

High Desert Journal

FICTION & NONFICTION

**WILLIAM KITTREDGE
ROBERT STUBBLEFIELD
LAURA PRITCHETT
ROBERT STUBBLEFIELD
LINDA HUSSA
TOD ERKKILA
ELLEN SANTASIERO**

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

**THEODORE WADDELL
DAVID VAN ZANDT
TOM JUDD
KERRI ROSENSTEIN
THEODORE WADDELL
VICKY SJOBERG
PETER HICKOCK
THOMAS OSBORNE**

**KIM STAFFORD
DORIANNE LAUX
ELLEN WATERSTON
JOSEPH MILLAR
TARA BRAY
ROB WHITBECK
JANE VARLEY
CARLOS REYES
PAULANN PETERSEN
MICHAEL SYKES
PETER SEARS
KATHLEEN FLENNIKEN
WILLIAM STUDEBAKER
CHARLES GOODRICH
ROBERT WRIGLEY
DAVE MEMMOTT**

POETRY

\$10

A Buddhist In Cattle Country

We heard a rumor she was on her way
to spend time in a quiet place alone
and met her first at the barbeque
out to the Z Ranch where

you had to see it through
her eyes: smoking carcasses
on spits turned slowly
over the mesquite coals.

God, that meat was good.
Burl knows how to fix it right.
You had to give her credit,
too: she sipped a beer

and asked how cold it got
hereabouts, and where
could you go for books,
and was the sky always

amazing and gold like that?

By **Kim Stafford**

by **Theodore Waddell**



Dubois Angus #5
Oil, encaustic and graphite on paper. 30 x 32 in.
Courtesy of the Stremmel Gallery, Reno, Nevada

art&photography

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Shape On Hill, June 2006



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EVERYTHING CHANGES

an interview with **WILLIAM KITTREDGE**

by **Robert Stubblefield**

WITH WILLIAM KITTREDGE'S FIRST NOVEL, *The Willow Field*, coming out in October, it seemed the perfect time to discuss his thoughts on the novel, horses and eastern Oregon. Robert Stubblefield sat down with Bill on a smoky August evening in Missoula, Montana.

ROBERT STUBBLEFIELD: Horses played a prominent role in your early life and work, and you've written that a number of things changed as machines replaced horses.

BILL KITTREDGE: We lived in the 19th century until 1945. We did everything with horses and teams. The haying crews used horses and we rode the fields in wagons pulled by horses. When I was four or five years old my dad plowed the garden and put me up on this old horse. If you fell off, you just fell off in the dirt and didn't get hurt. Back up you went. By the time I was six, I was riding all around the valley. For some reason I was sick and out of school for awhile, and I was just riding out there by myself. That was first grade. By the time we were nine, my cousin and I were going to the range with the buckaroos, which sounds extraordinary now, but that was just what we did. I remember the first thing we did was drive bulls up Greaser Canyon. These were ten-hour days and there's nothing worse than driving bulls. It wasn't quite what we bargained for, but we were horseback every day. My best friend Vernon Wasson and I would go all over the valley. He was Indian and lived with his mother in a house beside ours. I had a horse and he didn't, so he'd ride behind me. Finally my dad told me it was bad for the horse, having two kids ride. I don't know, maybe there was something racist about it – maybe he felt I shouldn't be spending all my time with this Indian kid. Anyway, after that I'd ride and Vernon would run behind me. He was the best athlete I ever saw. But horses were central to everything. I was a freshman in high school and the buckaroos were camped out at Catnip Reservoir, must have been about forty miles out there. My dad said, "You and Jack catch a couple of horses and get out there." We were there by noon. Then when I was thirteen my grandfather sold off the work teams – over one hundred matched teams. Everything changed and by the time I was fifteen, horses were over. That was another world.

RS: So after that, were you ever interested in recreational riding or horses in that sense?

BK: No. Not at all. I went to college when I was sixteen and I came back from the Air Force when I was twenty-five and started running the farming and I didn't have anything to do with horses. We sold out during the fall of 1967 and while we were gathering the cattle to sell, I was riding for three months or so. And I loved it again. But from the time I came back to the ranch in 1958 until that fall of '67, I was never on a horse as I recall. Ray Vance was a cowboy for the mc. One time he said, of my brother and me, "You fucking guys can't do nothing but read books." We were shipping cows from Klamath Marsh and Clinton Basey was in charge. My Aunt Viola kept some of that property and Basey was running things for her. He had these giant yellow Belgians and was going to start working them, going back to teams. One of those Belgians reared and took a front-foot swipe at him and knocked his hat off but it didn't bother Clinton a lick. Basey was one of the real ones. The withering of that culture was symbolic of the general speeding up and increasing abstraction of rural life and communication – radio, autos, telephones, television, tractors for the field work – and loss of contact with living creatures horses and one another.

RS: By now, you've traveled widely and well. How has travel



PHOTO: RAYMOND MEEKS

William Kittredge: "Believe what you believe and not what you think other people think you are supposed to believe."

shaped or informed you as a person? As a writer?

BK: Oh, I think my original impulse about all that was very provincial in the sense that I kind of resented people who had done all of these things I'd never done. People came back from Europe and talked about it incessantly, and I resented it. And then I traveled over there and saw a lot that I loved. I didn't necessarily like the parts they did, but I saw a lot that I did like. Travel doesn't make people or the world irrevocably better, but it provides a real sense that you're part of something larger. There are people living in eastern Oregon or sixty miles from Malta who are perfectly content to believe that is the entire world. Travel is a textbook. Animals, including us, gain biologically, and learn, by experiencing diversity, possibility. This is the major argument for both biological and cultural diversity. One of the most important things travel teaches us is that there is more than one way to live. It helps us be less one-dimensional and tribal, to be anti-Nazi.

RS: When you return to the Warner Valley and eastern Oregon what changes do you find most apparent?

BK: The culture is more open, more receptive to considering change. Kathleen Norris wrote that for many people in rural surroundings change represents failure. People in the rural West have tended to live out that philosophy for too long. But there is a liberalization of thinking and those people are not dominant anymore. Several years ago I went to a conference in La Grande put on by High Country News and there was a couple from Plush, probably about fifty, fifty-five. They had been reading and they were there to discuss ideas. I don't think many people like that were really in Plush in the 60's, or if they were, boy, they were keeping a low profile. Everything changes. It's unavoidable and often for the best. When I was down at the Malheur Refuge people said, "When you come back it must seem like nothing has changed." Are you kidding? Everything has changed. Not only are the cows off of Hart Mountain, but the fences are gone. People like our friend Lizzie Grossman participated in removing fences. They wouldn't have been taking down those fences when I left in 1967. The rangeland is in better shape and wildlife is surviving. Cattle are off the top of the Steens.

RS: The mythic past most white people in our region refer to was an extremely brief period. Any model for sustainability is pre-Lewis & Clark. Is sustainability possible for our region? What models might be instructive or useful?

BK: Don't we wish we knew. People are beginning to take seriously the idea of a large area of that region being a wildlife refuge. That's possibly the highest and best use. I remember being in the Sandhills and talking to the bookstore owner in Valentine, Nebraska, and he said that those ranchers there think everything they do is written in stone and they haven't been there one hundred years. The cattle business is one that people who make their lives around it are profoundly and deeply attached to, but it's a marginal business in the high desert and will continue to be. I don't think the region will ever be highly populated. People can still run ranches in ways acceptable to the remainder of the culture, but they need to abandon the idea that just because they live adjacent to public lands, they call all the shots. Any citizen gets to have just as much say over the management of public lands as they do. European culture in the west is an extremely sheltered culture. We fear the shift to a tourist culture, but it's possible a tourist culture will not be the end of the world. Annick and I were just in Greece. People there are every bit as attached to their way of life as people in eastern Oregon, yet they've experienced a tourist culture for two thousand years. Down on the southern tip,

the Peloponnese Peninsula, people come through with yachts and the locals don't pay them any attention, think fine, maybe they'll bring some money. You walk into town and they're perfectly willing to have a drink with you. As long as outsiders don't bring in guns and start killing people, though that's happened a fair amount over there, too. Yet the people don't seem particularly defended. We don't have to be paranoid about visitors. The future will never recreate the past. The future of the West is apt to be crowded, hot and multi-cultural, tending toward economic and cultural and biological enclaves – all of which, along with electronic life – e-mail and the like – tend to make life more abstract and less morally and ethically emotionally connected. Emotional connection is the part of the ranching culture most worth preserving.

RS: When I was growing up in eastern Oregon, we resented being ignored, and now it seems we resent being discovered.

BK: Yes. It doesn't have to be that way, though. I remember talking to Jim Galvin about driving from Barcelona to Madrid, basically high desert country. I asked him what it was like and he said, "Nevada with castles." People all over the world accommodate visitors yet conduct their daily lives the way they have for generations. The rural West has always been an emotional hide-out, a get-away. Many people yearn to escape the abstractions of urban life and connect to community and "nature" in some sort of working order so they come West, even to the most managed and un-natural faux settings. We respond to what we imagine, not necessarily what's there. People visit for many reasons. They're not all in love with or romanticizing cowboy culture.

RS: Those visits still have an impact, though. Almost all of our actions have some environmental impact. Golfers are vulnerable as to the environmental impact of the sport. How do we reconcile that? Or should we bother?

BK: I'm sure we should reconcile that, but I don't. It's much easier for me to reconcile golf than driving my car. The world is full of those kinds of contradictions. We hold environmental conferences and fly people in from all over the world. Think about all that jet fuel. But Mother Nature doesn't give a shit. She'll go right on. There are things we have to strenuously resist, for instance cyanide leach mining. I supervised the spraying of thousands of acres with Parathion. That was not a good idea. But there are pleasures in the world – maybe we need to recognize that it's a paradise all day every day. All kinds of things are changing the world. I was watching television last night and they'd brought together this group of thinkers, forty or fifty bright, influential people, and the organizer asked them about MySpace.com. How many of them knew about it, and not one raised their hand. And he said, well, millions of people do, but very few of them are over twenty-five. The world changes before we know it – how to predict the outcome?

RS: With *The Willow Field* coming out this October, how do you feel about the forms of the novel and the short story? People have wanted to see a novel from you for years – what prompted you to write the novel now?

BK: Maybe sheer luck. Suddenly the stories got longer and longer and I knew I wanted to write a novel and I'd been thinking about a horse drive for years. It's like baseball players who play to their strengths. You know, you figure out what works for you in particular and go with it, and what worked for me was that eastern Oregon and northern Nevada material, so that's where I started. I ended up with about two hundred pages of horse drive. It was pretty clear that



by **Rob Whitbeck**

**There is little left but years
of dry wind and winter
pressed into the weather-checked
boards of this cabin.**

But there is no shame, no vanity
in me that would conceal them,
or the lines of my face, no dye
that I would use to blond or blacken
the hair I loose from my braids
and let cascade in its gray,
evenings, at my bedside,
down the white back of gown.

Here nights are alone.
Thirty-nine miles
of dirt roads cross the desert
to the red cinder highway
and my neighbor's light.

But the green in my eyes
survives and sees fractions
of the night, in flames
of kerosene, by the light
of turgid moons.
At times, with so much silence,
I pass beyond gates
in omens and visions
and the evocations of my wordless,
rosaried prayer.

We came in '18 from Cumberland, Ohio
to the Fort Rock Valley
with a string of Morgan horses
to take a homestead
and raise from pumice and dust
spring wheat and winter rye.

I lay then with my husband
and put wildflowers on his table.
The sweet nights bloomed day, and day
our nights. I was soon with child.
I suckled a daughter whose tiny hands
kneaded my breasts.



1957 DESERT VOICE

Saturday nights we danced in halls
to stringbands while Emily
slept in a bassinet.
Sundays we worshipped and took mass
at St. Thomas in Fremont.

But the desert, with her droughts
and her warrior hordes of jackrabbit
withered and nibbled each planted sprout
and drove the white man out.
Her spoils were the rust of our abandoned
harrows and ploughshares,
ghosts of this valley's
seven towns and thousand
little farms.

Though there was hunger and sorrow
today I sometimes laugh.
I am a conqueror people
who slew the Paiute,
then were vanquished by a rabbit
who ran from us in fright
but decimated fields by night
until the desert would reclaim
her old coat of sage.

Today, I wonder, too, at our tragic ignorance.
We farmed and put bullets
and trap teeth into every beast
that ate the jack – coyote, cougar, lynx,
bobcat and eagle. It was this
and the feed of our futile fields
that set their numbers free.
And in the old volcano flows
we scarred our souls for eternity
by hunting to extinction
the tiny cinnamon
lava bear whose little cubs
were no bigger than puppies.

Destitute in '22, my husband erred
by leaving us behind
to find work in the kitchens
of San Francisco.

In '23 the black and accurate
wings of a great raven
streaked by my window at dusk,
and I saw my husband
on a wharf, lying still
in the darker arms
of whiskey and arsenic.

In those years I tried to farm.
I harnessed the Morgans, swathed rye,
trapped rabbits and bludgeoned
them with clubs. I drew
from the well with our windlass
to water the horses, but in the end
I turned them loose. Now their blood
has been thinned with the mustang
and they run feral and drink
from catchbasins with the remudas
in the Diablo Mountains.

I, too, went feral
as the towns shriveled and disappeared.
I burnt brush in the winter,
and boards torn from abandoned shacks.
I fed Emily mule deer, rattlesnake,
song bird and sage grouse ...
and their beauty, wild lives, and deaths
by my hands made sounds
where my mind has been silent.
Their mounds of entrails
steamed sweet and horrible
after the guttings in the sharp
autumn air. Their scents of musk and blood
pierced me, stabbed me, as if I were living
in the primal thought of God.

Through the years people
and I parted ways.
They left the desert
for the shipyards and factories
of the cities. And later Emily,
when she was raised, also went her way.
But I stayed because I'd tasted,
in the throes of starvation,
my Eden. In early days
I loved my husband, the cross

and the virgin. But then my love
swelled and flooded
those banks, and ran without gravity
through the silent tremors
of bitterbrush and bunchgrass,
through the voices, movements
of the snake, the antelope,
the peregrine and goshawk,
through the fullness and beauty
of the great mosaic.

When the rosary was idle
and necessity held sway
the psalm of the wild
was etched into my palm.

To live I also calved, lambed
and rode for the stockmen
who had laid claim to the land.
I raised in a garden
what little this desert would give.
But I die a little each time
my ways take money, and feel shame
at my ineptness, that I never grew here
fully wild or holy or human.

Though our spaces are separated,
in recent years the city
entered this valley in absentia
on the powerful waves of the radio.
A million watts are shot out of Reno
and this weakened my prayers.

And when I heard
that they set God's name
out on those artificial waves
I knew He became in that space
where the waves fade, for them,
irretrievable.

With so much buried blood guilt
toward the Modoc and Piaute,
with failure on the land
and desecrations of the sacred
perhaps they could not bear
to listen to the trembling,
tormented universe.

When I visit abandoned homesteads
and sites of the clapboard chapels
I can see myself among the rusting
square nails and rat-eaten magazines,
in shards of once clear and vacant jars,
discarded, and abandoned in the sand.
They were left exposed,
and after decades the sun tinted
the colorless glass the lavender
of amethyst.

When I was young
I clung to my husband
so much I knew nearly nothing
of myself. In the raven night
he died and I became
a widow, it was cold
and blowing, and I wrapped Emily
in many blankets. Then a desolate
ring of stillness
seized the air and spread
beyond the rim of the sky.
It was then words disappeared
from my prayers as I tried
to be with it and bridge
the vast tracts
of emptiness.

In his life my husband was often pressed
by our lack of meat and bread,
but his aura and marrow spoiled
when it ceased to matter deeply
how, and at whose cost,
he came by them.

I know he betrayed those things
that once held us here, and together,
even under a punishing sun.
He grew so quickly lost
in the city, among those lamps
that trap and strand.

Once I dreamed of them
and of ease, but after that
it became my way of absolution
to refuse them. And my labors
stayed my own, or was favors
to ease the needs of neighbors.
I have walked so many times into a dusk
dancing with the flock of nighthawks
and have rubbed the lovely oil
of yarrow and sage
into my skin and hair.
Though it meant the complete
spending of my years, and having
little, I came to live
with this place like the drover
who walks alongside his sheep
until both
are one.

I stayed because I'd tasted, in the throes of starvation, my Eden.