



Photos courtesy of the Petty family

# Adirondack Inspiration :

# Clarence Petty

by Ellen Bidell

Nearly 100 years ago, a seven-year-old boy named Clarence was helping his father guide a wealthy family in the Adirondacks when another young boy gave him a model canoe. Little did Clarence know that the little boy who gave him the canoe would grow up to be governor of the state and that the modest gift would bring them together at the forefront of the fight to save the Adirondacks.

Adirondack icon Clarence Petty, now almost 104 years old, grew up hiking, hunting, fishing, canoeing and snowshoeing the woods that currently make up the Adirondack Park. He has climbed all 46 high peaks, and some say he knows every square inch of the park. Described by the New York Times as one of the most important and inspirational

figures in the history of the Adirondack Park, Clarence Petty has devoted his life to protecting the land he loves so well.

Born in 1905, the son of a cook and an Adirondack guide, Clarence was the middle child of three boys. His father

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earned only \$2 a day, so the family lived in a primitive shanty near the east shore of Upper Saranac Lake for the first few years of Clarence's life. "My father...built his cabin on Forest Preserve land, just as most other guides did in the early days," Clarence remembers. In the winter, a wood-burning cookstove kept the family warm, and despite their limited resources, Clarence recalls those days as some of the happiest of his life.

Education was important to Clarence's

mother, so when Clarence was six, the family moved to Coreys to enroll him and his brother Bill in the one-room school there. After school and in the summer, the boys roamed the woods and explored the lakes, enjoying a freedom

unheard of today. Later, Clarence and his brother Bill boarded with a friend in Saranac Lake in order to go to the school there. They walked—and in the winter snowshoed—16 miles to Saranac Lake on Sundays and returned home on Fridays. The trip took four hours each way.

Clarence worked after school as a caddy at the Indian Point Golf Course, walked a trapline daily and picked up any other jobs he could. On the weekends, he took to the woods, helping his father

guide. By the age of nine, he was leading hunting parties by himself.

Knowing he wanted a career in the woods, Clarence attended Syracuse University College of Forestry. But when he graduated, life had other plans for him. The tough economy of the Great Depression forced him to endure a job in New York City. While there, Clarence discovered the second love of his life—flying—and attended flight school on Long Island. After a few years, he was able to return to the Adirondacks as a forestry foreman and supervisor for Civilian Conservation Corps camps. He met and married his wife, Ferne, who came to share his dedication to the Adirondacks for more than 50 years.

As a Navy pilot during World War II, Clarence flew plasma to embattled islands in the South Pacific. On returning home, he landed a job with the Conservation Department, now the New York State Department of Environmental

Conservation (DEC), as district ranger in Cranberry Lake. He held this position for 11 years, and, combining his forestry and



flight skills, was the first person in the state to fight forest fires using lake water dumped from an airplane.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Clarence realized that the Adirondacks would need more protection if it was to remain the wild and wondrous place he had come to know. As a Conservation Department liaison to the New York State Legislature, he surveyed 10,000 acres of wilderness over a three-year period, often on foot, to identify those areas suited for strict protection. During that time, he hiked, snowshoed, canoed or flew over virtually every acre of state-owned land in the Adirondacks.

In 1970, Governor Nelson Rockefeller created a commission to study the future of the Adirondacks and wanted Clarence to serve on the commission. The Governor had heard a great deal about Clarence's passion and expertise, but their meeting would not be the first time they crossed paths. When Clarence

arrived in Albany, he walked into the Governor's office and laid on the table the toy canoe the Governor had given him more than half a century earlier. Neither man had forgotten that chance meeting when they were children.

While on the commission, Clarence conducted an inventory of some 1,300 miles of Adirondack rivers. He did this on foot and in a canoe, classifying them for special protection and mapping the park's most primitive areas. The commission's final report led to the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency. Clarence went to work for the new Adirondack Park Agency, which was drafting land management plans for the park's public and private lands.

Even after Clarence retired in 1974 to run his flight school in Potsdam full time,

his dedication to preserving the unique and wild nature of the Adirondack Park never wavered. He joined a number of environmental organizations and today belongs to 68 different groups.

Using a 1934 Remington typewriter, Clarence has written countless letters to government officials telling them about the slow erosion of the Adirondacks to development, and the need to be unflinching in efforts to protect it. Since parts aren't available for his typewriter anymore, he now has to order custom cut ribbons.

Clarence also writes a column called "Questions for Clarence" in the *Adirondack Explorer*. In a recent column, a reader asked "What's the best thing to happen to the Adirondacks in your lifetime?" Clarence responded, "Just

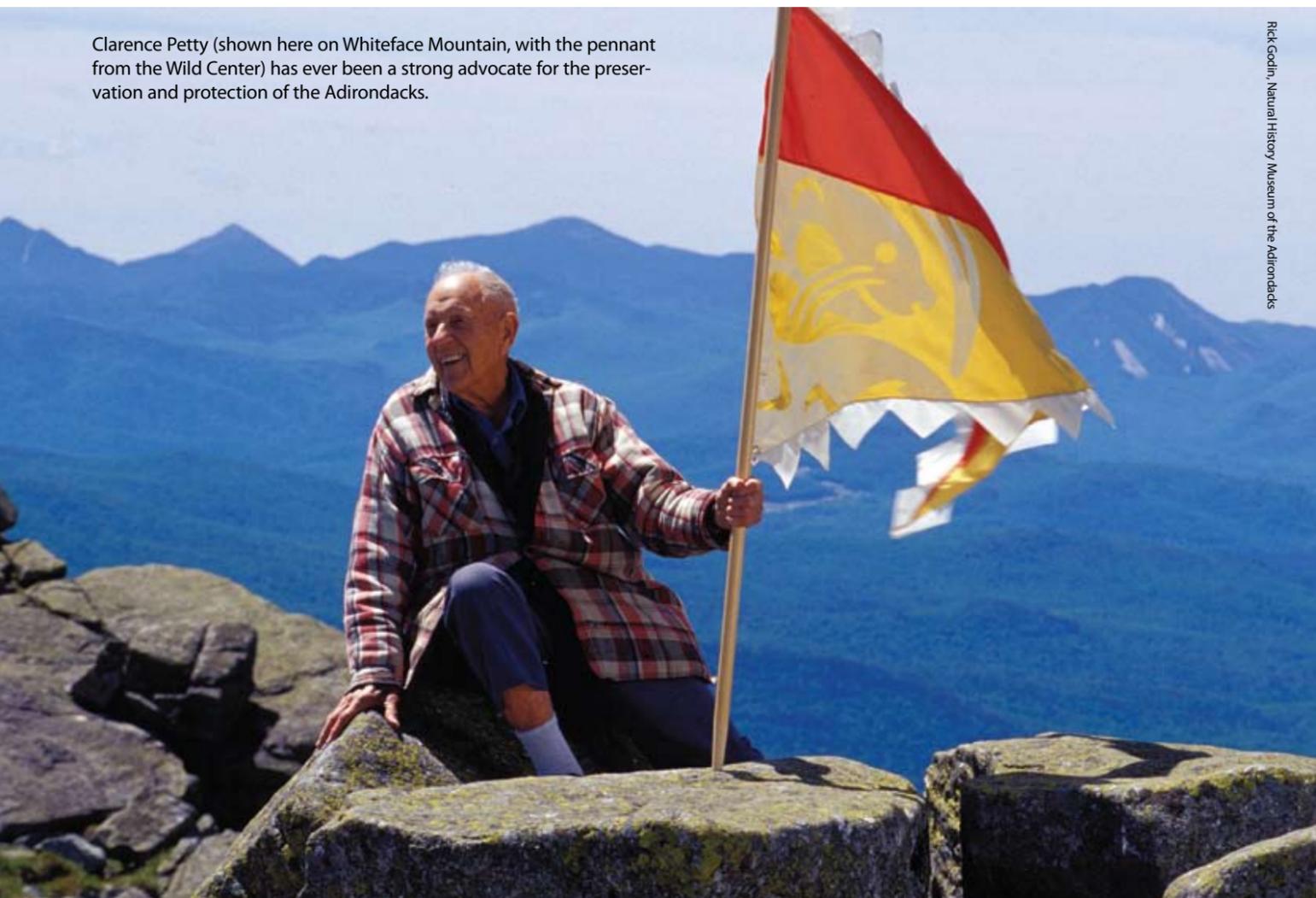
getting more Forest Preserve land is the best thing that has happened...If we didn't have the Forest Preserve, I don't think we'd have the wildlife we have here now. We're sitting in the middle of one of the most heavily populated states in the union, and you have almost all of the wildlife that was here originally."

Clarence believes that the "Forever Wild" clause in the state constitution is sacrosanct, and he has an immovable position about development in the park. "Clarence has always been in favor of conservation and preservation of the Adirondacks. Not too many old-time Adirondack residents feel that way," notes Dick Beamish, founder of the *Adirondack Explorer*.

In a 2007 letter to the *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*, Clarence explains,

**"We're sitting in the middle of one of the most heavily populated states in the union, and you have almost all of the wildlife that was here originally."**

Clarence Petty (shown here on Whiteface Mountain, with the pennant from the Wild Center) has ever been a strong advocate for the preservation and protection of the Adirondacks.



Rick Godin, Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks

Ken Rimany



Here, Clarence is pictured with Nellie Staves, another Adirondack conservation icon.

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"I've tried all my long life to do the right thing, even though that sometimes hasn't set well with some people. But I think you have to stick up for what is right." According to Clarence, his most effective way of influencing the future of this great resource was "doing by example."

Clarence is still doing by example, although he now writes his letters and newspaper columns from an assisted living center in the Adirondacks, rather than his cabin in the woods. Betsy Lowe, Regional Director of the DEC office that covers the Adirondacks and a close friend who visits Clarence frequently, reports, "He continues to be passionate about the park and takes the opportunity to speak about issues that are important to him."

Even with issues like climate change that didn't really come to the forefront of the environmental debate until he was well into his 90s, Clarence doesn't miss an opportunity to engage officials at all

levels. "Recently, he has talked about bringing back the railroad and supporting wind power as ways to reduce our carbon footprint," Betsy said.

Clarence Petty's contributions to the Adirondacks have been honored by the Adirondack Park Agency, and in 2003 he received a Governor's Award for contributions made to the environment. The Adirondack Council established the Clarence Petty Internship Program to make sure that Clarence's activism and passion for the Adirondacks is passed on to the next generation. As Clarence says, "It is never too early to learn that the Adirondacks is a special place."

Betsy Lowe agrees. "Clarence's greatest contribution is his knowledge of the park at a time when people are losing touch with nature. There isn't anything like first-hand experience to help you become passionate about something. It enriches your life in a way that just seeing beautiful photographs cannot. It is important that

we always have a spectacular landscape that inspires us, like it does Clarence."

Not only has Clarence Petty been inspired by the Adirondacks, he shaped the Adirondack Park we know today. He did it without stepping into the limelight, but instead through hundreds of small actions: hiking thousands of miles, attending committee meetings, writing countless letters, serving on boards of dozens of small organizations.

He didn't do it for the thanks, but for the love of a magnificent place that he has called home for the past 103 years. And we owe him great thanks all the same.

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