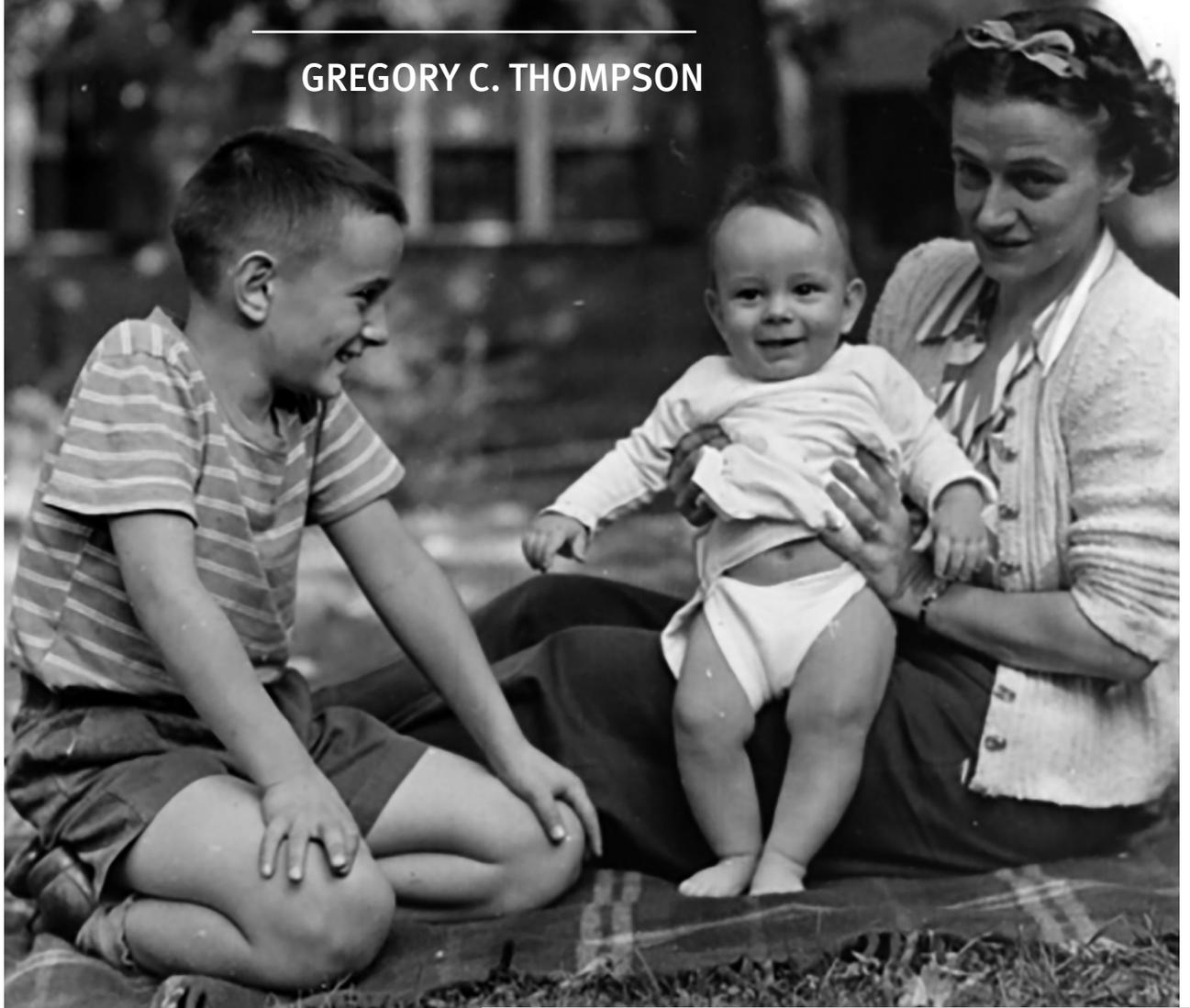


RECOUNTING LITTLE KNOWN FAMILY HISTORY

GREGORY C. THOMPSON



A Conversation with **MARK DEVOTO**



Avis DeVoto and Gordon DeVoto blowing bubbles at home one Sunday evening. University of Utah, J. Willard Marriott Library.

American West, which provided Bernard with crucial research opportunities, just as it exposed the boys to the West and introduced them to their extended family located in and about Ogden, Utah.

This interview was conducted on April 9, 2021, via Skype, and has been edited for clarity and length. I want to thank Professor DeVoto and his partner, Lois, for allowing an extended interruption into their daily routines, and to the staff of the American West Center, University of Utah, for their transcription services. I also want to thank Michael Wutz and Kristin Jackson at Weber for their commitment and dedication to this project.

Mark DeVoto, son of Bernard and Avis MacVicar DeVoto, is professor emeritus of music at Tufts University and a staff writer for the Boston Musical Intelligencer, with numerous publications on nineteenth- and twentieth-century music to his credit. I was privileged to conduct this first in a series of interviews focusing on Mark's early years growing up as the younger son of Bernard and Avis, and brother to his older sibling, Gordon. By the time of his birth, his famous father was well on his way to establishing himself as author, essayist, editor, lecturer at Harvard University, and historian and conservationist of the American West.

*Although Mark's life with his father was relatively short – Bernard died unexpectedly in 1955, when Mark was 15 – his recollections give the reader a glimpse into the life with his well-known parents in the Cambridge and Harvard communities. One needs only to read Bernard's *The Hour: A Cocktail Manifesto* to understand that the DeVoto home was a frequent gathering place for famous authors, educators, and movers and shakers of the period. Equally important are Mark's memories of the family's two summer tours of the*



Bernard and Avis DeVoto in the 1930s. University of Utah, J. Willard Marriott Library.

To recap for our audience, Mark. Where were you born?

I was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in January 1940. Actually, I was born on my father's 43rd birthday, January 11. The family included my brother Gordon, who was not quite 10 years older. We lived at 32 Coolidge Hill Road in Cambridge—a place I have seen but don't remember. Because in 1941, my father bought the house at 8 Berkeley Street, which is close to Harvard and Harvard Square. That house is still there. His memoirs mention that he paid \$5,000 for it in a very depressed market and spent another \$5,000 on a mortgage to improve it. The house would probably sell for about 800 times that amount today in Cambridge! Well, a lot of work has been done on it, but even so, I live now in Medford, in a working-class neighborhood.

Let's talk a little bit about your parents, and then what you remember of your grandparents on both sides. Tell us about your father and where he was born?

My father was born in 1897 in Ogden. He was the only child of Florian Devoto, who had not been married before, and Rhoda Ann Dye Devoto, who had been married before. And she had one child from that marriage. So my father had a half-brother.

I'm not sure I've ever seen a reference to the half-brother.

Yes, his name was Cleveland DeWolf, and he continued to live in Ogden. I met him only once, in 1946. He had two children, a son and a daughter. My father was very fond of the daughter, who was very smart. Her name was Laprielle. But she went by the name of Dee. A couple of years ago, out of the blue, I got an email from the daughter of Cleveland DeWolf's son, whom my father had been in touch with, I guess, up through his years at the University of Utah. The daughter sent me photocopies of typed letters my father had sent to Cleveland. And a copy of his college

graduation program. That was sometime in the 1930s. And I have copies of all of those.

Is the correspondence interesting and informative?

Yes, apparently. The son was trying to figure out what kind of career to go into, and my father gave some opinions on that. I never met that son, and I met his daughter only by email.

So let me switch you over to your mother and give us a little background on her.

My mother was born in 1904 in Houghton, Michigan, which is on the Upper Peninsula, home to the Michigan College of Mines. She had relatives who worked in the mines. It's still considered copper country. There's a lot of unmined copper up there still. My mother had a sister, a younger sister, who died at the age of, I think, five or six. So my mother grew up as an only child, similarly to my father, who was 10 years younger than his half-brother. Her parents were Scottish Presbyterians from Canada. My mother went to college at Northwestern University, where my father was teaching. She was said to be the brightest student in his freshman English class, and after her freshman year they got married.

Was that your father's first year at Northwestern?

After graduating from Harvard, he had spent a couple of years back in Ogden. I think he taught a year of high school. There was a family story that he worked as a sheep herder for one summer. I'm not sure I believe it.

So your father went through the school system in Ogden and graduated from Ogden High School?

That's right.

Did he ever talk to you about the experience of growing up in Ogden and being a teenager in the area?

Not really at all. He occasionally would speak about his family. His mother was one of six daughters of Samuel Dye. But in the letter to Kate Sterne, in 1936, he gave a whole family description about his aunts and his uncle, the one boy among Samuel and Rhoda Dyes' children. That was Samuel Dye, Jr. I don't think my father knew him well at all.

You're referencing The Selected Letters of Bernard DeVoto and Katharine Sterne, edited by you and published by the University of Utah Press, correct?

Right. There's an extensive letter in there, from February 1936, where he wrote down a whole lot of information for Kate Sterne's benefit about his mother's family. And he said all of that was based on reliable information provided by Aunt Grace, who was his favorite among the aunts. I met Aunt Grace once when she came, I think, in 1947, to visit the family. We all loved her dearly, of course. The other aunt that I remember meeting was Aunt Mat or Aunt Martha. I met her in 1953, when the family went on the western trip, and we stopped in Ogden.

Do you recall their last names?

Aunt Grace never married, but Martha married someone named Gray and had a daughter named Alice, who was a school teacher, if I recall correctly. All of this is extensively described in the letter; there's a copy of it on the Website I set up for my father, www.mdevotomusic.org.

Did your father talk fondly of his family and the extended members of his group?

Well, he was very fond of Aunt Grace and Aunt Mat. There were other aunts whom, I guess, he wasn't so fond of, or didn't know well. He knew some of their children, and he was, as I said before, fond of his half-brother Cleveland's daughter Dee. She married Gerry Boicourt, who lived with us for a while after he came out of the Army in the late 1940s. I never saw him after about 1948 or '49. I

found out from Cleveland's granddaughter that Gerry had died a few years ago. Dee died very prematurely in the spring of 1955, just a few months before my father died.

What was it like growing up being a member of a distinguished family such as your mother and father represented? Was it engaging? Was there a lot of conversation over the dining room table? And what was the atmosphere like, from your perspective of growing up in your family?

Well, my brother was nearly 10 years older than I. He died, by the way, in 2009. We were sent to private schools. And I think we were basically kept away from the professional activities of the family. I know that, for me, I was usually left to fend for myself, to find friends and find things to do for myself, though there were times when my father pitched baseballs to me, and occasionally we would go out for walks after dinner.

Let me take us back and focus on what you were saying about your father in his earlier life. When did he come back to Ogden and spend a year in Ogden? So he went to the University of Utah?

He spent one year there; I think that was 1914 to '15. His advisor at the university was

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the poet Wilbert Snow, who was forced to resign because of a controversy with some public utterance he had given that was unflattering to the Mormon church.

Yes, it was part of a larger issue at the time – about then-church president Kingsbury and who was going to determine the curriculum for the University of Utah, the church or the University.

And my father decided that he didn't want to continue with the University of Utah, with such an atmosphere, especially after his friend Snow had been effectively dismissed. So he transferred to Harvard. And he spent two years at Harvard, and then the United States entered the Great War. And my father, like so many others, dropped out of Harvard and went to serve in the Army and was eventually commissioned as a second lieutenant. And because he was a crack shot, having grown up with firearms on the Utah frontier, he was drafted to teach musketry and riflery at Camp Perry in Ohio. I think he may have been at one other army camp, teaching people how to shoot. But he never got overseas. There is at least one family legend that one of my father's students in riflery was the mathematician Norbert Wiener, the famous MIT professor who invented the term "cybernetics."

Would your father return to Ogden in the summers, or was he continuously living in Cambridge during his educational career there?

Well, he went off to teach at Northwestern, I guess, in the fall of 1922 and married my mother the following June. It was, I think, another three years before he went back to Ogden to show his bride to his father. It was by train then, although—while they were in Ogden—I think they did have a car, or they had the use of a car.

Did your mom ever talk about meeting your paternal grandparents and family and how she was received?

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Well, my father's mother died in 1919. So my mother would never have known her and, of course, I never did. I think she remembered meeting grandfather Devoto—Florian Devoto—favorably out there. And then of course, at some point in the 1930s, when he was an old man, he came to live with the family in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

I'd like to leapfrog to the times when your father took you and the family on their Western tours, and I assume it must have linked up in part with when he was working on Lewis and Clark. The journals project?

The first family trip with all four of us was in the summer of 1946. I had just completed the first grade. It was my first view of the West. The purpose of that trip was to do research for the book that eventually became *The Course of Empire*. So Lewis and Clark would have formed a part of that as well. But the immediate fallout from the trip was the first of the really famous conservation essays, when he picked up the information that the Western stock industry and some of the

other industries, like lumber, were going to make a major Congressional assault on the disposal of public lands. And my father wrote his first conservation essay. He had written earlier essays describing what was happening to the environment. There was the 1936 essay called “The Plundered Province.” And then, in late 1946, he published the essay “The Anxious West,” and then in January 1947 came the major text called “The West Against Itself.” That text is on the website as well. That was what gave substance to the story of what came to be called the land grab. In 1955, in a footnote, he described how he got the information about what was being planned to execute the land grab. And because *Harper’s* broke the story, it stopped the Congressional effort in its tracks. Of course, with the Trump administration, we’ve seen continual efforts to revive that.

Where do you think your father begins to understand and articulate the environmental philosophy that he writes of in these periods that you’re talking about? Something about being born and spending his youth in Ogden wouldn’t necessarily invite an environmentalist product out of the intellectual experience. I’m curious where you think that triggers his intense awareness of the environmental issues facing the West and his positioning, philosophically, as he did.

Well, I’m not really sure. Wallace Stegner would probably say more about that than I can remember, but certainly there are traces of it in “The Plundered Province.” In his correspondence of the time, where he talks about the dust from the Dust Bowl making its way east, as being an example of misuse of agricultural practices, misapplication of soil preservation techniques, and abuse of the land. That certainly would comport with probably his own personal observations of things like overgrazing of the mountains above Ogden, which can lead to several disasters. Exactly when that would have become a major issue for him I don’t really know.

Talk for a few minutes about his friendship with Wallace Stegner and how you saw that from your position.

Well, it would have started when my father was editing the *Saturday Review*. It was 1936 to ‘38 when the magazine was suffering financially during the Depression. He very often was soliciting book reviews, and somehow he came across this young writer named Wallace Stegner and solicited a book review from him; the friendship prospered after that. And then, eventually, Stegner wrote his biography of John Wesley Powell, for which my father wrote a preface. I never met Stegner until about 1988, because when he was preparing his biography on my father, he interviewed my mother repeatedly, but he didn’t interview me or Gordon. Mama said she wanted to keep the family out of the book, and he honored that. That was the only thing I regretted. In that regard Stegner could have learned a few things from me. It would have been valuable in the book, for instance, to have something about the quarrel with Robert Frost. That was a considerable one, and it had gone on for a number of years, but I knew nothing about it. Nevertheless, in the summer of 1955, June 1955, shortly before my father died, he and I went on a trip around northern New England, and in Vermont we stopped in to see Robert Frost at Ripton; the meeting was entirely friendly. I remember we talked about birdwatching, and I had no inkling that there was ever a difficulty between them. That difficulty, of course, had its ups and downs. And that is plain enough, not only in the Stegner book, but in the Sterne letters. But Frost was a dangerous personality that I had no appreciation of. There’s that chapter in Stegner’s book called “An Incident on Breadloaf Mountain” that showed that it started with certain basic flaws in Frost’s personality and the efforts of all those who admired him to try to contain those. It’s quite a story, and then—it would have been five years later—my father went out to Indiana University to give a series of lectures, and Frost came there. They didn’t

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see each other, but they quarreled in their correspondence, and that's all been published in the Lawrance Thompson biography and the collection of Frost's letters. And some of the letters turn up in the Kate Sterne correspondence as well. As I say, in 1955 it was entirely friendly. "Hello, Robert. Hi, Benny, haven't seen you in a long time." So forth.

Yeah. What about the other incident that is noted often in your father's writings on Thomas Wolfe and his, particularly his work The Story of a Novel?

Oh, yes. "Genius Is Not Enough," published in the *Saturday Review* in 1935.

Did he ever talk to you about that, that whole engagement experience?

No, I was too young to appreciate any literary matters, so we never discussed them. Of course, it was a big influence, but there's no way I would have read *Moby Dick* without having to read it in school. My father used to read poetry to me.

Did he?

Yeah. I would always listen with delight. I remember he read Chesterton's "Lepanto." He read Kipling's "Ballad of East and West." And he read, of course, Vachel Lindsay's

"The Congo," which nobody could read today because it seems so totally racist, although I still think of it as very musical.

You've referred to two trips to the West.

The second one was in 1953.

Two years before your father passes away, right?

Right. That would have been a research trip for the book that he left unfinished when he died, the book that was eventually published as *The Western Paradox*. Which my mother did not want to be published incomplete, for entirely understandable reasons. But I allowed it to be published because a lot of it shows my father at his best, even though it was in an incomplete state. After so many years, I don't think his reputation is going to be injured by having a work published that was not only unfinished, but that in places did not show him at his best.

So on that second trip you would have been how old?

I was thirteen.

By that time you're quite aware of the world around you and the environment. We didn't talk about the actual geography of your trips. On the first trip, did you go up into the Missouri Valley area and the Missouri? How did you do that trip? Then let's talk about the second one.

I remember on the first trip, in 1946, we crossed Lake Michigan on a ferry. We went through Northern Wisconsin and Minnesota, eventually meeting up in South Dakota in Pierre. That's when Wallace Kirkland, the *Life* photographer, joined us. Where we went from South Dakota I can't remember. I know we went to Wyoming, and we went to Montana, in what order I can't be sure. We spent some time in Great Falls. And after that we went to Oregon and through Coeur d'Alene and Idaho.

And then we went down into California, which we did not do on the second trip. That's when I saw Yosemite. And I think it would have been after California that we crossed the Nevada desert and then the Great Salt Desert. That was the trip that was done at night with me asleep in the back and my parents staying awake with amphetamines. That's when we arrived in Ogden and where I met Uncle Cleve, my father's half-brother, for the first and only time. How we got home from there I just don't remember. In the second trip, we went out through western Massachusetts, going through some of the area that had just been devastated by the famous Worcester tornado on June 9, 1953. I saw some of that damage. Then we went through New York state, Pennsylvania, Ohio. We spent a night in Urbana, Illinois. From there I'm not sure where we went, but eventually we wound up in Denver. And we spent quite a bit of time going around Colorado. I remember we saw Leadville, the Wind Rivers, Uncompahgre Peak, and Box Canyon in Ouray, Colorado. We stayed in Durango and went from there to Mesa Verde. I know that at one point we made a slight diversion so we could say we had been in New Mexico. We went a few yards into New Mexico.

On that trip you're referring to, coming from Mesa Verde, the best way to do that was to drive to the Four Corners where you could step on all four states, and you were doing this in nineteen-fifty – ?

'53. That would have been July or August 1953. I love that area. I especially love Ouray and Mesa Verde. And I've seen them again relatively recently. But from there we did go to Utah. And that's where we met Aunt Mat and Cousin Alice in Ogden.

Do you remember those engagements as fun and interesting, or just as yet another family visit?

Yeah. I also remember when we spent a week in the wilderness in the Forest Service

cabin in Snyder Basin. In Wyoming, up in the mountains, the nearest town was a place called Big Piney, and it was very small, but that was beautiful. I think my father got some important writing done there. And from there, I guess we would have gone north to Missoula. And then we saw the Lochsa River near the area where the memorial Cedar Grove now is. I saw that again in 1962 when the grove was dedicated. And I've been back there three times since, most recently in 2003, when Lois and I took my mother's ashes and scattered them there. When we came into the memorial Cedar Grove, there was still snow in Lolo Pass on May 21st of that year. By the time we got into the Grove, the forest floor was completely covered with white trilliums in bloom. That's when we also saw the Calypso Orchid. Lois said, "Mark, what's this?" And we took a picture of it. It's on the website.

Did your father interact with other writers on the West, novelists or historians, other than Stegner?

Well, yeah, there was Arthur Carhart, A. B. Guthrie, and of course Edith Mirrielees. He considered her one of the great teachers of writing.

As you look back over your father and his career, has your view of him changed as you have gotten older and more aware? How do you think of your father today?

Well, I'm certainly much more able to appreciate him than when I was growing up. But more and more I begin to see that his efforts as a novelist were not of the best quality. He was always a very professional writer. His writing style is not only accurate, vivid, and efficient no matter what he was writing. But as a novelist, he just wasn't very good. As a historian, and as a propagator for proper care of the environment, he is much better.

He was visionary.

I was interested to note that he was exactly 10 years younger than Aldo Leopold, to the day. They were both born January 11th. And yet I can't find anywhere where my father mentions Aldo Leopold or where Aldo Leopold mentions him. They were clearly kindred spirits. Leopold was a poet, and my father was a brash journalist.

That's interesting, because you would have thought that their writing careers might have crossed paths.

I'm sure they must have, but I just haven't found out how. My father was very impressed by William Vogt. His book *Road to Survival* was very popular for a while and then sort of dropped out of fashion. And Vogt himself had a career that had faltered, and eventually I think it led to his suicide. But he came to visit us during the summer, I think, of 1949. Maybe it was '48. I remember how deeply impressed both my parents were with *Road to Survival*, and now Vogt is making a comeback.

Did you find him interesting and engaging?

Oh, yes. I remember him whistling to the birds and getting a reaction.

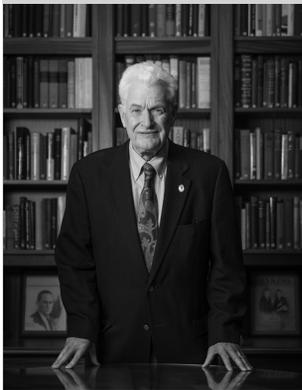
I want to spend a little more time talking about your mother because your father passes away in '55, when you're 15. I assume that Gordon is probably out and on his own by that time, but you're at home and with your mother and moving through life?

Well, certainly my father's death was the most dramatic part of my childhood. I was in 11th grade. My brother Gordon had been two years in the Army and was back in the States and staying at the VA hospital in Boston, undergoing various kinds of treatments including dental, dermatological, and psychiatric. My brother finished with all that in the spring of 1956 and then went to a technical school for a year.

Really, because the writings about your brother refer to him as a novelist and a writer.

Well, no. My brother liked to write but he kept it to himself. He wrote some very vivid letters from the Army that I remember.

Thank you for your time, Mark. It was a pleasure.



Gregory C. Thompson, Ph.D., is the associate director of the University of Utah's J. Willard Marriott Library for Special Collections and an adjunct assistant professor of history. He has published widely on the Ute tribe, including *Southern Ute Lands, 1848-1899: The Creation of a Reservation* and *The Southern Utes: A Tribal History*. Greg is a founding member of the Alf Engen Ski Museum Foundation Board and also serves on the Board of Trustees. His latest publication, with Alan K. Engen, *First Tracks: A Century of Skiing* (2001), focuses on the history of skiing in Utah. Greg is also the general editor for the Tanner Trust Publication Series, *Utah, The Mormons, and the West*. The latest publication in the series is *A Winter with the Mormons: The 1852 Letters of Jotham Goodell* (2002).