

Barlow: Now, what? See. You've learned your oral historian stuff very well.

Rawlins: Well, I'm just actually sort of beginning with the tape recorder.

Barlow: You've got the right idea, though. 'Cause I mean, there are a lot of tapes in this world of conversations that nobody can figure out the source of.

Rawlins: Yeah.

Barlow: It's kind of like all those old photographs of people that, if you knew anything about the history you'd think, "This is a valuable photograph."

Miriam: Hey, speaking of photographs, you told that you wanted go through those photographs. When are you going to go through those photographs down there? Or are you going to wait until I die?

Baarlow: Well, probably, yes. You'll be sorry.

Rawlins: We have an album from the Norwegian side of the family, my mother's grandmother. Beautiful big red velvet album, you know, mounted in silver.

Miriam: Oh, those pretty things.

Rawlins: Yes. And I have no idea who any of the, the people in it are my Norwegian ancestors. I have no idea who any of them are. Which is unfortunate. Because the photos are not labeled.

Miriam: That's kind of a pity, isn't it? Honey, this isn't the box. Where'd these come from? She . . . , was the motivating force.

Barlow: Who galvanized opposition, who built the fire under everybody, who managed all the files. Who, well, I mean, if there was one person who did it,

it was Sally. I wouldn't say there was just one person who did it, but I would, she was certainly critical.

Miriam: She was the, she was the spark plug.

Rawlins: Yeah, that was the impression I got. She's impressively, impressively organized.

Barlow: Oh, yeah.

Rawlins: So what, how did you first get involved in it?

Barlow: It was a model of citizen involvement. I mean, you know, it's a good thing you're doing this because I don't know that I've ever seen grass roots, sort of spontaneous grass roots opposition to something get so well organized and so effective in such a short time.

Rawlins: How did you first get involved in it, John?

Barlow: Well, it was Sally. Sally buttonholed me at the library one night. And I knew about it. This was, I hadn't been back in Wyoming very long. I'd just come back earlier that year and the Wagonwheel project was rolling along and had been for a while. But it was a political issue that I didn't know very much about.

Miriam: It was very political.

Barlow: I didn't actually share the general superstition about nuclear power because I had worked part-time while in college at a nuclear power plant in Connecticut.

Miriam: Well, you hated that thing!

Barlow: No, I didn't.

Miriam: You used to have nightmares about that nuclear bungle up there.

Barlow: No, no, no, no. I mean, yeah, I didn't like nuclear weapons. But I mean, I've been around the

actual, I've been around the generation of electricity with nuclear fuel. And I felt like there was, and I still feel this way, that there was --

Rawlins: You'd been in there and it hadn't blown up.

Barlow: Yeah, I'd been in one that seemed as safe as, as safe as an English garden to me.

Rawlins: So what was it in particular about this project?

Barlow: But Sally buttonholed me in the library and told me that we had to stop this thing. And I think that my first reaction was sort of to indulge her because I assumed that it was your standard kind of local hysteria over something people didn't understand. And I started to read a little bit more about it, pay more attention to it. And the more I found out, the less I liked it. It just seemed like there were an awful lot of really important questions that were either unanswered or strangely answered.

Miriam: John, where do these go? You got a box? Big ones?

Barlow: I don't know where. I'm figuring it out as I go along here.

Rawlins: Picking one kind at a time?

Barlow: Right.

Miriam: Oh, yes. They go that way.

Barlow: Yeah, you know, and the other thing was that, I think you could see plenty of evidence that this was — no, that's not the right size. I think these go in boxes like this here. There was plenty of evidence that what we had here was a case of bureaucratic momentum.

Miriam: Well, it was a scary thing. They let that thing that was loose down in there in the aquifer. We had a problem forever.

Rawlins: So as you got to know more about it, what seemed to you to be the biggest problems with it?

Barlow: Well, the biggest problem to me was the idea that

we might be polluting one of the major aquifers of the West with radioactive isotopes that would be around for about 300,000 years. But more to the point, the more I read about it, the less I could see why we wanted to do it. Because, you know, the really strange thing about it was that the gas that they were going to get out of it was going to be too radioactive to use anytime in anybody's lifetime. You know, I mean, it just seemed kind

of bone-headed.

Miriam: Well, it was bone-headed. But then, why they didn't see it, I don't know. If I went over there, could I find a box for these?

Barlow: Maybe. I mean, I looked, I didn't find it yet. But help yourself.

Rawlins: What, now, now I have a, somewhere I have a photograph that I photocopied, that Sally had of you sitting on the tailgate of a truck or a Bronco or something like that.

Barlow: Well, it was that El Camino right there. Was it the El Camino?

Barlow: Or no, wait a second. No, it wasn't. It was a Chevy Blazer. It was that old Chevy Blazer.

Rawlins: Yeah. But now, that was the straw poll?

Barlow: That was the straw poll. We tried to get an official referendum on the ballot. And there was no, at that time there was no legal mechanism to do so. And we went down to Cheyenne and tried to get the legislature to pass one, and you can imagine how favorable a reception we got with that legislature at that time. I mean, that was back in sort of the old days of Wyoming when the legislature was pretty much run by the Stockgrowers Association and the mining association. And the last thing they wanted was a mechanism whereby the people could dictate what they wanted the politicians to be doing. But in the absence of any legal mechanism to do this, we figured that what we could do was just put up sort of private polling places outside of the public polling places. And ask people to come by, and anybody who voted, and register an opinion on Wagonwheel. And I can't remember, and I'm sure Sally has this figure, but it was a fairly high percentage of people who voted in the one election

who also voted in the other. And the result was  
overwhelming.

Rawlins: Yeah, I have that in here someplace. Right here.  
That was the, in December, 1972, results.



Barlow: Yeah. Right. Right.

Rawlins: Okay. So it was pretty overwhelmingly opposed. In this photograph, I'm just curious, I don't know if you can tell from that photocopy -- who is that with you collecting the ballots? Do you remember?

Barlow: Uh, you know, that, I think, would have been —

Rawlins: I can't, he looks familiar, but I can't really tell who that is. 'Course just about anybody in a cowboy hat, sort of squinched over like that, looks familiar around here.

Barlow: Well, I'd have to see the real photograph I think. But, I mean, my recollection is that when that picture was taken, Floyd Bousman and Sally had come out together, and that that might be Floyd.

Rawlins: Hmm. Okay.

Barlow: I mean, they'd come out, they were just sort of touring the county to see how these various polling places were coming along. And I think that that could very easily be Floyd.

Rawlins: So as far as the, your involvement, you went over to the legislature first and got a pretty negative reaction. And then the straw poll came out of that.

Barlow: Well, no. I mean, I'm sort of hopping around chronologically. As far as my involvement was concerned, I started going to meetings of the Wagonwheel — uh, what was the name of it? The —

Rawlins: Wagonwheel Information Committee?

Barlow: The Wagonwheel Information Committee. Exactly. After Sally, you know, wouldn't let me out of the

library unless I promised to come to one. And I attended all their meetings for a period of time, and, you know, then I just gradually felt myself to be a part of it as I heard more.

Miriam: Well, I think it was one of the most remarkable things I ever heard of. I knew what was going on, and I figured they didn't have a chance of a snowball in hell.

Barlow: Yeah, it was interesting. I mean, the local, the overwhelming local attitude was, well, [?] that there's nothing we can do about it. At first. I mean, there was the usual small band of dedicated rabble-rousing citizens. But it was the same old group. I mean, it was Sally and Doris Burzlander and Pat Jackson. I mean the Three Fates. They'd already convened over at the drugstore and concluded that this thing shouldn't happen. You know, they'd made other decisions before (laughs) that hadn't necessarily been observed. But in this particular instance, you know, they were able to get something else going. But anyway, the first response was pretty much that. You know, that nobody liked it very much but that it was inevitable. And it was a very gradual evolution over to the point where they had enough people who were willing to think that we could stop it.

Miriam: Well, I think most people thought you couldn't stop it, but they were sure for you doing it.

Rawlins: Just the combination of the federal government and a big natural gas company was too —

Miriam: They just figured that it was inevitable.

Barlow: Well, the big natural gas company was not necessarily, you know, that was not automatically considered to be evil incarnate. I mean, for one thing, at those days a lot of people in Sublette County worked for El Paso Natural Gas.

Miriam: Yes, they did.

Barlow: And, you know, 'cause it was then, it was then what Enron became. And, you know, it was a major local employer. It was, and, you know, overall, environmental sensitivity was not what it is now. At all.

Miriam: Well, no, environmentalism was a dirty word.

Barlow: I mean, you just, if you were an environmentalist  
you just didn't admit it.

Miriam: You could be there, but you better not holler.

Barlow: That was part of my reluctance in getting

involved. I mean, for one thing, I at first thought that it was probably hysterical. And second, you know, I had just come back from back East, where I had been, you know, I founded a chapter of SDS and had my head bashed a number of times. And, you know, I was kind of interested in keeping a low profile at that point.

Miriam: You were doomed. Which is part of your lurid past.

Rawlins: One of the things that interests me, I guess as a scholar, I can't call myself a historian, but, is the, you know, the individual lines that people draw sort of between national interests, patriotism, things like that, and sort of local welfare, local citizens' interests, community interests, things like that.

Barlow: Local interests.

Miriam: That one doesn't go there. No, I've found a place over here.

Barlow: Right, well, you know the AEC knew that they had a good card in the "national interest" card. And they played it hard. You know, I mean, they did everything they could to make it unpatriotic to oppose Wagonwheel.

Miriam: That goes over here. I have a bag one over here where it goes.

Barlow: That just never, it was never very effective. Because, you know, I think people realized right away that if it was a stupid project, spending a whole bunch of American tax dollars wasn't going to, you know, wasn't going to be for the good of the United States.

Rawlins: Yeah, you can't turn a mule into a stallion by spending money on it.

Barlow: No, exactly.

Rawlins: What, and, did, now, did you go back to Washington, D.C.?

Barlow: Yeah, and that was really interesting. I mean, talk about —

I'd like to hear about that trip.

Talk about the use of, the effective and somewhat cynical use of theater. We knew that the best thing we could do was portray ourselves as a bunch of hapless hicks coming in from, you know, it's kind of like "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." So we basically did everything but, you know, bring Indians and buffalo. You know, we were all as rural as we could be.

They were stupid smarties.

And I'll never forget Floyd Bousman on the "Today Show," squared off against this guy from El Paso Natural Gas named Phil Randolph.

Did they show the [?] to Floyd Bousman? They didn't do it.

Phil Randolph was, you know, he was the main mouthpiece for El Paso. And he was, I gotta say, like a parody of your mealy-mouthed corporate tool. I mean, he just, everything about him said this guy is —

Mm-hmm. I've read a few statements by him that convey that impression [?].

I mean, he was just so insincere, so obviously insincere. And in the television medium, you know, Floyd's got that of Clint Eastwood look. And here's, he's stacked up in a kind of debate against Phil Randolph, and there was no question who won that one.

Ooh, there's a pinecone over there.

I see it.

Should be two more of them.

And what, now, let's see, after the —

So we went out there, and let's see, I'm trying to remember, I guess it was February, must have been February of '72. And I don't think we realized just how much clout we had until we found out that, I mean our original reason for going out there was to meet with the head of the AEG, who



was James Schlesinger. You know, this was before the Department of Energy. And Schlesinger resigned as head of the AEC the day before we hit Washington, and Nixon didn't appoint Dixie Lee Ray until the day after we left. So even in the White House they had arranged things such that there would be effectively no head of the AEC while we were in town.

Rawlins: Hmm. What, what response did you get from the congressional delegation?

Barlow: Well, at first the congressional delegation was not very helpful. But I think gradually they started to see that, that there was a lot of popular sentiment that was starting to gather itself around us. And Teno, of course, was on our side from the beginning. Teno had deployed a lot of his own office's resources on our behalf. And they were the, Teno's office was the principal Washington point for us. I mean, they were, they were our contact. Cliff Hansen was polite, but you could see that he had very little sympathy with our cause.

Miriam: I don't think he was really for you. I mean, he was kind of old-line.

Barlow: He tried to stay as neutral as possible, because he could see that there was a fair amount of political liability in being otherwise. But just temperamentally, you know, he was, he was of the old school. And you know, this, really, what you had here was a classic standoff between that form of consciousness that came out of World War II and the one that would develop subsequently. You know, the idea that large institutions can build great projects with humane goals, and nobody will get hurt and the commonweal will be supported in some way, and that the nation's energy is best

entrusted to huge corporations and large government. I mean, it was just, it was basically that the industrial, the military-industrial complex moving into energy. And it was kind of, I mean it was the same general set of people, and it was certainly the same general point of view. And they'd been, a lot of these folks had previously been with institutions like Bonneville, Bonneville Electric, you know, or the TVA. Large, sort of quasi-governmental power generation utilities.

Miriam: Could I get you a cup of coffee?

Rawlins: Oh, that would be lovely. If it's no trouble.

Miriam: Cream or sugar?

Rawlins: Uh, just plain. Let's, that, how would you, in terms of the, you know, when you say now that at that particular point environmentalism was pretty much something that one didn't profess around here, what in particular did you get as reactions to this from people, were, was the shift in this thing, a perception on people's part that this wasn't as much a case of generic environmentalism of genuine local interest? Is that what caused the shift?

Barlow: I think, I think that was, that was the biggest thing. I mean, when, when people started to realize that there were other folks involved besides the usual woolly-headed liberals. And people from the outside. I think that was, that was an important turning point. For sure.

Rawlins: And did you have any contact with any of the people down near Rifle, Colorado?

Barlow: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it's funny. I just drove up through there yesterday and I was thinking about all those folks that we worked with in Rifle and Rio Blanco, Meeker.

Rawlins: I'll just pause this. . . . It's just a professional [?], it's got stereo mike, a stereo mike. Okay, let's see where we, oh, you were talking about the people in Colorado.

Barlow: Yeah, they, we made a, an instant alliance with them. And they were very helpful. They had all

kinds of figures, and experiences which gave the lie to the projections of the AEC.

Rawlins: Was this after the tests had already been conducted?

Barlow: Yeah, there'd been several tests that had already been conducted at Rio Blanco, and, oh, I can't remember the name of the other one. There were two of them. Which had been pipsqueaks in comparison to the hooter that they were going to

send off here. I mean, they were going to put a real whack on us. But, I'm still missing one of these.

Rawlins: The reliquary for it there.

Barlow: Got it right. I don't remember the figures anymore, but I mean they were, I believe that Wagonwheel was going to be five 100-kiloton devices, something like that, sequentially fired. And, you know, and for purposes of comparison the blast at Hiroshima was 17 kilotons. Furthermore, the previous detonations had all been sort of more Hiroshima-sized than Wagonwheel-sized. And there had been a lot of unanticipated effects, even as a result of those smaller explosions. But the AEC, you know, they had "X" amount of funding for Atoms for Peace —

Rawlins: Project Plowshare.

Barlow: Project Plowshare, and they were going to by-God use their whole budget whether it made sense or not. And furthermore, I think there was some, I could never tell whether we were being paranoid or whether there really was pretty good evidence that this was actually weapons testing by another name.

Rawlins: Well, given much of what has come out concerning Nevada testing and radiation exposure in Utah --

Barlow: Right. Right. Yeah, there's plenty of evidence that

Rawlins: Suspicions --

Barlow: That our suspicions of the AEC were entirely merited.

Rawlins: Yeah, suspicion probably was sort of in order.

Barlow: Yeah. I think it would be interesting, I'm sure you'll, in the course of this if you have a chance to do that, but it would be very interesting to get some of their files from this period and find out what they were really thinking. 'Cause you know, there was an awful lot of high-handedness on the part of the government. Their whole exercise was one of, "Well, these poor locals, they certainly don't understand."

Miriam: You turned your light off here.

Barlow: Well, I had to turn it off to take it off.

Rawlins: That's the other, there were statements by Randolph precisely to that effect: that the people on the information committee were completely misinformed and so on and so forth. But to sort of shift a little bit, now when you were talking about you had just returned after having been away from your hometown for a while, and having sort of participated in SDS and a bunch of other things that were probably pretty contrary to the way most people seemed to feel around here at the time, did working on this Wagonwheel Information Committee and your involvement in this, did that give you a different sense of your community? Or did that somehow, how did that affect your feelings about this place and the community and the people?

Barlow: Well, I ~

Rawlins: Okay. Let's see. Yeah, I think the question that I'd asked just before the last phone call, after, you know, returning from being away from this place and being involved in a pretty different set of cultural things and coming back here and feeling like you were, you were sort of out of sync with the local culture, what, did this involvement in the Wagonwheel Committee affect your feeling about the community here?

Barlow: Oh, it sure did. I mean, it made me feel like there was a possibility that I could be part of it. And when I first came back to the ranch, well, first of all I had no intention of staying there anything like as long as I did. Because I'd just, I'd sort of grown up with the idea that I had no business being a rancher. I mean, and I knew a lot about what a vale of tears that could

be. And I was just kind of, I was here temporarily trying to reach some orderly conclusion to that whole saga. I wasn't planning on investing a large chunk of my life in it. And one of the things that happened, that made me decide that I did want to stay for as long as I could, was Wagonwheel. Because I could see that there was more, there was a lot more going on in this community than I, than I had -- well, I'd constructed a kind of political caricature, or



cultural caricature of the place when I was growing up that I hadn't bothered to check back on after I returned. I was just assuming that all the things I thought about this place when I was a kid, looking at it through a kid's eyes, were true. And I didn't —

Rawlins: You were just associating with parental authority and things like that.

Barlow: Associating with parental authority, but also, you know, hating a hick town like a hick kid always does, you know. And being especially hard on it for its insularity. And not being willing to recognize the kinds of sophistication that it actually can muster. And it wasn't until I saw the sophistication of, of these "local yokels" stacked up against the most sophisticated people in the country, and doing okay, that I realized that this was not just some kind of podunk backwater where nothing ever happened. I mean, I think it was an important realization about people in general. You know, I, and it's something that I think people have a hard time with. Wyoming, like a lot of rural places, or working class places, has a real serious self esteem problem. I mean, we just assume that if the issue is important, then surely we don't know very much about it. And that we can't, and that we're not smart enough to learn. And I think a lot of people who were involved in Wagonwheel were awakened to their own abilities in the course of it.

Rawlins: Yeah, that's an interesting situation when you have that kind of cultural inferiority complex, and all of a sudden you're up against the big leagues or the --

Barlow: Right.

Rawlins: And you find out you're not really inferior at all.

Barlow: Right. And I mean, and that was what happened to everybody who was involved. I think it was an enormously empowering experience. And I think that it, you know, it had a lot to do with fueling a whole set of victories in Wyoming.

Rawlins: Like the Union Pass?

Barlow: Well, that, certainly. But also the legislative sessions that followed Wagonwheel passed a whole bunch of enlightened legislation. I mean, there were a lot of people in the state who watched that whole thing go down. There were a lot of citizens who felt that they could make a difference, and went down there and passed the Wyoming Clean Air Act, and which is, you know, is still kind of a model piece of legislation. And started to address the whole issue of land use planning in the state of Wyoming and set up a, set up legislation to mandate that. None of that would have happened if the climate had remained where it was prior to Wagonwheel. And I think there were other factors that were involved in changing the climate. I mean, the '70s were a period when a lot of places suddenly became environmentally hip.

Rawlins: Mm-hmm. But the, something that was initially approached as a community issue actually was politically important for the state as a whole because it was a catalyst.

Barlow: Yeah. One of the biggest things that happened, though, was that people became aware of the possibility that environmental issues were something that you could care about even if you were for, even if you were a local.

Rawlins: Mm-hmm. Or even if you were conservative.

Barlow: And even if you were conservative. Exactly. You know, I think people like Floyd Bousman, who was basically a pretty conservative guy, you know, the example of someone like Floyd out there on the barricades was very helpful to a lot of people who had sympathy with some of the causes of

environmentalism but absolutely no congruence with the style of the environmentalist. Which has always been the real problem. I mean, environmentalists, you know if somebody went over, [?], you know if he felt like he was an environmentalist himself but he had a hard time getting hooked up with people that would never let him finish a sentence. You know? I mean, now that's really what it comes down to. It's exactly that kind of stuff that makes the difference.

Rawlins: Well, that's one of the things that seems to me most lacking in present environmental organizations, is local knowledge. And I think that, you know, I think that the specifics of caring for a landscape or a place are just as important as sort of the general ethical problems.

Barlow: I think it's even worse than that. There is, there is throughout the environmental movement, an assumed arrogance about the biased quality of local knowledge. If you're from the location, it's assumed that you're ripping off the land in some way. That whatever you think about it is purely self-serving. You know, and an inability to understand that, you know, oftentimes what serves local people also serves the environment. You know, this certainly was true in the whole grazing debate. I mean, you could never get anybody from a national environmental association to understand that any rancher with any brains at all would know better than to try to systematically deplete the resource value of his own grazing lease. That's not in his self interest.

Rawlins: Yeah. There's a lot of kind of a unfounded altruism, you know.

Barlow: Well, you know, one of the reasons, I just basically left environmentalism was because I felt like it had been taken over by people who were, you know, who had some serious, you know, family of origin problems. By and large. And were trying to address healing the environment instead of healing themselves.

Rawlins: Hmm. Yeah, I can see that. Well, let's see, I'm trying to think if I have any, one last killer question about Wagonwheel. And I guess that the

last thing would be, that this, that sort of response, you know to, local interest response now is very often characterized as NIMBYism, not in my backyard?

Barlow: Well, I think that's a, sometimes a fair charge. Yeah, what would you say the crucial difference between that, between that as sort of a mean or a narrow response, and the response that you guys had in the Wagonwheel Committee? What's the

difference?

Barlow: Well, I mean, let me take a recent example where I have a kind of an unfashionable point of view: The effort to stop the nuclear depository over at Riverton, the aboveground storage.

Rawlins: The MRS.

Barlow: MRS. You know, I hate to say it, but I think that was a pretty good case of NIMBYism. Because speaking on a purely environmental level, the system that we've got now really sucks. We've got to do something about leaving plutonium next to every place that it's being generated in the United States. There are, there are risks inherent to that, politically, you know, from terrorism. There are risks environmentally. I mean, the whole thing is a mess. You know, I'd like to get the damned stuff centralized, anyway. And I felt like, on the basis of what I could read about what they were trying to do, they had come up with a fairly responsible, thoughtful method of getting it into one place, anyway, until they could overcome the largely political obstacles to getting it permanently in situ. But I felt like most of the opposition, really, was, you know, "Well, that's fine, but we don't want it in Wyoming. You know, let the states that generated this shit take care of it. It's not our problem." And, you know, I just don't feel like that's a terribly responsible attitude to take toward it. It's a problem for everybody on the planet.

Rawlins: So that kind of self-interest with very little seasoning of community interest or common interest.

Barlow: Right. In this particular case, Wagonwheel was a bad idea and I would have been against it anywhere

they did it. I mean, it was really just a method of feathering the nest of a large company and maintaining the bureaucratic trough for a large governmental institution. The technology was flawed, profoundly. The results were going to be dangerous. You know, there was just damned little to recommend it on any level. It was a bad idea.

Rawlins: Well, yeah, I think that sums it up pretty well.