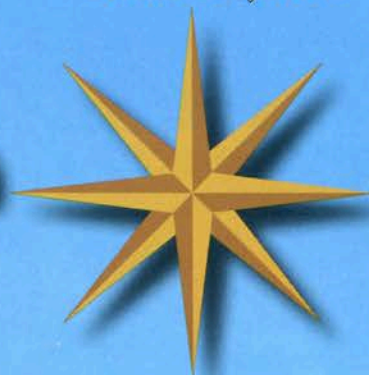


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2014 State Of The Trail

There Be GIANTS!

**Plan to Attend the
8-State Rendezvous**

The 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act and the North Country Trail

By Kirk Johnson

Just over fifty years ago, in September of 1964, the U.S. Congress passed the Wilderness Act into law, establishing America's National Wilderness Preservation System for present and future generations to use and enjoy. Under this historic statute, Congress extended the strongest possible protection to the wildest and most natural portions of our national forests and other federal public lands.

Designated wilderness areas are not just sanctuaries for wildlife, but sanctuaries for people too. In areas permanently protected as wilderness, people will always be able to bring their children to hear the birds, the wind in the trees, and the crunch of the snow underfoot without the hustle and bustle of motors and machinery, and other man made distractions. These are places to remember that we, too, came from the Earth and are wise to remember our dependence upon it. The Wilderness System has grown from nine million acres with the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 to 110 million acres today. Nearly every session of Congress since 1964 has added new wilderness to the system, and every president since Lyndon Johnson has signed wilderness legislation into law.

Here in Pennsylvania we have a special place in this history and the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, for it was a native of the Keystone State who conceived, wrote, and lobbied the Act into law in his capacity as director of The Wilderness Society from 1945-1964. Howard Zahniser was born in Franklin, Pennsylvania, and raised in Tionesta, on the banks of the Allegheny River not far from the route of today's North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) through the Allegheny National Forest (ANF). He played and hiked in the ANF during the formative years of his youth, and canoed frequently on the Allegheny River into adulthood, even camping on Thompson's Island that today is part of the Allegheny Islands Wilderness.

The NCT was created by the U.S. Congress in 1980, 26 years after the Wilderness Act became law in the tradition of the Appalachian Trail and other National Scenic Trails, and is the longest such backpacking trail in America at more than 4,600 miles. The NCT passes through seven northern states from North Dakota to New York, and also traverses 12 national forests along its length, including 95 miles through the 513,300-acre Allegheny National Forest.

Among other National Scenic Trails, the Appalachian Trail passes through 26 federal wilderness areas, the Continental Divide Trail passes through 20, and the Pacific Crest Trail passes through 48. However, so far the NCT has only five federal wilderness areas along its length: the Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness in Minnesota, the Rainbow Lake and Porcupine Lake Wilderness Areas in Wisconsin, and the McCormick and Beaver Basin Wilderness Areas in Michigan. The NCT also parallels the northern and eastern boundaries of the Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness for about eight miles, and it is close to the Rock



Kirk Johnson

A remarkable maturing forest cloaks the proposed Tracy Ridge Wilderness Area in the Allegheny National Forest.

River Canyon Wilderness, Big Island Lake Wilderness, Delirium Wilderness, and Mackinac Wilderness, all in Michigan's scenic Upper Peninsula.

The organization where I have worked for the past fourteen years, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, has identified several prospective wilderness areas in the ANF that the NCT passes through, such as Minister Valley, the Tionesta old-growth area, and the enormously popular Tracy Ridge. Tracy Ridge is the largest roadless area in the ANF, and encompasses a nine-mile segment of the NCT, in addition to a large network of side trails. A photo of the proposed Tracy Ridge Wilderness Area was even featured on the cover of the July-September 2011 (Volume 30, Number 3) issue of the *North Star*.

Years ago, Howard Zahniser's son Ed gave me some 1949 U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps of Pennsylvania that had been in his father's ownership. They were given to his father by then-Wilderness Society president Benton MacKaye. MacKaye, who conceived of the Appalachian Trail in 1921, used these maps to envision later what is now the NCT through Pennsylvania. MacKaye's USGS Kinzua Quadrangle map includes today's proposed Tracy Ridge Wilderness, before Kinzua Dam created the Allegheny Reservoir. The map shows a sprawling landscape, largely roadless in character, with the river untrammelled by a dam. Now professionally matted and framed, the map, one of my most treasured possessions, hangs prominently on my living room wall. Because of the landscape it depicts — and its chain of ownership

— this map is constant inspiration for my own wilderness advocacy work.

On September 25th, 2014, Ed Zahniser gave a fantastic presentation to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy in Roanoke, Virginia, on the subject of the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, the extraordinary work of his father to see the Act become law, and the visionary leadership of MacKaye in his work for wilderness and America's National Scenic Trail System. He said in part:

"MacKaye was by no means solely responsible for the trail, but without his expansive vision, we might not be here together this evening....Wildness was necessity for MacKaye. His regional planning schemes meant to keep wilderness and wildness connected to city cores. His schemes used wilderness and wildness to block what we now call suburban and exurban sprawl. MacKaye called it 'metropolitan flow,' or sometimes 'the iron glacier.'...Benton MacKaye proposed the Appalachian Trail in 1921 as a wilderness belt, not just a footpath. The wilderness belt would block and halt urban sprawl. MacKaye even proposed to have small communities along the wilderness belt whose residents would keep traditional Appalachian crafts alive. MacKaye's big planning goal was to keep wildness in contact with the urban core."

Now that I have become a board member for the NCTA, I am looking forward to hiking sections of the trail that I have not seen before, especially including where it passes through designated wilderness. I attended the 2002 NCTA conference in North Dakota, and hiked portions of the trail in that state during that weekend, but beyond that have not ventured far from the 95-mile section of the trail in the ANF (which I finished walking in 2000), and other sections further south in Pennsylvania and north into Allegany State Park in New York. I am also interested in seeing additional wilderness added where feasible to the NCT for the benefit of hikers, and to further the legacy of Howard Zahniser, Benton MacKaye, and all of the other conservationists who came before us and whose shoulders we stand on. ✱

Kirk Johnson, an NCTA member since 2000, is executive director for Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (www.pawild.org) in Warren, Pennsylvania. He joined the NCTA Board of Directors in December of 2014.



Alice Zahniser

Howard Zahniser on Allegheny River in 1937.