

William Grant Bagley

May 27, 1950 ~ September 28, 2021

William Grant Bagley, born 27 May 1950 in Salt Lake City to Lawrence Miles Bagley and Cassandra Margene Bailey, left us 28 September 2021 after a series of strokes. The many who will miss him include three siblings, Kevin (Patty), Pat (Kate Hahn), and Lisa (Wendell Payne); wife Laura Bayer; daughter Cassandra and son Jesse; three beloved grandchildren, Noah (Mikah), Megan Cassandra, and Maya; numerous extended family members; and legions of readers, students, friends, and fans.

Bill, as he was known through childhood and young adulthood, moved with his family to Oceanside, California, where his father served first as town planner and later as a multiple-term mayor. He graduated from Oceanside High in 1967 as class president, state debate champion, and national pullup champion. He studied for a year at BYU, which, as one of his cousins tactfully noted, may not have been the right school for the young rebel who ran for student body president on an anti-Vietnam War plank. As a sophomore he transferred to the University of California Santa Cruz, where he studied writing with Wallace Stegner's son Paige and history with John Dizikes. While attending Santa Cruz, he arranged an independent study program to build a raft and travel from Rock Island, Illinois, to the Mississippi delta. This was the first of two trips down the Mississippi River, journeys chronicled in his last book, River Fever. Fortunately for us, he survived a near-fatal encounter with a barge. In the following years he hitchhiked, bicycled, and drove a van across country twice. He also spent time in a cabin in remote Spring Creek, North Carolina, writing, listening to traditional local musicians, playing music, and growing an epic beard, which his mother complained made him "look like a goddam hippie."

After returning to Salt Lake City, he worked construction, played what he called ka-chunk guitar for various country bands, and recorded an LP, "The Legend of Jesse James." When he married Janis Johnson in 1978 (divorced 2001), the required blood test revealed that he had type 1 diabetes, which he would struggle with the rest of his life. After the birth of his daughter in 1980, Will gave up the precarious music business for a series of technical writing jobs in the emerging computer industry, working at the legendary computer graphics company Evans and Sutherland and later at Dayna.

Not until the 1990s did he pick up his pen to write history. His first publication, A Road from El Dorado, appeared in 1991. Encouraged by mentors Floyd A. O'Neil and David Bigler, in 1990 he began research on the Mountain Meadows Massacre, a project that culminated in the publication of Blood of the Prophets in 2002. In 1996 he teamed with brother Pat to produce an illustrated children's history of Utah, This is the Place. In 1997 publisher Robert A. Clark invited him to serve as editor for a documentary history series that became Kingdom in the West, a project that occupied him until 2019 and produced 16 award-winning volumes. From 2000 to 2004 he wrote the popular "History Matters" column for the Salt Lake Tribune. During the decade he also served on the executive committee of the Journal of Mormon History, edited two volumes for the Utah, Mormons. and the West Series

sponsored by the University of Utah's Marriott Library and the Tanner Trust, prepared research documents published online for the Park Service and the Oregon California Trails Association, and provided information for multiple National Park Service trail maps. In 2003 he married Laura Bayer. From 2010 to 2015, he produced four major works, including Mormon Rebellion (with David L. Bigler), So Rugged and Mountainous, With Golden Visions Bright Before Them, and South Pass.

In the end, he published more than 25 books and hundreds of articles related to the history of Utah and the West. He appeared in numerous videos, including Helen Whitney's The Mormons, Brian Patrick's Burying the Past, and many documentaries. He won research fellowships from Yale's Beinecke Library, the Huntington Library, and BYU's Redd Center. In 2008 he held the Wallace Stegner Centennial Fellowship at the University of Utah. He appeared on local radio and television programs, including Doug Fabrizio's Radio West program at KUER (26 times). He lectured regularly throughout the state and the country, even speaking in Morocco and other world locations for the Center for Study of New Religions. He enthusiastically mentored every student who came his way and generously gave advice to anyone who asked (and some who didn't). A self-proclaimed expert on the Bear Lake Monster, he delighted in giving presentations about the mythical beast. He compiled a second music CD, The Crows Will Pick Our Bones. He wrote a one-act play for Salt Lake Acting Company's evening of short plays related to water. He provided historical consulting for fiction and nonfiction, theater, television programs, videos, podcasts, visitor centers, museums, government agencies, and others.

Will received recognition from dozens of professional organizations. Blood of the Prophets won the Utah Arts Council Original Writing Publication Prize, the John Whitmer Association's Smith Petit Best Book Award, a Western Writers of America Spur Award, the Denver Public Library's Caroline Bancroft History Prize, the Westerners International Co-founders Best Book Award, the Western History Association's Caughey Prize for the Major Distinguished Book on the History of the American West. After giving him multiple Spur Awards over the years, in 2016 WWA named The Blood of the Prophets as the 6th best book published in the association's first 60 years. Three years later they presented him with the Owen Wister Award for Lifetime Achievement in the History of the West. With other Wister Award winners, he is enshrined in the WWA hall of fame in the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming. In 2010 he received the Wrangler, the highest award presented by the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. He was also honored by the Utah Arts Council, the Oregon California Trails Associations (OCTA), Salt Lake Weekly, the Utah Historical Society, the Mormon History Association, and others. In 2013 he was elected to the Oceanside High School Hall of Fame. In 2014 he became a fellow of the Utah State Historical Society.

Throughout his career he served in many organizations, including Western Writers of America, Utah Westerners, Friends of the Marriott Library, Oregon California Trails Association, Utah Rivers Council, Friends of the Great Salt Lake, Western History Association, Mormon History Association, Utah State Historical Society, Sunstone, Mountain Meadows Association, Mountain Meadows Foundation, E Clampus Vitus, Center for Study of New Religions, and others.

The family would like to extend thanks to the staff of Legacy Village Sugarhouse and Suncrest Hospice, who gave Will excellent care in his last year.

A private family service was held; a public celebration of life will be held in the future. In lieu of flowers, we suggest donations to one of the many organizations Will worked with throughout his lifetime, including Friends of the Great Salt Lake, the Oregon California Trails Association (OCTA), the Southern Utah Wilderness Association (SUWA), the Utah Rivers Council, and Utah Westerners.