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Marcia Thomas and the Legacy of John Wesley Powell

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Marcia Thomas, November 8, 2019

Charlie Schlenker (announcer): Without the curiosity of one Bloomington Normal resident, the United States might not have expanded past-the Rocky Mountains-when it did. Illinois State University's Horticulture center is celebrating John Wesley Powell and his historic, 1869 Grand Canyon expedition-next week. The center's director, Jessica Chambers and former Illinois Wesleyan University librarian: Marcia Thomas sit down with WGLT's Mary Cullen to talk about why Powell's expedition is still relevant 150 years later.

Marcia Thomas: John Wesley Powell was a largely self taught explorer – uh-, anthropologist, geologist-um- and a lot of people lay claim to him as an environmentalist- which makes him particularly interesting; and he was a professor at Illinois Wesleyan University and Illinois State University. Uh- he was a Union Soldier –uh- in the Civil War, he lost a part of his arm at the battle of Shiloh. Um... so when we talk about- the- explorations that he did out in the south west- um- in the- in the end of the 1860s and 1870s you gotta remember he was doing this all, basically, with one arm. Which is pretty impressive.

Mary Cullen (interviewer): So you mentioned that Powell taught both at Wesleyan and Illinois State, what made him so impactful as a professor, and why do we care about him today?

Thomas: Well he was, if not the first, certainly among the first professors to involve students in his explorations. So in 1867 and 1868 during those two summers, he took students with him as well as some friends and other professors and his wife to Colorado Rockies-to- do some field collecting. So he- so Powell led the way in how you involve students in science. And the interesting thing –to me personally- and I'm gonna talk November 15th is his wife, Emma Dean, who also went with Powell and the students to the Colorado Rockies; spent the winters in camp with him up in the mountains –um- rode horseback. She was the second woman to climb Pike's Peak in Colorado- very, very interesting woman, very adventurous woman who also – by the way, nursed Powell through the Civil War when he lost- uh was shot in the arm.

Cullen: Present day, Illinois State University's Horticulture center is hosting an event to recognize the 100 and 50th anniversary of John Wesley Powell's expedition through the Grand Canyon. So Jessica, how does Powell fit into the Horticulture center's theme this year of Plant Exploration and why is the Horticulture center really taking on this event as its own.

Jessica Chambers: So, I became fascinated with Powell –um- through this theme that we have that we have this year. It's: Plant Explorers Discovering the Botanical Riches of the World; and the Horticulture center focused on the Herbarium at ISU. A herbarium is a collection of preserved plant specimens used for educational purposes. Our herbarium is in the biology department- and I say "ours" as in ISU's

herbarium and it's called the George Vasey Herbarium and George Vasey was really good friends with John Wesley Powell. That's kinda how I was introduced to John Wesley Powell, but then, the more –um- incidents I had this year- uh for example- I went to the Grand Canyon this year- this year is the 100th anniversary of the Grand Canyon –uh- being part of the national park system and I- I kinda learned about Powell there on the way out west, I- by happenchance, stayed in Green River Wyoming. That's where Powell put into the river when he went on this great exploration. Uh and the more I just started learning about him and his connections to the universities here in –uh- Bloomington and Normal and the adventure in him and the connection to Vasey, the Grand Canyon; I was just like “we should be like celebrating this man.” Uh and it was a great way to end our exploration theme for the Horticulture center, so I got this little gang together [laughs] here about a month and a half ago- I'm like “let's do something.”

Cullen: So now, let's talk a little bit about that expedition, Jessica you brought it up slightly in your own exploration, how it kind of paralleled what John Wesley Powell did but, Marcia, maybe you can explain what went on in the Grand Canyon expedition itself.

Thomas: Well, John Wesley Powell- after going out to Colorado those two summers had heard about the Grand Canyon and nobody had really- I should say- I'm gonna back up and say: not that nobody ever explored it but he was the first white American to systematically go down that river to see what was there. He was interested in the geology, he was interested in the archeology, he- he was interested in so many things. Um so and he obviously had this great spirit of adventure. So, in 1869 he organized an expedition- started off with 10 men... um met up at Green River Wyoming, got in four boats and started off into what was called “The Great Unknown”. This was a total- the whole northern Arizona area where the Grand Canyon is, was a blank spot on the map. So he essentially filed that in. So they were gone for quite a long time, there was no communication, there were some letters that were sent out at the beginning of the expedition. So for a while people thought that they had totally all disappeared. So, it was quite the adventure, but it propelled him into the national scene and from there he just took off and had a great career and left this great –uh- heritage.

Cullen: And now you've touched on it a little bit earlier, you mentioned that this exploration really filled in parts of the map. So if you could- maybe- elaborate on the impact of this type of exploration and why it was so important- and you know, why we even acknowledge it as something that we should be paying attention to 150 years later.

Thomas: At the time-the-this was a time of great expansion uh- this is when – the- when the United States was –uh- holding public lands out in the west; and people were very interested –uh- real-estate

people were interested uh- railroad people were interested and then- you have to think about this at the time, it's like sending them to the moon. To go off into the great unknown where you can't always communicate where it's just... who knows what's gonna happen, it's the first time, and it's a big deal. So it draws attention to...Um...Interest in the west, getting more people interested in settling in the west... For Powell, I'd say one of the great impacts for him- was – he- he was captivated, fascinated with this country, the people that lived there. He was really one of the fathers of American anthropology because of an interest in Native Americans. That's-that's a legacy of his, that's really important, and for a 19th century man, he had some very... I guess you could say evolved ideas about how these Native Americans should be treated. We wouldn't agree with everything today, but it [laughs] was a lot more enlightened than a lot of the people in the 19th century.

Schlenker: WGLT's Mary Cullen speaking with Jessica Chambers and Marcia Thomas about the somewhat "woke" John Wesley Powell. Join Chambers and Thomas at the 150th anniversary celebration of Powell's Grand canyon expedition. The evening will include a presentation on Powell, various exhibits and a cake. It runs from 5-7pm Friday November 15th at ISU's alumni center.