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Wild at heart

Clarence Petty, shaped by the woods, did the fieldwork to define what is now wilderness

By MIKE LYNCH, Enterprise Outdoors Writer

Few, if any, Adirondackers in the past century have been more tied to the concept of wilderness - as both an ideal and a way a life - than Clarence Petty, who died Monday in his family home in Canton at the age of 104.

As a child, Petty lived among a small settlement of guides in Coreys that included his father Ellsworth. Petty himself started guiding sportsmen before hitting his teenage years, leading hunters on deer drives and fishermen to holes filled with brook trout. His home had no electricity, food came in the form of deer and trout, and entertainment came from the likes of Noah John Rondeau, the legendary hermit who lived 15 miles away on Cold River and stopped by occasionally for dinner.

"I would have liked to have been here 200 years ago, before there were any people," Petty recalled about his childhood in an interview with the Enterprise last winter. "When my brother and I used to go out to trap, we used to talk about that: 'Wouldn't this be great if this was all wilderness?'"

Although Petty loved spending his time in the woods and perhaps would have been satisfied spending his life as a guide, his mother Catherine had other ideas. She made sure Clarence and his brother Bill attended the local school in Saranac Lake. Every Sunday, the pair would walk the roughly 16 miles to school and board up for the week in the village. They would walk home at each week's end.

Later, as a young adult, Petty attended the State College of Forestry in Syracuse (now the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry) and eventually got a job with the state Conservation Department (now the Department of Environmental Conservation). He held several Conservation Department jobs, including leading a Civilian Conservation Corps camp near his home in Coreys during the Great Depression. He was also a district ranger in Cranberry Lake from 1946 to 1957 and, as a pilot, was the state's first aerial firefighter when he dumped water from a small airplane on forest fires. (He also served as Gov. Averell Harriman's personal pilot from 1957 to 1959, a job he reportedly hated.)

But it was in 1959 that Petty began the work that would help change the Adirondack Park forever. That year, he was hired as the liaison officer between the Conservation Department and the state Joint Legislative Committee on Natural Resources, led by Assemblyman R. Watson Pomeroy. During this period, an increase in recreational use - especially by four-wheeled motorized vehicles such as jeeps - was viewed as a threat to the natural resources of the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserves, and zoning was proposed to protect sensitive areas. Petty and

Neil Stout were assigned to inventory lands in both the Catskill and Adirondack parks that might be suitable for wilderness designation, which meant motorized vehicles would be banned.

For the next three years, Petty and Stout spent time paddling, hiking, snowshoeing and otherwise exploring the Forest Preserve to gather scientific data for their wilderness study. They even hired Herb Helms, who owned a floatplane business in Long Lake, to fly them to the remote ponds and lakes. Years later, when the wilderness classifications became reality in the early 1970s, Helms' planes were banned from wilderness areas, initiating a debate over floatplane use in the Park that continues to this day.

After three years, the committee used Petty and Stout's survey to choose a dozen areas in the Adirondacks and four in the Catskills for the wilderness designation, and maps were created showing them, according to "The Extraordinary Adirondack Journey of Clarence Petty," a book by Christopher Angus. Ultimately, though, no legislation was introduced to create those wilderness areas because Conservation Commissioner Harold Wilm wouldn't back it unless it was accompanied by legislation allowing for timber cutting in the Forest Preserve. Pomeroy wouldn't support the timber cutting, and the bill died.

Years later, Petty and Stout's wilderness survey resurfaced when the Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks was created in 1968, the year after a widely unpopular Adirondack National Park was proposed. Soon after the creation of the Study Commission, Petty was asked to continue his wilderness studies, often working with ecologist George Davis, a job Davis said was perfect for Petty.

"I swear he loved every tree, every lady slipper, every pine marten, all of the things that characterized the Adirondacks," Davis told the Enterprise Tuesday. "He loved each one of them, almost as individuals. And he saw how they lived together and were dependent on this special area, on this type of forest or a type of wetland, and if those things changed dramatically, it would mean the end of things like the pine marten."

Davis recalled one of his favorite stories that exemplified why so many enjoyed working with Petty. The story dates back to the winter of 1970, on a day when temperatures hit minus 34, according to Davis. Davis and Petty were supposed to visit OK Slip Falls that day for their studies, but Davis couldn't make the trip and had to meet up with Petty afterward at a North Creek hotel. When Davis arrived, he found Petty making an attempt to warm himself.

"Clarence let me in, and he was all wrapped up in all the blankets from the bed," Davis recalled.

Petty was trying to warm himself because, while snowshoeing across OK Slip Pond earlier that day, he had broken through a weak spot in the ice and slipped up to his chest into the frigid water.

"Boy, it was cold," Petty told the Enterprise last winter. "My hands were freezing, so I couldn't get my boots off. So I just had to leave them on with all the water in them."

Petty, who was in his mid-60s, ran back roughly six miles to his car, enduring temperatures that would have killed many others. He credited his woolen underwear with helping save his life. He also drew on his past experiences of breaking through the ice near his home in Coreys to help him get out of the water.

"I got used to breaking through the ice," Petty said. "I think most everybody who lived up there at that time did. You either did that or didn't survive."

Petty survived and continued with his work. In 1971, the Temporary Study Commission recommended the creation of the state Adirondack Park Agency and two land-use plans for the Park: the Adirondack Park Land Use and Development Plan for private lands and the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan.

Davis and Petty were hired as the first employees of the APA. In the following years, Petty helped create the two zoning plans and also did the fieldwork for yet another important piece of legislation: the Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers Systems Act.

For this study, Petty had to paddle and walk about 1,300 miles of Adirondack waterways, carefully taking notes on the flora, fauna, water clarity and manmade structures he found in and near the rivers. He worked with Gary Randorf, Anita Riner (now Davis) and Greenleaf Chase.

During these trips, Petty's experience in the backcountry once again provided invaluable, and it impressed those who would occasionally join him.

"He always did things so well and thoroughly that even I, through hanging out with Clarence, became somewhat of an expert," Randorf wrote in an e-mail to the Enterprise Wednesday. "I should have paid the state to be in such company as Petty and Greenleaf Chase."

Dick Beamish, who was the APA public information officer at the time, recalled that he and an Associated Press reporter joined Petty on one river trip.

"This guy from the AP was in his 20s, and at the end of the day, after paddling and bushwhacking and everything, I said, 'How did you like it?'" Beamish recalled. The reporter replied, "It was the most humiliating experience of my life."

Beamish asked why it was so humiliating, and the reporter replied, "Here I was, carrying no more than a pencil and a pad, following behind this man in his late 60s who was carrying a canoe on his shoulders, and I couldn't keep up with him."

After those crucial surveys, Petty went on to become invaluable to environmental groups like the Adirondack Council and The Nature Conservancy's Adirondack Chapter, which have done much to protect and add to the "forever wild" land Petty loved. Even after his 100th birthday, he continued to send environmental advocacy letters to senators, congressmen and presidents, plus occasional letters to local newspaper editors, all typed on his old Remington typewriter.

Ultimately, it was this rugged backcountry experience, combined with a wide-ranging education and a passion for wilderness, that separated him from and endeared him to others.

"The old fellow has parted," Randorf wrote. "I'm weeping for joy and sadness - he's as fine a human as I've ever met or will meet. I have been so lucky to cross trails with this man since 1972. The damn tears are burning. I can hear him say, 'You've been drinking too much of that acid rain.'"

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