

New York Times
December 6, 2009

Clarence Petty, Protector of the Adirondacks, Dies at 104

By DENNIS HEVESI

Clarence Petty, who so revered the pristine Adirondack wilderness he first roamed nearly a century ago that he spent virtually all his adult life fighting to preserve it, died Monday at his home in Canton, N.Y., a town tucked between the Adirondack foothills and the St. Lawrence River Valley. He was 104.

The death was confirmed by his son Ed.

Mr. Petty, a lanky man who well into his 70s could still snowshoe 35 miles a day, was an Adirondack Park ranger and later a liaison between the New York State Conservation Department (now the Department of Environmental Conservation) and the State Legislature. In 1975 he helped found the Adirondack Council, a nonprofit environmental group, and became its first director.

For decades Mr. Petty defended what he called the Dacks, a 5.8-million-acre oasis of publicly owned and private land in upstate New York that is considered the last great wilderness in the Eastern United States. Into his late 90s, he spoke at public hearings, gave lectures and typed letters to legislators. His greatest fear was that the park would be nibbled away, lot by subdivided lot, and he vigorously opposed the intrusion of motor vehicles.

Long before he began lobbying, Mr. Petty had made his mark on the park. In the late 1950s, in his scratchy woolen hiking pants and battered boots, he and a colleague conducted a three-year survey of thousands of acres in the park.

“What Clarence did with Neil Stout, another employee of the Conservation Department, was to backpack throughout the most remote terrain in the park,” Phil Brown, the editor of Adirondack Explorer, a bimonthly newspaper, said on Tuesday. “Based on their research, the Adirondack Park Agency eventually decided which tracts of land would be wilderness and which would be wild forest.”

The distinction between wilderness and wild forest is significant. The slightly more than one million acres designated as wilderness in Adirondack Park are totally off limits to snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, motorboats and seaplanes. Some motorized vehicles are allowed in the park’s 1.3 million acres of wild forest.

In the early 1970s, Mr. Petty, then in his mid-60s and traveling on his own, paddled his canoe (except when he had to carry it on his back) along more than 1,300 miles of rivers and streams to map the most remote regions of the park. He undertook that task after Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller asked him to be a member of a commission set up study the future of the

Adirondacks. The commission's final report prompted the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency, which develops land-use policy for the park, about half of which is privately owned.

"His studies led to the strongest protection of vast tracts of wild lands and additional protection of more than a thousand miles of rivers," Mr. Brown said.

The protection did not come without opposition. In 2005, when Mr. Petty criticized a plan to create more snowmobile trails in the park, Carol W. LaGrasse, president of the Property Rights Foundation of America, which opposes state control over private land, told *The New York Times*: "The environmentalists treat him like the great father, a dignitary par excellence. But to my mind, he's just a repressive, arrogant individual who, along with others, has caused a great deal of hardship for lots of people who live in the Adirondacks." She and others equate wilderness expansion with loss of personal freedom and potential income.

For his part, Mr. Petty was adamant. "I would be just as pleased if I could stand on the Capitol steps in Albany and look towards Montreal and not see a damn thing except wilderness," he said then.

In a written statement on Tuesday, Pete Grannis, the state's commissioner of environmental conservation, said Mr. Petty "helped shape the Adirondack Park we know today."

"He didn't do it for the thanks," Mr. Grannis added, "but for the love of a magnificent place that he called home for the past 104 years."

Clarence Adelbert Petty was born on Aug. 8, 1905, in the Lake Champlain town of Crown Point, N.Y., the second of three sons of William and Catherine Van Druska Petty. The family lived in an illegal lakeshore shanty until being evicted by the state, then moved into a small house with no plumbing or electricity in Coreys, N.Y., on the edge of the wilderness.

William Petty eked out a living as a guide. His sons spent their days hiking, fishing, trapping and, for a time, hanging out in the woods with a famous local figure known as the Hermit of Cold River.

When Clarence was 11, his mother ordered him to begin hiking 16 miles into town every Sunday night and to stay there all week so he could attend school. He graduated from Saranac Lake High School in 1926, then earned a bachelor's degree from the State College of Forestry (now the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry) in Syracuse.

After working for the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression, Mr. Petty served as a Navy pilot in the Pacific in World War II. He returned home and got a job as a ranger, combining his forestry and flying skills. He was the first person in New York State to extinguish a forest fire by dumping lake water from an airplane. He also trained hundreds of fledgling fliers at a school he ran in Potsdam, N.Y., from 1967 until 2000, when, at 95, he sold his planes.

Mr. Petty's wife of 56 years, the former Ferne Hastings, died in 1994. In addition to his son Ed, he is survived by another son, Richard; a brother, Archibald; four grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Mr. Petty was a legendary trekker who climbed 46 of the highest peaks in the Adirondacks.

"Not all people feel they need to have wilderness, but I do," he said in the 2005 Times article. "If things go bad and everything seems to go wrong, the best place to go is right into the remote wilderness, and everything's in balance there."