



TOM BELL'S SUCCESSORS FORGE A REGIONAL INSTITUTION OUT OF A PASSIONATE JOURNAL

by Joan Nice Hamilton

The odyssey began in a phone booth in Colorado. On the advice of a friend, I called a man with a reputation for fiery oratory and blistering editorials — Tom Bell. He needed help running a small environmental newspaper, and I wanted to write about conservation issues. We arranged to meet in Wyoming. "Meanwhile, I won't look further," he promised. When we met in May of 1973, I told this small, softspoken man that my only hesitation was my friend Bruce. Could he also find work in Lander? No problem, said Tom, who had already published some of Bruce's work in *High Country News*' pages. He'd hire both of us. Just like that. And so we came to our destiny — an occupation so absorbing we scarcely looked up for four years.

JOAN NICE HAMILTON, associate and managing editor of *High Country News* from 1973-1981, is senior editor at *Sierra* magazine. She lives in San Francisco with her husband, Bruce Hamilton, and their two children.

Bruce was finishing college and I an 18-month stint running a magazine for technical climbers. We'd both helped run environmental groups in Colorado and written conservation articles. We knew towns like Boulder, Aspen and Ft. Collins, but little about the other places on the paper's map. I remember looking out the window of my Lander-bound car, agog at Wyoming's spaciousness, its vast snowfields in May, and the orangish fur and space-creature eyes of a large ungulate I had never seen before. Bruce, a wildlife major in college, knew it was a pronghorn antelope.

Though I was disappointed by the paper's cement-block office next to a flashing neon "Beer and Booze" sign just off Main Street, I was delighted with everything else. We rented a geodesic dome in a pasture 10 miles from town. The roof leaked, the water was undrinkable, but the neighbors — deer mice, wood rats, foxes, deer, beaver, eagles and an occasional moose or elk — answered my suburban childhood dreams.

Our garden plot was so big we plowed it with a tractor. For entertainment, we wrote in journals, stalked birds, sketched, and spent an occasional Saturday night playing bongo drums with the people down the road. Mostly, though, we stuck to our typewriters, trying to live up to the expectations Tom must have had when he took a leap of faith and hired us.

Leaps of faith were not new to Tom. Shortly before we came, he had declared the paper dead. The situation looked so hopeless he threw an issue's worth of pasteup sheets in the trash. But readers soon mailed an infusion of cash that sent Tom and his staff, Mary Margaret Davis and Marge Higley, rifling through the dumpster. In a drawer labeled "A.M." for "After Miracle," a pile of \$5, \$10 and \$20 contributions gave the paper a future. There was both enough money to print that last issue and a few more, as well as add staff.

That's when Bruce and I signed on for \$300 a month each. Such a deal, we thought. We get to do the work of our dreams together, and somebody pays us!

We soon learned that our saintly employer had endured three years of financial and mental strain. The paper was appreciated by its readers — the \$30,000 that came in after he declared it dead testified to that. But money or no money, putting out *HCN* — and helping to lead the Wyoming environmental movement — absorbed most of Tom's waking hours. It was a struggle that energized and emboldened him at first, but finally demanded too much.

During the paper's first three years of life, he had sold his ranch to keep *HCN* afloat. He hadn't taken a salary in months, and his wife, saddened by the move to town, found herself without even money to buy snow boots for their three adopted children.

We brought hope to Tom, I think, despite our inexperience. We shared the editorial burden, leaving him free to make speeches, write and seek funds. But by the end of our first year, he had become restless. He toyed with the idea of running against his long-term nemesis, Gov. Stanley Hathaway. But when Hathaway said he wouldn't seek re-election, Tom's ambitions shifted. In the wake of the Arab oil embargo, he feared the nation's economy might collapse. So he decided to buy a fertile, well-watered ranch

in eastern Oregon, where he and his family would hammer and dig out a life on a self-sufficient homestead. "Do whatever you want to with the paper until the string runs out," he told us.

Tom's life-crisis left Bruce and me with a mission so compelling that we dropped our plans to stay in Lander for a year or so, and then go to Alaska. Here was a challenge as large as we could hope to find in the far North.

"You've got a big set of Vibrams to fill," a Colorado reader wrote me a few weeks after Tom's departure. Indeed, Tom was a beloved and respected institution among *High Country News* readers. Many subscribed not so much for information as to hear what he had to say. He didn't wear Vibrams; he wore cowboy boots — and it was clear we couldn't fill them.

But we were too young — 22 and 25 — to brood. If we couldn't be as personable, inspiring and wise, we'd be thorough and fair. We'd put out a newsy, more objective publication. Tom's no-holds-barred advocacy had made enemies as well as friends. We'd try to reach a broader audience, to become a trusted, if not so provocative, source of information about the Rocky Mountain West.

The grand surprise, once we struck out on our own, was the intimacy of the reader-staff relationship. *High Country News* was not just a newspaper — it was a source of hope and community to many isolated people throughout the region. Readers liked the paper's feisty, underdog status. They were not about to let us get too distant, too objective. They adopted us.

The small three-room cabin by the Little Popo Agie River that we rented in our second year became a popular environmentalist crash pad. When our couch was full, as it often was, the living room floor could sleep another eleven. Twenty or more could be crammed into the front room for potluck suppers. When we went on the road as reporters, the tables turned. There was a free dinner, bed and breakfast for us in nearly every town. We'd return with a news story, a better understanding of the region, and a sack of garden surplus or frozen elk steaks.

In off-hours, we plunged into the activist vacuum left by our mentor. In fact, the amiable, forthright journalist we hired when Tom left, Marjane Ambler, occasionally had to remind us of journalism. A Denver native who had been running a community newspaper in Nebraska, she was determined to keep the news column even-handed and free from jargon. Pig-tailed and smiling in jeans and a tank top, she'd ask needling little questions: "What does that mean?" "What does the opposition say?" "Can you prove it?" Our stories grew clearer and better balanced, our zealotry more or less under wraps.

But we, too, made enemies. In 1975 former Governor Hathaway was nominated Interior Secretary by President Gerald Ford. Hathaway had been a booster of industry in the statehouse; he was not a promising steward of the federal government's vast natural riches. But many Wyomingites liked him and were proud of the nomination.

Bruce built an extensive file on Hathaway's environmental record and soon began to get inquiries from national reporters, conservation groups and congressional aides. One night, while describing Hathaway's sorry record to an *L.A. Times* reporter who had

called him at home, a raspy voice came on our party line: "Why don't you guys just get out of the state?" Our rural haven suddenly seemed less benign.

But the paper's growing circle of friends made us feel too well-loved to be in real danger. First there was the local crew: Sarah Doll, a musician who worked as our volunteer editorial assistant; August Dailer, who sold ads so well for a commission that we found him a small salary; Michael Weber, a young attorney who helped us set up the High Country News Research Fund pro bono; Myra Connell, a lifelong Lander resident in her eighties who wrote "Branching Out," a popular column about her Lander childhood; and Charlie Smith, a high school English teacher and our most loyal envelope stuffer.

Many loyal friends knew us only through the paper. Ken Morgan, an auto mechanic in Kemmerer, sent us \$30 every month. Lynne Bama, a Cody photographer, donated superb black-and-whites to the cause. David Sumner, a *Colorado Magazine* writer and photographer, sent free articles and photos. And Dick Prouty, the *Denver Post's* environmental reporter, sent free advice. Poet and English professor Peter Wild sent page after page of good copy. Edward Abbey sent manuscripts that national publications would have purchased for 20 times our rate.

We were a secular charity whose believers took excellent care of us. A college professor, Spence Havlick, assigned *High Country News* to his classes at the University of Colorado. Tom Stroock, a Wyoming state legislator and oil man, bought subscriptions for the Wyoming public schools every year. Artists such as Laney Hicks, Carol Snow, Bob Lewis and Paul Breeden donated work that we sold on posters, notecards and T-shirts. A local "Polish bluegrass" band, the Buffalo Chips, played *HCN* benefits. Jackson lawyer Hank Phibbs donated time to help set up a High Country News Foundation. While retracing the Outlaw Trail for a book, regular contributor Robert Redford came by in mirrored sunglasses, shook everyone's hand, and posed for promotional pictures.

If we were a charity, we were also charitable to numerous urban journalists on assignment. Bill Richards of the *Washington Post*, Grace Lichtenstein and Molly Ivins of the *New York Times*, Phil Fradkin of the *L.A. Times*, author Marc Reisner, Calvin Trillin of the *New Yorker* and numerous other reporters passed through at one time or another trying to make sense out of the Rocky Mountain West.

So did Edward Abbey on assignment for *Playboy*. He carried a shirt-pocket-size notebook, and politely stopped us whenever we tried to ply him with too many facts about his topic, the energy boom in the Northern Great Plains. Later in the day he brought four bottles of wine to our cabin, ate whatever it was we had in the refrigerator, and bedded down under a currant bush along the creek. Bruce then accompanied Abbey on a strip mine tour across Wyoming, stopping every hundred miles or so to refill the leaky tires of Abbey's battered old truck.

Life was hectic. Tom Bell's ability to help raise a family while presiding over this regional institution came to seem a near miracle. Occasionally we felt done in by the pressures, even though we had no capital invested in the paper, paid only \$100-a-month rent, and had few pressing family commitments. When we realized that we, too,

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wanted children, Bruce looked for another job. In 1977, he took over the Northern Plains office of the Sierra Club.

That left Marjane and me with another big set of Vibrams to fill; so we did some soul-searching. We could no longer lurch from deadline to deadline trying to be the same journal we had set out to be four years earlier. With the energy boom almost at its peak, many of the abstract problems *High Country News* had earlier warned about had become real. Most of the big dailies in the West had their own environmental reporters. Did the region still need *HCN*? Maybe, we decided, if it became more lively, provocative and perceptive.

To brighten our look, we hired Hannah Hinchman as our first part-time art and production manager. A Stanford-trained economics major, Jaz McDonald, took over the business side.

The first journalist we hired after Bruce's departure was Dan Whipple, a staff writer for the Washington, D.C.-based newsletter *Coal Week*. Jovial and effusive, Dan had almost instantly fallen in love with Wyoming (and with one of our staffers!) during a *Coal Week* reporting trip. Soon he was writing energy articles for us from a bureau in Sheridan, Wyo. Later he worked in our Lander office as part-time writer and editor, put in a short stint

at *Business Week* in 1979, and returned to become editor in 1982.

Then there was Justas Bavarskis, a seasoned *UPI* editor from Detroit taking extended leave in Hudson, Wyo. When he joined our ranks in 1978, I felt we had gained an editorial guru. Tragically, the apprenticeship was cut short after only a few months, when Justas died in an auto accident.

Geoff O'Gara, a *States News Service* writer who joined the staff in 1979, picked up where Justas left off. Geoff was more writer than editor, but he shared Justas' commitment to strong, pithy prose and aggressive reporting. I also hoped he would be a strong leader. I'd been at the helm six years, was pregnant, and was ready to ease into part-time journalism.

Geoff's first stumbling block was our peculiar management structure. He had final word on editorial content. But business decisions were made by consensus. We had been paying talented people a pittance (\$300 a month until 1979). In place of money, I shared power.

Geoff came in promoting revolution: redesign, large-scale promotion, salary raises and new typesetting equipment. Some staffers shrank from these as expensive and risky. Our familial operating style started to look like a formula for stagnation. In a long, heartfelt memo, Geoff told me I had given him responsibility without authority, and he

would have to leave. Risk or no risk, the paper desperately needed someone with his talents. So together we ended the era of consensus decision-making. It had been my style; it was not his.

I stayed on a while, working while my placid baby, Kate, napped or played in my office. But relieved of most of the paper's weight, my mind wandered, just as Tom's must have when Bruce and I came to help. After eight years, it was time to try something new.

Beginning in 1981, I devoted my limited work hours to freelance writing. It was a relief. But there was sadness, too, at leaving a job that had filled my house with fine people, had led me to the haunts of grizzly bear and pronghorn, had become a compelling way of life.

Today I have memories, an unusual journalistic background, and strong admiration for the people who have brought the paper from its tumultuous first decade through its more stable and increasingly well respected second. Its survival seems a miracle to some of us — yet maybe it shouldn't. *High Country News* continues to speak with a voice that understands both the environmental movement and the rural West, yet is ruled by neither. That's a rare and valuable combination. ♦

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This is an episode that many of Bell's allies in the environmental movement still find troubling. Rather suddenly, in the summer of 1974, Bell announced that the Lord had told him to move to Oregon, leaving his new editorial staff to run the paper on their own. They sensed a new passivity in him — a tendency to defuse his own passion by saying that even environmental problems were in the hands of God. At one point, reading a religion-oriented column Bell had sent to *HCN* after his move to Oregon, the staff went to a local bar to hold a wake for the paper, which they feared was losing its focus. But Bell stopped sending evangelistic columns when he heard his staff's concerns.

Bell, who has since moved back to Lander, understands the consternation of people who don't share his beliefs. "The world doesn't believe that the Lord talks to you," he says. He has had several deep religious experiences, though he finds it difficult to discuss such events in objective terms. Still, religion has not put out his fire. "You can put a problem in the hands of the Lord, but you can still do something about it," he says.

Plenty has been done about the issues Bell first articulated in the late '60s. Many of the laws that form the foundation of environmental policy in Wyoming were passed before he moved to Oregon, and others followed shortly thereafter. The state's Environmental Quality Act even has former Gov. Hathaway's signature on it.

In addition, the two institutions he created, *High Country News* and the Wyoming Outdoor Council, have thrived. *HCN*'s readers have repeatedly provided

miracles: when the uninsured staff was decimated in an automobile accident, and whenever money ran short. Today it has an annual budget of more than \$300,000 and a circulation of 7,500. The Wyoming Outdoor Council has had its ups and downs, but a recent drive brought membership to an alltime high, and it continues to provide education and leadership on issues such as acid rain and forest planning.

If the Rocky Mountain environmental movement of the 1960s had been given the power to construct from scratch a leader to represent its cause before the world, certain attributes would surely have been included. That leader would be a native, not a newcomer to the region but someone familiar from childhood with the ways of the plains and mountains; he would be a rancher, someone who had put up hay as a child and knew how to move cattle from pasture to pasture; he would have family who suffered the grunt work of mining and homesteading in the early settlements of the West; he would be a scientist, who could approach ecological problems with a scientist's eye; and he would be lovingly intimate with the rocks and wildlife and landscapes of the high country.

Extraordinarily, the movement got all that in Tom Bell.

"It always amazed me to sit down with Tom — this mild, self-effacing, gentle little fellow," says Keith Becker, who now ranches near Thermopolis, Wyo. "He'd get on Hathaway or one of his pet peeves, and the sparks would just fly." Bell says the old days are "just like a world removed" to him now, but just get him talking (about the policies of Ronald Reagan and his public lands managers, say) and his voice rises and the sparks still fly.

In fact, some of the struggles Tom Bell began are not yet over. Louisiana-Pacific, which has a sawmill in Dubois, is fighting attempts by the Shoshone and Bridger-Teton national forests to reduce timber harvests on those lands. The elk are gone from the Fish Creek area on the crest of the Wind River Range, where the scars of roading and clearcuts remain, and Bell has not forgotten that lesson. He called down to the *High Country News* offices to have them send him copies of a recent article on failed forest practices. He'll distribute them to local leaders in the Dubois area.

Bell himself is clearly pleased that many of the things he envisioned have come to pass, though a little embarrassed when homage is paid him. He laughs off suggestions that he run for office — and he would probably need a nemesis like Hathaway to motivate him, since he lacks a politician's vanity. Furthermore, he is back at work on his novel about Wyoming, and apart from his work as historian at the Fremont County Museum, he wants few distractions. He is returning to his childhood and the events that shaped his strong views of the land. It's a subject that he touched upon in one of those gentler columns, almost 20 years ago:

"I don't know how I would have fared in this world had I not had the great outdoors in which to roam, seek solace, heal sensitive feelings, and begin to grope my way to adulthood.

"My lot has been cast with the simple wonder of the world. You cannot buy the light flashing from a rainbow's side in limpid waters. There is no price on the hoot of an owl from dusky woods at eventide. You can only experience a coyote by hearing his howl." ♦