VICTOR YVELLEZ, NARRATOR: Wildness: the character of being uncultivated, undomesticated, or inhospitable; to lack discipline or restraint.

If I were to ask if you have a sense of wildness within yourself, what would you say? What about this, what is the best conversation about wildness you’ve ever heard? For Roger Dunsmore, it happened in 1977, while he was teaching inmates at the old Montana territorial prison. Four convicts: Paul Bad Horse, Joe Youpee, David and one unidentified man debate back and forth about wildness, referencing the Hell’s Angels, wild animals and the thought of escaping prison. Roger remembers not picking up on the conversation until about an hour later, while he was driving home. It came to him like a punch in the face, and he pulled over his car to write it down as best he could, later making it into a poem. I’m Victor Yvellez, and this is “In Wildness”.

(DUNSMORE READING POEM)

ROGER DUNSMORE: Deer Lodge, Montana State Prison...

YVELLEZ: The first Territorial Prison in the western United States, Deer Lodge was built by convict labor in 1871. With its sandstone walls and foreboding watchtowers, it retired as a prison in 1979, two years after Roger’s poem was written.

(DUNSMORE READING POEM)

DUNSMORE:

Unit A is half an hour late, a butcher knife turned up missing in the kitchen. We watch a movie: Kalahari Bushmen hunting giraffe, 13 days in the desert on foot.

Paul Bad Horse says,

“Why didn’t they tame those zebras:

They had our ways

Only not so advanced,

And no horses.

If they’d tame those zebras

Their lives would be easier.”

David laughs:

“Me and my partner up in Kalispell,

We had a zonie,

Half zebra, half horse.

Tried to tear the corral down

To get at our stud.

We put the kid on him,

Hell he was no kid, eighteen years old.

It threw him,

Tried to kill him.

Wildest thing I ever seen.

Maybe those Bushmen knew about zebras.”

Bad Horse - “Did you try friendly first?” (fade out)

---Scene II---

YVELLEZ: We’ll get back to the Deer Lodge poem a little later. Roger Dunsmore, who says he is 82-years-old if you count the moment of inception, is a scholar, poet and taught for the Montana University system for over 50 years. He wears glasses and dresses pretty conservatively. People who meet Roger are gravitated to his personality, and almost all of his former students would agree that he was an influential, sometimes radical part of their lives.

Today you can probably find him stapling the work of other poets like his good friend, Gary Snyder or even his wife, Jenny, to utility poles around Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. But in 1970, Roger was a young professor at the University of Montana, when he and a few other professor friends had the chance to start something different. This thing that they created would go on to have an impact on small cohorts of students for almost 50 years. They called it the Round River Experiment, after an Aldo Leopold essay. And the program's purpose was simple: to flip the way students would learn on its head, to break the traditional mold of sitting in classrooms, and to focus on experiential learning with the outdoors as the learning environment. And maybe most importantly, to help young people find their inner wildness.

After a half-century, Roger and the other professors cultivated a small army of alumni who have gone on to become inspired individuals in literature, poetry, art, public land stewardship, conservation, and one is even running for Governor of Montana in 2020, many of them crediting the small program, which is now known as Wilderness and CIvilization.

*(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)*

JOANNA CAMPBELL: My name is Joanna Campbell, and I’m the Director of Education Programs for the Wilderness Institute, I primarily run the Wilderness and Civilization Program

YVELLEZ: Can you explain what Wilderness and Civilization is?

CAMPBELL: It’s a semester in the wild.

YVELLEZ: Joanna was a Wilderness and Civ student in 2000.

YVELLEZ: What did you tell that student?

CAMPBELL: I told him that it’s an interdisciplinary liberal arts education in wildlands conservation. That its a hybrid of classroom and field based learning. That it has a long history that if he were to do this program that he would be entering into a legacy of, um, alternative education that is rooted in the 1970s.

YVELLEZ: Roger emphasizes that the Round River Experiment was truly that, an experiment, that he and the other professors didn’t really know what they were doing. But they did have some focus.

DUNSMORE: And I think what we tried to do was to extend social justice to the natural world.

YVELLEZ: For the professors, it wasn’t just the movements for Civil Rights, American Indians, Women’s Rights, or Gay Rights, which they were also involved in.

DUNSMORE: It was trees and fish and air and water and everything, to extend our sense of their rights and some connection with them and some recognition of them and protection of them. So in terms of how it played out, all we wanted to do was plant whatever seeds we could extend that energy of the 60s movements to the natural world. It was an experiment and still is, I would say.

YVELLEZ: For many alumni, those seeds did germinate. Rick Newby was born and raised in Montana, and spent much of his childhood in the Beartooth Mountains. His family instilled a passion for the outdoors and the environment, which led him to join the newly minted Round River program in 1971. However, back then, the larger campus looked at the Round River crew with a raised eyebrow, questioning their motives to be involved with something considered counterculture.

RICK NEWBY: Round River did get a bad rap. You know, people said it was all about sex, drugs, and rock and roll. There actually there probably wasnt that much sex going on, and ,uh, some drugs and, uh, very little rock and roll, but, um.

YVELLEZ: Rick came into the program as an aspiring writer and poet, but admits his early work was quite bad. He credits Roger, as well as the other professors, for pushing him to find his voice and self-direct his own learning experience, which he did. It also didn’t hurt that the program would be visited by some of the most influential poets of the time.

NEWBY: For example, Gary Snyder came a couple of times,

YVELLEZ: The same guy who’s poems get stapled throughout Coeur d’Alene, oh yeah, and he is also the recipient of the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

NEWBY: Allen Ginsberg came with Synder once, so were getting to rub shoulders with these great poets.

YVELLEZ: Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder were also the inspiration for two main characters in Jack Kerouac’s novel, The Dharma Bums. But the program wasn’t just about writing and poetry.

GARY OYE: My name is Gary Oye and I was in the Wilderness and Civilization program in 1977. I came to Montana to go to forestry school with the dream of working out in the mountains.

YVELLEZ: Gary credits the program for sparking his desire to work in wilderness areas, which in the late 70s was still a young system.

OYE: We didn’t just open up books and say I wonder what the Cabinet Mountains are like, we like got in the van or cars and drove up there, or I wonder what the Bob Marshall is like. It wasn’t so much book learning, it was getting out and experiencing nature, like front and center, in your face.

YVELLEZ: Which, as Joanna says, is part of the point.

CAMPBELL: I think it doesn’t mean anything to just talk about wilderness and wildness, that is just an insult to those concepts. You need to actually be in those places

YVELLEZ: During the summer of his junior-senior year, Gary started working for the Forest Service in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, which lies just south of the University of Montana. And after 30 years with the Forest Service, he went on to become the Chief of Wilderness for the National Park Service, providing leadership in regards to every acre of wilderness within the Park system.

OYE: One thing that I didn’t realize when I started, When you talk about the icons, the parks out there that people hold very dearly, you would think they would afford them the highest level of protection - places like the Grand Canyon, Glacier, Yellowstone, Great Smokeys, none of those have designated wilderness in them.

YVELLEZ: National Parks have roads, development, and allow different types of recreation, while all of that is much more regulated and limited in wilderness areas. This stuck Gary as off. This new position led him to Washington D.C., where he was rubbing shoulders with people who have been involved in conservation for decades.

OYE: It's something I never thought about. Um, last night I was talking about my opportunity to talk to Jimmy Carter, President Carter and I shared that idea with him and he kinda listened to it and as he was leaving the room he looked back at me and he says, “you know you might be right about that, this might be the time to do that,” and I thought that was kind of interesting, you know to have an idea that you share with a former president that had done a lot of conservation work and that he would like give it some thought and them come back and say you know you might be right about that.

YVELLEZ: Rick found poetry and writing as a profession, and Gary worked in or with wilderness for his entire career. Their paths, though different,were found through a combination of the open minded teaching styles that their professors offered them and wild places. They both agree that Round River and Wilderness and Civ were pivotal to them finding their voice and place. The stories of those two are echoed in decades of alumni. Jessy Stevenson, an alumni from 2018, felt like many young people, she was tired of structured academia and lack of fulfilled learning, so she left the university. Two years later, she jumped at the opportunity to experience learning in a new way.

JESSY STEVENSON: I didn’t, honestly, really look into the program all that much before I signed up. Other than knowing that it was a program in which a group of students would be together four days a week in classes and three day field courses.

YVELLEZ: Following her gut, Jessy knew she needed something different to enjoy her time back in school. And a program that almost immediately starts with a 10-day-backpacking trip in the Bob Marshall Wilderness fit her criteria.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

The Bob Marshall Wilderness extends along the Continental Divide in Northwestern Montana. It is prime habitat for grizzly bears, moose, wolves, and pretty much every other large mammal species - a truly wild place. But Unlike many of the students who enter the program, this wasn’t Jessy’s first time in the Bob.

STEVENSON: When I was 18 months old we spent a winter back in the Bob Marshall, which I think was my parents sort, um, it was their ultimate version of living simply. We snowshoed back there I think on January 1st and spent four months living in a teepee on the South Fork of the Flathead River, um, eating smoked white fish and a small food cache they had a packer bring in the previous fall.

YVELLEZ: Jessy doesn’t remember the experience, but cherishes the pictures and stories from those early months of her life. And not every student had much backcountry experience before the fall hike. Joanna was that student, she had never been in a backpacking scenario like this before.

CAMPBELL: Man it was hard, it was hard. There were some steep climbs and passes.

YVELLEZ: On a specific hike through a pass, Joanna remembers being in the back of the group, babystepping. One foot in front of the other as her field leader talked her through the uphill trudge.

CAMPBELL: I had never done anything like that before. I mean I was a big hiker, but I had never carried forty pounds up a pass like that before. And I remember getting to the top, and she took a photo of me and the joy on my face was just, it was just pouring out of me. And I’m tearing up right now thinking about it because only in that setting would I have done something like that.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

YVELLEZ: Joanna aims to expose her students to different opinions and ways of life. Having them interact with ranchers, miners, and loggers in small Montana towns is an integral part of the learning objectives

CAMPBELL: There’s been this historical pattern with people graduating with degrees in conservation, in forestry.

YVELLEZ: Student gets degree, gets job with some land managing agency, moves to rural community.

CAMPBELL: And you have this person coming in saying well i'm your new expert here and I’m here to tell you everything you’re doing is wrong. That hasn’t worked out very well.

YVELLEZ: For Jessy, growing up in a rural area of Western Montana brought her in contact with something that defines much of the conversation surrounding the West.

STEVENSON: Being exposed to conflict over natural resources.

YVELLEZ: Predators, like wolves or grizzly bears, logging, mining, and ranching.

STEVENSON: I was definitely present at a few town hall meetings that just got out of hand. People screaming at one another, people getting up and leaving and slamming doors. Um, and so even though I didn’t quite understand it as a kid, I think that sort of started this small fire in me.

YVELLEZ: Jessy hopes to be involved in rural communities in the future, helping find solutions to help small town problems. Joanna can’t say exactly whether the students are learning what she would hope for. Like Roger, Joanna wants to plant seeds within the minds of her students.

CAMPBELL: I just sprinkle water and just see what happens, maybe there’s a garden or maybe there are gremlins, no I’m kidding, I’m kidding.

YVELLEZ: But she does know that putting young people in dramatically different experiences from traditional academia is part of her goal. That was the point. Roger and the other professors of Round River had originally intended for the program to be radical.

DUNSMORE: And there were times for the Wilderness and Civ program where it became overly domesticated. It became too acceptable to the academics. And there was the fear of losing that wilder and more unpredictable and willing to take risk.

Narrator: In an overly domesticated world, Roger says he hopes humans can keep their sense of wildness, the kamikaze spirit alive in our souls alive, our divine winds. Similar to that same wildness that got Paul Bad Horse into Deer Lodge.

(DUNSMORE READING POEM)

DUNSMORE:

Bad Horse - “Did you try friendly first?”

“Yep. Didn’t make no difference.

Finally sold him for dog food

After he went for some kids by the corral.

He was just plain wild - that’s all.”

Bad Horse laughs -

“Hell, that’s what got me in here in the first place,

That wildness.”

YVELLEZ: Paul Bad Horse, also known as Small Change, was a golden glove boxer before he went to prison, in both California and Montana. Roger says that Bad Horse used to talk about hunting elk around the Rocky Mountains with his father. And he probably was a little too wild for a portion of his life, eventually getting arrested after being involved in a robbery that led to the death of a young Safeway employee in Hardin, Montana. Paul Bad Horse eventually got out of prison, and died in 2015.

(DUNSMORE READING POEM)

DUNSMORE:

Someone asks,

“What do you mean?

Wild like a Hell’s Angel

Or wild like an animal?”

Joe Youpee says,

“I never saw a person that was truly wild,

Not like a deer anyways,

The way a deer

When you’re trying to sneak up on him

Will all of a sudden lift its head and see you.

That’s wild.

You can sneak up on a man.”

Dave says,

“I’ll bet if one of us escaped from here

And they were hunting us up on the Divide

We’d have a lot of that back -

Like that deer.

They wouldn’t sneak up one me.”

YVELLEZ: For Jessy Stevenson, wildness doesn’t only occur in the highly protected areas like the Bob Marshall Wilderness, but in little things that make us and the landscape vulnerable and beautiful. And not just the beauty you encounter at the top of a mountain peak,

STEVENSON: And I think beauty is also recognizing the vulnerabilities in the landscape and the vulnerabilities in people. I think that there’s an inherent wildness in a farmer who has worked the land for generations knowing exactly what time prairie crocus will come up in the spring, and I think that there’s a wildness in an old logger in the Swan Valley whos fed up with all of the new people coming into the valley, knowing exactly which trees mistletoe has sprung from and spread to the other trees. I think that wildness is knowing places. I think the connection between us and wildness is knowing places.

YVELLEZ: The conversation between the four men in Roger Dunsmore’s poem connects with Jessy’s personal definition of wildness. They are vulnerable because of their situation, stuck behind those prison walls. Yet they also recognize the complicated beauty of the world that surrounds those walls. And how much wildness they could recover if they were one day able to escape those sandstone barriers.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)