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Adirondack 'hero' dies at 104

Petty remembered as pioneer for preservation in massive state park

By BRIAN NEARING, Staff writer

Clarence Petty, an Adirondack native who became one of the region's most passionate defenders, died Monday at his son's home in Canton, St. Lawrence County. He was 104.

Petty grew up in a remote cabin in Upper Saranac Lake and during his long life was a golf caddy, outdoor guide, caretaker, Navy pilot, state forester, flight instructor, government adviser, pilot to Gov. Averell Harriman, cartographer of Adirondack rivers and a founding member of an environmental group dedicated to the six million-acre park, the Adirondack Council.

Environmental Conservation Commissioner Pete Grannis joined several Adirondack conservation groups to mark Petty's passing.

"We have lost a true Adirondack hero and a great New Yorker, the likes of which we will probably never see again," Grannis said. "He was an ardent conservationist, activist, woodsman and pilot, and came to know nearly every square foot of the park through his lifelong experiences. He made it a life mission to regularly express his concerns and interests about the future of the park -- often through letters to state officials that he either hand wrote or typed on his antique mechanical typewriter."

After returning from World War II, Petty worked as a state ranger in Cranberry Lake in the northwestern Adirondacks, where he became the first person in the state to fight forest fires using lake water dumped from an airplane, Grannis said. In 1970, Gov. Nelson Rockefeller named Petty to a commission to study the future of the Adirondacks, leading Petty to hike and canoe about 1,300 miles of Adirondack rivers. That journey became part of a report that resulted in the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency.

"Thirty-four years ago, when Clarence Petty was a mere lad of 70, he got together with other leading environmental activists in the Adirondack Park and held the very first meeting of the Adirondack Council," said the organization's spokesman John Sheehan. "The major concern on the minds of the group was the rapid, ceaseless advance of unplanned development on the park's private lands."

Petty helped form the council to defend the new agency's power to regulate land use in the park, thwarting a proposed 400-lot subdivision on Silver Lake in Clinton County.

"At the age of 95, he told me he was contemplating knee-replacement surgery because he could hardly carry his pack five miles anymore without being winded. I thought he was kidding me," Sheehan said, "He wasn't. He had the surgery and was soon carrying a pack again."

Petty passed his love of the Adirondacks to future generations, said Dan Plumley, director of conservation programs for Protect the Adirondacks, formed last year by the consolidation of the Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks and the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks.

"Clarence was indefatigable in his commitment to saving wild lands, and unusual in his ability to explain that commitment in terms that anybody could understand. That impressed and rang true for the younger interns and staff who joined us in recent years," Plumley said. "One of their first requirements was to meet Clarence."

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