

Interview with Maya Miller 2/10/93
About the fight to get a park at Lake Tahoe

Why did you care about the Lake – what was your experience there that moved you to fight for it?

Well, I already had been fighting for a mile of ocean bay beach in Long Beach. And what I'd found there was how complex the powers that operate are that determine something should become a public beach or whether left up to the laissez-faire of the market-place. And how continuing the citizen effort has to be to make anything happen. And of course we really hadn't preserved that when I left – it was a fight in process. But it was a conservation type fight to keep the beach public. I found myself even among those who were fighting to keep it a beach – you know even in our ranks there were people who would be happy to have it private so long as it stayed a beach and not have a sea wall built so that it was just a mooring for yachts. But there were people who were fighting on our side who did not want it to continue to be a nice little family beach because there were so many Hispanics and Asians and others who came and used it and that was probably one of my first realizations that you can be on the right side of a conservation issue and not want it to be for everybody if it's in front of your house.

Another thing I found fascinating about the governmental involvement was how many different entities you have to deal with – the county commission, the city council, oil companies that had involvements. Then there was the state park system, the state planning commission. So that even before we left Long Beach we were going up to Sacramento in order to meet with some of those bodies. So I was really sort of primed to save a body of water on the edge and had a little sense of how you go after it governmentally.

My experience with the Lake – Dick did his dissertation on the fish of Lake Tahoe, and we'd gone up for playtimes with you, and we were familiar with Sand Harbor because it was obviously a nice piece of beach which we all used just freely because it was there – it wasn't guarded. It did belong to Captain Whittell, but he wasn't around. Not a lot of people used it, there was no parking there.

We moved back in 1959 and then I was more in the domestic scene and more able to function outwardly – you were in school.

But what you can see from these calendars is that we were consorting with a lot of Sierra Club type people - the Angelos, the Wheats, the Bowers, so that even though this year was a legislative year when Grant Sawyer had a reception for Jack Kennedy. We went to Squaw Valley for the Olympics and down to South American. We kept picnicking up at the Lake. Lunch with Bob Laxalt and Dono and Nancy Bowers and Peg Wheat.

Was that part of what motivated you – that there was a core of people?

what, Maya? You know how foul-mouthed those legislators are? Well, we just traded foul for fowl!” And I said, ‘why don’t you let those birdwatchers have their little piece over here and then you can have the rest.’ And so I think they bought it. (laughs) You could see him couching it in the most crass fashion.

Some pages difficult to read

And we didn’t get Spooner in the first round, Paul Laxalt was active in getting that.

That’s near Marlette Peak so maybe that was a sheepcamp.

Could be, There may be an old campsite as part of that deal. Yeah, I bet it was.

After we got the park, Dick was very interested in having the whole region planned for as a region, rather than as a state or county. Art Wood was the arch-enemy then, he represented the developers. He was the patsy, the person who gets the permits and all of that.

I have just one more issue that I want to talk about. That’s the role the Outdoor Recreation Act played. It just illustrated the way politics work, and the value of using Nevada’s easier access to politicians. It was a result of the study the Rockefellers had commissioned to look at lands around the country that should be preserved for outdoor recreation, not just for national parks but that were needed for outdoor recreation. There was up for passage in the Congress the Outdoor Recreation and Conservation Act It provided for funding of motor boat licenses – gasoline taxes or something like that. So it’s got its own money attached to it, but it also really set up the Outdoor Recreation Department. But when they were in the process of working its way through Congress, we got a call from this man who was a forester and the head of the western region of outdoor recreation. He said that all the people in Washington who were interested in it told him that they really needed help from Alan Bible, because although he was not the chair of the committee, the chair was ill and he was temporary chair.

He was in the Senate. And it was in his committee and I was the drawer and he was not going to bring it out unless he heard some interest from his own state. And so we sent out the word to friends in Las Vegas and the Deacons, and others we knew to be interested. And we generated almost 100 letters to him, and Alan Bible said he had heard from his state, and he pulled the bill out.

Then later we were trying to get the money for the park (a whole other piece) but in that later period, we really wanted this forester to come over and talk to the legislature here, because he was a good Nevada type outdoor man who really had the facts and figures about the value of the park and how it might be put together fiscally. And we had arranged to have him come and we set up a meeting with the legislators. At the last minute he couldn’t come, and we just really raised... I sent a wire to Udall saying “what about Trinity that is more important than Lake Tahoe. And we pressured him to come and explain the mechanics. But I’ve always thought that – it was again like the letter to Grant

– one of those times when you’ve been lovely for a long time. And when they disregard you, you have to take the occasion to confront them. And that sometimes really does work. You can’t do that every week, but you musn’t be afraid to do it, to speak up and challenge them when you know that it’s necessary.

End

Next: 2/17/93 Maya Miller calendar and transition from environmental to people (on another file)

No, I can't identify what motivated me. Dick was always preoccupied with Lake Tahoe and since I was interested in the legislative side, having a hangover from a taste of it in Long Beach. What I see is that there are people not necessarily who would be support systems, but who were interested. And I began to try to figure out what I could do because I was mainly sitting at home taking care of cooking and bookkeeping. I mean the bookkeeping ites get aggravated and start usurping January and February because I did you income tax, Eric's income tax, HM's income tax, my income tax. But in the development it is a significant piece that we were in this world where people were thinking about parks. Dick an Gus Bundy did a tour around the state and Dick did a list of possible state parks and a description of them. It was a formal document that he gave to the people in government and that was part of why he later started Foresta, because he noticed that nobody paid attention to the document cause they hadn't paid for it and also it didn't come from an organization. I don't think the payment was significant to him but it would be to me, and I see that even the ones they pay for they have a hard time paying attention to.

Lake Tahoe was on the list. And in 62 and 63 he was going to Nature Conservancy meetings so that he was thinking about areas that were not only park, but were endangered species protection. And then he was interested in the whole basin because he always had that kind of ecological slant. He wasn't interested in just saving a park for people to play in, but he was interested in saving the whole basin. You could see that it was Impossible even then to have the kind of thing that a little pristine pond someplace would have, like in the east where they were protecting little choice spots that had all the natural flora and fauna. And already the Lake was being lived in, but by very few people. It was really an accomplishment and an iddity to find a woman who lived up there year round, lived at the south end. They didn't keep the roads open. So part of the early organizing was to keep the roads from being opened up. O of the things that at one point we fought about was that they wanted to make a four laner out of the road to Placerville, Hwy 50. And of course the casinos did want that.

But Sand Harbor, May 22, Harts, Peg, lawyers, must have been thinking about the park then. The woods were full of Sierra Club. One of the first steps was fielding the idea with people. In June talking with the state park people Peg and Bea Thor, Les Gould – he was the chair of the state park. They were just beginning to feel their way also. It was the first time there had been a state park board system and these were the first members of the state park. Jim Hulse's mother was on it. Peg Wheat was around just a lot. Shortly after that she actually went to work for Captain Whittell, so that she got a real intimate sense.

But we were going up to places like Winnemucca Lake all the time with friends, to Don and Nancy's for dinner with the Laxalts, lunch with the Griels Lake Tahoe.

Was Bob Laxalt a supporter?

No, he was a sympathetic friend of Don Bowers. I suppose the way it worked was you had this state park agency starting and that board, and on the board were people that we were well acquainted with and because acquainted with thanks to Peg who was also on it.

And certainly Lake Tahoe was one of the spots that they would recognize as an asset the state oughta think about.

We didn't ever talk to Capatin Whittell. 1963 was a legislative session, and that was the year the pipes froze and Dick was gone the early part of the year when the legislature started. So I think what must've happened was that I would take out to school and drop you and go over and sort of smell out what was happening at the legislature. And then I have notes about brochures as if we had been writing brochures. And I have lots of notes about hearings and meetings. League of Women Voters meetings, conventions and parks. 1964 we had put the pressure on Grant Sawyer to have a special session of the legislature, and we brought the south and north together, also through the League of Women Voters as well as our state park people.

The special session was for 2 things. It was for the problem of Clark County running out of money for education and the Lake Tahoe Park, So they had a special session in 64. And I have "February 5, the Parks Bill Passed". But previous to that, in 63, which must have been the build-up for all of this because it has all these things like during the legislature then there were hearings and I went to a jillion of them, and there were also Leave of Women Voters meetings of one kind or another all the time. And that must have been the year that I connect with Jean Ford, because part of our strategy was to compliment her interest in saving Red Rock Canyon with our interest in saving Lake Tahoe, and let the north and the south understand that they had some common interest in preserving for parks and that these could both be done. And that money for parks didn't need to compete with the money for Clark County schools and so forth.

People like the Franklins were coming up and camp was maybe in it's second year.

When the state park people started becoming interested in it and Les Gould was the chair and he was a doctor with a lot of interest in the Sierra Club and hiking. He was an energetic and creative thinker, They apparently found out through the first director of the park was a guy named Bill Hart. He must have looked at the maps and seen what lands Whittell owned and he'd gotten it by picking it up for taxes during the Depression. So that he owned this big block of land that comes all the way over and abuts ours up in the edge of Little Valley. Captain Whittell came from San Francisco. His father was a rich man who made a lot of money in SD and other real estate and he made a lot of money doing this thing of buying and allowing people to get options on the land then keeping them from exercising those options. Which is what he sort of hired Peg Wheat to do – to keep anybody out of his home up at the lake. But he sold the option to this rich developer who developed in Hawaii and in Arizona (imagine a combination like that!) and the reason that they have Incline Village and all of that – originally with Les Gould the character stuck out and wrote a proposal to Whittell to encompass all the land that included pretty much all of what is now Incline Village and all this back country that comes over into here and we wrote up this brochure that was both lyric and practical that explained where the land was and showed the maps. I wrote the high line, and Les wrote part of it and Bill Hart wrote part that described where it was. There should be a copy of that booklet someplace in Foresta.

It was a nifty little proposal that he give this in the spirit of the Rockefellers who had given these other parks to the nation. But the only way to get this to him was through his lawyer who was Paul Laxalt. And at the same time an outfit that has some interest in the lake, who had some business interests but who felt the park would be an asset, prepared a model of what the park might look like, a three dimensional model that was six feet by four, and that also was in the hands of Paul Laxalt to deliver to Whittell.

But nobody ever identified whether it was delivered, whether the brochure was delivered, whatever, because he never answered. And because he was a recluse, no one had access to him. But that proposal was for this whole thing. And it must've been then that Peg was hired to care-take his place with the instructions that this Admiral Crenshaw, he and his wife, who was a Sierra Clubber, lived there, and until he let someone come through and exercise their option by delivering the money to their house. And this may be apocraphal, but he at any rate felt that Admiral Crenshaw had failed in his duty to keep people out. And so that occasioned his hiring Peg. Exercising his option means coming through with a payment, and that payment was for the Incline property. Not the part that's now a park, but it meant that all the lakefront that goes around the curve as you get up there was no (not?) (now?) preserved.

I don't know whether Whittell was interested in the land, or whether it was a game he played. Effectively what it did was to wipe out both that and 80 acres of Little Valley, because subsequent to that, and because of it, - they sold it for \$5 million, just Incline. But then what Whittell wanted from his lawyer and what Laxalt worked out for him, was a tax offset on that. This land had all been bought for practically nothing. And to sell it for \$5 million would have occasioned a lot of capital gains tax. And so the tax offset was made by their giving 80 acres up at Little Valley. And who did they give it to? Paul Laxalt figured out that they gave it to the Sisters who had the hospital up at St. Mary's. I don't think it was given to St Mary's, but to the sisters themselves, the order or something. And legend has it that Whittell was really enthusiastic about animals and hated people and that he had this provision in the deeds, which didn't hold, that no Negroes should ever be allowed up there, that it should be a White preserve. And so that subject came up when the park was under consideration - was it deed restricted? And of course finally by the time of the Civil Rights Act, that kind of restriction couldn't hold up in court.

And you tested that immediately by taking campers up to Little Valley?

That's true. But those really big pieces were lopped out of the possibility for a park. So what was left mainly was the really steep land that goes down to the lake on the eastern side, and of course the beautiful shoreline. It's the land that we had such a hard time getting the legislators, who were ranchers, to appreciate. They kept talking about it as just rick and gravel and pine trees (which really aren't any good as a crop). And I realize that one of the things that was developing in all this process of making this offer - trying to get the whold thing given - then when it wasn't given - Les Gould, the chair of the Parks Board, had something going with Earl Warren, who was governor over in California. And

his premise was and it became Earl Warren's, that California had a vested interest in Lake Tahoe's preservation, especially for a park for people, Californian's would be using it. And so they make a proposition to go in with the purchase of the land with California.

We had no champions in the legislature for the park. But one of the ones who would look at our map was a man named Norman something. He was important, I thought, and I worked on him a good deal. I mean I would go and show him the map and try to get him to understand, because he was a youngish man but from an old ranching family, and was indeed a rancher himself from the eastern part of the state. But he was also the majority leader, and so he had some power in the legislature. But mainly this was something that the state park people were putting together. And when they failed to get Whittell to give it they started working on what it would take to buy it. The first proposition was to buy it in concert with....

Then you had to think about getting it appraised and all that. Don Bowers, because of Nevada Magazine, was a very important person in all of this because he had grown up with Grant Sawyer out in Winnemucca. Grant was from Elko and Don was from Winnemucca, and they had some childhood relationship. But they were good friends, so a lot of the pressure on Grant went through Don. Grant was naturally not an outdoor person and the oddity of it was that you had Grant Sawyer, a Democrat as Governor, and you had Paul Laxalt, as the Lt. Governor, a Republican. Paul actually had more affinity to the outdoors. He ultimately became an ally. At some point in this process – and it must have been after we came back from Africa (in late fall of 1963) – because what happened was, we were in the middle of this high-powered lobbying and thinking about all of this when we would break, that was in '63. And I find that the first mention of welfare anywhere is just a word welfare in April of '63. It didn't know about it before, and I don't know what that meant. But then we had camp and the legislature finished and nothing happened. At some point in '63 or in '64, when we did the special session, we got this man who'd been the superintendent of parks, of a bi-state park in New York, which is along the Hudson, so come out and describe to people in the Legislature how such a bi-state park could work because it was the early days for a lot of these parks. He came and we had a little lunch with him near the airport and were going to the Legislature to this hearing which was in the money committee. And the chair was one of the legislators from near Gardnerville, Douglas County. And they were always very conservative, but we figured that this man who sort of carried the impress of the Rockefellers and all, would carry some weight. So Les was wanting to introduce him and beginning to show on the map where the boundaries of the park were. And this legislator who is one of those old family names down there, not Jacobsen, couldn't have been Dressler. He just said flat out, "This is not germane to the money committee what the outline of this map is, and so the hearing will go forward on the money. And they breezed right out and closed out this man who had come from the east to explain and so forth. But for that hearing we had really rallied a big group of people, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and horsemen, people in outdoor education, anybody who used parks, and we had about 200 of them. It was in the old Capitol Building and that filled and people were standing up in the balcony. And the result of that was that you had a good body of indignant people who had themselves seen

how the government, the legislators could just wipe it away. And so that was what we built on for putting pressure on to have a special session of the legislature the next year.

We got them to call or write and at that time there were lots of county commission meetings that we were attending in Washoe County, in Ormsby and Douglass, all of them were having meetings to do with the lake itself.

At this point it was about 45,000 acres that were being considered. We didn't get the acreage around Skunk Harbor and his home (between Skunk and Sand Harbors). And there's a whole square mile that we did not get. But other than that we got everything. It is huge. At one point in that process we were really trying to make sure that Grant Sawyer and his administration supported the idea. And Don Bowers had done a lot to introduce Grant to the are, and he actually had gotten Grant up there with some legislators. I mean Grant did a whole overnight trip up there with legislators. And all of that was done while we were in Africa that Autumn before the Special Session.

And at that point I guess Laxalt was both Lt. Goernor an lawyer for Captain Whittell. What I can't remember is when an election would have taken place. Because I seem to eel that when the Parks Bill actually passed, which I have as Feb 5, 1964, that Paul Laxalt was then the governor. So maybe Grant was governor from 60-64?

But I was very conscious in 1963, when we were having all these meetings and hearings and things, of wanting to put pressure on the legislators, and did that thing of having a luncheon for the wives out here. There was so much snow they had to walk up from the road. Only one wife came, but that didn't matter very much, because I sent letters to all the wives and made some of the points. The main thing was that the two people who came were the most important. I got Emily Greil to come and be "la", and then I got Yvonne Lathrop and her good friend from the Nugget, Mrs. Graves. And Mrs. Graves wad introduced that day to this book called the Gold Book. It was an early, even before Dick's roster of what parks they might have, it was a description of what they might have for a few parks. It included a glowing account of lake Tahoe, and a park at Lake Tahoe. And she became a total convert and they were heavy duty Republics. Her sort of assignment was to work on Paul Laxalt who was then Lt. Governor, because it was really important that we have some of those Republican votes. And she would go around with this book and nail one after the other of the legislators – it was great. The legislative wives weren't as important as having her for a lobbyist, and also having the legislators themselves get the word that they were being invited.

Tahoe Park Part 2 Interview on 2-10-93

How much money were you talking about?

Bill Hart, who was the professional in charge of parks, the one employee they had, went forward to get an appraisal made, and they came up with \$6 million. This was before the bill passed, before it was even a bill, because they had to assess it for Appropriations.

In the meantime, Bob Stitser had been hired by the Sierra Club for something like \$100, to come down and lobby, so we would strategize. That was when Dick was in England and Moscow, that whole period when it was really agonizing about the parks. (laughs)

But we were at the same time applying for licenses and planning for camp. Then in 64 came this special session of the legislature. (Maybe Grant was still governor when it was signed, and the paying for it and raising money came later when Paul was in.)

And we had a meeting with Hugh Schamberger, the head of Natural Resources under Grant. There was a Sierra Club meeting to which he came in Reno where we really wanted to know that the Administration was going to ask for the whole 45,000 acres, and not just Sand Harbor. Because they were beginning to get the idea about Sand Harbor, but Dick saw it was ridiculous to preserve that little piece and not preserve the back-country, because the whole notion of an ecological preservation was bound up in that. So we asked Schamberger and he was very evasive about it, and so that's when I wrote my open letter to Grant Sawyer, the Governor, and asked him what he was planning, what were his plans, and his Administration's plans, for Lake Tahoe? Were they for the smallest possible park to appeal to the least enlightened legislator? Or was he going to lead, the way a governor was supposed to, and ask for the whole 45,000 acres? And that's when he got so mad that he sat down and wrote me a hand-written note saying that "we don't usually answer letters that we see in the press before. But because we love ya, (laughs) we're assuring you that we are asking for the whole piece."

That must have been pretty exciting.

Well, it was, and of course he assumed he was always going to do that and that we were idiots not to know that, but that's the kind of question to get somebody on the record, that helps in the future carving out of what you want.

And do you think that he really was?

I don't know. But I will always think that the pressure was valuable. Whether it was the decisive element or not, I'll never know.

And so the legislature passed a State Parks bill. While we were in Africa, Grant Sawyer worked out a political solution that was quite inventive. He offered the legislature two possibilities: one was a bi-state park, which California would pay half of and he had the financing organized. California would pay \$500,000 and Nevada would pay \$500,000.

And then the way we were putting the deal together was that we started asking the Fleishman Fund for a matching million.

Either that, or a "go it alone" park that would mean that Nevada puts up the \$1.5 million. Then we were asking Fleischmann for a matching \$1.5 million -- \$3 million. Then we were going to the feds for a matching \$3 million to make the \$6 million. So the legislature, because they hate California so, elected to go it alone. But you could see that

was a politically savvy thing to do – to give them an offer that showed that California was interested, but that challenged that chauvinism.

Nevada was a very different legislature because it was before reapportionment. That came in around 1965, and so the legislature was full of ranchers, and a very big, disproportionate number of them.

Reapportionment changed that because it meant you didn't have representation from trees and bushes and cows, you had it based on people. It was more conservative in a sense. That was always one of the interesting curiosities to me, and one Don understood well. That actually, conservationists and ranchers have more in common than conservationists and city folk, because they live with the land and understand weather and soil and everything. But they don't understand the recreational value to city people of having the land, because they live with it.

And they don't understand the rocks and pine trees (laughs).

They certainly don't understand the ones that aren't productive.

Did that make it harder to bring those people in?

Well I think it made it so that you had to frame your discussion in a different way than you would normally do. But I think it remains one of the intriguing parts as you know. The question is whether ranchers can't have more in common with conservationists than they think. But of course the use of it by lots of people – that's a question. And that was one that was there with Whittell. He didn't want people, especially.

Well were you able to preserve it as Nevada heritage?

That's what Mrs Graves was good at, because this Golden Book quoted liberally from Mark Twain and Fremont, and all (laughs) the other historical characters who admired the Lake and wrote about it knowingly. And I think Don helped Grant to give that off to them as well. There's a lot about how they lobbied during that time that we were in Africa that autumn that I don't really know in full about.

The South End was all wonderful slough and meadow, that just was rampant with birds and everything. There was a little town where this friend of ours lived year-round. There was a Vet center. One of the instructive pieces for me in lobbying, was how you bring disparate kinds of people to bear on the political people and give them a variety of arguments from which they can choose. And because always there were people who said well you don't talk about the money. Just talk about the high line. And there were others who said the economic issues are the only ones that will tell. And the fact of the matter is you need both of those (laughs). You need a reason that gets to the heart, and you also need people to understand the economics. Bob Stitser's role in it was instructive too. He would come by and we would strategize and then he'd go down there to the hearing, And then one time he came back and was just full of his loud laugh, and said "You know

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