

# *The Extraordinary Adirondack Journey Of Clarence Petty*

*Wilderness Guide, Pilot, and Conservationist*

Christopher Angus

Syracuse University Press, 2007

Reviewed by ERIC HOLMLUND

*Editor's Note:* Clarence Petty—protector of the Adirondacks—died on November 30, 2009 at the age of 104. The following book review by Professor Eric Holmlund of Paul Smith's College is a tribute to an amazing man.

I brought a group of twenty-five Paul Smith's College undergraduates from my course in Environmental History to spend an hour with a truly extraordinary man one sunny October morning in New York's Adirondack Park. We met him at a Saranac Lake retirement residence, Saranac Village at Will Rogers, which has a fascinating history in its own right as a former hospital for vaudeville actors and then as a tuberculosis sanatorium named for the famous actor, cowboy and humorist of the 1920s, who died in a plane crash in 1935. The man we met in the lobby of the sprawling Tudor-style historic structure would have been thirty at the time of Will Rogers' death. Our class speaker, forest ranger, pilot, conservationist and wilderness activist Clarence Petty, had celebrated his 103rd birthday two months earlier.

Petty, wearing a well-used flannel hunting shirt bespeaking many years of service in the Adirondack forests, spoke with passion, conviction and animation, emphasizing his points about the preeminence of nature with thrusts of his hands and variations of his refrain: "You see, nature has a provision that was built in long before we came along. . . .

We always think we know more than the forces of nature but we don't. . . . We make the mistake of thinking that nature is out of balance when actually, if we let the forces of nature take their course, it balances itself out."

As the students and I came to know Clarence Petty, we recognized his bed-rock conviction that the natural world around us contains unrecognized resources of wisdom and examples of dynamic balance and complexity that can astonish us, and which are profoundly worthy of respect and protection. Petty provided us with a rare example of an unusually focused and productive life dedicated to an ideal: the health and integrity of the Adirondack wilderness. We came to understand his life's progression: from first finding his subsistence in the wilderness, to leading others into it, and finally to delineating and protecting wilderness areas in the wisdom and activism of his mature years.

Petty was eager to share his story with the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts. A student wearing a camouflage ball cap asked a question about the introduction of non-native fish into Adirondack lakes, and was stung to find out that his favorite sport fish, bass, are considered "coarse fish" by Petty, invaders which pushed out native trout, introduced by locals out of "spite" for the state Conservation Department. Another student asked about the prospect

of reintroducing wolves to the deep forests, and listened with silent respect to the musings and reminiscences of the centenarian, including a memory of a hard winter in the 1920s that allowed the St. Lawrence River to freeze over. Petty explained that river ice provided a pathway to the Adirondacks from Canada for the coyotes which today occupy the former niche of the wolf, which was hunted out of the Adirondacks in the 1800s. Many of Petty's concerns and anecdotes are elaborated upon in Christopher Angus' comprehensive and richly detailed 2002 biography, *The Extraordinary Adirondack Journey of Clarence Petty: Wilderness Guide, Pilot and Conservationist*, which covers nearly a century of Petty's personal history, centering on his lifelong professional and personal dedication to the wilderness values of the Adirondack Forest Preserve.

Angus' biography reveals perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of an extraordinary life in its exposition of the arc and progression of Petty's life, including its rustic beginnings, its pragmatic early work years, and the progressive formation of Petty's emerging conservation ethic. He did not have to turn out the way he did; truly, it would have been far more likely if Petty had hardened and adhered to the utilitarian ethic of his youth, as did his brother, another forest ranger. But something changed the trajectory of his development, and turned

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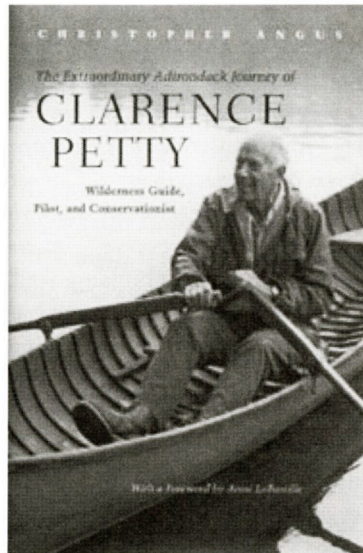
## BOOK REVIEW

him from user to conservator of wild country.

If you consider his birth and early years, you might justifiably expect one outcome or perspective, but what you discover is entirely surprising. Petty was the second son born in 1905 to a very poor family, living in a bark shanty on state land on Upper Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks. His father was a seasonal guide, caretaker, hunter and trapper who worked for the wealthy visitors who spent their brief summers at the houses and estates on and around Upper Saranac Lake. His mother had been a cook at the Bartlett Carry hotel on Middle Saranac Lake, then known as Round Pond. Young Clarence grew up fast, being required to do rigorous chores and hunt at an early age. He became a caddy as a boy, working two golf courses—both of which are now reclaimed by forest or developed into seasonal residences—and carrying the golf bags of wealthy industrialists, many of whom were Jewish businessmen refused admittance to the resort community of Lake Placid, less than twenty miles to the east. Unlike the rigid class divisions in place in Lake Placid, life was somewhat more open for the resort community of Upper Saranac Lake: Petty and his brothers became playmates for the children of the wealthy summer residents such as the Seligmans, Guggenheims and Baches. As a five-year-old boy, Nelson Rockefeller, scion of magnates and future New York governor, gave Clarence Petty a toy canoe, which he still has.

Eventually the family moved a few miles to a home in Coreys which doubled as the post office, with Petty's mother assuming the role of postmaster. The significance of the Petty family economics is not lost on his biographer, who writes: "Thus the entire Petty family earned livings from rich New Yorkers and their guests" and learned to appreciate the cultural and economic significance of outside visitors and seasonal residents to the Adirondack community and landscape (Angus 29). Clarence Petty understood not only what divided

local residents from their wealthy symbiotes, but what brought them together: an abiding and enduring interest in the forests, lakes and mountains of the Adirondack Park. Each class had a role to play in maintaining each others' lives: each "served" the other—in terms of supplying labor and expertise on the one hand and cash wages on the other—in order to serve themselves.



From his father, Petty learned about self-reliance, the deep forest and hard work. He was carrying mail at age six, hunting and guiding by age ten and running a trap line shortly thereafter. From his mother, an accomplished amateur photographer, he learned to value education and its promise for social mobility. By her arrangements, he and his brothers walked 16 miles one way to Saranac Lake to attend school during the week, only to return on the weekends. His mother encouraged the boys to attend college, and in 1925, young Clarence won a scholarship to the State University of New York's College of Forestry at Syracuse. As Angus notes, "If his mother would not let him live like an Indian or at least as a full-time guide, then he would become a forester" (Angus 67). Access to higher education, then, forged Petty's ultimate vocational destiny as a professional conservationist, while his formative experiences as a hunter,

trapper and guide linked him inexorably to the Adirondack backcountry.

Petty's experiences as a college graduate led him first to the largest city in the nation, and then quickly back to the most remote settlements in the East's most formidable wilderness, where he would use his training and background as a leader and administrator. While he was working for Western Union in New York City, Clarence had invested a huge sum of his small savings in attending flight school on Long Island, obtaining his pilot's license in 1931, a decision which allowed him a lifetime of opportunities to serve his country and fulfill his various job responsibilities from the air. The Great Depression cost Petty his job with Western Union, but through contacts he made in college he was offered a job in the newly formed Civilian Conservation Corps running a work camp a few miles from his Adirondack home.

Petty worked as a camp supervisor for the entire nine-year history of the Civilian Conservation Corps, supervising and educating workers drawn primarily from the ranks of the unemployed and undereducated from the nation's large cities. He felt a need to better the lot of his workers, and arranged for out-of-work teachers to come in and teach the workers how to read and write, and how to drive and operate vehicles. He reasoned that if the workers learned new skills, they would see the CCC as more than a "make work" operation designed to keep them fed and off the streets and would learn to take pride in what they were doing. His vision paid off. By the time his CCC camp was called in to fight the massive Boot Tree Pond Fire in 1941, Petty had won the respect of his men, and had honed his own ability to lead them. He supervised the entire effort, commanding over 1,100 firefighters, both CCC workers and volunteers, in the successful firefight. Aside from fire suppression, Petty's CCC work consisted of shaping and developing interior forest resources; he supervised the construction of roads, bridges, campsites and other



building projects as well as the planting of hundreds of thousands of trees. Petty used his considerable knowledge of forestry and the Adirondack backcountry to develop, shape and “improve” the landscape for human access, use and resource extraction and management.

Petty’s early experiences as a hands-on resource manager were to take a more sinister turn, which caused him to question the wisdom of tinkering with the “forces of nature.” After a harrowing stint as a bomber/transport pilot in the Pacific theater during World War II, Petty used his skills as a pilot to spray the revolutionary new pesticide, DDT, on Adirondack forests to control spruce budworm and white pine weevil outbreaks in 1946, a job he later deeply regretted, when the dangers of DDT were fully recognized. “We were experimenting with different things. I was carrying about a hundred gallons of stuff at a time. . . . I generally sprayed at treetop [and] I had to be real careful to watch out for snags that might clip the plane. . . . [I]t was all DDT spray. I’m not proud of spraying that stuff,” he would later remark (Angus 112). After six months on the job, a forest ranger position in the Adirondack Park opened up. Petty took it and never looked back.

With his assumption of the district ranger position in Cranberry Lake, located west of Tupper Lake in the northern Adirondack Park, Petty returned to his home region in an ambivalent role. As a ranger, Petty was responsible for interpreting and enforcing laws and policies governing the use and treatment of state-owned forests. As a local resident, he had lived the realities of the subsistence local lifestyle and was well known by the community. He found that he was both an insider, by virtue of birth, and an outsider, by virtue of education and life experience. He soon found that he had to choose between strict interpretation of the law and an accommodative, liberal interpretation of state policies for the benefit of the local community. He chose the former. These challenging years forged Petty’s conser-

vation ethic amid considerable personal and existential pressure. His biographer highlights the strain of Petty’s dual role: “[Petty] was an embarrassment, a native son who was not afraid to speak out in favor of protecting the wilderness” (Angus 118).

As a district forest ranger, Petty took his responsibility to protect the State Forest Preserve lands most seriously. He knew that Article 14 of the New York State Constitution forbade the felling of trees on any state land that lay within Forest Preserve boundaries, even by its stewards within Petty’s own state agency—the Conservation Department. Petty was deeply suspicious of Conservation Department development activities within the Forest Preserve—its road, trail, bridge, and shelter building—all for the express purpose of promoting public recreation and access to remote regions.

Petty was particularly opposed to widespread public and departmental calls to “salvage” timber felled by high winds in the legendary Big Blow of 1950, which resulted in a salvage plan approved by the New York State Attorney General in violation of Article 14. He ranged the woods checking on the various salvage contractors, who were known to condemn and cut perfectly healthy trees for market. Recalling when he caught a logger in the act of felling a healthy tree, he remarks, “They were only interested in getting the volume of timber out, and there were a lot of violations. State foresters were supposed to be checking up on those guys, but a lot of them didn’t care about what was cut or not” (Angus 133). While salvage operations went forward over the next few years, the Conservation Department pushed to remove protection on all Forest Preserve lands in order to admit active forest management, which led to the formation of a legislative committee to study the eventual zoning of the Forest Preserve; a committee which would eventually enlist Petty’s aid as chief mapper and planner.

This new Joint Legislative Committee on Natural Resources, charged with

devising a zoning strategy for Forest Preserve lands, recognized that Petty, who had retired as a ranger to become a pilot for the state in 1957, possessed unparalleled knowledge of the Adirondack backcountry. In 1959, it offered Petty a leadership position as liaison with the Conservation Department, tasked with determining the characteristics of Forest Preserve lands for their eventual classification. Petty plunged into his new career, and the Adirondack bush, eventually designating twelve wilderness areas in the Adirondacks and four in the Catskills. On the way, he noted frequent instances of litter and abuse of backcountry resources, illegal trails, structures, supplies and evidence of illegal motorized use. All the while, Petty conducted a campaign of letter writing and advocacy for the lawful protection of natural resources, commenting that “You’ve got to have input. It’s the only way you’re ever going to change anything” (Angus 159).

Since then, Petty has moved even further out in the open, taking a stance as a critic of the Department of Conservation, his former employer. Citing the recent inconsistent enforcement of rules governing snowmobile use in the Forest Preserve, Petty wrote in a public letter, “The DEC [the new name of the Department of Conservation] is not paying enough attention to their employees. Some of them have been issuing permits that have directly violated Article 14” (Angus 160). Enter Petty the whistle blower.

Petty’s career culminated in his work with the Temporary Study Commission in the late 1960s, which formed the basis for the modern map and management of the entire Adirondack Park. His maps and recommendations from his earlier work for the Joint Legislative Committee became the basis for the State Land Master Plan in 1972. All of this work was conducted under the threat of massive second home development. In this contentious period, Petty and his wife worked behind the scenes with wilderness advocacy groups to protect



the Adirondacks from inappropriate development. Throughout the process, Petty sought to include all voices in deliberations: "I think one of the big mistakes that was made was in setting the thing up without first going to the local people and telling them and actually involving them in the process. . . . You need to get all the voices out there, whether it's for or against" (Angus 201).

Angus renders a judgment on the significance of Petty's overall contributions to the Adirondack Park and progressive land management: "The Adirondack Park Agency Act regulations [on public and private land] have been called the most comprehensive, ambitious and enlightened regional land use controls ever put in place in the United States. Clarence's contribution . . . was at the heart of the entire system" (Angus 204). In his final retirement, Petty was able to join the boards of directors for many wilderness advocacy groups, and to speak out more openly in favor of wilderness protection. At last he was free to remark, "I'd just as soon stand on the Capital steps in Albany and look toward Montreal and not see a damn thing except wilderness" (Angus 229).

Clarence Petty's interests, vocations, accomplishments and style have much in common with another, more prominent figure in the history of wilderness protection: fellow Adirondacker Bob Marshall, who mapped and delineated millions of acres of federal wilderness, drafted the first wilderness management policies for the Forest Service, was one of the founders of the Wilderness Society and whose writings and philosophy laid the foundation for the Wilderness Act of 1964. Near contemporaries—Marshall was born in New York City in 1902—the circumstances of the two wilderness advocates' births and social standings could not have been much different. Son of a prominent constitutional lawyer, Marshall was of the class that summered in the Adirondacks—his family had a rambling estate on nearby Lower Saranac Lake—while Clarence Petty's family served such wealthy families in

the kitchen, on the golf course, and on the hunt.

While both boys grew up deeply fascinated with wilderness, spending much of their time deep in the Adirondack Mountains, their paths crossed only once. Marshall had a legendary reputation as a long distance hiker, routinely logging days of twenty and even thirty miles in his ceaseless exploration and cataloging of the Adirondack High Peaks. When Petty met him for the first time in 1931 at a slide talk that Marshall was giving, he was disappointed: "He looked kind of pudgy. He didn't look like the athletic type at all. But I guess he had legs like steel" (Angus 42).

Despite this illustration of the dangers of heroic myth-building, it is quite likely that the two would have hit it off. What is most remarkable is that the pathways of the two men showed such parallel convergence, despite the gulf that separated them at birth. On the one hand, Petty was the poor Adirondack resident, the insider, who derived his early subsistence from the forest and from the tourists, who worked hard to build a career using his own resources, intelligence and persistence. On the other, Marshall was the privileged wealthy visitor, the outsider, who "consumed" the forested mountains for recreation and who hired guides such as Herb Clark, who was a friend of the Petty's and fellow guide. What they had in common, and what captured both of their imaginations and became the center of their professional lives, was the mystery and majesty of wild country, in particular the Adirondacks, and secondarily, Alaska, which was the great wilderness that both visited several times. As their parallel stories evince, the freedom and sanctity of wilderness, along with its threatened status under the advances of human use and development pressure, transcended whatever social, economic and educational differences that might have otherwise divided them. In the same way, wilderness in the Adirondacks and elsewhere brings people of all casts together today, to both enjoy and defend the challenges and glories of nature.

For Marshall and Petty, wilderness was their common ground, passion and life's work.

In retrospect, *The Extraordinary Adirondack Journey* of Clarence Petty shows us that the apex of Petty's career as a forester and resource manager, and as a lifelong Adirondacker with arguably the most wide-ranging field knowledge of the 6 million acre Adirondack Park of any person in history, was his delineation of wilderness areas and recommendations for classification of many others, including rivers and roadway scenic vistas. Angus' biography suggests that Petty's work in no small part created the Adirondack Park as we know it today; his arduous treks established the shape and boundaries of its most beloved Adirondack wilderness areas, such as the High Peaks, the Dix Mountain, the Five Ponds and Siamese Ponds Wilderness Areas, among others. Further, the land management classification scheme which Petty contributed to is hailed as a model for protected landscape management world wide. For the Adirondack Park is not just a park: it is a patchwork community, a living and working landscape, which embraces and is embraced by 150,000 year-round residents living in its valleys, near its rivers, under its trees, and on the shores of its glittering lakes.

In a sense, the management of the Adirondack Park is a model for most if not all of the protected landscapes of the future. No longer will large parks be carved out of the wilderness, excluding human settlement. In most corners of the world, this opportunity has passed us by. The more likely model, the more practical model, is the living model: wilderness not as forbidden ground set apart, but wilderness as living park, as community resource, as workplace and as neighborhood. One man has carried the standard of such integrated and protected wilderness landscapes. The reader has much to gain by following the unlikely path of a true "force of nature," Clarence Petty, in Angus' most enriching and enthralling biography.