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INTERVIEW WITH: Bruce Babbitt  
INTERVIEWER: Marsha Holland  
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Part of the Southern Utah Oral History Project-Monument History segment. Olympus WS-821 recorder.

Bruce Babbitt, former United States Secretary of the Interior 1993-2001. The interview takes place in a restaurant and begins informally with this discussion:

BB: The decision to look into Grand Staircase had a lot of politics in it and it really came out of people around the President who were looking for a big splashy production at the front end of the '96 election. Exactly how that all took place has never been entirely clear. It came from the White House. I think that Dick Morris had a big hand in it. Have you heard that name?

Let me tell you the story line. I was not a direct participant in this. Everybody has different memories of this. But the story line is this. You may never have heard of Dick Morris. Dick Morris is very controversial character who was a pollster, just a political operative that Clinton talked to in a one-on-one relationship. You can Google him and find out about him, he was a weird character, but a very insightful person. He is talking to Clinton on the lead up to the '96 election, and he said, "My polling shows that soccer moms are going to be a key element in the '96 election and they are all interested in the environment. You need to do something that is big and spectacular that shows you care about the environment. It can't be legislation because Congress wouldn't pass anything, you have to use your executive power."

Clinton begins casting around within his White House circle, "What is there that we can do?" Up comes the Antiquities Act because that is Presidential prerogative that does not involve Congress. In the discussions, the environmental groups surface the Grand Staircase-Escalante, which had been discussed for years among the environmental community, as you well know. It had an added sort of appeal because of all these proposals to mine coal up on the Kaiparowits Plateau. As Clinton and his environmental people in the White House go from Dick Morris who said soccer moms are the constituency and you need to do something that you can do to demonstrate that you really care, to the Antiquities Act, to what are the possibilities, and Grand Staircase immediately emerges because it has all this long appeal from the environmentalists, because it is now threatened by all this coal mining prospect up on the Kaiparowits. Now you can connect that to John Leshy because it all fits exactly into what Leshy told you, he starts talking with the White House and it all goes on from here. Exactly how? I don't know if Clinton

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would be able to talk about the details of how it emerged. One person you might talk to is Katie McGinty.

Recording is suspended at Mr. Babbitt's request.

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### Part 2

BB: You should call Leshy again and say, "John, I want to talk to the White House people who were talking to Clinton about this. Who can you send me to?" He will say Katie McGinty. She may not talk to you, she is running for Senate in Pennsylvania right now. There has been a little legacy of controversy about all of that. Ask John for other names, there were other people out there in the mix.

MH: If we might now refer to the interview questions provided, which may be a bit repetitive, to place you in history, what is the date and place of your birth please?

BB: Really?

MH: Yes.

BB: As I say, when they always ask that, 6-27-38, Los Angeles.

MH: Would you care to talk about the family you were born into?

BB: There is a book which you can find in the library called, Brothers Five which gives 300 pages of my family's history. And it all fits into my growing up in Arizona.

MH: Oh, okay, born in Los Angeles, grew up in Arizona.

BB: All the background is there. I will say this, from Los Angeles to Flagstaff, my ancestors arrived in Northern Arizona in 1886. It was a time when the territorial capital of Phoenix was virtually inaccessible, you could hardly get there. You had to ride a horse for two or three days, but the railroad ran east-west across to Los Angeles. So, all of my family's urban contacts; medical care, banking, all that stuff has always been in Los Angeles. They have had houses there, various members have lived there, my parents happened to be living in Los Angeles in that time period, but I grew up in Flagstaff.

MH: Flagstaff is an interesting place; higher elevation, great climate. Was your family then involved in ranching?

BB: It is an interesting story, but I do not want to take an hour to tell you about it, because it is all in this book. We are still up there. I was on the ranch yesterday. It is a significant ranch, 750 thousand acres, a four season ranch right up on the rim of the Grand Canyon. It is run in a very traditional style, it is now in the fourth-fifth generation. It is kind of a western story.

MH: The area coming into Flagstaff from the north on Hwy 89 – the big plains- is so stunning to me.

BB: That is the C-O Bar, which is the sort of our anchor ranch. The land where we ranch on is all the way from Cameron pretty much up to Flagstaff, much of that land. It is really impressive.

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MH: So, you grew up in these beautiful landscapes, wonderful.

BB: Absolutely.

MH: So, a bit about educational background and your career path, I guess we can say to the White House. I'm sure that is a good story, too.

BB: In lieu of a long thing, may I send you an article or two that describes this? I basically went through the public school system in Flagstaff, I went to Notre Dame where I majored in Geology. I spent a couple of years in Britain in graduate school studying geo-physics, got a Master's degree. I spent some time in South America which relates to what I am doing now. I came back and thought that academics was not exactly a perfect fit. I went to Harvard Law School, spent two years in the South in the Civil Rights movement, part of which at the time I was working for the federal government in the Johnson Administration. I found a spouse, settled in Phoenix, was elected Attorney General, I became governor. Clinton asked me to become the Secretary of the Interior.

MH: How did you two meet?

BB: We were both Governors at the same time, so there was a lot of interaction.

MH: Okay, and you spent time in the South. Such an interesting time, talking with John Leshy, and Charles Wilkerson, author of the Proclamation, that was such a time of activism. Sometimes I look around now and wonder if such people are still out there?

BB: It did kind of fade away. It really was and a lot got done. In the conservative political environment of today it is sort of gone. In fact, the Civil Rights revolution was really a core of much of what went on in the Sixties. It was incredibly dramatic. From the Civil War until the 1960s—the Civil War is over, the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment prohibiting slavery was passed and the South imposed de facto slavery all over again and nothing was done about it for nearly one hundred years. In the Sixties it was taken on.

MH: We still are struggling with the same issues.

BB: It is by no means over and the emerging unrest, Black Lives Matter, on the college campuses is maybe a sign of a more activist approach to it.

MH: It is sometimes vexing to me, that some of the most poignant issues of human equality remain issues today.

BB: You are in fact the beneficiary of all this change. Think of your mother's generation. A wonderful writer, a guy named Eric Foner, this is way off topic but he writes about liberty in American history. He traces, just beautifully, the Suffragist Movement, in the mid-nineteen century, the emergence of the racial issue, Civil War, Reconstruction, and how it is that racial discrimination and the attack on it that broadened very quickly into Women's Suffrage, Women's Rights, Gay Rights, from this core idea there, that has progressively expanded, not perfectly and by no means completely but it is wonderful facet of American history.

MH: During the time period of the Monument's designation, it was an election year, 1996. How did the idea of the Grand Staircase designation come to you?

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BB: Leshy is exactly right about all that. It is all correct.

MH: So, he mentioned it to you at a Christmas party?

BB: I have no memory of that, that is his description and truly essentially correct.

MH: During that time period you remained the Secretary of the Interior. Your responsibilities in relation to the Grand Staircase and its designation were what?

BB: The important piece of this story is I think, the really important piece, is the use of the Antiquities Act in history had always been that the President would use his power to designate relatively small, relatively wild areas, to make them National Monuments as trial candidates for inclusion into the National Park System. If you look at how they were used, particular in the west, add a piece of the Colorado River, make it a national monument with the expectation that the Congress would transform the monument by legislation into national park. The Antiquities Act was a president using his power to put these areas on a kind of a conveyor belt into the National Park System. That was the real threat of all of this. The important change here was we looked at this in two ways that were very different. The first was a large entire landscape that was in fact not all wilderness, it had people on the land, communities on the land, that is to say we don't think of this as becoming a national park. We think of it with kind of a vision that what we really want to do is protect the landscape for deleterious change from mining and the inevitable road networks and the stuff you see on so much of BLM land. That is the idea, we are going to have a boundary, there will be no disposition, we will remove it from mineral leasing and the mineral location act, we will get some administration. We are not going to let the land be chopped up by roads, we will be very attentive to endangered species and grazing. But that is the vision, we are not going to run everyone off the land and make it a National Park. We will consult with everybody, try to put together these management plans which are so important. That led to the next thing, a really important change which was it will stay in the BLM. The history of National Monuments was that they were always transferred to the National Park Service. That was really *the* decision that shaped, the vision and deliberate decision, the idea to build a conservation system inside the Bureau of Land Management.

That was really one of the big surprises. There were two surprises. One was Utah saying, "Holy smoke! What are these guys doing?" The second, kind of lesser one, took place inside all the conservation commitments; National Park System, they were furious. They are saying, "Wait a minute, these are ours, national monuments are run by the Park Service on the way to becoming national parks." We are saying, "Uh unh, these are different." Leshy's memory is much better with all of that stuff.

MH: It is the big ideas...

BB: Those are the big ideas.

MH: If you would be willing to talk about Utah's response with the designation, or your interaction with the Utah delegation?

BB: Sure. The decision was made, it wasn't an ideal decision, but in the run up to the '96 election, the White House said it wanted it to be a big unanticipated announcement. That is the way the

news cycle, the news culture works in this country. If you dribble it out and have two years of process, no one remembers nothing. The decision was made, we are not going to have a lot of advanced discussion of this, we will work it out in-house, and there will be a big announcement. That is exactly what happened and it was a spectacular success everywhere except in Utah.

Leavitt gets wind of this in Utah, again I trust his memory, he is a straight talker, whatever he told you...you know oral history, everybody tends to embroider the past to fit their concept of what was going on.

MH: Yes, it is a personal perspective.

BB: That is a generous way of saying it. Leavitt is a reliable witness to history. He got wind of it, we talked a number of times, I tried very hard, without giving away the President's confidence, to get around lying to him. That is where Katie McGinty got in trouble. The Congress felt and Senator Bennett felt, that she had not told them everything. Everyone is trying to walk a line to not disclose but to not absolutely lie about it. I walked that line with Leavitt and agreed with him that he should talk to, or one of us agreed to the fact that we should talk to the Chief of Staff, Leon Panetta at the time.

Leavitt went to Leon with a very persuasive presentation, saying, "Look, what's happening, we ought to participate in this", and I think they actually showed a video they had put together of the region. Panetta was impressed, but it did not really change anything because the White House had decided that this was going to be a BIG announcement. I think I probably talked to Senator Bennett as well. He is a straight shooter and he will talk to you, if you ask.

MH: Mr. Bennett has been asked, but is not doing well health-wise. And I tried to speak with Rob Bishop.

BB: Bishop was not an important player in all that. The important player (for Utah) was Senator Bob Bennett. Hatch was also involved. Bennett, in my judgment, is the most reliable. The two people who can give you a straight clear picture of Utah are Mike Leavitt and Bob Bennett. That is the Utah connection, I dealt only with Leavitt, and a little with Bennett. There was a wonderful follow-up, as a footnote, when this all went down finally, after the big announcement, Leavitt started talking very openly about all of this and it resulted in a remarkable deal which was that land swap taking out all the in-holdings in federal conservation areas across the whole state of Utah. It would never have happened except that, people said, if those two guys agree on this-but it was really an important event because it consolidated the whole system. That was after the declaration.

MH: Right, these are the little checker board pieces all over the state?

BB: Absolutely, the state lands which were given in that kind of configuration.

MH: Mike Leavitt mentioned this part of the process resulted in one of the largest federal land swaps ever in the contiguous United States, beside the Louisiana Purchase.

BB: Whatever he said is probably true. There may have been some exception in Alaska. In the framework in which we deal in the lower forty-eight, it surely was the biggest.

MH: The main work objective was establishing the Monument designation in the realm of the BLM. What were your major challenges after the designation?

BB: There are two sets of issues, one was to repair the relationship with the State of Utah. And the second one was to bring BLM around because this was not something they were used to. It was a very traditional place. Their traditional mission, as they see it, is collaborating with the locals to maximize resource production. That takes you to what you know about that landscape- What, we can't cut timber anymore? No coal mines! And the ORV guys will be unhappy. The grazing permit holders will be watched over a little more carefully in the riparian areas along the Escalante River and all of that.

Working with Utah and the State agencies...what we learned very quickly was it is really quite mixed. The official position in Utah, it was a waste of time going to the Governor's office because that was like waving the bloody shirt, and a lot of locals who were really really unhappy, but in between, in the State agencies there were a lot of people saying, "You know look, we deal with reality." Utah Game Management agency was pretty thoughtful in working it out in terms of Federal/State interface. BLM still had a lot of traditional people and it was unclear how it was going to fit organizationally. BLM has typically been state agencies run on their own with no oversight from Washington. In many ways BLM was not a federal agency, it was a collection of state agencies where they never heard that much from Washington. Now all of a sudden here is a totally new program that has been put together, formulated and worked out in Washington and now ironically, BLM people were as skeptical of the federal government as the locals were. They had blended into the local culture. Those were really the issues. You will hear plenty about these issues with grazing allotments, the ORV thing and I have nothing to add to that except those are issues that needed to be addressed. My job was to put the pressure on, to say that you have got to have plans that address these issues.

MH: And now BLM is charged with protecting and restoring special landscapes- that is a new one.

And those issues continue to be worked out- it is tough to range cattle there especially during these drought years.

BB: It is a slick rock range. It is an issue that has been there non-stop since 1850. It hasn't changed. Progress does not happen overnight. My family deals with all these issues on our ranching landscape and there is never a perfect equilibrium.

MH: And dependent on weather. Results...what do you feel like the successes or results were from the designation?

BB: It has created a whole new perception of conservation management everywhere in the west along the lines that we talked about. The west is no longer a place of national parks and landscapes where the BLM has historically stepped aside and let the local users have their way on everything, sort of a divided landscape. Total protection; no grazing, no Indians, no nothing in National Parks. Total exclusion. Versus the rancher who runs the land and does whatever he wants, to a new vision with a primary purpose being conservation, but it is conservation with a working landscape, with people on the land. Of course, that has conflict built into it. Once it is defined that way, there will be conflict. So, there has to be an intense process of transparency,

communication, on the ground management. [With] a lot of the problems, the closer you get to the ground, the easier it is for both sides to start to see. I spent all of yesterday on the Little Colorado River, on the reservation boundary of our ranch, looking at problems. The Navajo cattle are coming across the river, there are uranium tailings that look like they need to be restored, and there is this and that. State Game and Fish and the Endangered Species Act have got some issues. When you get out there and actually look at it and talk to people about exactly what is going on you start to make it a little better, but it ain't easy.

MH: And we are at the end of our time but may I ask what you are involved in currently?

BB: That is also very complicated. My day job is in South America where I am at the center of a virtual network of organizations and governments, lots of different entities that are looking at the Amazon Basin and trying to visualize the future in terms of conservation, settling Indian claims and doing the right kind of development. What I am doing in the Amazon is kind of like being in St. Louis on the Missouri River in 1850, the nation with all its industrial might is ready to move west. How is all of that going to unfold? We know how if unfolded in the United States and we learned a lot of lessons. In the Amazon Basin that process is being repeated. The development is moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific into this vast wilderness, there are Indian tribes that have never had outside contact, incredible landscapes and possibilities. We are working to set up protected areas, settle indigenous claims, control the infrastructure. You cannot get into these places unless you build a road, you can't drive a wagon out and homestead in the middle of the Amazon. We are working on that and helping to change the laws in the national capitols, empower the local groups and put together plans, all that. My day job.

Here at home, one thing we did in the wake of all this was set up a little NGO called *Conservation Lands Foundation* which is dealing with national monuments, public land and BLM issues. That was what I was doing up in Colorado, we were having a meeting. That is my follow on all the BLM stuff. We left government and said BLM needs attention, it needs attention from the outside. So, we set up and funded this organization from the outside. We work with BLM, help and visualize additional national monuments, pressure them on their energy and mineral regulations and just sort of become a friendly, sometime critical, observer of what is going on. They are desperately short on resources; we will work to try and make the case in Congress, stuff like that. That is in the western half. BLM has never had that kind of help. Park Service has all sorts of support organizations, also Forest Service. BLM never had anybody. Lobbying, "Hey, this agency does important things, you have got to fund them." And we need good science. Then turning around in the state office and to tell them about what they are not doing. We review management plans on the Escalante and elsewhere, quietly intervene.

MH: My liaison at the GSENM passed on to me a speech you had given several years ago regarding the further designation of monuments after the Grand Staircase, I think there were twenty something...

BB: Yes, none of that just happens. You have to have somebody out there pushing it. All the twenty-some we did while I was still in government, but it is still going on today. This organization is kind of a hidden hand behind those. We organize local support. We have organized local friends groups on the theory that if you are really going to change management for conservation, you

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have got to have more support on the ground. We actually manage and fund some of those. There is a Grand Staircase-Escalante friends group, mainly centered in Kanab.

We put together this Bears Ears proposal. It is very complex, it is moving along but there are a lot of tribal interests there.

MH: Again, the organization is Conservation Lands Foundation?

BB: Yes, the director is a guy named Brian O'Donnell. They are located in Durango, a great group of people. He is the CEO. We have a board of directors and the usual sort of stuff. The Chairman of the Board is a very interesting guy named Edward Norton. He is a really dynamic guy.

MH: Any final thoughts or comments on this project?

BB: No, no, I think you have all the right questions and I think we have covered the areas that might be a little hazy including the President and his circle connecting to the story that John Leshy tells you about how we took it from there. And the significance which I think runs through all of this is what a different concept it is, how the Antiquities Act got reinterpreted with a different vision of what you do with public lands.

MH: I want to thank you very much for you time.

BB: Yes, this was really great.

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