

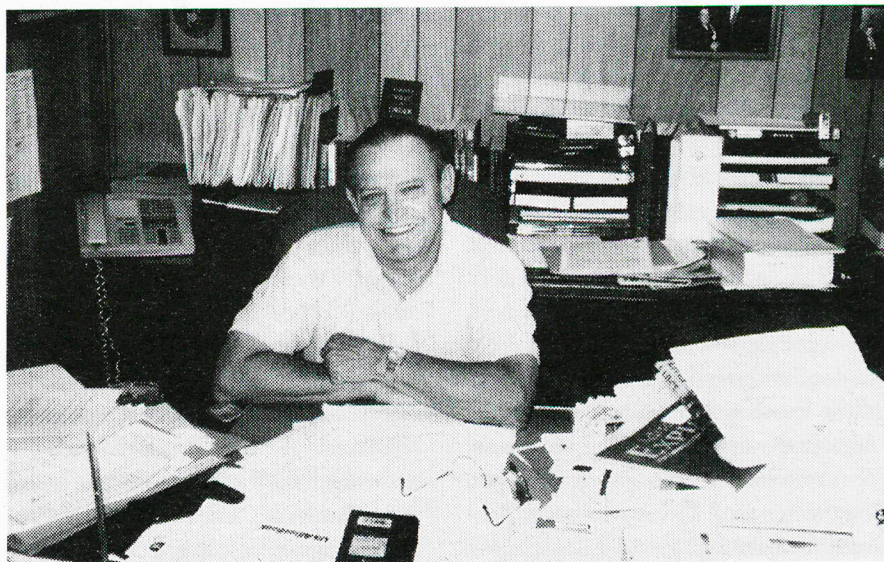
George Canon, Supervisor Town of Newcomb

BY KIRK PETERSON

Adirondack vistas. A quote from Teddy Roosevelt. More photos of George with assemblymen, senators, the governor. An idyllic camp in the woods, in the foreground a man holding a huge pike caught in the Upper Hudson. Photos of the grandkids — no one could be a prouder granddad. A well-used microcomputer. Files of paper crowding the desk, what little surface left uncovered displaying still more pictures of George with his many North Country friends.

"With George, what you see is what you get," says Betty Stickney, a 25-year veteran of the town offices and George Canon's assistant and right arm since he became Town of Newcomb Supervisor in 1990. Betty's big problem with her boss is getting him to take time away from the job. "He loves golf, but never takes a day off. Last week was vacation, but he was here every day." George's energy, usually fueled with coffee and a cigarette, belies his 62 years. Clearly some of that energy springs from his love for the people of the North Country region he was born in and has lived in all his life.

A visitor to Newcomb has no trouble getting into George's office, that is, when he is not on one of the many road trips to the county seat in Elizabethtown or APA meetings in Ray Brook, both 60+ miles away. (No wonder the car he just traded had 200,000 miles on it.) The door to his office is open. The hard part is getting a word in with George, given the constant



stream of phone calls, visits by councilmen and other neighbors, and myriad other interruptions. On a typical morning, George is seated behind the desk, lighting a cigarette, frankly sharing his views on every subject from local economic development to the need to modify "forever wild" with people of all political stripes, his language salted with vintage off-color phrases — George is not the kind of guy who worries about being politically correct. Maybe that's because in the heart of the Adirondacks getting re-elected depends more on what you do than what you say, and also on whether you honestly represent the views of the people who struggle to eke out a living from the region's stony economy.

George was born in 1938 in Indian Lake and has been a life-long resident of Newcomb except for the war years when his father worked in a plant in Massena. Ride with him for a morning as he checks on the town water system or visits the town beach to talk about a bear problem with town employees

and you have to believe he knows every soul in the township. Visit the legislature in Albany or mention George's name to a member of an "environmental" group and you have to think most folks who have anything to do with the Adirondacks know — and have heard from — George, party affiliation and rank notwithstanding.

On another day, catching up with George at the monthly Adirondack Park Agency meeting in Ray Brook, where he is monitoring the discussion in his capacity as President of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, you can't help but notice that, although the audience is not allowed to join in the discussion, George is never still. He grabs one APA staff member by the shoulders in friendly greeting, holds a whispered discussion with another observer, then slips off toward staff offices to do some lobbying or maybe outside for a smoke. Yet as the presentation winds down, you can bet George will be sharing his views on the day's discus-

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sion, frankly, during the public comment period at the end of the meeting. Watching the whole process, the culture clash between Agency staff members and George is striking, both in language and perspective, but what is also striking is how comfortable George is in the house of his long-time adversary and how effectively he does business there.

George is blunt in his criticism of the Agency, "...the problem is the Commissioners don't see 97 percent of the issues; they're handled by career civil servants. . . extremists make most of the decisions. . ."

Yet George seems to have an easy rapport with many of the people at the meeting — including several APA staffers. Although everyone in the room knows where George stands on Agency oversight of local government, he is not easy to pigeonhole, having long recognized and supported the need for balanced local planning. He simply feels that for many years the APA has focused too much on protection of the Park and not enough on the equally important mandate of stimulating the sluggish regional economy. "We all want to protect the Park, but some of us don't see development as a dirty word."

One long-term Newcomb resident, presently a Newcomb Town Board member and a former Park Agency Commissioner, Barbara Sweet, worked with George in bringing the Newcomb local land use plan into existence when she chaired the Town Planning Board. Newcomb is one of only 15 Adirondack towns and villages — of 103 — to have an APA-approved local plan in place and Barbara is quick to credit George for helping to make this happen, ironically over the opposition of several environmental groups. She says flatly that without George's support and tenacity the Newcomb local use plan would not have come into existence. In fact, perhaps doubting the Town's ability to implement and enforce, then-APA Chair John Collins

and the commissioners met with the Town Planning Board and asked them to withdraw the plan, but George's leadership carried the day. According to Barbara, "George was key to bringing it forward. A lesser person would not have brought it forward, but George was not to be deterred."

Ironically, perhaps George's rapport with his opponents derives partly from his direct approach to discussions. According to Park Agency wetlands specialist Dan Spada, who worked with George on a recently approved golf course project for the Town of Newcomb, "even if you don't agree with him you always know where George stands." Four years of work culminated in APA approval of the golf course in June, one of many local projects, along with Camp Santanoni and the Newcomb Visitor's Center, that George has worked hard on to bring jobs back to a community that was devastated by the closing of the mines at Tahawas in the 1980s. Dan says that, initially, he felt the site was not appropriate for a golf course because of its location, but that George and the Town's consultant "did such a great job with the proposal" that he changed his mind.

At this month's Park Agency meeting, however, George is not presenting a project designed to generate hard-to-come-by jobs in the town of Newcomb to the Park Agency commissioners, a group he feels has become more responsive to local concerns in recent years. Today George is representing the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, an organization he helped to found in 1991 to bridge what he saw as a "communication gap" between Adirondackers and Albany bureaucrats. George has served as the AATV President since 1993 and has helped the organization grow into perhaps the best-known and most influential advocate for local governments inside the Blue Line. [See AJES 1(2) 1994.]

One key bylaw distinguishes the AATV from many other lobbying groups and this bylaw epitomizes

George's philosophy when it comes to representing Adirondack residents: all members of the AATV must be locally elected officials — and therefore locally accountable — to their constituents. Key issues recently on the AATV agenda include wolf reintroduction — not surprisingly, the AATV opposes this; a comprehensive review of the state master plan, which the AATV supports; and reimbursement of Adirondack municipalities for forest lands that are held partly exempt from local taxes under FOR 480 and 480-A of the tax laws. As this article is being written, the "bare bones" budget just adopted by the state legislature includes reimbursement to Adirondack towns for tax-exempt forest lands, even though many other needful programs will have to wait until supplemental legislation is passed in Albany — a tribute to the work done by George and the influence of the AATV. In the Town of Newcomb this exemption, much of it on Finch Pruyn lands, would mean \$100,000 in lost tax revenue without state reimbursement — a major impact when viewed from the perspective of a Town budget of only \$2,000,000. Magnified Park-wide, the forest lands exemption would cost local towns millions of dollars without state help.

In another conversation another challenge for local officials arises: Inside the Blue Line the "big problem is not necessarily regulation. . . but infrastructure." George asks rhetorically, "Why (should businesses) go to Newcomb when Glens Falls has fiber optics?" As you visit with George you begin to appreciate the complexity facing a town supervisor trying to generate jobs in one of the smallest municipalities in the Adirondacks: Newcomb is a town with one diner, four B&Bs, one general store, and no gas station. Even with new initiatives such as the golf course, where will tourists leave their money if they have to drive out of town just to buy gas?

"We're becoming more polarized," George is attempting to explain why

the perspective of some local residents differs from that of groups such as the Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks. He jumps to the RCPA's release earlier this year of a report on building in the Adirondacks. The report shows over 8,000 new structures built in the Park over the past decade, with the greatest impact in such critical areas as lake shores, a potential "crisis" if the build-out continues unabated. "The statistics are flawed, erroneous," he continues, pointing to Newcomb, where the RCPA report indicated 72 new homes built in the last 10 years. Of this 72, George says about 33 were hunting and fishing cabins. Five or six more of the new homes replaced existing buildings which had burned or were otherwise destroyed. This leaves perhaps a net of about 30 new residences built over the last decade in Newcomb, which at 480 residents has about a third of the population it had 30 years ago when the mines at Tahawas were in full production. From George's point of view, this is not rampant development.

"I'm not sure there can be a crisis when 75 percent (the actual figure may be closer to 55 percent) of the private land (in the Adirondack Park) is resource management," he continues. Resource management is the most restrictive category of land classification in the Adirondack Park, allowing approximately one home for about 43 acres, with further restrictions based on criteria such as slope and soil conditions, the presence of wetlands, proximity to shorelines and so on.

George's conversation moves on to Article 14 of the New York State Constitution, the "Forever Wild" amendment. New Yorkers are unique among the 50 states in our constitutional protection of wilderness. George calls the prohibition of harvesting timber on state land a "total overreaction" to the actions of the early lumber barons. "It doesn't make

sense not to harvest it in an economically sound manner. Some day they will modify it (Article 14), perhaps not in my lifetime or yours, but some day." One reason George supports a timely review of the state Unit Management Plans, by the way, is that new state acquisitions are essentially treated as wilderness until they are officially classified, which limits snowmobiling, for example, an activity vitally important to the winter economies of many Adirondack towns, where unemployment can reach 15 to 20% in February.

The discussion returns to changes needed at the Park Agency: "The five in-Park commissioners should be elected" so that they are responsive to local concerns. George feels that "environmental groups have been very successful in portraying Park residents as uninterested in protecting the Park," something he doesn't feel is the case. "They (the APA) have a job to do — I don't have a problem with that — but some of them think their only job is protecting resources. One of the resources of the Park is people. They should be protected, too." With George it's not a question of whether or not regional planning is needed — he clearly feels it is important — but of balance between preservation and development.

Howard Kirschenbaum, a founder and board member of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, knew that he needed George on board when he founded AARCH in 1990. AARCH is one of the few active groups working within the Park that has been able to forge a consensus between environmental and preservationist groups, on the one hand, and local governments on the other. Howard is quick to credit George with making this possible, especially on last year's designation of Camp Santanoni as a National Historic Landmark. George had been president of the Newcomb Historical Society and Howard realized "if we didn't have George on our Board our goal of sav-

ing the Camp would be seriously compromised." With Article 14 "forever wild" potentially at issue, the environmental community was divided on the importance of preserving this special great camp. Some felt it should be torn down as an inappropriate intrusion into the forest preserve.

However, AARCH was able to build a coalition of preservationists and local and state supporters that made it happen. "When George would pick up the phone to call DEC (the Department of Environmental Conservation), they would listen. State leaders paid attention to his views," Howard recalls. And once the Park Agency agreed to reclassify the land, the town of Newcomb was instrumental in stabilizing and preserving the camp, buying many of the materials the state used to rebuild the roof and assisting in other ways as well. For example, on a recent morning after torrential rains washed out the road into the Camp, George was on the phone with DEC putting the agency in touch with someone who could get some gravel into the Camp to rebuild the road in a hurry.

As with any person long involved in local politics, George also has his adversaries. Town of Chesterfield supervisor Gerald Morrow, a Democrat, has squared off with George on a number of issues, but when you talk to Gerry you soon learn party affiliation is not an impediment to doing business with George. "I'm a Democrat, he's a Republican, but George supports me on a lot of things. When I joined the Essex County board in 1994, George welcomed me."

Another supervisor who has worked closely with George is Town of Willsboro Supervisor Teresa Sayward, a Republican, and another of George's many north country fans. Although Newcomb has only 37 votes on the Essex County Board under the county's weighted voting system, vs North Elba's 453 for example,

"George has more than once turned the Board around." She credits George's integrity, fairness, hard work, and knowledge of the law, among other attributes, with making this difference. She also respects his ability to capture the attention of the media when he wants it as well as his knowledge of Albany politics and ability to influence events there. "There's hardly an assemblyman or senator who doesn't know him." Pure George is an anecdote about a lobbying trip to Albany with George on the floor of the senate, working hard on the AATV agenda. Assemblyman Brodsky approaches, George makes his pitch, and Brodsky responds with, "What are you gonna give me?" At which George begins peeling off his shirt: "In the

Adirondacks, this is all we've got left."

Agree or disagree, when you go a round with George Canon you are never in doubt that you've tackled a tough and nimble opponent.

Seated in his town office, midway through a conversation, George points out that Teddy Roosevelt became President of the United States in Newcomb, an even 100 years ago, inviting me to attend the town celebrations. Now, reading the quotation from Roosevelt's "Man in the Arena" on his office wall helps me understand some of what drives George: . . .the credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred with dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes up short. . .because there is no effort

without error. . .

George, like Teddy Roosevelt's man in the arena, always comes out swinging both fists, his first instinct an aggressive offense. Like Roosevelt's fighter he sometimes stumbles and makes mistakes, but he never fails to raise dust and draw attention, both to himself and to the problems many Adirondackers face. In his view, both the natural beauty of the Adirondacks and the cultural heritage of the region's people need to be preserved if the Park is to continue to be unique. Opponent or friend, agree or disagree with him, a good deal of the recent political history of the North Country has been profoundly influenced by George Canon.

Call for Papers: Ninth Annual Conference on the Adirondacks

The Adirondack Research Consortium (ARC) will hold its Ninth Annual Conference on the Adirondacks on May 22-24, 2002, at the Hotel Saranac in Saranac Lake, New York. The ARC encourages research papers and topic sessions on all aspects of Adirondack natural environment, history, politics, economics, and culture. This interdisciplinary, regional consortium is home to physical and social scientists, humanists, planners, environmentalists, government officials, and all those interested in this important region.

Papers, posters, discussion panels, and workshops that explore the natural, economic, cultural, historic, and philosophical features of the Adirondacks, Lake Champlain, and the North Country are encouraged. Of particular interest are themes addressing the intersection of the social and natural sciences in research, and issues of public-private ownership and management of complex natural and social systems. Past conference agendas and abstracts can be found at the ARC's web site: www.rpi.edu/~erickj/ARC/

Graduate and undergraduate students are strongly encouraged to participate in the conference through both paper and poster presentations. All student papers will be evaluated for an annual award. Presentations should be designed for 20-minute summaries and 10 minute question and answer sessions,

with a general audience in mind. Technical language should, to the greatest extent possible, be limited and fully explained.

Abstracts should be sent to the address below no later than January 31, 2002. Electronic submissions are strongly encouraged (dja1@cornell.edu).

Each proposal should include:

1. Title of the presentation.
2. Name and address of author(s), with presenting author specified.
3. The type of presentation proposed (paper, poster, panel, workshop, etc.).
4. A 250-word abstract of the presentation, which will be published in the conference program.
5. The need for audio-visual equipment. Poster displays are the responsibility of the presenter. Tables and easels will be provided.

Send inquiries and proposals for presentations to:

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