

For Barbara

Love, Gretchen

Where the Bluebird Sings: Remembering Wallace Stegner

by Gretchen Holstein Schoff

Now we are finally here. This, in all its painful ambiguity, is what we came for.

Crossing to Safety

It happened, on a brilliant May morning in 1986, that Patricia Anderson, Professor Walter Rideout, and I stood at the front door of a home in the village of Shorewood Hills, and Wallace Stegner answered the bell.

More than nostalgia must have been on Stegner's mind that spring morning. He had come back to Madison to receive an honorary degree from the University of Wisconsin. The university was the place where Stegner had spent some of his first lean years as an academic—teaching, correcting student papers, and working “around the edges” and far into the night on launching his own writing career. Madison had been the seed bed for friendships and emotional relationships that lasted all his life, and by the time Stegner returned, he had honed “returning” to an art. Writing *Wolf Willow* and *The Sound of Mountain Waters* had taught him how much could be learned by going back, checking memory against reality.



Wallace Stegner

And in 1986 he had another project in the works. His novel *Crossing to Safety* was published in 1987. Much of the story has Madison as its setting, though, clearly, emotional landscapes, more than lakes and hills, count most in this book. As Stegner was to put it later: “Of all the books I ever wrote, *Crossing to Safety* is in some ways the most personal. It is, in fact, deliberately close to my own experiences, opinions, and feelings, which are refracted through a narrator not too different from myself.”

Crossing to Safety tells the story of an important relationship between two academic couples, one wealthy, the other struggling to get



Wallace Stegner was born in Lake Mills, Iowa, on February 18, 1909, and spent much of his youth on the prairies of Canada and in western United States. He died on April 13, 1993, from injuries sustained in an accident. The following excerpt is from *Wolf Willow*.

I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from. I can say to myself that a good part of my private and social character, the kinds of scenery and weather and people and humor I respond to, the prejudices I wear like dishonorable scars, the affections that sometimes waken me from middle-aged sleep with a rush of undiminished love, the virtues I respect and the weaknesses I condemn, the code I try to live by, the special ways I fail at it and the kinds of shame I feel when I do, the models and heroes I follow, the colors and shapes that evoke my deepest pleasure, the way I adjudicate between personal desire and personal responsibility, have been in good part scored into me by that little womb-village and the lovely, lonely, exposed prairie of the homestead. However anachronistic I may be, I am a product of the American earth, and in nothing quite so much as in the contrast between what I knew through the pores and what I was officially taught.

a start (as Stegner and his wife were in the 1930s). Stegner called the themes of the novel "love, friendship, and survival" and the villains of the novel "willfulness, polio, cancer, and blind chance."

So to say that *Crossing to Safety* was on his mind in 1986 is too mild a statement. Stegner, somewhat later, put it this way: "I wrote my guts out trying to make it as moving on the page as it was to me while I was living and reliving it."

You don't go out and "commit experience" for the sake of writing about it later, and if you have to make notes about how a thing has struck you, it probably hasn't struck you. (On the Teaching of Creative Writing)

Inevitably, Stegner admirers in Madison looked for ways to make good use of his time during that commencement weekend, one of the ways being to request an interview for broadcast over the state radio network. Stegner agreed, but asked that the interview be conducted, not at the station, but at the home of friends with whom he was staying. Patricia Anderson, then executive director of the Wisconsin Humanities Committee, arranged for the interview. (At her encouragement, the committee had commissioned Stegner to write a special essay, "Sense of Place," which had been published in a limited edition under committee auspices by Silver Buckle Press at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Stegner regarded this essay as important enough to be included in his last published collection, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*).

I was afraid of that first encounter. I have had more disappointments than I care to mention meeting "famous writers," watching them diminish, shrivel, indulge in displays of ego or eccentricity. I was not over-awed at the prospect of meeting Stegner. I was afraid he would have feet of clay, that I would be disappointed to meet in the flesh the image and voice I had come to love on the page.

The door opened and the "sizing up" came first—so much is conveyed in the first minute. If he felt reluctant or thought of the morning ahead as a nettling obligation, he gave no sign. He smiled and welcomed us. Casually dressed in a figured knit sweater, tan trousers, comfortable shoes, he moved across the room and sat down with the grace of a man much younger than his years. He had a sense of style, a presence—snow white hair, a quiet dignified bearing. Most arresting of all were his easy laugh and his eyes. He was a born listener and told you, with his gaze, that what you were saying had his attention. What-

ever fear of disappointment I brought along dropped away at the doorsill.

Other details struck me. Stegner was missing a finger on one hand (below the second knuckle) and I wondered how it had happened; it made me think of farm boys I'd known who lost fingers in corn choppers or on power take-offs. The longer I watched Stegner the more familiar he seemed, like the Scandinavian men I had known all my life—my father, grandfather, uncles, cousins, my husband. There was that fundamental strength and muscle of the body, the strength acquired through hard work in youth, strength that never completely fades. There was the wry humor. Most of all, there was Nordic understatement. (Is it the Scandinavian "iceberg syndrome"—nine-tenths of the significance concealed below the surface?) Stegner was, by 1986, winner of a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, dozens of other awards and prizes—a giant of a writer who had shown that he could do it all: novels, short stories, essays, history, biography, reportage. But he talked about his writing craft that morning with the modesty of the Wimbledon champ who says he plays a little tennis.

... a novel is a long, long agony. ... When Bill Styron described it as like setting out to walk from Vladivostok to Spain on your knees, he wasn't just making a phrase. (On the Teaching of Creative Writing)

We talked of many things that morning, about writers like Beryl Markham and Isak Dinesen, about the triangulations and plotting in *Angle of Repose*, about teaching writing and about doing your historical homework.

At one point I asked, "How long did it take you to write *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*?"

"Eleven years," he answered. *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, the story of the voyage of John Wesley Powell on the Colorado River, sets one of the great benchmarks for writing about the West. It is a masterwork of dazzling virtuosity, weaving together history, geography, biography, geology—a tale of rivers and mountains and short grass prairie, of whites and Indians.

"How did you know what questions to ask yourself, or where to look for answers?" I asked

Stegner stopped, smiling slightly at the memory of what the book must have taken out of him.

"Sometimes I didn't know. Whenever I needed to know what to do next, I'd ask Benny. Benny knew everything about the West. Benny was loaded." (One of Stegner's most loving pieces is his memoir of Bernard DeVoto, *The Uneasy Chair*.)

I took no notes that day, but the morning with Wallace Stegner struck me. It has stayed with me ever since. What can

you see in two or three hours? Certainly not the warts, the sins of omission and commission. (Who among us is without them, but they were territory reserved for the people who knew him well, lived with him, worked with him.) I wasn't canonizing him for sainthood, but I walked down the drive of that house in Shorewood Hills thinking, "What you see on the page is what you get in the flesh." The work and the man seemed as close to seamless as one could hope for, expressions of one another, a rarity in any life.

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.....

Largeness is a lifelong matter. . . . You grow because you are not content not to. You are like a beaver that chews constantly because if it doesn't, its teeth grow long and lock. You grow because you are a grower. You're large because you can't stand to be small. (On the Teaching of Creative Writing)

The phone rang half a dozen times before 10:00 a.m. Three of the callers eased into it with, "Have you seen the morning paper?" Two simply blurted it out, "Stegner died yesterday." The sixth was already

thinking ahead. "We should do something, some kind of memorial meeting, talking about his work, something. I'm not quite sure what."

All over America, ink will flow, now that Stegner has died. So many different kinds of people staked out claims on him—friends and family, environmentalists, historians, Westerners, his writing students, colleagues. He had covered a lot of ground.

The environmentalists owe him. He didn't whine or sermonize; he just turned a formidable talent to things he believed in. People like Stegner and DeVoto had a parade started on wilderness long before there was a bandwagon, before Earth Day had become a catch word. Stegner's essay on Dinosaur National Monument, though written in the 1950s, could have been written yesterday. He was already worried about the day when human beings might have only one square foot of ground to themselves, and no place to run to. He also understood the West, how inextricably its history, its myths and delusions, its angst are tied to the presence or absence of water. Aridity has always driven the destiny of the West, and few writers knew the particulars better than Stegner. What he learned writing *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, he came back to again and again—in *The West as Living Space*, *The Sound of Mountain Waters*, and *Wolf Willow*.

So a host of Westerners, writers like Ivan Doig, Larry McMurtry, Edward Hoagland, will remember what Stegner taught them about themselves. If there really is such a thing as an ethos of a region, Stegner went very far in shaking out the ingredients—individualism, loneliness, ego, rapacity. Missing

from the crew who remember, and it's a pity, will be Edward Abbey, whose outrageousness was full of surprises; Abbey always could be counted on to skip being too reverent or solemn. He was amused at the way regionalism was turning into a writing industry, and he once remarked that regional writers were crawling all over the landscape, staking out territories "like vacuum cleaner salesmen." Stegner managed to be larger than that—interpreting the West, but slipping past the regional label.

Historians owe Stegner too. He showed that he could do his homework on the facts, corroborating where he was able and admitting he couldn't when he was unable. Further, he demonstrated in *Wolf Willow* how he thought history was a pontoon bridge and its building materials a mixture of verifiable fact, memory, and autobiography. The histories we get, Stegner believed, depend on which stories historians choose to tell, what questions they ask, and ultimately on the artistry they summon to set the stories down. Whether historians agree or not with the Stegner idea of historiography, they can't have failed to notice how powerful story-telling history can be or what a writer can do with a prose style that has no fat. Readers can learn as much about how America was transformed, grabbed, explored, and exploited from Stegner's short essay "Inheritance" as they can from a shelf full of ponderous historical treatises.

Then there are Stegner's students, the writers he helped all those years. Hundreds of writers got their start at the Stanford School of Creative Writing when Stegner led the program there. Festschrifts are probably bubbling all over the place, because long after writers left the school, they kept sending Stegner galleys. By all accounts, the Stegner touch was a blend of expectation and respect. His expectations were rigorous—he was a bear about grammar, impatient with phoniness or missed deadlines. No excuses. You put your seat on the seat of the chair, and you write. And it had better be seven days a week, "not six, not five—certainly not two or three."

As for the respect, he seemed to have little taste for personality cults or for creating clones of himself. Take a look at his alumni list if you need proof. A writing school that has nurtured the likes of Wendell Berry, Tillie Olson, Ken Kesey, must have been a place that knew how to spot "promise" on the application form and, once writers got there, didn't encourage cliques or clones.

Every writer knows how lonely a business it is, how dull facing the wall can be. Brotherhoods develop among those who face the wall. Stegner sometimes wrote to the brotherhood, pieces like his wonderful "Letter to Wendell Berry," and his moving response, probably the best yet written, to Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*. It's a pity, too, that Maclean, like Abbey, is not around to say goodbye. He would have known what Stegner was trying to do. Both men had grown beyond their Westernness, without ever losing a sense of how it shaped them. Both lived long lives, years that spanned an incredible century. Both lived long enough to fish the river of time. Both

knew what it meant to lay the line down in a perfect cast with their words, and then to enjoy the quiet pleasure, as Maclean put it, of "watching yourself softly becoming the author of something beautiful."

In a lot of ways, it's the people who won't write tributes, don't know how to say goodbye, that will miss Stegner the most. With all the public acclaim that gathered momentum in the last years of his life, it is doubtful that he realized how many garden-variety readers he had, people who love books and regard them much as they do favorite friends. Stegner never caved in to fads, never reached for the bizarre, the decadent, the arty. That was his great art, the control of a sentence that lesser writers would kill for and the genius to take dailiness and turn it into transcendence.

Readers recognized the sound of an American voice. They waited for it and took comfort that it was there, as children do who hear the murmur of grown-up voices in distant rooms. When they read, "I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from," they got the message. Stegner wasn't so much telling them who he was; he was telling them how to find out who they were.

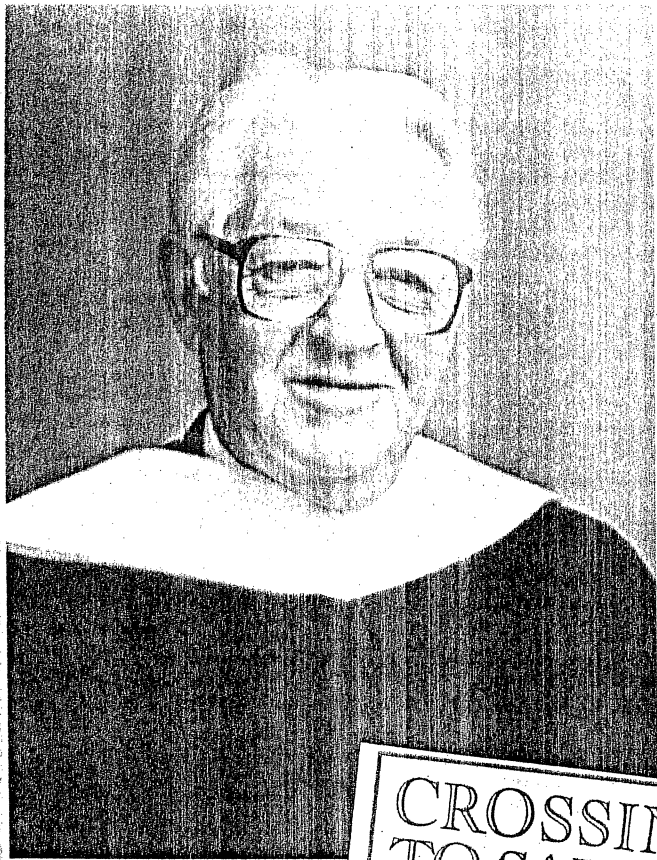
There is no decent literature on how to die. There ought to be, but there isn't. . . . Medical literature is all statistics. So I'm having to find my own way. (Crossing to Safety)

This remembrance, much too late, recalls a brief encounter with Wallace Stegner. The blink of an eye, for him, but I wanted him to know the encounter "stuck." I caught him, that day, shuttling back and forth between inner and outer landscapes. In 1986 he was seventy-seven years old, and still growing. Three years later, at eighty, he sat down and wrote a long overdue letter to his mother.

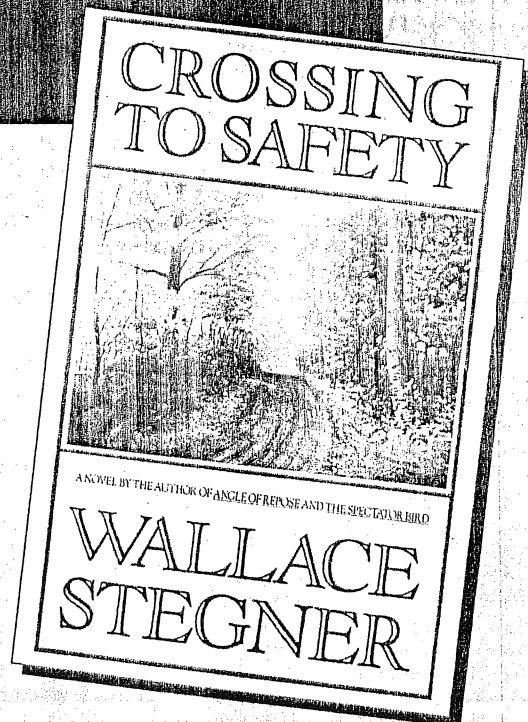
Mom, listen. That's the way he starts. Except when I have to tie my shoelaces, I don't feel eighty years old. . . . But if I don't feel decrepit, neither do I feel wise or confident. Age and experience have not made me a Nestor qualified to tell others how to live their lives. . . . Instead of being embittered, or stoical or calm, or resigned, or any of the standard things that a long life might have made me, I confess that I am often simply lost, as much in need of comfort, understanding, forgiveness, uncritical love—the things you used to give me—as I ever was at five, or ten, or fifteen. (Where the Blue Bird Sings to the Lemonade Springs)

What an admission! So there is no decent literature on how to die? Well, then, you do the next best thing. What Wallace Stegner left behind was the road map from the Big Rock Candy Mountain to the land where the bluebird sings. This is what he came for, to tell the long, broken story of crossing to safety, with all its painful ambiguity.

Photos courtesy the Office of News and Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Wallace Stegner in Madison in 1986 to receive an honorary degree from the University of Wisconsin.



The rain fell steadily on the narrow, right-angled road, on white farmhouses and red barns . . . on browning September cornfields, and pigs knee-deep in muddy pens. It fell steadily as we passed through Platteville, Mineral Point, Dodgeville, and was still falling when somewhere beyond Dodgeville the wiper blade disintegrated and bare metal began to scrape in a crazy arc across the windshield. Rather than delay us by stopping to get it fixed, I drove from Mount Horeb to Madison with my head out the window, my hair soaked, and water running down inside my shirt collar.

The traffic led us directly into State Street. However Sally felt, I was interested. This that we were entering was our first chance at a life.

I knew that the university was at one end of State Street and the State Capitol at the other, and I couldn't resist driving the length of it once, and part-way back, just to get the feel.

Crossing to Safety