



# TOM BELL: THE QUIET REVOLUTIONARY

by Marjane Ambler

**I**n 1970, *High Country News* was born of Tom Bell's passion. For five years its pages thundered with his outrage at ranchers, politicians and corporations that threatened Wyoming's water, wild lands and animals. The noisy tabloid reflected both Bell's personality and the changing times, as the rural West roused to face the nation's appetite for its resources.

Thomas A. Bell grew up in Wyoming and tried several different vocations before arriving at the door of the *Camping News Weekly* — *High Country News'* predecessor — at age 45. His approach to conservation issues was a curious combination of toughness and vulnerability. Armed with bachelor's and master's degrees in wildlife conservation and game management, he started his career with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, not because he wanted to be a hunting cop, but because of the sensitivity to wild creatures that he acquired as a boy in Wyoming, lying on river banks watching fish spawn.

His principles drove him to resign from the department dramatically, not once but twice, the second time in 1959. He thought untrained game wardens had too much power over game management, and he said so loudly.

His next career, or rather the same career in a different arena, was as a junior high science teacher, where he conveyed his love of wild things as part of his lessons.

While teaching, Bell wrote a column called "High Country" for the local newspaper in Lander, primarily as an outlet for his pent-up feelings about the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. But his interests were wide-ranging. In 1963, he wrote a column mourning the passing of Pres. John F. Kennedy and wildlife biologist Olaus J. Murie, saying they were "great and dedicated conservation leaders."

His published work during this time was only a fraction of his writings. His files are filled with eloquent, emotional pleas he wrote to game and fish commissioners to allow professionals to control the wildlife, to senators to come visit proposed wilderness areas, and to fellow conservationists to join battles.

Bell set high standards and did not worry about offending powerful people. In 1970, he wrote to the regional forester of the U.S. Forest Service protesting the transfer of District Ranger Harold Wadley. Wadley had recommended against allowing Louisiana-Pacific to overcut timber on the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming, a warning vindicated more than a decade later, when the L-P mill in Dubois was shut down for lack of logs.

Bell said, "If there was ever any doubt as to the ability of the timber industry to put the finger on a man in the Service, it has been completely dispelled. This kind of thing leaves nothing but a bad taste. Sorry to see the Forest Service rack up another defeat."

Although the National Wildlife Federation was one of Bell's favorite organizations, he wrote to the executive director in 1968 saying, "National is too concerned about tax-exempt status and not enough concerned with the blood and guts issues. I have great admiration for your stand on most issues, but I think I can sometimes detect an unwillingness to really get bloodied on some fights."

**B**ell, the fierce critic of the Forest Service and other government agencies and prodder of national and local environmental groups, had as close to an Abe Lincoln upbringing as one can have in 20th century America. He grew up in the small, isolated community of Lander, and was elected student body president in both high school and college.

After the war and his service with Wyoming Fish and Game he taught until 1966. In that year, he quit teaching and began his real career. From a personal point of view, it was not a good time to quit: He and his wife, Tommie, had two boys in college and two adopted sons at home.

But he had a message to transmit, and so he left his junior high post, promising Tommie that he would try writing for a year. But he wasn't yet ready to begin writing. Instead, in 1967 he formed the Wyoming Outdoor Coordinating Council and served as its unpaid executive director. Among the organizations WOCC was set up to coordinate was the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, which he had headed in 1965, while still a teacher.

In 1970, after he had established *High Country News*, the second enduring organization he was to create, he said:

"I view conservation not just as a job nor as an avocation but as a way of life and a means to survival for the human race. It is a deadly serious business in which a person must be willing to sacrifice, personally as well as economically."

And sacrifice he, and his family, did. Bell savored a good fight but his battles against the rich and powerful were always fought from a terribly weak economic base, forcing him to time and again expose his underbelly when he needed financial help.

Throughout his career as a conservationist in Wyoming, his zeal and sensitivity attracted loyal followers and

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## "A matter of the utmost urgency"

Tom Bell's letter of April 19, 1972, to Gov. Stanley Hathaway reads, in part:

I write you as a concerned citizen of Wyoming on a matter of the utmost urgency... like most other natives, I like Wyoming the way it is. It greatly disturbs me to see the profound changes which will come about in the next decade. What disturbs me even more is to know that proud, intelligent, Wyoming people could guide their own destiny if they only knew what was truly in store.

"Change is always with us. Profound change can be directed and channeled to mitigate the bad and emphasize the good. The challenge is to boldly seize the initiative and capitalize upon the natural character and resources of our state. The will and the desire of the people is here. We look to you for the wisdom, the foresight, and the leadership which is required.

"Time is of the essence. We no longer need to dwell upon progress, growth, and development. Those are here, thanks to vast natural stores of energy resources and this place in time in the history of our country when prodigious amounts of energy are called for. Our need now is to plan how this growth and development can be accomplished without destroying the very social and physical fabric we all cherish.

"One announcement of gigantic proposals and projects follows upon another. Personally, I am overwhelmed and frightened at the prospects, given our present naivete, lack of knowledge and understanding. We must learn to deal with such projected developments, and quickly, else we will all be overwhelmed...

"We have come to the time and place in history where if we do not do these things on our own, and at our own initiative, we will lose our prerogatives by default to the federal government. As in all other areas where our actions are preempted by a federal monolith, we won't like the results. We have the opportunity — I say, let's use it..."

donors. But it was at *High Country News* that his followers' support took on legendary characteristics. Mary Margaret Davis had begun working part-time as a bookkeeper for the *Camping News Weekly* in 1968. When Bell took over the paper and changed the name to *High Country News*, she became office manager and later typesetter. She remembers typesetting articles about many topics unfamiliar to her. A housewife and mother of four in her 30s, Davis never considered herself an environmentalist.

A second staffer, Marge Higley, wrote the "Distaff Corner" column and "Loony Limericks," took photographs, and was in charge of circulation. She was more politically oriented but, like Davis, was certainly not well-off.

Yet the two women worked alongside Bell for more than six months without pay when the newspaper's bank account hit bottom. Several people in Lander, who had already told Davis they thought Bell was too radical, then thought Davis and Higley were crazy.

Bell is known as the founder of *High Country News*, but he doesn't see it that way. He says there were four founders — Tommie Bell, Marge Higley, Mary Margaret Davis and himself.

Why did Marge and Mary Margaret stay? "We just stuck by Tom because of the person he was. He had faith in it, and so you had the faith in it, too," Davis says.

**B**ell says he had gradually evolved into an environmentalist after becoming disillusioned with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. The events of the early 1970s converted many others to the conservation ethic. Through *High Country News*, Bell gave the emerging ranks not only information and inspiration but also the comfort of knowing they were not alone.

In 1973, his readers demonstrated the depth of their dedication in what became known as the "first miracle." Davis remembers when Bell came into the *High Country News* office one day and told her and Higley that the last bit of money was gone. He printed that news in the paper, saying that, barring a miracle, it was the last issue. Soon, however, the staff was dumbfounded to see checks start arriving, many of them for just a few dollars and some for much more. Ultimately, readers donated more than \$30,000.

The paper could go on, and the staff was paid its back salaries. As important as the checks to a paper that ran on spirit, were the accompanying letters of support that vindicated the sacrifices. "That just showed everybody that there were a lot of people who felt as he did," Davis says. In three years, *High Country News* had made a place for itself in the West.

To understand that outpouring of support, one must look at the times and at Bell's charisma. In 1970, Wyoming had only 332,416 people, ranked 49th in population, and was heading for 50th, according to Wyoming historian T.A. Larson. Wyoming oil and gas production was declining, and experts only expected six more years of oil and 10 of gas. Politically, 63 percent of Wyoming voters that year re-elected Governor Stanley K. Hathaway, who championed developers and growth. They believed industrial development offered the only hope that their children would be able

to stay in Wyoming after high school.

Through his "High Country" column in the Lander newspaper and later through the pages of *High Country News*, Bell made it clear that he saw a different future for Wyoming.

He supported legislation for the DuNoir and Washakie wilderness areas. He criticized ranchers who constructed fence barriers to antelope migrations across public lands, saying the fences constituted a "taking of the public's natural resources for illegal private use." He led an attack on the Kendall Project, an incredibly ambitious federal plan to dam the Green River, drain one of the Wind River Mountains' most scenic high mountain lakes, divert the water over the Continental Divide, and irrigate dry lands in southeast Wyoming.

Another incredible federal proposal, Project Rullison, would have used underground nuclear detonations to release natural gas if *High Country News*, the Wyoming Outdoor Council, and Pinedale, Wyo., area residents had not defeated it. Bell was also among the first conservationists to call attention to the problems of clear-cut timbering and of irrigation of submarginal, alkaline lands.

In retrospect, those were "practice" issues. The energy crisis soon overshadowed everything else and was the crucible that tested *High Country News'* usefulness. Bell quickly saw the threat energy posed to the region and, while others scoffed, he took seriously the rumors of massive development.

On April 19, 1972, he wrote to Hathaway pleading for a special session of the legislature to deal with "impending social, economic and environmental problems." Copies of an Oct. 1971 federal report known as the North Central Power Study surfaced with predictions of dozens of coal-fired power plants and coal gasification plants for the Northern Plains states.

Hathaway may have been governor, but in retrospect it is clear that Bell was setting the terms of the debate for the next 10 years. In that 1972 letter and in *High Country News*, Bell foresaw not only the very real threats but also some of the weapons for Wyoming's self-defense — local control, planning, and taxes to provide for the coming bust.

The letter suggested an additional severance tax to be put into a capital reserve for the time when the coal and oil were gone. Bell said the consumer, who was demanding more and more, should pay the taxes passed on by the energy companies. "Our philosophy should be: let them pay, for we will pay a dear price in social freedoms lost, land lost, amenities lost, clean air lost, and the complete change from a rural-agricultural state to a highly industrialized one..."

Hathaway refused Bell's request for a special session, saying the energy plans did not seem imminent, and special sessions of the legislature were "historically ineffective." In retrospect, a special session may have made little difference since skepticism about the scope of industry's plans for the West was widespread. The editor of *Science News* read an article by Bell on a giant generating plant proposal and telephoned, sure that there had been a mistake. Nothing could be that big, he said. After checking, he did a cover story for his magazine in 1972.

The plans were shrouded in secrecy, but they were real. The joint government-industry North Central Power Study predicted 42 power plants on the Northern Plains. In 1972, the six major Western coal states produced only 9,000 megawatts of power;

the study predicted that the northern states would produce five times that much by 1980 and 200,000 megawatts by the year 2000. *High Country News* publicized the study, and Bell inspired the Audubon Society to send a renowned writer, Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., to the West to expose the plans to a national audience.

Bell's and others' attacks on development did not go unanswered. All through the 1970s, Hathaway and Wyoming's state-wide newspaper, the *Casper Star-Tribune*, portrayed Bell and other environmentalists as voices in the wilderness. Historian Larson quotes Hathaway as saying in 1973: "Mr. Bell speaks so often and it seems to me out of focus so much. He hasn't said anything good about this administration for six years."

A *Star-Tribune* editorial in March 1974 said, "The 'no growth' philosophy of meeting the energy crisis of the future, enunciated in a talk in Casper by ecologist-editor Tom Bell of Lander, has scant appeal for most Americans." Later the newspaper referred to the "small but strident minority — most of whom have spent scant years in Wyoming and less in actual work — clutching the hatchet, Carrie Nation fashion, and hacking away at anything that stands in their way."

Yet the gentle crusader was not a young, Eastern transplant, and he was difficult to dismiss. Bell didn't hesitate to exploit his family's roots. Not only was he a native, but his great grandfather, Edward Alton, served in the Army in Wyoming in 1868. Bell's grandfather was a string-team freighter and his father a rancher and coal miner.

"I would venture there are few whites who can trace their ancestry so far back into the history of Wyoming," Bell told Hathaway. No one could ignore one badge of his patriotism, a black patch covering the eye he lost as a bombardier in World War II.

**T**he environmental activists and *High Country News* supporters represented a much wider spectrum of Wyoming people than Hathaway wanted to believe.

Congressman Teno Roncalio of Wyoming recognized the broad base of the conservation sentiment in his state. He called *High Country News* so often that receptionist Davis says she was on a first name basis with him. In 1974, Roncalio wrote to Bell telling him that the House had passed coal strip mining legislation that required the consent of surface owners; the legislation passed both houses in 1977. "Written consent remains in the bill as one of its essential and outstanding features, and you deserve credit for that!" Roncalio told Bell in July 1974. It was one of Bell's last battles.

That fall, he moved on to Oregon. "My heart and soul had been literally poured out," he now recalls. His leaving shook but didn't shatter *High Country News*. He had received a fortuitous letter dated April 18, 1973, from a Colorado activist, Carolyn Johnson, about Joan Nice, an editor of *Climbing* magazine, and freelancer Bruce Hamilton, who had written several oil shale articles for *High Country News*. Johnson described them as "savvy types," who would be willing to work for very little.

Sure enough, Bell offered them \$300 a month, and they came. Not long after they had demonstrated their skills, Bell told them he was leaving. Believing that the country's economy would soon collapse, necessitating self-sufficiency, he tackled a new challenge. He took his hands, softened by years of being

an editor, to Oregon to saw, plant, milk, and build a new home for his family. Handing over the newspaper, he said, "Play with it until the string runs out."

Even had the string run out, the accomplishments of Bell and the other Wyoming conservationists of the 1960s and early 1970s would have made that period a golden era, full of crucial successes. The Kendall and Rullison projects never materialized. In 1964, the Wyoming Game and Fish announced that game and fish wardens must have degrees. The Wyoming Legislature increased the fossil fuel tax twice and provided a special impact fund from coal taxes. An air quality act was passed in 1967 and later was strengthened to be one of the best in the region. The state passed a surface mining reclamation act and an environmental quality act in 1973 and two years later, a land use planning act.

In 1975, to Bell's amazement, the legislature enacted an industrial siting act, which Bell had pushed for but had never expected to materialize.

While the victories represented the efforts of many people, no one questioned that Bell's crusades left their mark on Wyoming. His many awards attested to that: the Society of American Travel Writers' Connie Award in 1973, the American Motors Conservation Award in 1973, and the Department of Interior's Conservation Service Award in 1974.

Along the way, Bell made many sacrifices for the newspaper, the most difficult being his family's 120-acre ranch and his emotional health. He was not to return to Wyoming until 1983.

Ironically, Hathaway's emotional health also was to suffer from the protracted battle with Bell. When Hathaway was nominated to be Interior Secretary in 1975, the *High Country News* staff supplied information from Bell's files to news media and conservationists across the country. The Senate eventually confirmed him, but he resigned six weeks later because of exhaustion from the hearings.

Hathaway, too, returned to Wyoming, but he and Bell don't scrap anymore. Bell devotes his talents to editing the local history magazine in Lander, *Wind River Mountaineer*, tackling a few political battles to protect historical areas; and participating in thrice yearly *High Country News* board meetings.

Those who have followed Bell as editors of the *High Country News* have been journalists first and environmentalists second, if at all. No one has combined advocacy with writing as comfortably as Bell, who for several years ran the Wyoming Outdoor Council and the newspaper out of the same office.

Bell's immediate successors squirmed at the evangelistic tone of the "High Country" columns he sent from Oregon, but Bell had always fought the environmental battles with religious dedication and thus had won many disciples. In fact, some of these followers grumbled about the new editors' reserve, not Bell's High Country column. As current publisher Ed Marston says, "HCN never thundered since, because none of us have had Tom's legitimate righteous wrath."

Despite the complaints, the loyalty lives on, as demonstrated by the donations that constituted the second miracle in 1978, when an auto accident almost destroyed the paper, and by the many charter subscribers who each year send their renewal checks to *High Country News*. ♦

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