

TRANSCRIPT:

INTERVIEWEE: Russell Graves

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:03] OK. Good evening, I'm David Todd, and I have the pleasure of being and talking with Russell Graves. And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press and for an archive at Briscoe Center for American History over at the University of Texas at Austin, and he would have all rights to use the recording as he sees fit. And I just wanted to make sure that's OK with him.

Russell Graves [00:00:43] That's OK.

David Todd [00:00:45] All right. Well, it is February 5th, 2022, about six o'clock - a little later, 6:10 Central Time. My name is David Todd. I'm representing the Conservation History Association of Texas and I am in Austin and we are conducting a remote interview with Russell Graves. And he is based in Childress, actually the Dodd City, Texas, area and today happens to be in Montana. So we wanted to thank him for taking time out of his travels to visit with us.

Russell Graves [00:01:24] Thank you.

David Todd [00:01:26] All right. Well, Mr. Graves has worked as a teacher and author, a photographer, a photography guide and teacher. And, but some 20 years ago, 2001, Texas Tech Press published his book "The Prairie Dog: Sentinel of the Plains", featuring both Mr. Graves' camerawork and his writing. And it was a great volume that sort of discusses the prairie dog. And so we wanted to pick up on an earlier conversation we had about his knowledge about the prairie dog that we had started speaking with him about on February 1st. And once again, we're going to resume and talk about his life and career and especially focus on his work with the prairie dog.

David Todd [00:02:18] So we just have two questions for him.

David Todd [00:02:21] And the first is: this book that I referred to before, "The Prairie Dog: Sentinel of the Plains", came out some 20 years ago, and there have been a lot of technical changes since then. And of course, Mr. Graves has probably evolved since then, too. So I was curious if you might be able to tell us, if you had the chance to do a sequel or to do the book over, how might you do it this time?

Russell Graves [00:02:52] I think my same basic approach would be the same because really the core, I think the core theme of the book, when I wrote it, was more sort of, you know, was based out of my curiosity, I didn't have any preconceived notions that prairie dogs were good or bad. They're just a neat species of wildlife that I found close to my house. And so, thinking

back, I think I'd still approach it from the same, same sort of open mindedness and same sense of wonder that I did then.

Russell Graves [00:03:26] You know, of course, some things have changed as far as, you know, at the time I wrote it, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was petitioning, it was being petitioned to list the prairie dog as a threatened species, so I'd kind of follow up and see how all the states have done on their charge to, to manage the species themselves, that precluded the listing of the species as threatened. I know I want to follow up on that and kind of see what that's, how things have been done.

Russell Graves [00:03:55] Also, I kind of want to do a review of the scientific literature and see, you know, if any advances have been made in just the understanding of prairie dogs.

Russell Graves [00:04:03] I think the one thing that would excite me the most, though, is to really go back with today's technology and in re-photograph a lot of that book. You know, a lot of the photographs I'm proud of and I am, you know, because I was 20 years younger then, and I'm proud of the way they came out in the book. And some of them, I don't know that I could do any better.

Russell Graves [00:04:24] But you've got to remember all that was shot on film too. It was, it was in the early days of digital photography, but the medium, the medium hadn't really, hadn't really come of age yet. And so one of the things I'd like to do is, if I was to do volume two or redo it all over again, is to go back and, and shoot a bunch of the same, or similar type, scenes with the newer cameras, and, and just to try different technologies to capture the, the same pictures in sort of a different way.

Russell Graves [00:04:57] And what I mean by that is using some of the drone technologies to do flyovers or low-level flyovers of the prairie dog town or, or, you know, the small action cameras like GoPros and in camera traps and be able to just set out a camera and leave it on a town for weeks at a time and be able to take high-quality digital photographs that are lit with studio-quality strobes to be able to figure out what's in the town when you're not there. Because obviously, when you're in the town, the prairie dogs know you're there and everything else around knows you're there, so I'd be curious to see if I could, again, set some, set some camera traps out, use GoPros, use the fiber optic technology, the high-def fiber optic fiber optic technology that you can buy off the shelf at like any Home Depot or Lowe's store used for inspecting pipes. But you know, it'd be neat to put one of those down and be able to shoot pictures or video of a prairie dog inside the burrow.

Russell Graves [00:05:55] I think ultimately what I would do since I've learned so much more since then, and since so much of the digital technology has been democratized, probably what I would do is take a good chunk of the, of the manuscript and make that into a documentary script and just do a, do a film about the prairie dogs and how fascinating the creature, how fascinating of a creature that they are and interview people who are on both sides of the issue. I think that would be fascinating.

Russell Graves [00:06:24] Not sure who the ultimate audience would be. If the audience is just a YouTube video that's probably suffices. I don't necessarily have, have images of grandeur in my head concerning that it is going to be on BBC America or anything like that, but it'd be, still be neat to go back and film, film all of that stuff, both on video and redo a lot of the still photographs that I did before.

David Todd [00:06:48] That's great. You know, it's interesting how, you know, this is a creature that's been out on the plains for hundreds of thousands of years, and yet the ability to tell its story has evolved so much, you know, with these new devices, and, and then the whole political realm that surrounds it, and the scientific understanding, has evolved a lot. So maybe volume two is, is merited.

David Todd [00:07:16] So one last question, if you don't mind. I, you know, we tend to sort of have these scripted questions and I don't know if they give you enough latitude to really talk about what you would like to talk about. And so I would hope that if there's anything you'd like to add that we skipped over or just didn't do justice to before, I would love to hear, you know, if there's something you'd like to add.

Russell Graves [00:07:44] Well, it seems like my life has been cyclical in a way that things, like you hear a lot of people say tend to come full circle a lot for me. You know, the prairie dog was one of those species that really, as a young man, I mean, I was like 27 or 28 when I started work on that book. As a young man, it really kind of was a springboard for my confidence to really understand the depths of, and I hate to say my talents because I don't want to sound like I'm someone special, but whatever talent I was given, that the prairie dog and being able to do that book helped me springboard into a larger career and a broader career.

Russell Graves [00:08:29] You know, at the time I was teaching high school and I love teaching, and I left that profession in 2009 and continued, you know, with, with my professional writing and photography career, and you know, I've been making my living doing that for, I guess, the past 20 years. I've started, I started probably making as much or more money taking pictures and writing words in 1999 than I did when I got paid as a teacher. And so but I love teaching and I love doing the, the, you know, telling stories of things that are wild. And so I did both for a long time. And then when I left the profession in 2009, it felt like there's was a little bit of a void because a lot of teaching. I love teaching high school. I love teaching at Childress High School. It's the only, only school I ever taught at, and I did it there for sixteen years.

Russell Graves [00:09:17] But my point about things coming full circle: a few years ago, I met a guy that we quickly became friends, and he owns a company called Backcountry Journeys, and he had asked me to come be a, do some photography, some photography educational events with him. And so, you know, started going out and guiding people on photographic adventures in the wild, and it really rekindled my love of teaching.

Russell Graves [00:09:41] And so from a teaching standpoint, that really brought me full circle. The photography has been a part of my life since I've been a teenager into the adult. But when I left teaching, like I said, it left sort of a hole in what I was doing and what I felt like my purpose was, and I never really saw myself as being a guide or leading workshops or anything like that. But the first one I did, I just realized how much I love doing it, how much I love sharing, not only how to take pictures and the things I've learned from a photography standpoint with other people, but just sharing nature with other people and educating them about the natural world and being an advocate about different species and why they're important and just letting people understand all the nuances of wildlife photography.

Russell Graves [00:10:28] It's not just about taking a picture, pushing a button on a camera. There's also a bigger story to be told and helping them understand that story because a lot of people, well-meaning as they may be, they're, they are limited in their exposure to it, because,

I take this really seriously: a lot of times when people go on trips with me, I understand that may be the only time, that's their vacation for the year, they saved up money to do this trip.

Russell Graves [00:10:53] And you know, they're going like, right now, I'm doing a trip this week in wintertime in Yellowstone. You know, or it may be one of my Yellowstone trips, or it may be one of my trips to the Smoky Mountains. Or maybe it's one of my bear trips in Alaska I too. But I, I don't negate the fact that people have spent good money to be there and they've worked hard and they may be taking the only week they get off at vacation a year to go somewhere with me.

Russell Graves [00:11:22] And so I just feel like it's important for me to teach them as much as I can about photography and about the natural world. And at this point in my life, I'm 52 years old right now and I feel about as fulfilled as I've ever felt in my professional life.

David Todd [00:11:42] That's a good place to arrive: you know, lots of twists and turns in anybody's life, and it must be really satisfying to be at that stage where, yeah, this has been a good trip.

David Todd [00:11:54] And I must say I wanted to thank you for spending some time to discuss it with us. And you know, much as you taught kids in high school or the adults on your photography tours, you taught us a lot. So thank you for that.

Russell Graves [00:12:10] Yes, sir. Thank you.

David Todd [00:12:12] All right. Well, so good to spend time with you again. I hope our paths cross. In the meantime, good luck out there in the snow. Hope you see some, some big, shaggy, icy animals. Keep an eye out for mastodons. Who knows? Yetis? Who knows what you'll see?

Russell Graves [00:12:33] You never know. That's what I tell them.

David Todd [00:12:35] You never know.

Russell Graves [00:12:35] We might see a yeti while we're up here. So keep your eyes open, you always got to watch. You know what you'll see if you're staying at home: you won't see anything. So you got to swing for the bleachers if you want to hit a home run.

David Todd [00:12:47] There you go. Well, glad you're out there. Enjoy it. Good to talk to you.

Russell Graves [00:12:52] Yes, sir.

David Todd [00:12:52] Talk to you later.