

THE ADIRONDACKS— Where Wilderness Preservation Began

By Doug Scott

On a Saturday in July 1923, the irrepressible wilderness enthusiast Bob Marshall was doing what he liked best: tramping through the wild Adirondacks. He camped by a beaver dam, and wrote in his journal: "... it seemed hardly possible that I was in the crowded Empire State of today.... The forest outlined against the rising moon, the deer drinking in the rippling brook, the cool wind from the West were all as they had been when the first pioneer trapper spread his blankets in the untrammelled country, termed Couchsachraga, the dismal wilderness."

Bob Marshall led an extraordinary life, tragically foreshortened by his death at age 38 in 1939. In that span, Bob inspired the movement for wilderness preservation that now reaches around the world.

Everything he wrote and did reflected the impress of the summers he spent in the Adirondacks. His family summured at Knollwood, their compound on Lower Saranac Lake, but Bob was happiest when out climbing the peaks with his brother George and their guide, Herb Clark.

Bob's adventures in the Adirondacks and in wilderness areas across North America, together with his awareness of the ever-present threats of development, laid the groundwork for his widely influential statement of the case for preserving wilderness areas. Published in 1930 in the country's most important scientific journal, *The Scientific Monthly*, "The Problem of the Wilderness" reviewed the many benefits people gain from wilderness and the threats fast eroding

remaining wild expanses, concluding with a ringing call to action: "There is just one hope of repulsing the tyrannical ambition

The Wilderness Society



Bob Marshall canoeing in the Adirondacks.



Adirondack High Peaks

fight wherever and whenever wilderness is attacked.

At Hanging Spear Falls during a climb of Mount Marcy, Zahniser told Schaefer that he was overwhelmed by the quiet and beauty of the Adirondacks and compared it to the Grand Tetons. Zahniser’s love affair with the area deepened, and when Schaefer learned of a 25-acre parcel of land with a cabin that his neighbor wanted to sell, he wrote to Zahniser, who took out a loan for the purchase. Ever playful with words, he combined the first syllables of his four children’s names, Mathias, Esther, Karen, and Edward, and the family retreat became “Mateskared.”

Testifying before a New York legislative commission in 1953, Zahniser dipped into the 1857 classic, *Wild Northern Scenes*, quoting Samuel H. Hammond’s alarm that Rackett Lake would soon be within civilization’s ever-extending circle: “When that time shall have arrived, where shall we go to find the woods, the wild things, the old forests, and hear the sounds which belong

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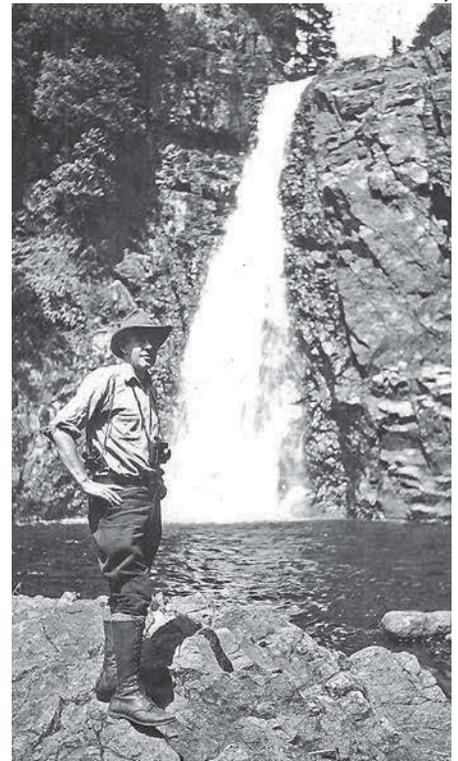
of civilization to conquer every niche on the whole earth. That hope is the organization of spirited people who will fight for the freedom of the wilderness.”

His call galvanized founding of The Wilderness Society in 1935. Thus, from Bob’s nurturing in the wild Adirondacks, events were set in motion that would spark action for wilderness preservation from the halls of the U.S. Congress to vast wild sanctuaries in Alaska, South Africa, Malaysia and beyond.

In 1936 The Wilderness Society held a membership meeting in Washington D.C. One who attended was a government editor named Howard Zahniser. A decade later, the Society asked Zahniser to put together an issue of its magazine, *The Living Wilderness*, when their own editor became

ill. Soon the Society asked him to take the job as the executive director and editor.

In his new role, “Zahniser” attended a wildlife conservation conference in New York City in 1946. There he met Paul Schaefer, who was fighting proposed dams on the Moose River. Eager to learn more about the Adirondacks, he and his family took a long vacation that summer, setting up camp outside the Schaefer’s cabin near Bakers Mills. The two families became great friends—and discovered an interesting link, for as a young man, Schaefer had encountered Bob Marshall on the summit of Mount Marcy. He related to Zahniser how he had told Bob about logging threats on Mount Adams, and how Bob had said that all of us who love wilderness must band together and



Howard Zahniser at Hanging Spear Falls.



On Mt. Marcy, looking east towards Mount Haystack

Carl Heilman II

to nature in its primeval state?...Had I my way, I would mark out a circle of a hundred miles in diameter, and throw around it the protecting aegis of the constitution...The old woods should stand here always as God made them, growing on until the earthworm ate away their roots, and the strong winds hurled them to the ground, and new woods should be permitted to supply the place of the old so long as the earth remained.”

Yet the threats never seemed to stop coming—and the people of New York always answered with solid defense of the Adirondacks. Faced with a proposal to build the Panther Creek dam—a proposal backed by every prominent mover and shaker in the state—the public voted three to one in November 1955 to keep the Park “forever wild.”

Outstanding things can happen when a person and a mission in life come

together at the perfect moment. At its annual meeting in 1947, The Wilderness Society’s council formally decided to work for protection of a continent-wide system of wilderness areas. Zahnle brought exactly the right aptitudes to the task—an evangelical approach to making converts for wilderness, and endless patience. Patience was essential, for the proposal aroused determined opposition from mining, logging and livestock-grazing interests and their congressional allies. Moving it from concept to bill and through Congress to the president’s desk would take the next 17 years.

From the start, the Adirondacks played a central role in Zahnle’s campaign for the Wilderness Act. Retreats at Mateskared gave him time to reflect and to renew his energies, even before he learned he had serious heart disease. His knowledge of the “forever wild” clause

of the New York State Constitution inspired him to seek the strongest form of protection for wilderness areas on Federal lands. An amendment to the U.S.

Bob Marshall

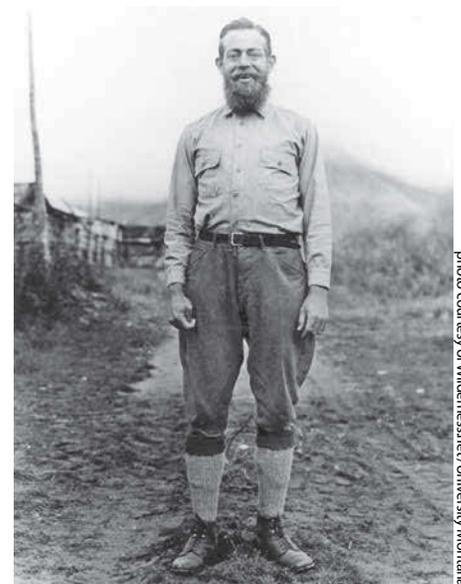


photo courtesy of Wildernessnet/University Montana

Constitution was not a practical option; next best would be establishment of wilderness areas by Act of Congress protected by exact boundaries mapped in the statutes themselves so that *only* Congress could alter them in the future.

Zahnie spent the first nine years refining his own thinking about the contents of such a law, using his travels to stir conservationists across the country, and deftly taking advantage of each fight against proposed dams and other threats to wilderness areas to broaden the coalition of support he knew would be needed to overcome entrenched opposition. In early 1956, he judged the time right and sat down to draft the legislation. His bill was introduced that summer, but it still required eight years to move it through Congress.

Zahnie did not live to savor his triumph, however, dying on May 5, 1964 of congestive heart failure. He was only fifty-eight years old. Four months later his widow, Alice, stood proudly in the Rose Garden on September 3, 1964 as President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law.

As we celebrate the law's 50th anniversary this year, we see that the Wilderness Act, so deeply influenced by the history of wilderness protection in

Howard Zahniser



photo courtesy of Wilderness.net



President Lyndon Johnson congratulates Alice Zahniser after signing the Wilderness Act in 1964.

the Adirondacks, has had extraordinary reach. Today, our National Wilderness Preservation System protects more than 109.5 million acres in 44 states—and Congress is actively considering bipartisan legislation to designate more.

Gaining the protection of the Wilderness Act for additional land requires an act of Congress; more than 170 wilderness designation laws have been passed since 1964. Each of these laws has enjoyed local support, a reminder that the preservation of wilderness begins—as it did in the Adirondacks—with a few people eager to see wild places they love protected as strongly as possible.

The Wilderness Act has been the model for a number of states, such as California, Minnesota and New York, to pass laws protecting wilderness areas on state-owned land. In fact, one-fifth of the Adirondack State Park—20 wilderness areas—are embraced in this strongest-possible legal protection. In addition, the Wilderness Act has been the inspiration for numerous nations around the world to create wilderness protection policies adapted to their own social and legal systems.

While drafting the Wilderness Act, Howard Zahniser kept thinking of Bob Marshall's description of the wild Adirondacks as "untrammelled," feeling no other word conveyed the essential idea. To say, as Congress does in the 1964 law, that wilderness is "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man" is to say that wilderness is where we humans leave the forces of nature to unfold in their own way.

And for the past 50 years, the Wilderness Act has done just that: helped ensure our wild areas remain forever wild; places where, in Zahnie's perfect phrase, we humans should "be guardians, not gardeners."

Doug Scott retired last year after 40 years lobbying Congress to protect more national parks and wilderness areas. He has written *Our Wilderness: America's Common Ground*, foreword by Robert Redford (Fulcrum, 2009) and *The Enduring Wilderness: Protecting Our Natural Heritage Through the Wilderness Act*, foreword by Theodore Roosevelt IV (Fulcrum, 2004).