

## **ASEH Founders – Oral Histories**

Interview with Stephen Pyne by Lisa Mighetto

Tempe, Arizona

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**LM --** Good afternoon. Let's start out by talking about your background. Can you describe your education?

**SP --** I actually had a very good education. I went to a Jesuit high school here in Phoenix. It was an old school, classical education, although it was during the '60's, and you could just watch it unravel as the years went by. But I was there young enough that it was very good. Then I went Stanford as an undergraduate, and had, I thought, another good education. But I had a very hard time getting into graduate school. I was rejected by all the graduate schools I applied to...

**LM --** That's surprising. You were from Stanford!

**SP --** I had good grades, good GREs, summa cum laude ...there was something wrong with my application. I don't know what. But it was just across the boards.

**LM --** What were you interested in? Where were you applying ... which department?

**SP --** It had been suggested that an American Studies program would be good for me. My advisors had named good programs. It just didn't happen. Anyway after graduating I ... was working at the North Rim [of the Grand Canyon], and I received a postcard. It was mis-addressed, but it was from one of my old professors. And he said he had heard from another guy, from whom I'd taken a couple of classes, that I ought to consider Texas ... University of Texas, at Austin, and study under this guy Goetzmann, who had similar interests. So I just wrote a letter to Texas. And they said fine, so I started in January....

**LM --** And this was in the '70s?

**SP --** Yeah. I was at Stanford from '67 to '71, right at the height of all of the action. And then graduate school from '72 to '76.

**LM --** "All of the action" – did you get to Berkeley during those years?

**SP --** I didn't get to Berkeley. I got tear-gassed going to the library once.

**LM --** At Stanford?

**SP --** Yeah. Oh, there was a lot of ... unrest ... Everything was just ... goofy all over

**LM --** All over the Bay Area.

**SP --** Yeah, it was that. It was all over. There were plenty of things going on, and plenty of disruptions, and nobody knew what was ... what was really happening.

**LM --** And were you involved in any of this?

**SP --** No....

**LM --** So what was your attitude at that time?

**SP --** The central fact for my career is that a few days after I graduated from high school, here in Phoenix, I got a job at Grand Canyon. I was supposed to be a laborer on the South Rim. And I showed up, and it turns out, that day they had an unexpected opening on the fire crew on the North Rim. Somebody had called in and couldn't come. So, they asked if I wanted to go, and I said, why not. So, I flew over, in this little Cessna. We landed in this meadow, north of the Park ... in a big storm ... fog ... it was very exciting. And I became a member of the fire crew...

**LM --** And who are you working for?

**SP --** That was the National Park Service.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** It was 15 summers in all on the North Rim, and one winter. After I had my doctorate I was unemployed ... I just worked as a winter seasonal on the South Rim, actually at Desert View, on the east entrance, for the winter.

**LM --** So, you went to the University of Texas in the middle of this? I mean, you were working all along ...?

**SP --** Yeah. I started at the Rim the summer before I went to Stanford [summer of 1967]. So before I went away from home, to college, I started at the Rim. And I was there five years more after I got my doctorate [in 1976].

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** By the time I left I was married and had one kid. So, my whole academic career was framed, basically, by being on the North Rim. And everything I've written about, all my interest in environmental history, comes from that experience. It all comes out of writing about that place, or places like it. Or it comes out of fire; being on the fire crew; being in those settings.

**LM --** What was it like being at the University of Texas?

**SP --** Well, actually it worked out pretty well for me. It was not a structured program – certainly not American Civ. You had to have one course in intellectual and cultural

history. Other than that, you could put together whatever else you had. So I decided early on - like my first semester there - what I wanted to write for a dissertation, and then structured all my courses accordingly. I took western history, history of science, and geology. I tested in geomorphology. And then had Goetzmann for American Civ. I put it all together to write a biography of G. K. Gilbert, an exploring geologist in the west. Everything folded into that. I went through the program pretty quickly. They didn't spend much time on mentoring or teaching. If you weren't a problem, they just left you alone. So, once I figured out how the system worked, I took the courses that I needed to get through, and they signed off. I then ... wrote the whole dissertation, and just turned it in. I got two comments back. One was: the title was pretentious, which it was, but I wasn't ...

**LM --** What was the title?

**SP --** The title was: *The Inculcation of Grove Karl Gilbert: A Biography of American Geology* and ...you had to read it to understand.

**LM --** “*The Inculcation ...*”

**SP --** “*The Inculcation*” comes from the title of an essay Gilbert had written on the scientific method, and I applied to him. The pretentious part was “*A Biography of American Geology*” because I aspired to capture through Gilbert that larger theme. But they let me leave the title in. And then, I had numbered the subchapters – one, two, three, four, and I was told to replace those with subtitles. And that was fine...

**LM --** And you finished in '76?

**SP --** ... I defended in May, '76, which was a terrible time to come out, very few jobs available.

**LM --** Has there ever been a good time to come out?

**SP --** I don't think so. It's just different.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** I ... had my fire boots on when I defended, and then I just walked outside to my car and drove to the Rim ...and started up again.

**LM --** But this job was in the summers, right?

**SP --** That was all in the summers.

**LM --** So in the winter ...

**SP --** So that winter, that following winter, I had no job. I actually I had placed third [for a position] at ASU, and in retrospect it was a fortunate outcome. Because if I had gotten hired, I would have been hired either in western history or history of science, which was what I thought I was doing.

**LM --** And who got hired?

**SP --** BobTrennert. If it had been me, I never would have ... done any of the stuff I've done. So instead, I just worked on the South Rim that winter. Actually I had to take a three-month break in service because I was a seasonal. So while at Desert View, wondering what I'm going to do next, I realized that I really liked fire, and I ought to take the education I'd received as an historian, and look at fire in the way I'd been trained to look at all these other things. And so ... I got the idea for doing what became *Fire in America*. Then was able to convince the Forest Service to come up with some funding to make it happen....

**LM --** And by this time you no longer were in contact with Goetzmann?...

**SP --** Well, really, I'm out. Yeah.

**LM --** But he didn't continue to advise you, or—

**SP --** Well, not really. I didn't ask for it.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** I mean, you have to realize I was never really socialized into the academy. I was rejected by graduate schools. I came in late to UT. I didn't come in as part of a cohort. I arrived in January. I just was ...out of the loop. And then I was gone every summer. So there was no ...society. I just thought, oh, I take my classes; I write my dissertation; I get my degree; and go on.

**LM --** So there's no one to tell you that you couldn't do it, when you decided that you're interested in pursuing fire.

**SP --** That's right. There was no one to tell me ... otherwise.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** And in a way, Goetzmann, for all of his eccentricities – and they were many and often powerful – really valued serious work. He thought that scholarship was important, was worth devoting your life to. And he was interested in people who would take on big themes and, you know, do different things. There was a standing joke in the department about how do we select new students here? The image was Goetzmann - somebody just comes in and lays a surf board on his desk and says, “Hey, dude, you know, I've been at Malibu the last ten years, I want to study American Civ.” And he'd say “Why not?”

Welcome!” You know, they didn’t care. I mean, they didn’t provide for you. It was a social Darwinist approach. If you were really good – then you would find a way. If you weren’t –

**LM --** You’d get weeded out?

**SP --** ... you weren’t worth wasting time on. Well, it worked for me. Worked for Hal Rothman, too. We didn’t overlap, by the way. He came after I had left. But Hal was someone else that kind of system could work quite well for.

Anyway, I got out. I had no job. I took on this research project with the Forest Service. And while I was out fighting a fire – in California actually, ‘77 was a big year – we got a call ... I had just been married earlier in the summer, and Sonja got a call from the Forest Service who said, you know, we can’t pay any salary for this as we had first said...all we can do is pay per diem. We can only authorize science projects. This is history. So, we can do it as a cooperative agreement. Same money; but, you’ll have to contribute something. And what you’ll contribute is your salary. So, I just had to live off per diem. We had already bought a used International Harvester pick-up truck and a little, used single axle trailer to go around and do all the archival work. We didn’t have any money, were in debt for the truck and trailer, and now we had lost our expected salary. All I could claim was camping per diem, which was like two dollars a day. And it was just ... pathetic.

We were broke. We were dead broke. Anyway, I did it for two years, still going back to the Rim for summer; that’s what we basically lived on. And then, just trying to find some other way to write, get some money. I had this book of grants and fellowships or historians and used it to apply to the National Humanities Center. Turns out that was the first year they had opened. So, I got a fellowship there- I was part of the second class.

**LM --** Right.

**SP --** The reason was that nobody had really known about the place. Now it’s pretty difficult to get in, probably under 5% acceptance rate.

**LM --** I thought you were there later. Did you go back there a second time?

**SP --** Yeah, I went back a second time. They had an ecological humanities program for a few years with MacArthur Foundation money, and Harriet [Ritvo] and Jay [Taylor] and Mart [Stewart] – we were all there at the same time. They invited me. I doubt I could have gotten the second tour otherwise.

**LM --** So that’s later, ok.

**SP --** Yeah, that was later. That was where I was working on my *Canada* book.

**LM --** So you were saying that you went to North Carolina...

**SP --** So we went to North Carolina for the year, had our first daughter born there.

**LM --** You said [earlier] that Sonja liked it there.

**SP --** She liked it. She liked North Carolina a lot.

Meanwhile, [I was] still working at the Rimstill in the field; I was foreman. And I was starting to break down, because I just ... couldn't take the pounding. And we couldn't continue to live like this – moving randomly all the time. So I sent off the manuscript, finally, in December of 1980, to Princeton University Press. That was after a big fight with the Forest Service over copyright. They insisted they owned the manuscript. And I said, “well, you didn't pay a salary, so you don't own it.” I had to hire a lawyer, like I could afford one. A final insult. But the Forest Service did agree they would buy a thousand copies at deep discount, which was a nice subsidy for the Press. The book finally came out in summer of '82. By then I had, again by mysterious means, just received an announcement of a Fellowship by NEH – an Antarctic Fellowship. And ... I asked, “what am I going to do with this? I don't know what this is about. I mean, what do I do with it?” And, Sonja ...

**LM --** What do you mean, you “just received” it?

**SP --** Well, it just came in the mail. A brown envelope ...

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** I didn't know what to do with it, and Sonja insisted I really ought to think about this. And so, I did apply, and got it. It was a joint program between NSF and NEH. And it required that you go to Antarctica for one to three months with NSF. I went for all three months. For one thing, it took me out of the household for three months, so we saved that much food money.

**LM --** So your family didn't go, this was ...

**SP --** No, no. I had to go and they stayed. And after I'd accepted that, then finally ... after four years of sending out applications and the rest – and at this point the *Gilbert* book had been published [*Grove Karl Gilbert: A Great Engine of Research*], been revised and published, and I had *Fire in America* in press – I finally got an interview and was hired at the University of Iowa. And I said, well, I have already accepted this Antarctic thing. And so, I did that for the year, and then we went to Iowa.

**LM --** Oh, so it was a year? I thought it was just three months.

**SP --** It was a year-long Fellowship with three months on the Ice, I spent Christmas at the South Pole. New Year's at the end of the world...

**LM --** What was that like?

**SP --** ...Dome C [Station], which I described in my presidential address in Baton Rouge [See *Environmental History* 12 (July 2007).  
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/eh/12.3/pyne.html>].

**LM --** Right – “The End of the World.”

**SP --** The end of the world. That’s pretty much what it was like. The South Pole was weird, but interesting. I’d go out and walk around the actual Pole for exercise. And tried to make sure, however many times I went in one direction, I went in the other, so I didn’t gain or lose any days. ... Anyway, I was the only one in five years who ever took the Fellowship, so, they abandoned it. And I’ve never understood why it would go wanting. But I think part of it is that nobody teaches Antarctica, and if you write a book about it, where does that go? It doesn’t go anywhere. And so, I think from a career standpoint, it’s perhaps seen as not ....

**LM --** Even now?

**SP --** I don’t know. Now NSF has an artist and writers program.

**LM --** Right.

**SP --** But they’re mostly dealing with journalists and others ... Barry Lopez has gone down several times ... people like that, rather than academics, because the academics don’t know where to put it. So, anyway, at this point we went to Iowa ...

**LM --** And what year was this?

**SP --** Really, that must have been ... what, ‘82, ‘82 / ‘83. We were there for a couple of years. And, it really didn’t work out very well -- for several reasons.

**LM --** Did you teach environmental history there?

**SP --** No. I was supposed to teach the basic stuff ... basic surveys. I was hired really for intellectual history and history of science. So I would always work environmental stuff into my courses, but it would always have to be within that context. Then they found out my wife was Mormon, so they wouldn’t let me teach the survey course. They actually redesigned ....

**LM --** Are you joking?

**SP --** No. No. They redesigned the survey course. The survey course would traditionally go through reconstruction. And I was teaching the first part, and they changed it, so that I wouldn’t teach reconstruction. They couldn’t trust me to teach after they learned about Sonja. At the time I couldn’t figure out what was going on – how it

all turned so antagonistic. Everything had gone from being enthusiastic to being very, *very* hostile. The American studies department wouldn't have anything to do with me. I got threatening letters in my mailbox. I didn't understand. Anyway, I finally left. After I left, there was an article in the *Des Moines Register*, and the department used my departure as [an example of] professors leaving because their salaries were too low, which they were. But then they said, well, Pyne, you know, Pyne is Mormon, so he's gone off to live with his own kind. It was just outrageous. I mean, suddenly all this politically correct bigotry comes out. Nobody ever asked me if I was a member (I wasn't). It didn't matter. I suppose we've all got stories of his kind.

**LM --** But I haven't heard this one before.

**SP --** Yeah. To see it in print like that was just ... it was just appalling.

**LM --** That's a lawsuit waiting to happen. Gosh. You'd think they'd be more cautious....

**SP --** Well, they don't have to be. Only with certain groups. Anti-Mormonism was the politically correct alternative to anti-Semitism.

**LM --** Well, in any case ....

**SP --** I'd been through this before with the agencies. After my doctorate I tried to get on in fire, and the hit the affirmative action wall.

**LM --** Which agencies? The Park Service; the Forest Service ...?

**SP --** The Park Service and Forest Service, and they were both very emphatic that this is an era of affirmative action, and they were not hiring white males [during the late '70s]. They were very explicit about that. At one point the director at the [NPS] Western Region was on the Rim, and said, this is how it's going to be. He actually pointed to me, he didn't know who I was, we were all just standing around, asking if there was any chance of getting hired permanently. And he said, "this guy, we couldn't hire him if we wanted to." And the Forest Service was the same. They were under court orders. So, that option was shut off.

[Break in tape as narrator takes a phone call.]

I think of those days as my career that might have been. Interesting... I would have worked in the summer and been furloughed in the winter and maybe have some done writing. That's what Sonja thought when we married. She didn't know me as an academic, only as foreman of the North Rim Longshots.

Anyway, we ended the Iowa round. It was not working very well ...

**LM --** How long were you there?



**SP --** '82 / '83 / '84 ... We left in '84 ... But already, the summer of '83, I missed working for the parks. I missed working away during the summers ... So, I went ... let's see, I went to Antarctica in the winter of '81/'82, and then spent a summer in Iowa, and then, an old colleague from the North Rim, a ranger, said Rocky Mountain has had some big fire problems, and wondered if I could come out for the summer and work on fire plans. So I went to Rocky Mountain Park, as a seasonal, with the family, in '83 and '84.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** And then the next summer I was supposed to go to Theodore Roosevelt – the regional office was running this and they said “well, we just had an opening in Yellowstone, we'd like you to go to Yellowstone instead.” So I spent the summer of '85 in Yellowstone working on a fire plan, which gave me some insight into the '88 fires that happened afterwards. That's why I've been a continual critic of Yellowstone, I sort of saw it from the inside. Besides, I had decided I really wanted to write this Antarctic book. I couldn't do it at Iowa. And ... there were other problems, and we just had no connection there. So I just took a leave of absence, turned out [to be] for two years, and we lived on my summer earnings.

**LM --** Where did you live? You still lived in Iowa?

**SP --** No, we moved. We moved to Phoenix.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** I'm sorry, this is starting to get complicated. And I had basically four months in the fall of '84 to write *The Ice*... so I did. And ...

**LM --** In four months?

**SP --** Four months. And I had to write one chapter every two weeks – was the only way I could make the deadlines. Because in the spring, I then got a job teaching – one semester – a course at the University of Arizona, so I would commute down one day a week, for a seminar. And then I had a contract with the Defense Nuclear Agency, which was interested in the nuclear winter question. And another guy [Dr. Philip N. Omi, from Colorado State] and I did that. I was the historian and he was the number cruncher. All in all, we were living pretty close to the bone. And then we went to Yellowstone in '85 In the meantime, I wrote *Fire on the Rim* and *The Ice*. Sent *The Ice* off. I had a small advance from Oxford, which I needed, because it paid for about three ... three and a half months rent. We have two kids now, our second daughter born in Iowa. And, Oxford rejected it. They said “we're not going to publish it, *and* we want our advance back.” That was the summer I was in Yellowstone.

**LM --** Why did they reject it?

**SP --** They just said it was incomprehensible. They didn't want it. So, I said I don't have any money to pay you back, but when I publish it I'll pay you back out of whatever royalties I get. The copy editor on my *Gilbert* book [Holly Carver] had now taken a position at the University of Iowa Press, which was building up, oddly enough. So I contacted her and said, are you interested in Antarctica? And they said, fine. They were desperate for manuscripts. So it got published. And then the *New York Times* named it to its best books list for the year....

**LM --** So you were able to pay back the—

**SP --** So I was ... We sold about 2500 copies. But we got a paperback edition out of it with Ballantine. And so I was able to pay back. It wasn't a huge advance. But, as it turns out, I probably didn't need to pay back at all, I could have just walked. But anyway, so I, at that point taught a course as a visiting professor at ASU in the spring of '86. And then it was either go back to Iowa, or I'm out. It turns out ASU West was opening, and they had advertised for an historian – a western historian. Later I learned the search was rigged. But, I didn't know that then. So I went through the process. And, as it happens, they didn't pick me; it was already foreordained. But they didn't fill a position in sociology that they wanted. So they said “well, we're kind of intrigued, so we'll use that position to hire you.” So I took it, but I had to give up tenure, which I did. I couldn't reapply for three years. Those were the terms. So, in those three years, I went to Australia – I got a small NSF grant –and started that book; *The Ice* came out, and got an award; and I got a MacArthur. 1988 was an *annus mirabilis* – I couldn't do anything wrong in '88. Even Yellowstone burned. So I'm here ... at ASU West, ten years after my degree. It's a new, upper division, undergraduate program.

**LM --** In which department?

**SP --** Well, there were only seven of us in the entire College of Arts and Sciences – the “Magnificent Seven,” we were called. We were building the institution. One year we actually hired two people for every person that was there. There were no departments. I got to design the departmental structure.

**LM --** So you were teaching while you had the MacArthur Fellowship, for five years?

**SP --** I couldn't have lived off the MacArthur.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** But ASU West gave me some space to negotiate, so I could rearrange teaching. So I was able to get some work done. And so, mostly [indecipherable] .... I was at West campus for ten years, and then the history department at ASU Main made an offer, and I came over, transferred over....That was about '96/'97. I was in history for three years, and then transferred into biology.

**LM --** And you've been here ever since?

**SP --** Yeah, I've been at ASU since '86.

**LM --** And how long have you taught environmental history here? You're teaching a course right now ...

**SP --** Well, I'm teaching a course right now. The problem is, you see there was no interest in ASU West, because we're just trying to get basic courses. And it takes three years to get a new course approved. You have to justify it with enrollment, and we didn't have enough enrollments, so I couldn't teach environmental history. I just put environmental history components into other courses. And then when I transferred over here in '96/'97, I began teaching an environmental history course at the graduate level. There was nothing in the undergraduate catalog ; it would take three years to get something on the books. I worked to get my other courses transferred over. That's what I taught. And then I left history, which then wouldn't allow its students to take courses from me, not even readings and conferences. So I didn't teach environmental history and biology students had no interest in the field. So I didn't teach environmental history. And now we're reconnecting.

**LM --** You mentioned earlier that they hired you here because they were intrigued. ["Here" being at ASU.] This is before you got the MacArthur?

**SP --** ASU was interested because I'd published a lot at that time, for someone at my stage. I mean, that was the trade off.... Everybody I talk to has an unusual career. Nobody seems to be average. Mine was odd in its own ways, in that for years I wasn't heavily teaching. I was just starving and writing, basically.

**LM --** And you were prolific and ...

**SP --** And so, I built up this reservoir [of publications], which then served me very well, later on. Suddenly, I'm ten books ahead of other people.  
End of Side A

Suddenly I'm very well positioned to move up the hierarchy and begin doing things. I wrote my way through the ranks. Two books to get hired, two more to get promoted, two to reclaim tenure after I went to ASU, two more to get to full. Brute force, in a way.

**LM --** Then what you're saying is that it wasn't necessarily the topic itself, it was the prestige and the volume of publication?

**SP --** Yeah...

**LM --** Ok, so, they weren't looking for an environmental historian, in other words...

**SP --** Well, I could advertise as western history, they liked the regional stuff. You know I had written in that field, and tested in it. And I could ...

**LM --** But I remember—

**SP --** I could go in history of science, which was also attractive. So, I ... when I graduated from Texas, I thought of myself primarily as a historian of science.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** And that's what I was writing. I like science, and I like the history of exploration, because they both deal with nature. These were people encountering nature; people writing about nature; people interpreting nature. We didn't have a lot, at that point, of environmental histories. Rod Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, was really ... pretty much it. The great outpouring was just starting. So, that's how it refracted through me.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** And then my other interest was simply being in the Park; being on a fire crew; connecting in those ways.

**LM --** And what was your last year working on the fire crew?

**SP --** '81. Then in '85, I was at Yellowstone. I got on a couple of fires. That was fun. After Yellowstone I went to the northeast in August, and I had a subcontract with a guy there to go around to Acadia and some other parks ...

**LM --** A subcontract?

**SP --** Yeah.

**LM --** Consulting?

**SP --** Consulting on fire planning.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** And that was kind of fun. And then the Yellowstone arrangement had some money left over so I talked the Park Service – the regional office – Rocky Mountain – into paying for me to go for one pay period – two weeks – back to the North Rim. And they agreed. So I went back as a crewman, and that's when I made the notes that became *Fire on the Rim*. So by '86, I'm finally stabilized. I'm at ASU – one place or another at ASU...That was the end of my summer... stuff with the Park Service. Meanwhile I've also gone to Australia. I've written a stack of books.

**LM --** When did you become involved with ASEH?

**SP --** I've been trying to think of that. Part of this was, in 1976, while I was still in Texas... the bicentennial was underway, and there were these regional [history] meetings, and there was one in San Antonio. I met John Opie there, and Don Worster. And maybe some others. I remember them talking, at that time, about getting a journal, or organizing, or doing something. So, my recollection is that that there was a discussion. I was still a graduate student at that time, and I enjoyed listening in, but I wasn't a participant.

**LM --** This was a formal meeting at a conference?

**SP --** I just remember people getting together with similar interests... just talking.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** I was just there. I wasn't active. I still hadn't graduated.

**LM --** Were there other students there?

**SP --** I can't remember anybody else. I mean, it didn't seem ...

**LM --** How did you get to that conference?

**SP --** Well, I just drove, from Austin. That's why I could afford to go.

**LM --** On your own....

**SP --** I had saved up a little money and there was a side trip, associated with the conference that went to Mexico City. So I went down to Mexico City, for that ...

**LM --** I didn't know that.

**SP --** They took us out to the pyramids and there was a mariachi band playing "Dixie" because they heard the group was from Texas. And I had to think "this is too goofy, this is real American Studies stuff."

By the way, I didn't see a future in American Studies the way it was developing. The program at UT was fine because they let you organize your own education. There was no official methodology. There was none of this social science garbage. And Goetzmann, to his credit, was tolerant – always in how other people saw the world, that's what he thought education was all about. As long as you were interesting and you're working hard, and you're not a problem, you're not begging for money, they let you alone...

**LM --** But, you went to this meeting in '76, by yourself, and it was an independent thing. It wasn't like a group of students got together...

**SP --** No. No. I just went...It just happened. As I recall, it was a case of people similar interests finding their way together. I recall Don Worster urging me to read *Nature's Economy*.

**LM --** And they were talking about a journal.

**SP --** And they were talking about, you know, getting organized, or doing something. And ... that was the end of it for me, at that point. I graduated, and then was off – either in the summers at the North Rim, or tooling around collecting information and writing *Fire in America*.

**LM --** You didn't keep in contact with them?

**SP --** No contact with anybody.

**LM --** Ok.

**SP --** After *Fire in America* came out, I was invited to participate in this new organization. And, in fact,

**LM --** In what capacity?

**SP --** ...maybe join the executive committee, or do something. And I said “well, that sounds great.” The problem is I had no money to go to meetings. So I just thought it was more like an editorial board and they'll send me stuff. And I didn't realize that actually I had to go to the meetings, because I couldn't afford to go. This was not a statement about ASEH. For a number of years I didn't belong to any organizations. I couldn't afford them. I didn't renew memberships in anything for probably six years. I fought fire, tried to raise a family, and wrote books.

And, so, I sort of vanished, and then reconnected many years later ... After I was settled at ASU, I finally had some money, and some institutional support. I could go to a meeting or two. And I remember going to Vegas. That was first. And I had met Hal.

**LM --** And were you invited there again, or you remembered that they had once asked you to—

**SP --** I think somebody may have invited me, or I was just interested in connecting. I mean, I was finally in a position that ...

**LM --** How did you find out about it?

**SP --** I don't recall. But ... it may have been Hal, because we had made contact. He had sought me out, and found me while I was still of kicking around. We had a great chat. We got along great. I liked Hal a lot. And we had a lot of things in common. Well,

some things in common. And I think ... it was probably through him that I heard about ASEH, and connected.

**LM** – And what did you think when you went to Las Vegas and Tacoma?

**SP --** Oh, I thought it was great fun. I thought the group was nice. It was a friendly group. I thought these were topics that interested me. And I, you know, ... I was still sorting out what groups do I belong with? Am I a historian of science still? I decided that, no, I'm not anymore.

**LM** – What other groups did you belong to?

**SP --** Still thought I belonged with western history, but I thought western history was getting stranger, and it had less and less to do with what I was interested in. And so ...

**LM** – Stranger? How so?

**SP --** Oh, I don't know. Social history was just taking it over. And I didn't feel like the kinds of things that interested me were as common there, as at first they had been.

**LM** – Ok.

**SP --** And, you know, I had money to go to one meeting, basically, and so ...

**LM** – So ASU did give you money for one meeting?

**SP --** They would contribute towards one meeting, and then the rest I could pay for. And, so, it was sort of a slow connection. But I realized this is the group that I belonged with. I mean, I was writing these fire books, but in many ways they were not so much for historians as for the fire community. They thought of it as a kind of clan epic in a way. But they were happy to have it.

It's a good and bad news story. The good news is that, because I was out of the history loop, I wasn't plugged into all the various theses and historiographic concerns. For me, the problem was to go to the subject -- fire -- and build history out of it. The problem wasn't to begin with historiographic concerns and show how fire (or ice or the Grand Canyon) fit. I just said: I'm building history; I'm going to nature, and building history out of it. I didn't know how else to do it. There was no one to tell me any differently. I mean, I was doing this on my own, basically. And, then once I got up enough momentum, I realized well, this environmental history is where these books belong. If they belong anywhere, they belong in environmental history. This is the group I should be supporting, because, whether they think about it overtly or not, they're the ones supporting me....This is how I can explain what I do to the university. I can present this as environmental history.

**LM** – You said “this is the group.” So, would you identify ASEH with environmental historians? Are they the same thing?

**SP** -- Well, obviously, there are others. I don’t think we’d exist, for example, if geography hadn’t killed off the Sauerian tradition in historical geography. I mean, that dies out at exactly the time environmental history arrives. I think there were *lots of* topics in history and environment. And a lot of people doing environmental themes, which have a historical connection.....But, given my training, my temperament, and the rest, this was my group. They were people I liked, and associated with ....

**LM** – And you stayed in contact with Hal, it sounds like.

**SP** -- Oh, yeah. And we worked on his final manuscript, the fire history of the Park Service – administrative fire history. He contracted with me, actually, as a consultant, as kind of editorial advisor. I’d tell him “well, I think these are the topics you want to look at, this is the stuff I would look at, read.” I’d read and comment on his manuscript. We had a long correspondence going back and forth. It was a good experience, because we were actually able to talk though a lot. We could disagree. And he said “well, they don’t want to hear that, they want the story to be this.” He knows what an administrative history of the Park Service is supposed to be like, it has to meet these expectations. And I’d say, “well, I think it’s something else.” And he’d say, “well, I might agree with you, I might not, but this is what the task is.” It was a fun experience. I’d never thought of scholarship as a contact sport before, but with Hall there was always so much energy. You’re always just ... colliding and you know, smashing in. And then shake hands and get up and do it again. So it was a great exchange. Good fun.

**LM** – So–

**SP** -- And we stayed in contact.

**LM** -- And you attended every meeting after Tacoma?

**SP** -- I missed Denver, but I think I hit most of the meetings. This is the meeting I go to.

**LM** – Ok.

**SP** -- So it was a surprise when I was invited to serve as president.

**LM** -- A surprise in what way?

**SP** -- Well, I ... really hadn’t been engaged – institutionally. I mean ...

**LM** -- Ok.



**SP --** And I hadn't been engaged, in some ways, intellectually, in the sense of promoting environmental history to the academy, or promoting it to history, or arguing that we need to make space for it. I was just doing it.

**LM --** Well, you had students, which we really didn't talk about, but ...

**SP --** Well, I had grad students for three years –and then I continued on their committees, as they worked through. But, once I left the history department, the program wouldn't allow students to work with me otherwise...And biology had no place in a student's program of study for it. I'd offer it, and nobody would sign up. But Paul [Hirt] and I are co-teaching this course, and we are going to keep it, in one way or another Between history and the School of Sustainability we should enough students.

**LM --** It sounds interdisciplinary, from the way Paul described it.

**SP --** Yeah. Yeah.

**LM --** It seems to come from all over.

**SP --** I think it has to. The students are all over it. It's historically informed, but it's not necessarily out of history, as a discipline.

**LM --** But we were talking about why ASEH would be interested in you.

**SP --** Yeah. I don't know. I think it's just ... well, I just published a lot...And I guess I'm identified with the field. I know I felt a real obligation, a sense that well, whether it had been a conscious effort or not, we had sort of grown up together. I'd certainly benefited by it. People ask, "what do you do?" And I could say "I do environmental history." And, I mean, that counted for something. I felt I needed to ... pay back is maybe a clichéd term, but to the extent I could, I would try to do something for the people who, whether they knew it or not, had helped me.

**LM --** What do you think was your biggest accomplishment as president?

**SP --** Well, I think the biggest accomplishment has to be solving the executive director situation, and getting you as full time ...

**LM --** This is sort of an awkward conversation, because, you know ...[It's "awkward" because the narrator is being interviewed by the same administrator he helped put in place.]

**SP --** It was something the organization had talked about for a long time. We were close. We just needed to make it happen. And, part of that was thinking through the finances, thinking through the other parts of it, to show that it could be done. And then just bringing it before the executive committee in a way that we had to discuss it and make a decision. And then, finally, act on it. It took several false starts to get ... it was a

very awkward process. I'll apologize again for it. But I didn't know how else to do it, to keep it going, and have everybody feel they were engaged. I think it has worked out. I'm very pleased with it. And I regret I wasn't able to follow through with a financial thing, but that's happening. It's in the works. We're talking through the economics of the society.

**LM --** And you laid the groundwork for that.

**SP --** Well, I thought that that had to be done before we could act on the executive director position intelligently. We did other things, too. We got the web page re-designed, and moved a little more on line. We tried outreach, trying to think of what kinds of connections we might have with other organizations. We're still feeling our way through that. What the right mix is. We tried some things that worked. Some things that didn't work. I think that's necessary for us to keep going. In the end, I'm reminded of what Doug Weiner said when his term concluded. You're just grateful it didn't collapse on your watch. So, that's a relief.

**LM --** Well, along those lines, I talked to a lot of other administrators in other societies, and they have many factions. Even societies our size have many factions, and much tension, that we don't seem to have. I'm not saying it doesn't exist, but it's—

**SP --** I think the tensions are pretty mild, and people get along well.

**LM --** How do you account for that? I gave you that quote from John Opie that environmental history tends to be centrifugal. And he's not talking there in an administrative sense, but, it's related intellectually *and* administratively.

**SP --** I don't think ...

**LM --** It keeps flying apart. How do we keep ...

**SP --** I don't know that it keeps flying apart. I mean, that assumes that the discipline, or subdiscipline, should be centripetal. That it should have a core. I think that the core ...

**LM --** But it's expanding, and it's growing, and it's changing. And how do you keep an organization together administratively when that's happening?

**SP --** That's a good question... I think you have to be tolerant ... The organization is what its members decide it's going to be. I don't think we have a methodology, or a creed, that we all subscribe to. Our interest is looking at the engagement of people in the natural world with a historical perspective. And that can embrace a lot of different things. And I think, other than that we should let it happen. If you start taking party lines then you create factions. I think you let people go with stuff, explore, and come back. That's a strength that environmental history can interbreed with lots of other interests and topics. So, it may be disappointing to some people who really want a rigorous, well defined topic and methodology. I'm much more content to have it free range, and connect with lots of

things here and there, and then disconnect, and come back. I guess it's a version of what I learned in grad school.

I think this is a group that enjoys meeting, and talking about these things, and getting along with one another. I think the crisis may come when the founding generation passes away. Because there was a large, single cohort, in the short period of time, who wrote the founding books, and established the field. And some of them are still here, and some are just recently retiring. As that generation passes away, how do we make the transition? And not just to the next generation but to the generation after that, who had no personal contact with the founders.

**LM** – Who don't have that sense of common identity and purpose?

**SP --** A common purpose, or just, being part of a common cohort. A stable group needs a broader demographic, a diverse portfolio of interests and ideas. It seems to me it's happening. I think the organization's trying ... thinking about the next generations. They need their own subjects; their own books; their own history; their own sense of self. I'm not sure that's an analysis anyone else would agree with, but I think that may be where I would ... where I would be concerned.

**LM** – Do have any advice for future presidents?

**SP** – Well, I think the advice, you know, the advice is to be thinking about making that...

**LM** – That transition?

**SP** – Yeah. that double transition. It's not just for the people who are sort of following immediately behind the Don Worsters, the Carolyn Merchants, and Al Crosbys, and Bill Cronons ... The generation after that are the ones who will decide, I think.

Other than that, I think the organization is doing pretty well. I mean, people enjoy the meetings. They seem to have a good feel about them, even as we're getting a little larger. They seem to ... I enjoy going to it. It's not harassed. It's not going to feel overwhelmed. Get to talk to people.

**LM** – Do you go to other meetings, of other history organizations?

**SP --** I have not.

**LM** – Well, you mentioned western history.

**SP** – I was on a panel at the western [Western History Association conference] a few years ago, when it was in Phoenix, and gave a talk. Paul [Hirt] and Nancy [Langston] were on the same panel. We were talking about the Forest Service Centennial. I'm happy to do that. But otherwise – no. Most of the meetings I go to are for the fire community. They are fire officers, technicians, scientists. I'm usually the token

humanist or historian . I give talks at the federal fire training center . Again, I'm invited to give talks to public groups, or fire groups, at *their* meetings all the time.

**LM --** But I was just wondering about comparing ASEH to other history groups ... other like organizations, such as HSS [History of Science Society] ....

**SP --** Well, I was at the meeting last year ... Actually, I was at a conference in D.C. which held an evening session that segued into the reception for HSS. And I just ... didn't feel like I belonged. I mean, I always include history of science. I just think the history of science has sort of run out of gas.

**LM --** Well, it's interesting. In the Boise conference evaluations, several people said "these are my people." I thought that was an interesting way to phrase it, but ....

**SP --** Yeah. I think there is a good sense of community, and I think we're fortunate that its not defined methodologically or by thesis., Nature allows lots of people to come in; and environmental stuff allows for lots of variety; and [there] seems to be tolerance for it all. If we start taking stands on these intellectual issues – it's fatal.

I have a book coming out in the spring with Harvard titled *Voice and Vision*. It's a book about how to write books... I call it my post-modern phase. . Anyway it was sent out to historians to review, and my editor at Harvard said, this should be taught in history programs. And, the problem is that they all liked it, but they said, you know, he's not addressing these sort of post-modern, literary critic themes, or he's not addressing historiographical issues. And I said "that's the whole point of it." The point is, this is how you read and write – consciously, critically. How do you develop character? How do you deal with setting? How do you plot? How does voice relate to audience?

But, anyway, to the historians ... I said "well, there are other people than historians, who will be interested in this." But, they were immediately trying to put the text into these ongoing, disciplinary debates. And the whole point is to stand outside that, and say "you can take whatever stand or theme you want it. But this is how you can write it."

**LM --** Right. Right.

**SP --** My sense is, that's the great thing about nature, you just go back to nature, and build the history out of that. Bring the other stuff to it. But if you do that, you sit outside some of the disciplinary questions, which makes the text hard to teach. So, it's tricky to integrate, in some ways, into classrooms. That's why, my cycle of fire suite has become a world, in some ways, unto itself. I think the criticism I would make, if I could borrow from my biology colleagues, is that the organism is flourishing but not reproducing....

**LM --** But that's a serious problem.

**SP --** Well, it *is* a serious problem. I accept it. But it's just the way it is. I can't change that.

**LM --** Well, is there anything you'd like to add?

**SP --** Oh gosh, I don't know. I think I've talked about too much ... the wrong stuff.

**LM --** It's never the wrong stuff.

**SP --** Well, I belong to two communities – environmental history and fire. I probably give four talks to fire people for every talk I give to historians. And if it weren't for ASEH that ratio would probably be seven to one.

**LM --** But good for ASEH, because you've got this whole community that's getting exposed to ....

**SP --** Well, I would hope so. But this is really my academic community, and I was honored, if a bit stunned, to be asked to serve as president. Because even if I had come late to the community, it had done a lot of validating of what I did. People could ask, "what are you doing?" "Well, I'm doing environmental history." And that was acceptable. If that hadn't happened, who knows, where I would be. You know, I often say, all the other elements have disciplines, and departments, to teach them. The only "fire department" on a university is the one that sends emergency vehicles when you sound an alarm. Where would I be? There would be no place for me.

**LM --** Well, thank you.

**SP --** Thank you.



Stephen Pyne at ASU, April 22, 2008.