

Listening to the Land: The Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness as Oral History

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Abstract: Although there have been oral histories made of wilderness activists such as Wallace Stegner, oral history and pristine wilderness are seldom paired. Wilderness, as defined by the 1964 Congressional Act is, “in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, [wilderness] is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”¹ Given this definition, human history is often neglected in wilderness literature. This is especially true of places like the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, the third largest of such areas in the continental U.S. as well as one of the most remote. Yet, however, “untrammelled” this landscape appears to be, in fact it has a complex human history. Representing this history is best done through the medium of oral narrative since orality holds the ability to preserve a sense of time and place, and sound is the fullest way to transform a real space into an imaginary one. Oral narratives of the Selway-Bitterroot, and by extension many American wildernesses, are vital to understanding the interconnectedness between cultural and natural environments. These narratives get closest to the experiencing body in real time, which is what understanding wilderness requires.

Keywords: embodied narrative, Nez Perce Indians, orality, Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, wilderness history

The Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness stretches for 1.3 million roadless acres across the Montana-Idaho border in the Northern Rocky Mountains. Six years ago, I began gathering primary material and conducting oral history interviews of this region in preparation to write a book and set up an online exhibit. To my surprise, it was the interviews—the human voices—that gave me a window onto the area’s meaning. I say “surprisingly” because oral history and pristine wilderness

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do not seem like natural bedfellows. When most people think of remote wilderness, they picture places where biologists study natural history, not where humanists chart human history. In fact, in thirty-seven years of publication of the *Oral History Review*, no articles address oral history and wilderness.² In this essay, I argue that orality is the best medium for understanding the relationship between the Selway-Bitterroot's natural and cultural history. Further, using the Selway-Bitterroot as an exemplar, I suggest that representing wilderness necessitates oral history in ways that other narratives of place may not.

Selway-Bitterroot history

On a map, the massive Selway-Bitterroot looks collegial, as if shaking hands with a dozen smaller wilderness areas that cluster around it: the Rattlesnake, Welcome Creek, Sawtooth, Wenaha-Tuchannon, Hell's Canyon, North Fork Umatilla, Eagle Cap, Gates of the Mountain, Anaconda Pintler, Lee Metcalf, Red Rock Lakes, and Scapegoat. On its southern border, the Selway-Bitterroot seems downright collaborative since it directly adjoins the Frank Church River of No Return and Gospel Hump Wildernesses as well as the Blue Joint Wilderness Study Area to form over six million acres of nothing but roadless wild, the biggest chunk of such land in the continental U.S. From the air at 6000 feet, the region looks like the brain of a massive organism. The deep canyons and high peaks resemble the brain's ripples and convolutions while the snow caps melting down mountainsides and through ravines look like the neural pathways powering it all. Indeed, the water's power is ever-present: the Selway River feeds the Clearwater, the Clearwater feeds the Snake, the Snake feeds the Columbia, which flows into the Pacific Ocean, the world's largest geographic feature.

Yet in the context of some of the most well-known U.S. wildlands such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, Denali, the Everglades, and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, the Selway-Bitterroot is a neglected outpost. It is routinely referred to as a "remote" American wilderness in scientific, policy, and travel literature.³ Still, it has never been without proponents. In 1935, conservationist Bob Marshall, who founded the Wilderness Society, classified the Selway-Bitterroot the "greatest of all" U.S. wildlands.⁴ In fact, he gave so much energy to the area it was originally supposed to bear his name (that distinction went instead to an area northeast of the Selway-Bitterroot). More recently, scholars, journalists, and the popular media—Elizabeth Arnold on NPR's Morning Edition and Timothy Egan in *The New York Times*—agree the area has much to teach about the ways human beings interact with wild environments. "In many parts, the land is as wild today as it was 200 years ago, full of jumpy rivers kicking out of the Bitterroot Mountains and exotic surprises," writes Egan, "an amazing swath of real estate, owned by every American—a public land inheritance unseen by

most of its owners.”⁵ The allure of the Selway-Bitterroot has to do with its location and size, its pristine quality (it is one of the few intact ecosystems in the country), its age (it was among the first pieces of land to achieve Federal wilderness status in 1964), and its cultural history.

What is that history? Although the Selway-Bitterroot is, and always has been, largely unsettled, groups and individuals have lived in or on the edges of the land for thousands of years. It is a history of human connection and clash but also of devoted protection of the land itself. Archeological evidence shows that ancient Indians as well as the Nimiipuu (Nez Perce) and Salish (Flathead) hunted and fished the land and forged travel corridors to the north and south but rarely set up permanent camps because of the area's extreme winters. Their relationship to the land was one of practical and spiritual interdependence. Elizabeth Wilson, a Nez Perce tribal elder and relative of Chief Joseph, recorded an oral history in the 1970s. She emphasized the tribe's interdependence on the Selway-Bitterroot in her explanation of “camas digging time” ceremonies, her descriptions of steelhead fishing and elk hunting, and especially her chants about goat. Goat roamed the high country precisely because of its opposition to civilization: “I wander along only in the higher mountains. And the heads of the streams all the way through. I'm never down anywhere where it's civilized country. I'm way up in wilderness,” Wilson sings in the voice of goat.⁶

White people arrived in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: explorers, missionaries, trappers, and scientists were drawn to the beauty of the Selway-Bitterroot but, like the native Indians, found it too inhospitable to dwell in. That unfriendliness comes from the area's steep granite mountains and narrow valleys, which means few flat places for farming. Even if there were, the soil does not lend itself to farm crops, though trees such as pine, fir, and cedar, and all kinds of native plants grow in abundance. Weather also plays a role. The summers are scorching, the winters freezing. Consequently, the early explorers and would-be settlers had—with some exceptions—an antagonistic relationship with the land.

For example, when the Lewis and Clark expedition traversed the mountains in September 1805, they almost died. Sergeant Patrick Gass called the Bitterroots, “the most terrible mountains I ever beheld” and Lewis noted, on the return trip in May 1806, “I have not leisure at this moment to state all those difficulties which we encountered in our Passage over these Mountains—suffice it to say we suffered from everything Cold, Hunger, & Fatigue could impart.”⁷ The land's physical challenge even captured the imagination of Washington Irving in his 1837 *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, USA in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West*. It is significant that Irving, who is widely considered the first international American author, turned to the Selway-Bitterroot region to top the

drama of stories like “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle.” The climax of his *Bonneville* narrative occurs in the Bitterroots when the men are “entangled in the wild and desolate labyrinths of the snowy mountains; climbing and descending icy precipices; and nearly starved with cold and hunger.”⁸ The land also forced both friendly and hostile interactions between groups—such as the confusing relations between Indian tribes, missionaries, and fur traders in the mid-nineteenth century.

The homesteaders of the early twentieth century also found the land hostile, but like the Nez Perce story of goat, to them it was attractive because it represented everything civilization was not. The majority of these residents did not “fit” the mainstream culture of the time, such as the outlaw Shissler brothers whose cabin, bearing an elk skull and crossbones, became the area's first ranger station; Charlie Gallagher, an African American fire crew cook; Mary Ellen Dodds Rees, a lone female homesteader; William Moreland, a mad poacher who ended up in a sanitarium; several same-sex oriented (gay) rangers and fire lookouts; and George Case, a Cherokee immigrant who became a celebrated Selway ranger. Case built one of two airfields in the wilderness (for fire protection) and oversaw the first U.S. smoke jumping maneuvers later used by World War II paratroopers. Most worked at subsistence farming, outfitting, trapping, and seasonal labor for the Forest Service. Although there were those who profited from the land, more often than not people let their emotional relationship with it trump business decisions. For example, in the early 1930s, a major grazing operation ended when landowner Phil Shearer turned his homestead over to the Forest Service because he wanted the place to fall back to its natural state.

Preserving the natural history of the Selway-Bitterroots has been a guiding principle of the region ever since. Bob Marshall single-handedly prevented a major roadway through the Selway-Bitterroots in the 1930s. The area is the birthplace of prescribed natural fire and one of the few areas in the country where fire plays its natural role today because of the innovative but controversial fire study programs of trapper-turned Fire Chief Bud Moore. Human structures are virtually gone because of a maverick bridge foreman who was directed to burn every building he found during the 1960s (though many of the footings of these structures are still visible under clumps of brush).

Moreover, the Selway River remains one of the most intact U.S. watersheds. Thanks to Idaho Senator Frank Church, who not only played a leading role in passing the Wilderness Act into law but also contributed to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Yet Church's efforts would not have had the same impact if not for a group of committed wilderness workers who, in the 1970s, made the unprecedented decision to allow only one whitewater launch per day on the Selway River. Trails have been maintained by people like Connie Saylor, a former Forest Service

wilderness ranger, who for twenty years enlisted Iowa farm kids and teachers as volunteer crews. Although Iowa is one of six U.S. states with no wilderness areas, many of these volunteers later pursued careers in conservation, some in the Selway-Bitterroot itself. Saylor also has the distinction of scolding Harrison Ford for flying his Beaver aircraft into Moose Creek Ranger Station—where George Case built his airstrip in 1930—with a small fleet of airplanes and retinue of cooks for a personal vacation. Because of people like Saylor, the Selway-Bitterroot is now a major study area for wilderness workers from across the country. She is Lead Wilderness Steward of the Selway-Bitterroot Foundation, a nonprofit group dedicated to training wilderness workers of the future. All this makes the Selway-Bitterroot one of the most important areas in the Wilderness Preservation System.

Selway-Bitterroot oral histories

Shortly after I began collecting Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness history, I met Dennis Baird, a former librarian who has gathered much of the north Idaho history and edited five books of primary material.⁹ Because of our desire to protect the documents of human history of the Selway-Bitterroot with the same avidity others have given to conserving the land itself, Baird and I have initiated a number of preservation measures which we have since grouped together under the title “The Selway-Bitterroot Cultural History Project.” This will include an interpretive history book and a Web exhibit as well as a collection of documents.¹⁰

The most important of these preservations took place several years ago when the Forest Service gave Baird and I gave permission to scour their buildings in Lowell, Idaho, five miles from the wilderness trailhead (this complex is headquarters for one of the wilderness area's ranger districts). There we discovered a trove of key primary materials which had been stored randomly for years, some of them dating to 1905, when the Forest Service was founded. We located several thousand documents and photographs stashed in the cookhouse freezer, half a dozen boxes in the fire building attic, some partially eaten by mice, and still more at the bottoms of large crates full of broken machine parts. We examined everything, sorted, and consolidated the materials into eleven boxes, then transported the lot to the University of Idaho Library.¹¹

As I engaged in this documentary preservation effort with Baird, the project began to take shape. I was excited to find old maps, early handwritten personal reminiscences, reports and correspondence, and thousands of wilderness inventory photographs. But I felt something was missing. Although these objects, documents, and photographs illuminated parts of the wilderness's human past, none captured its essence—that is, the unique ways in which cultural and natural

histories interconnect in the immediacy of the present. It was about that time I discovered several small oral history holdings associated with the area. Because oral narratives have the ability to preserve a sense of time and place, and sound is the fullest way to transform a real space into an imaginary one, I felt orality was vital to our representations of the land and its human history. Furthermore, it was not just the oral histories themselves that were important. It was also the circumstances in which they had been preserved that illuminated interaction between humans and landscape in this wildest of environments.

The first oral histories date to the mid-1960s when a man from Oklahoma named Dick Walker became wilderness ranger in the Selway-Bitterroot. He was one of the first people to begin interpreting the Wilderness Act of 1964 on the ground. While working in the backcountry, he became obsessed with the area's human history. Stationed at the historic Moose Creek Ranger Station (thirty miles from the nearest road), Walker met people coming back to visit the homesteads they had once owned and that were now public lands. Using primitive recording equipment without training in collecting oral narrative, he relied on his love of the landscape and its history to interview visitors. He routinely stopped his own work, detained people, who were more often than not weary from days of hiking, and coaxed them into telling their stories on tape. During the winters, he often took old timers out on ski trips where he would record their stories over a four- or five-day period. Over three seasons, he recorded the earliest oral narratives that exist of the area. He never indexed or transcribed the interviews, which are to this day in his private collection.

A second wave of oral histories a short time later documented Nez Perce voices. In October 1971, Bernie Krause, a University of California, Berkeley, professor interested in bioacoustics, and his partner, jazz musician Paul Beaver, recorded the oral narratives of Elizabeth and Angus Wilson (Elizabeth Wilson is the Nez Perce Tribal elder I referred to earlier).¹² These recordings are now part of a much larger collection at Washington State University that includes war dances, tribal speeches, spirit songs, and owl dances as well as tales and legends.¹³ However, the Wilson tape is the only one that deals exclusively with the land that is now the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.

A third oral history initiative occurred in 1988 when the Forest Service issued a contract for a written history of the Moose Creek Ranger District which was, until a few years ago, the only all-wilderness ranger district in the country. Over the years, Moose Creek's managers helped set a national "standard" for wilderness use and practices, and the Forest Service recognized that a record of these practices needed to be captured. As part of the contract, Forest Service Archeologist Cindy Schacher supervised ten taped interviews, which are currently held in the Supervisor's Office in Grangeville, Idaho, about fifty miles from the

Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness boundary. Schacher preserved these tapes, catalogued and indexed them, and has transcribed several.

A fourth collection, which I am undertaking, is in process. Two years ago, Cindy Schacher gave me Dick Walker's contact information while telling me, "He doesn't like to share his information. But maybe he'll talk to you." I finally met Walker at his log home built into the side of a deep canyon a few miles from the wilderness boundary. I instantly understood that his collection—hundreds of historic photographs as well as ten thousand or so personal images (Walker is a photographer) and about 70 oral history interviews—was the most important source for the cultural history of the area. But more than that, Walker, the man, carried under his skin the stories, facts, and the context necessary for any accounting of the area (fig. 1). I began traveling to Walker's home on a regular basis to record his oral stories and information.

A final collection, which is the most problematic, but also the most metaphorically important, dates back to 1970. This collection also originated with Walker. In the summer of that year, Walker hired a historian from Washington, DC, Mary Ellen Ackerman, to conduct an unprecedented number of interviews with old timers, people who had watched the landscape turn from Indian territory to homestead lands, primitive area, and then protected wilderness; people whose stories would have disappeared if she had not captured them. For example, Ackerman was able to do extensive interviews with Elizabeth Wilson who was 88-years old at the time. Ackerman also interviewed people like Punk Wolfinbarger, owner of Running Creek Ranch, one of the Selway-Bitterroot's few remaining inholdings, and Jim Renshaw, long-time packer, outfitter, and wilderness resident.

When Ackerman returned to Washington, DC, after her summer in the woods, she set about indexing and cataloguing the interviews. She also transcribed parts of them on 4 × 6 note cards. She limited herself to a back and front of one card, writing down the most important narrative moments—such as the story of a dead Shoshone woman atop Shissler Peak. She also recorded basic historical information, like how long it had been since people hunted grizzlies in the wilderness. She was especially assiduous with transcribing the extensive interviews with Elizabeth Wilson. In some segments, like the one provided below, Wilson's voice—her personality—speaks through Ackerman's written text as if it were pure sound. Curiously enough, here Wilson uses her narrative about the Selway-Bitterroot region to talk about the value of oral history to traditional native culture and lament its loss:

You know Indians used to tell stories. It was their custom every evening. Everybody would be listening. One would tell all kinds. Coyote stories, any kind of stories. It was just sort of a council, I think. Everybody knew all the



Fig. 1. Dick Walker on a ski trip over Lolo Pass, Idaho, 2009. Photo courtesy of the author.

stories. These days, this generation, they could not tell you one coyote story. My people, my age, and a little bit younger, those are the ones that can. Not these young ones anymore. They do not even talk Indian. It is hard when everybody talks English.¹⁴

After completing this note-taking process, Ackerman sent the cassette tapes to Walker in Idaho by U.S. Post Office. They never arrived. Although her detailed note cards in her compact cursive writing survive (they, too, are privately held) Ackerman's oral histories are ultimately a narrative of loss. For not only are the tapes lost but also the sounds and voices, as well as the stories. This is similar to the lost orality that Wilson speaks of. But the lost narratives also fittingly characterize the contours of the Selway-Bitterroot. In other words, such far-flung

wilderness outposts are places where academic methodology, orderly archiving, and institutional protocols are the least known. After all, the urgency to record narrative, given the advanced ages of many sources who agreed to tell their stories, trumps the need to form systematic plans for gathering it. Thus, these oral histories, as unsystematic and incomplete and tragic (i.e., the lost tapes) as they are, have since become vital to the philosophy of the Selway-Bitterroot Cultural History Project. They, more than any other primary source, come closest to capturing the spirit of this particular wilderness.

The Selway-Bitterroot wilderness as oral history

What is that spirit? The Selway-Bitterroot is one of this country's most rugged and "wild" landscapes and presents an ultimate challenge to sensory experience. On the ground, walking the area's thousand or so trails, the landscape splinters into a kaleidoscope of sensations. Musty, fruity, piney, smoky, and nutty scents come at you from every direction. Sometimes you can capture each separately and sometimes they intermingle to suggest moods: jarring or soothing, ethereal, or earthy. The sounds fall immediately into a synesthetic orchestra: the water sounds hazy blue and the Swainson's thrush sounds silky and seems to whisper. That blending is part of the embodied experience of the place, part of being in this ecosystem. In other words, wilderness users find their physical senses heightened. But just as important, users' intellectual senses become fine-tuned as they simultaneously realize they are walking one of the most intact ecosystems in the country and begin to notice faint traces of human history: the remains of ancient Indian rock art or stone ovens, the footings of century-old cabins hidden by hawthorn bushes, and crude gravestones of early trappers and homesteaders. As one old-timer told me, "There's so much history here."¹⁵ His comment is typical, for the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness user's sense of cultural history is amplified by the very fact that so much of the surrounding environment is strikingly natural.

I have come to think that the best way to replicate the sensual experience of being in the wilderness is to emphasize the area's oral history. In the process, maverick ethnographer Dwight Conquergood and his ideas of "embodied narrative" have inspired me. Conquergood takes his cue from poststructuralism, which caused a rethinking of identity as culturally constructed and relational instead of given and essential. For historians, the consequences of this rethinking means eschewing epic narratives, aggregates, and abstractions in favor of personal observation, local knowledge, and evidence that can be seen, touched, photographed, and recorded, such as oral history. At the heart of this kind of history is an experiencing body located in time and space or an *embodied narrative*.

Readers or listeners who engage in an embodied narrative are then compelled to make interpretive decisions about the information and stories they see and hear.¹⁶

In other words, embodied narrative not only focuses on the contingency of people and events, it also recognizes that the act of interpretation is a vital part of making meaning: In both cases, unmediated physical experiences make a greater impact on people and are more memorable than those described solely in print. Embodied narrative is powerful because it is based on the belief that only when the body is put into motion, on site, in opposition to weather, traffic, and even consumer diversions (to use an urban example), can it actually make meaningful connections. Thus, exhibits like the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, or the Bristol Slave Trail in England, compel the student of history into active engagement with the past. And when people are made to actively participate in the making of meaning, they see themselves as having personal and political agency.

Once I understood how important it was that the audience for the project's Web exhibit and book feel as embodied as walkers through the Selway-Bitterroot at any point in history, turning to the area's oral history was an obvious choice. The power of pairing wilderness and oral history can be demonstrated through a segment of Bernie Krause's recording of Elizabeth Wilson in 1971. The segment, transcribed below, begins with Wilson talking about Indian religion and then transitions to her and her son Angus discussing the sounds of wind:

Elizabeth: And my mother used to say . . . *sound of Elizabeth clapping, a drum-like clap, that also sounds like a heartbeat* it's drumming . . . Now they'd hear them, now late in the afternoon, till way late in the night, they'd hold that services . . . *she begins to chant while still clapping/drumming*. Now that chant is—see—waaaaay before white people. Way before any papers or books came to this nation, or any Indians say any book or paper, but they did, in that song, they chanted, “you have no idea how you were recorded in that book. How your day, your everyday life, your future days to come is recorded in that book.” It's a teachings in the book. That's what it said. So it must have been something that came and taught them about [the] Bible or something. Something connected with [the] Bible.

Elizabeth: Anyway, that's what the Indian religion held on. Even after missionaries came, they still held that. When Chief Joseph retreated, 1877, they held those songs down there, I mean, religious doings down Wallowa and Asotin and Whitebird. Till soon years after it died off. There's no more left of the old Indians that could carry on the . . . *soundscape of birds sound of birds singing, water rushing, wind whistling and crickets chirping*.

Angus: In the valley now you get that effect, at Whitebird; not Whitebird, but I suppose you go down the Salmon River, but up the Snake River the wind blows in such a way, it sounds like, at times it will sound like there's a band of sheep at a distance, maybe there's a herd of them, maybe 50 or 100, and that, as the matter of fact, and it's just the wind, it's the way the wind whistles down. Of course the wind blows an awful lot down the Snake River, up the river, and it's just the sound, it's just a weird sound, not real . . .

Elizabeth: And these snags, tell 'em about *tiye-pu*.

Angus: Well, *tiye-pu* it's merely the wind going through a dead snag.

Elizabeth: Just whistling.

Angus: You only hear it in the mountains where fire has swept through. And even one snag will make noise. But where there's a bunch of them, you just hear . . . *starts to make a howling noise*.

Elizabeth: Yeah, sad noise. I've heard that.¹⁷

While there are many interesting aspects to this recording (e.g., the mention of Chief Joseph and the war of 1877), the most important for our project is how the Wilsons' narrative triggers listeners' five senses separately—the feel of wind, the sight of dead snags, the outward birdsong and inward drum of the human heart, the scent of water, and the sense of memory. The effect is to create an extension of the listeners' bodies but also to intensify their self-awareness and self-perception, and ultimately to make listeners feel alive. Perhaps this is why Elizabeth asserts sound as the primary vehicle of history. As she narrates the history of the area—(e.g., earlier in the recording, when she speaks of the religious ceremony where dozens of Indian tribes camped during camas digging)—she also questions the recording of history in papers and books—“you have no idea how you were recorded in that book”—instead of in the sounds of ceremony and song.

Haruo Aoki, a specialist on the Nez Perce language, defines the sound *tiyé pu* as just what Angus Wilson says: “wind whistling through snags.” Aoki counts *tiyé pu* as one of the Nez Perce's phonosymbolic words, that is words that describe sounds (onomatopoeic words) or the way something happens (mimetic words).¹⁸ Not surprisingly, many Nez Perce phonosymbolic words come from life in the mountains: *cis*, the sound of an explosion, as when a blood-bloated mosquito burns and bursts; *calalal*, the sound made by a lone katydid; *lap*, the sound of flapping of raven's wings; *kux*, the sound of footsteps of a deer; *pay*, puffs of smoke in the air; *pox*, the sound of fish splashing; *quaiy*, just full of odor; *wiyux*, the inertia or heaviness one feels when one is pulling a rope with something heavy attached. The use of phonosymbolic words is another way the Wilsons draw readers into their narrative and into the environment of which they speak.

Phonosymbolism, or “sound symbolism,” as it is sometimes called, acts as a metaphor for the oral history of the Selway-Bitterroot since such language has the power to articulate the interconnectedness between words, emotion, and ecology in a way no other linguistic units do—and sometimes more so. For example, the sound of wind blowing through a snag might be more ecologically salient than its visual incarnation because the thick forests and high mountains of the area obscure them. But more importantly, phonosymbolism, as it is employed by the Wilsons, has the ability to bring the listener within the embodied and emotional space of the narrative. It enacts oral language's ability to ground experience. As theorist Julia Kristeva puts it, “Language is not conceived of as a mental elsewhere, or as an abstract thought process. It participates as a cosmic element of the body and nature, and is joined with the motor force of the body and nature. Its link with corporal and natural reality is not abstract or conventional, but real and material.”¹⁹

The Wilsons further expand listeners’ self-awareness by drawing their attention to the process of perceiving the immediate environment and talking candidly of bodies as instruments of interpretation. Elizabeth's and Angus's discussion of the sound of wind—the moaning he mimics and her affective interpretation of its “sad noise”—emphasizes that interpreting the natural environment is a physical and emotional experience. Elizabeth's voice, like the wilderness itself, engages listeners in the present tense. At the same time, the past she speaks about compels listeners to reconcile her narrative with their own current states of mind, their own unsolicited memories, and the physical worlds around them. Even if people listen to her narratives at a coffee shop in California or a bar in New York, they feel the historical presence of this distant world in the same way they feel the memory of a human touch, as embodied experience.

The Selway-Bitterroot Cultural History Project will privilege oral stories of the Selway-Bitterroot in order to provide readers/listeners with an embodied narrative. Such a narrative will, in the best case, help them take interpretive action by making connections between their own experience, a remote landscape, and a distant past. Oral narratives of the Selway-Bitterroot, and by extension many American wildernesses, are vital to understanding the interconnectedness between cultural and natural environments. These narratives get the closest to the experiencing body in real time, something that being in the wilderness requires.

Debbie Lee is a professor in the English Department at Washington State University. With the aid of a National Endowment for the Humanities Collaborative Research Grant, she is currently at work on a cultural history book and Web site about the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. Her project includes collecting oral histories that will inform her understanding of how humans shape a pristine wilderness area, and how it, in turn, shapes them.

NOTES

- 1 Public Law 88-577 (16 U.S.C. 1131–6).
- 2 I should make it clear that there are, in fact, oral histories devoted to the topic of wilderness. An excellent example of this is the Sierra Club Oral History Series in the Regional Oral History Library, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Moreover, many Park Service and Forest Service historians have collected oral histories of their regions. See, for example, Janet A. McDonell's article "Documenting Cultural and Historical Memory: Oral History in the National Park Service," *Oral History Review* 30, no. 2 (2003): 99–109. However, the scholarship about national parks, national forests, and especially wilderness areas remains minimal.
- 3 Nick Gerhardt. "Summary of Stream and Water Quality Conditions—Selway River." Nez Perce National Forest Memorandum, U.S. Forest Service, January 23, 1992; "Bush Flying: Moose Creek," *Pilot Getaways: Adventure Travel for Aviators*, Summer 1999, Web; "Backcountry Fly-Fishing Adventure," Richie Outfitters, Web.
- 4 AnneMarie Moore and Dennis Baird, ed., *Wild Places Preserved: The Story of Bob Marshall in Idaho* (Moscow: University of Idaho Library, 2009).
- 5 Elizabeth Arnold, *NPR Morning Edition*. The Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. Radio Expeditions: Wild Country Preserved by 1964 Wilderness Act (September 2, 2004). Timothy Egan, "The Last Wilderness," *The New York Times* (July 1, 2007).
- 6 Nez Perce Music Archive, Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections. Tape 12, Side A, Section 1.
- 7 Sergeant Patrick Gass, *Gass's Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, reprinted from the 1811 edition (Cambridge, MA: A. C. McClurg, 1904), 143. Harry William Fritz, *The Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 122.
- 8 Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A. in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West* (New York: Putnam and Son, 1868), 320.
- 9 These include Moore and Baird, *Wild Places Preserved*; *In Nez Perce Country: Accounts of the Bitterroots after Lewis and Clark*, ed., Lynn Baird and Dennis Baird (Moscow: University of Idaho Library, 2003); *The Nez Perce Nation Divided: Firsthand Accounts of Events Leading to the 1863 Treaty*, ed., Dennis Baird, Diane Mallickan, and William Swagerty (Moscow: University of Idaho Library, 2002); *Faithful to their Tribe and Friends: Samuel Black's Report from Fort Nez Perce*, ed., Dennis Baird (Moscow: University of Idaho Library, 2000); and *The Early Years of the Bitterroot Forest Reserve: Major Frank Fenn Reports to Washington*, ed., Dennis Baird (Moscow: University of Idaho Library, 1999).
- 10 This project will include an interpretive history of the region and an online Web exhibit, both of which will feature oral histories. Baird has visited the National Archives in Maryland and the Seattle Federal Records Center many times. What he discovered was disturbing for public land archivists. Forest Service agencies in the region usually send their cultural/historical material to Seattle, but if they do not request, at a later date, that the records be transferred to the National Archives in Maryland, then the Seattle Federal Records Center can destroy the records after a ten-year period, a phenomenon also noted by Harold Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996, 2004). This means that

- records for public lands are hit and miss, and some go missing altogether. When Baird visited the Seattle Records Office in the early 1990s, for example, he briefly examined a box labeled “Wilderness” which dealt primarily with the Selway-Bitterroot. Five years later, when he made another visit and requested this box, it was gone. He assumes it was destroyed under the ten-year policy.
- 11 The University of Idaho Library runs the Wilderness Archive, which Baird founded. The documents have been deposited there.
 - 12 Krause went on to produce from his Nez Perce recordings a soundtrack called *All Good Men*. Apparently his favorite track of the album is “Legend Days Are Gone,” in which Wilson’s voice provides the background. He has a CD of Wilson’s oral narrative called “Nez Perce Stories.” Buyers can purchase this CD from his Wild Sanctuary Company (<http://www.wildsanctuary.com>), which provides natural sound and media design services, and has one of the largest libraries of wildlife sounds. See Krause’s autobiography Bernard Krause, *Into a Wild Sanctuary: A Life in Music & Natural Sound* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1998).
 - 13 Nez Perce Music Archive, Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections. Some items in the collection, which dates from 1897 to 1974, were originally recorded on wax cylinders, others on reel-to-reel and cassette tape. Wilson’s interview comes from Tape 12, Side A, Section 1.
 - 14 Elizabeth Wilson interviewed by Mary Ellen Ackerman, summer 1970. Notes privately held by Jane Holman.
 - 15 Bud Moore. Personal interview by the author, March 30, 2009. Moore is author of *The Lochsa Story: Land Ethics in the Bitterroot Mountains* (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press, 1996).
 - 16 Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” *Communication Monographs* 58 (1991): 187. I am also indebted to Elizabeth Kowalski-Wallace’s use of Conquergood’s theories in her book *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
 - 17 Nez Perce Music Archive, Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections. Tape 12, Side A, Section 1.
 - 18 See Haruo Aoki, “Symbolism in Nez Perce,” in *Sound Symbolism*, ed. Leanne Hinton, Johanna Nichols, and John J. Ohala (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15–6. Also see Haruo Aoki, *Nez Perce Dictionary*, University of California Publications in Linguistics, volume 122 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1269–71.
 - 19 Julia Kristeva, *Language: The Unknown*, trans. Anne M. Menke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 50.