

Carrying on Conservation
A Talk with Bob Buell
By Jacqueline Widmar Stewart

It wasn't by chance that I found myself sitting at a café with Bob Buell, but chance had a lot to do with how I even knew he was in California. The son of Dorothy Buell, who is credited with galvanizing the movement that pushed the legislation that created the National Lakeshore in 1966, has lived in Palo Alto for some 57 years.

The voice on my answering machine had sounded mildly bemused, somewhat surprised. Robert Buell had received my book along with his newsletter, thank you, and was curious to know the rest of the story. We agreed to have coffee.

Bob, I found out, had moved out to California in 1950, after dividing his boyhood between the bright lights of Chicago and the family's duneland hideaway. In his high school years he'd often retreat to the dunes with his dog or catch the South Shore commuter train. By 1941 his family had moved out fulltime to the little community of Ogden Dunes, just south down the Lake from Chicago.

His mother worked hardest on her quest for a National Park during the 1950's and 60's, after Bob had left the Midwest. The twist of fate that thrust the effort forward, however, actually happened on California soil.

It was on a visit to see Bob shortly after he moved to the West Coast that a seminal breakthrough took place. Instead of returning straightaway to Ogden Dunes, Dorothy Buell went by way of Santa Barbara, ostensibly to visit relatives living there. While in the area, Mrs. Buell stopped in to see a famous naturalist who had agreed to have his name used as a supporter on the Save the Dunes letterhead. Donald Culross Peattie, author of *A Prairie Grove*, *American Acres* and *A Natural History of Trees*, had awakened the country to the beauty and uniqueness of the Chicago Wilderness.

The great writer who had devoted his entire life to Nature's intricacies lay dying at home. In hushed tones, his housekeeper told Mrs. Buell that there was no way she could see him. Soon Louise Redfield Peattie, herself a noted journalist, appeared at the door to explain the situation to the caller. Mr. Peattie could not receive her.

However, Mrs. Peattie had a good friend, acclaimed author and politician Emily Taft Douglas, who happened to be the wife of the U.S. Senator from Illinois. Mrs. Peattie would give her Mrs. Buell's information.

Emily Taft Douglas did get in touch. Shortly after Dorothy Buell returned to Ogden Dunes, she got a call from Mrs. Douglas with the news. Her husband Paul Douglas would take the torch.

With that the landscape changed rapidly. President Lyndon Johnson also got behind the cause and legislation creating the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore passed in 1966, with Senator Douglas pushing hard the whole way. “My mother used to say that Senator Douglas was one of the finest men she’d ever met, despite the fact that he was a Democrat,” her son remembers.

“My mother never understood the word ‘no,’” Bob Buell told me over coffee. “What’s more, the people who said ‘no’ to her didn’t understand that she didn’t understand that they were saying ‘no.’” When I visited Odgen Dunes, I saw her at her desk with the telephone to her ear for hours and hours and hours. I remember seeing her endlessly there in that position.”

In 1968 Mrs. Buell and her husband, whom Bob describes as an “anguished bystander” in his wife’s undertakings, moved to California to be near their son. In 1977 Bob went back to the dunes once again, this time to attend his mother’s memorial service with his two daughters and to participate in the National Lakeshore’s inauguration of the Dorothy Buell Visitor Center.

California had served as the stage for the crucial encounter that led to the formation of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. The state has also benefited from Bob Buell’s 19 years as a member of the Nature Conservancy Board, his 20+ years as a docent at Stanford University’s 1200-acre Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, and his current service as a docent for the Edgewood County Park and Natural Preserve. Environmental ardor has been passed to the next generation as well - Bob’s daughter Ann works for the California Coastal Conservancy.

So, how had I stumbled onto Buell Californiana? In fact it was a mistake in which the federal government played a key role.

Late one morning while thumbing through the mail, I found that two Save the Dunes newsletters had been stuck together. To my surprise, the second one bore the address of one Robert Buell. That surname carried great significance for me. Dorothy Buell’s success in bringing the national park to my hometown of Beverly Shores, Indiana, had been a major part of my inspiration to write my book on the five parks at the tip of Lake Michigan.

May I add my cudos to the Buell family for their undying devotion to parkland!