not deter us from trying to do it. We can make a good group effort, and I think that's the thing that's really important.

The last question, "If you could be granted one final wish for the future of this field, what would it be?"

Well, in light of what I've just said, I guess maybe it would be great if we could make it possible for every youngster in America to have at least a one week experience every year in a natural setting. Not necessarily way out in the boondocks, but something that gets them away from television and the noise of the inner city; and puts them into contact with nature, with teachers, and chaperones who are sensitive and awake to the teachable moments that come by. I think that would be a fantastic thing to do.

I guess on a more mundane, personal level, it would be great to see Nature Study magazine in the hands of every teacher in the country. I think if we could, somehow or another, get a grant of money to do a distribution of that kind, we'd probably pick up a lot of new members, and people who're enthusiastic about what we do. That, of course, would put a tremendous burden on our editors and others who are trying to pull all this together. Helen Russell is to be commended for her superhuman efforts to put together this journal, and we need to have help. I think it's time to come forth with some young people who can carry on what we've started and improve on it.

Well, I think that covers fairly well the questions that were asked, and I hope the quality of this tape isn't detrimental to using it effectively.

Cliff [Knapp], having listened to this tape, I noticed there is one very important person I omitted to mention, and that is John Brainerd. I can think of very few people who have had more of an impact on nature study, on our society, and on the development of innovative ideas and techniques than John.

[end of tape.]