

A Tense Meeting in the Mountains

It is a crisp, bright, clear Sierra Nevada morning, September 15, 1968. The Sierra Club's board of directors is having one of its quarterly meetings in the meadow behind Clair Tappaan Lodge in the mountains 170 miles or so east of San Francisco.

The air smells of pine, cedar, and fir. The lodge, whose floors creak and are scarred from thirty years of pounding by ski boots, is used mostly for winter skiing parties. The club maintains and operates its own modest ski run, Signal Hill—still served, at this time, by a rope tow—above and behind the lodge. It is a ramshackle affair—half a century later the club's website description uses the word *rustic* twice in one paragraph.¹ Visitors sleep in dorm-style rooms in their own sleeping bags and must do a chore—dishwashing, floor-sweeping, snow-shoveling—each day. Meals are served in a big dining room where diners eat at long tables, sit on benches, and serve themselves from bowls of salad; big, steaming trays of spaghetti; and other such communal fare.

The lodge sits about 7,000 feet above sea level, perched just above U.S. Highway 40, rerouted and rechristened a decade previously as Interstate 80, near Donner Summit. The summit is named for the Donner party, which got caught by blizzards on its way to California in 1846. About eighty men, women, and children were trapped just below the pass near what is now called Donner Lake for several months. The party ran out of food, and after they ate their livestock, according to some survivors, they began to eat each other as people died of starvation.

David Brower, Martin Litton, and Luna Leopold, Sierra Club board meeting, September 15, 1969. Photograph by Tom Turner.

The Sierra Club, a hundred twenty years later, is about to imitate the phenomenon.

The thirteen directors (two are absent) are sitting behind two long folding tables, set up in a splayed V shape. They are all men, all white, mostly of middle age.

The board president, Dr. Edgar Wayburn, sits at the apex of the V.

Sitting at the end of one of the tables is a tall, lanky, handsome, white-haired man in a plaid cotton shirt, reviewing the agenda. He is David Brower, fifty-six. He has been a member of the Sierra Club since 1933, and is its first—and so far only—executive director.

Brower has served on the club's rock climbing committee, its publications committee, and its outings committee among others. He was editor of the *Sierra Club Bulletin* from 1946 to 1953. He has been chairman of the San Francisco Bay chapter. He led club outings for more than a decade. He served on the club's board of directors from 1941 to 1952, when he was named executive director. He is a familiar sight on Capitol Hill, where he has led campaigns to create parks, block dams, and win passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

He has designed, edited, written forewords to, and overseen publication and distribution of many books for the club, including the celebrated Exhibit Format series of oversized photo-and-text books (don't say "coffee table books" within earshot), most of which were published to assist one conservation campaign or another. He is a decorated combat war veteran, a celebrated mountaineer, a skilled filmmaker, an accomplished photographer, and virtually invented the use of newspaper advertising for conservation.

The club is on a roll. Its membership is growing smartly, with now approximately 77,000 members, up from about 7,000 when Brower took over sixteen years earlier. The club recently defeated plans to build two hydroelectric dams inside the Grand Canyon and led successful efforts to create new national parks in the redwoods in Northern California and the North Cascades in Washington State. Its short documentary on the redwoods has just won an Academy Award.²

Brower has been at the center of these efforts and many others and is undeniably the public face of the Sierra Club and the main reason for its fame. He is, simply, the best-known and most influential conservationist in the country.

On the downside, the Internal Revenue Service has just confirmed a provisional decree it had made two years before: it has found that the Sierra Club

violated agency rules by being too active legislatively, specifically with newspaper ads challenging the Grand Canyon dams. The result is that contributions to the Sierra Club will no longer be deductible by contributors for income tax purposes.

President Wayburn gavels the meeting to order.

Upwards of one hundred members and staffers have gathered on folding chairs in the meadow or sit on the grass behind the lodge. Two or three microphones are set up on the tables for directors to use. The moment the gavel hits, director Richard Sill, a physics professor at the University of Nevada, leans into the mike closest to him and says: "The Executive Director, in spite of great energy and remarkable ability, is not an able administrator of money." Sill argues that Brower's "very energy is hazardous to the Sierra Club, in that he sees what he thinks should be done and acts rapidly, not infrequently involving the Club in unwise contracts, excessive financial burdens, and other actions which countervene [*sic*] Board policy or budgets." He pauses for effect, then continues: "This seems to be beyond his own self-control and beyond the control of the Board of Directors. With the greatest reluctance I therefore feel compelled to support the immediate dismissal of David R. Brower from employment by the Sierra Club."³

Directors Ansel Adams, the world-renowned photographer, and Richard Leonard, an attorney and one-time close friend and rock-climbing companion of Brower, quickly second the motion. Director Larry Moss, a nuclear engineer and supporter of Brower, then moves that the matter be tabled. Martin Litton, former travel editor of *Sunset* magazine, now operator of Grand Canyon Dories, seconds the motion, which passes on a vote of ten to three. Adams immediately tries again, saying "Because of repeated financial and administrative irresponsibility, I move that David R. Brower be dismissed as Executive Director of the Sierra Club and as an employee, effective at the end of the fiscal year, December 31, 1968." This motion fails on a vote of ten to three. Brower has dodged a bullet, but Sill, Adams, and Leonard are not about to give up.

This is in part a generational matter. Ansel Adams has served on the board continuously since 1934, Dick Leonard since 1938. Brower's supporters on the board, several of whom he recruited to run for election in the first place, have served for five years or less. The old-timers, who now number somewhat fewer than half the total, are uneasy about Brower's bold, some would say scatter-shot, approach to his job. His supporters admire him for precisely the same

reasons the detractors are nervous. Feelings run deep. The cannibalism will be only metaphorical but painful, dramatic, and decisive.

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I was there that day, age twenty-six. David Brower had hired me the previous May to winnow a book from the writings of the legendary Sierra mountaineer Norman Clyde, a task to which I would bring enthusiasm but absolutely no training or experience. Upon completion of that project, I became Brower's administrative assistant. When Adams and Sill moved to fire Brower, I was stunned; I had no idea what was brewing, being a callow newcomer.

I had known Dave Brower slightly my whole life. His wife, Anne, and my mother, Beth Turner, had met and become friends on the University of California campus in the 1930s before either was married, and our families lived only a quarter mile from one another in the Berkeley hills starting in the late 1940s. My family had been on a few Sierra Club trips, and I was deeply in love with the mountains. When Dave asked me to come work for the Sierra Club, I didn't have to think twice. I worked with him at the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth for the next eighteen years. I was in touch periodically over the following fourteen years, until his death in 2000.

So I knew him as a grownup, a boss, and a colleague. He was a many-sided character, who attracted both fervent admirers and dedicated enemies. He was quick to admit his own shortcomings and to forgive hostilities. He tended to keep his eye on the big picture, sometimes at the expense of immediate and demanding details.

I decided to write his life for several reasons. First, to learn. He threw out stories of his early years now and again, but my knowledge was sketchy and I knew the whole story would be fascinating and instructive. I also sensed that, despite his fame, notoriety, and great influence during the years I saw him in action, his legacy as one of the world's greatest and most effective environmental activists seemed to be slipping to the margins of history. This was confirmed over the course of dozens of interviews for this project, and also by young college graduates in environmental studies or environmental law who, when I said I was working on a biography of David Brower, would say, "Hmm. David Brower. I've heard that name somewhere." To me, that was shocking and needed to be rectified.

So I set out to write a professional biography of David Brower, an attempt to examine his career as an environmental pioneer and leader. This is not

meant to be a thorough personal biography, though there are many features of his personality that show through.

Despite—in some ways because of—the conflicts that rose up around him, David Brower was a key figure in the evolution of the environmental movement or, as some would have it, the evolution of the conservation movement *into* the environmental movement. There's much to learn from his story, from his philosophy and his synthesis of various competing themes and concerns. Much to learn also from his mistakes.

As you will read in the following chapters, Brower was a complicated man—charismatic, impatient with authority, some would say reckless, visionary (a word he probably wouldn't like), driven. Working for him was exhilarating, maddening, frustrating, and inspiring. I wouldn't have missed the opportunity for anything.