Local Voices in Conservation

Practicing stewardship in their own backyard

BY KIRK PETERSON

In May of 1997, the Adirondack Conservation Council (ACC) celebrated its 50th anniversary with a gala dinner at the Hotel Saranac in Saranac Lake. Among the distinguished guest speakers were Senator Ron Stafford (R Peru), and past Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioners Hank Williams and Michael Zagara. Also in attendance were a long list of noteworthy voices in conservation, paying tribute to the respect—and political power—the ACC and sportsmen’s federations have been able to project, not only in Northern New York, but even in Albany’s labyrinthine halls.

Yet statewide political organization and power was far from the minds of the sportsmen when they gathered for the first time in May of 1947, at the Saranac Lake Fish and Game Club to form the ACC. These were men gathered as much for fellowship as to share concerns about issues, according to Stan Logan, who today, at 88, is a representative to the ACC from the Massena Rod and Gun Club, and who attended the first ACC meeting in 1947. Issues discussed in 1947 included changing the opening day of bass season on Lake George to protect the fishery, how to better protect Adirondack deer from “two legged coyotes,” and whether or not women should be required to have hunting and fishing licenses—the ACC felt they should. Chair Ed Worthington, ACC’s first president, noted at the Elizabethtown meeting, held in October 1947, that the ACC was not intended to be a “pressure group nor is it aimed towards any other section of the state” and that the ACC would deal with “matters pertaining to our own back yard.”

Reviewing the minutes of 1947, and talking with members of the Adirondack Conservation Council who attended those first meetings, it is clear that the sportsmen of the nascent group felt a strong sense of stewardship for their region, felt that they were qualified to make decisions about their “own back yard,” that “matters of local interest should be discussed and settled in the ACC” and not passed on to Albany. They also felt, clearly, that their voices would weigh in heavily when policy discussions were held in Albany; their license fees had, after all, been the primary source of funds for conservation efforts for many decades. These were individuals loathe to play politics, unless it were in support of the job of a local “Game Protector” who lived and worked in their home town. Evidence of this sense of shared purpose with state agencies and the conservation officers who represented them exists in the minutes of the October 1947 meeting, which contains resolutions asking for increases in Game Protector travel allowances—local officers had to use their own vehicles at the time, according to Bob Jarvis, a long time conservation officer from Plattsburgh area, who is an ACC member today; and resolutions were also passed asking for an increase in Game Protector numbers and for “more teeth in the fish and game laws.”

Woven into the same cultural and social fabric, state agency and local sportsmen shared the same values and beliefs in 1947.

Now leap ahead forty years, into a strikingly different political era in tenor of dialogue between local sportsmen and state agencies. There is still a camaraderie between local hunters and fishermen and the officers who work so closely with them on a variety of Adirondack projects; however, there is now often hostility towards state control and the state agencies which now appear—to native Adirondackers, at least—to govern the North Country. Witness the July 1987 Adirondack Conservation Council Position Statement on the Pharaoh Mountain Wilderness Area, drafted by ACC past president George Fuge. ACC opposition to the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) plan for Pharaoh focuses on the elimination of the fire tower (ACC wanted to retain it), but the tone of the position statement is nothing like the kinder, gentler 1947, when “men of good will” eschewed playing politics and believed Albany would listen as closely to local sportsmen as it does to better financed national and regional environmental groups. The moderate discourse and sense of common purpose with the state people and state agencies which prevailed in 1947, has been replaced by suspicion 40 years later, and DEC is actually accused of violations of law in effecting their control of the Adirondacks.

Most of the sportsmen’s ire today, however, is reserved for the Adirondack Park Agency (APA), as the title of the lead editorial for the Summer 1998 Adirondack Conservation Council Newsletter stridently announces: “APA Celebrates 25
Years of Genocide and Slavery of Adirondackers.” In the editorial a comparison is suggested—is it entirely without foundation in late 20th century New York realpolitik?—between the state agencies’ treatment of Adirondackers and the British subjugation of Colonial Americans. Governor Pataki has become “King George.” Looking back, 1947 sounds idyllic.

What has also become self evident by the 1980’s is that local sportsmen’s groups like the county federations and the ACC to which they send representatives, have made an important political transition; the way they see themselves has been perforce transformed. Fish and Game Clubs and the federations still do a myriad of local projects, from stocking pheasants to fishing derbies, but they have also developed a sophisticated political awareness of the larger role they play on the state and national stage in protection of long standing freedoms and prerogatives for sportsmen. Whether it be fire towers or motorized access to wilderness, local sportsmen know how to create and use political pressure and they understand the ramifications of their actions. As ACC past president Nellie Staves puts it, “When we’re fighting for access up here, we’re fighting for access in the Catskills, too.” As if in testament to her comment, Ulster County Federated Sportsmen petitioned to join the ACC at its August 1998 meeting in Lake Placid.

Opening the August 1998 meeting, Adirondack Conservation Council President Ed Morette articulated the changed political perspective of local sportsmen: “We’re not the only ones with problems. I know people out in Buffalo, and down in the Hudson Valley, who’re having the same problems.” At 84, Ed is not only the ACC president today, but he chaired the group in the early sixties, and was present at its initial meetings in 1947, as a delegate from the Ticonderoga Fish and Game Club. His remarkable continuity of leadership thus begins a half century ago—eight years back in the world of Adirondack politics—when rhetoric was calmer and cooperation, not confrontation, was more typical of local state relations. At the August ACC meeting there were no DEC representatives, an unusual occurrence, as a result of the fiery language of the most recent ACC newsletter, Adirondack Echoes. Chairman the debate about the newsletter language, in which representatives of the Saranac Lake Club threatened withdrawal from ACC unless the language was disavowed, President Morette effectively worked out a compromise to tone down the rhetoric of future publications.

Nellie Staves, ACC past president

But there was no compromise in President Morette’s view of the situation: sportsmen, who have consistently contributed most of the dollars for conservation through their license fees, are losing out to well-heeled environmental lobbyists. “We can’t match the environmentalists (money). The governor and the DEC have forgotten they’re public employees. They work for us.” And fiery activist Don Sage, the author of the controversial newsletter rhetoric, sees the fight on a larger stage as well: “We’ve tried to deal locally and didn’t get anywhere.”

Ted Galusha, of Adirondackers for Access, presenting to the ACC August meeting on the progress of his suit to keep the Forest Preserve open to motorized access for the handicapped—and claiming national interest in the lawsuit—put his case succinctly: “We just want to drive where they (the state) drive.” He feels that, if the state can make exceptions for themselves, they ought to make exceptions for the handicapped. For Mr. Galusha it goes beyond the political: “I have my differences with Pataki, but this is not a political fight. This is a fight between right and wrong.” [Editor’s note: see Ted Galusha’s essay in this issue’s Forum]. Following his presentation the ACC voted to support Mr. Galusha’s lawsuit. Also approved was a resolution opposing the acquisition of 144,000 acres of Champion land; thus the ACC joined almost every local government entity in Northern New York: Solidarity. The sentiment: “The state doesn’t have the manpower to take care of the land they’ve got, and they keep getting more land,” observed Ted Galusha.

Sportsmen’s groups organizing, linking arms with local governments and property rights activists, making common cause against powerful outsiders: logical, politically effective.

All is not confrontation, however, and the person who perhaps best epitomizes leadership of North Country sportsmen is Nellie Staves, a more moderate voice—but nonetheless effective. It is said that Nellie is one of the few Adirondackers who can call Albany and talk with the Governor personally, and her many years of work on local projects and cooperative efforts with the state are legendary.

Nellie calls herself a “transplant” because she started her career in Vermont, arriving in the Tupper Lake area after WWII when her employer, a logging company, built a softwood mill to cut the Walker Lot near Long Lake. Words like “resilient” leap to mind with Nellie, yet are inadequate to describe someone who began cooking for lumberjacks—eighteen hour days baking fresh bread and pies and doughnuts and cookies (the French Canadians demanded these, too, for breakfast); butchering sides of beef and pork; laundering clothing for Saturday night out; finding time to do the bookkeeping and send the scale back to the
home office so men could be paid—and describes all of this as a wonderful life! How do you begin your career cooking in a logging camp and end up with a personal invitation to share your views with the governor in Albany? Incredible stamina and energy.

A random selection of just a few of Nellie’s activities over the past several decades includes raising and stocking over 10,000 pheasants with Camp Gabriels and the Franklin County Federation of Sportsmen (the Federation comprises seven Franklin County Fish and Game clubs and sends delegates to the Adirondack Conservation Council). Some years ago Nellie worked with Bob Brown, of the Saranac Lake Fish and Game Club, and Assemblyman Glenn Harris, to save a deer yard east of Tupper Lake that was threatened by a Department of Transportation project. She lobbied unsuccessfully for inclusion of mounts in the exhibits at the Adirondack Park Visitor Center at Paul Smiths. And she worked with the Federation to purchase a Biotic Deer which is used by DEC to catch poachers.

In the 1970’s and early 80’s, with concern growing about acid rain and its impact on Adirondack lakes and ponds, Nellie embarked on one of her most significant initiatives. As president of the Franklin County Federation, in cooperation with DEC, she began a pond liming project. In 1984 Echo Pond, near Fish Creek Campground in Franklin County, was the first body of water tackled by the sportsmen, at a cost of $1,200 and one ton of lime an acre. Characteristically, Nellie raised much of the money herself, door to door. Given the growing concern about acid rain at the time and the large number of ponds needing attention, the prospect of funding other such projects might have seemed daunting—to anyone other than Nellie, that is. While meeting with then DEC Commissioner Hank Williams in Malone to discuss the beaver problem (Nellie is an avid trapper), the topic of liming came up. Williams said to call him in a few days, and Nellie soon had 20 tons of Canadian lime plus a DEC truck to deliver it. Through the 1980’s and into the 1990’s other ponds were limed, including Sunrise, No Name, Long, Cooler, and Ross. One DEC source said that the sportsmen’s effort saved the state more than $50,000, according to Nellie.

And in recognition of the sportsmen’s effort, the state renamed No Name Pond “Federation Pond.”

More recently, Nellie, along with other Adirondack Conservation Council members, has been advising the DEC on the classification of the Whitney Property, a decision soon to be taken in Albany. Commissioner John Cahill has indicated he will recommend a restrictive classification such as wilderness or primitive, according to a recent Plattsburgh Press Republican article, while Nellie and the ACC are suggesting wild forest to allow greater access. To re-emphasize their position, there was a demonstration on August 30, 1998 by those who support motorized access at Little Tupper Lake. Nellie feels that, while the state has not acceded to all of the sportsmen’s requests, the final regulation at Whitney will be more in line with local concerns than they might have been without local input. And DEC Region 5 Director Stuart Buchanan is appreciative of Nellie’s leadership: “She has been very helpful in communicating the feelings of local sportsmen. We rely on her to give us that perspective.”

It is local leaders like Nellie who, at 81, with a lifetime of living and working in the northern forest, represent so effectively local concerns and values in contrast with those outside interests which have different priorities and a different agenda for the Adirondack Park. Some national and regional groups such as the Sierra Club and the Adirondack Council feel more state acquisition of land and more wilderness is clearly the answer. Local stewards of the land, to whom this is not a “Park” as much as it is home—men and women like Stan Logan and Ed Morette and Nellie Staves—have been living with the Adirondack forest for most of this century, hunting and fishing and working, but cherishing the wild nature of these mountains as well; wisdom distilled from long experience. And they sometimes wonder why, after decades of good stewardship, their voices don’t reverberate as loudly as those of the newcomers. Listen closely: isn’t there a note of condescension in the voices of those who would instruct them in the ways of the Adirondack forest?