

Review: Hazel Wolf: Fighting the Establishment

By Susan Starbuck

Reviewed by [Kathy Piselli](#)
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Susan Starbuck. *Hazel Wolf: Fighting the Establishment*. Seattle: University of Washington, 2003. 408 pp. ISBN 0-295-98222-5 (trade cloth). US\$29.95

Though a lifelong environmentalist in the truest sense of the word, renowned activist Hazel Wolf became an organizin', agitatin' environmentalist sometime in the sixties, having cut her teeth on a battle by the United States to deport her and others during the McCarthy period.

Wolf began her environmental activities by whipping the local Audubon Society into shape and seeing it through a period in which it evolved from a group of bird-watchers to being a part of the national lobbying effort that the national Audubon is today. She brought different individuals into groups, and brought groups into working on particular issues they had not considered before. She was a firm believer in the interrelatedness of all things and is quoted as saying "I think the best an organizer can do is get people together, inspire them to want to stay together, and share with them any particular knowledge you might have to help them do that. And then that's the end of it, as far as I can see. If you want to *run* the thing, then you're not an organizer-you're just on an ego trip."

Wolf took to organizing naturally, and this imparts a sense of simplicity to her history. She breezes through her account of how, in 1979, she undertook the monumental task of bringing the state's Indian tribes together with environmental lobbyists. It sounds simple because to her, her actions were simply the right things to do. But was it simple? Probably not. She alienated friends on behalf of a tribe of strangers. She was on the road for months through Washington State and British Columbia, meeting with tribes. Wolf was 81 at the time.

Wolf is well known for her stories and sayings. This biography is full of them, collected by a skilled interviewer who, over a period of 20 years, became a friend. Starbuck contributes summarizing paragraphs and catchy headers, such as "How to Manage the Timber Industry," that would read beautifully on a Ken Burns-style TV documentary. Wolf contributes the rest. In addition to stories about her activities, the book is mined through with observations that reveal her general worldview. For example, at one point Wolf describes attendance at PTA meetings as "that fruitless pursuit" and Stanford University as "Stanford or some horrible place." Wolf was an

organizer, but not necessarily a joiner. The book is full of accounts of organizations she helped and then left, or did not help and then left-useful lessons for all who would build organizations.

Those interested in politics will enjoy the section on how Wolf tried to run for president in 1983. She was elected Democratic precinct committeeperson in a way she describes as definitely not democratic. In a true democracy, after all, all citizens would be required to participate in their government. But Wolf does identify one critical problem in the process that "tramples" the grassroots and ultimately kept her from running for the presidency, and it isn't something that is commonly blamed.

Wolf has many animal "totems." The wolf, because it can melt into the scenery. The brown creeper, because it works for its living. The sparrow, because it is streetwise. But the humans she identified with were the poor, whom she describes as "my childhood people where I came from."

One of the appendices consists of some personal reminiscences. They tell the story of both an extraordinary woman and an ordinary woman we all know, all at the same time. This is a funny, warm, and thought-provoking book which pulls you in as surely as if you had been speaking to this compelling individual in person.

Author Susan Starbuck teaches at Antioch University in Seattle. The book derived from her work collecting oral histories for the Washington Women's Heritage Project, a grant project of the Washington State University Women Studies Program. Starbuck found the two-hour interview required by the project "hardly scratched the surface" of Wolf's activities, and gradually this book was born.

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