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# OUTDOORS

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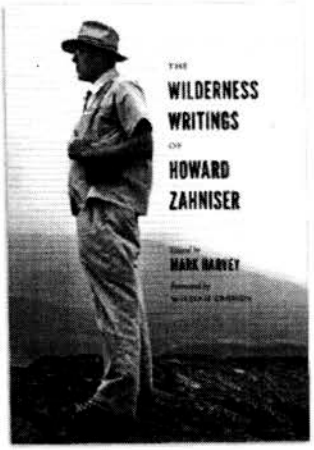
## Writings released of area native, Wilderness Act author Zahniser

**By Kirk Johnson**
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

In 1753 the progenitor of the Zahniser clan in America, Matthias Zahniser, arrived in Philadelphia from Germany at age 4 with his mother, Juliana. In his late 20s, Matthias would become a Lancaster County militia soldier in the Revolutionary War under the command of Gen. George Washington. The Zahnisers eventually made their way across Pennsylvania, settling in Mercer County, where the family flourished. Much later, another Zahniser, Matthias' great-great-great-grandson Howard Zahniser of Tionesta, Forest County, would also do important things for America, including one accomplishment in particular that is comparable in its significance to those of the Founding Fathers of Matthias' day.

When Benjamin Franklin and others met in Philadelphia to meticulously labor over the drafting of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and the Constitution in 1787, preserving wildlands was the last thing on their minds. Virtually the entire continent was wildlands then and the myth of superabundance was the conventional wisdom of the day — there was so much forestland




and wildlife it was assumed that we could never run out. In fact, it would have been considered impertinent, even unpatriotic not to utilize the continent's natural resources to the greatest degree possible to help grow our fledgling country. The Founders could not have foreseen in the late 18th century the extent to which the Industrial Revolution and its consequent population growth would take hold over the next two centuries, and the impact that would have upon our landscape.

The Founders provided for many of the fundamental rights that we cherish today, and for which we fought the Revolutionary War. Their work was augmented by the addition of the Bill of Rights and later amendments to the Constitution. But it was not until 1964 that another of our most fundamental rights was secured with the passage of the landmark Wilderness Act, establishing America's National Wilderness Preservation System. Even the National Park Service, created in 1916, had not fully committed to preserving its backcountry wilderness until then. The "privilege of a wilderness experience is something to which every American is entitled, including those who are not yet born," Howard Zahniser wrote in 1949.

The Wilderness Act came to fruition largely as the result of the dedication and tenaciousness of Zahniser, who served as the leader of The Wilderness Society from 1945 until his death from heart failure in May of 1964 — just a few months before President Lyndon Johnson signed the bill into law. Zahniser was born in Franklin in 1906 and raised in Tionesta. He hiked in the sprawling lands now known as the Allegheny National Forest during the formative years of his youth and canoed frequently on the Allegheny River into adulthood, even camping with his wife, Alice, on Thompson's Island, upriver of Tionesta, that today is part of the Allegheny Islands Wilderness.

The Wilderness Act that Zahniser authored provides mechanisms for setting aside substantial tracts of federal land in perpetuity for primitive recreation, hunting and fishing opportunities. Wilderness, according to the Wilderness Act, is an area "where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Motorized and mechanized uses and permanent developments are prohibited. Designated wilderness has grown from 9 million acres in 1964 with the passage of the Wilderness Act to nearly 110 million acres and 762 wilderness areas in 44 states today. Every president since 1964 has signed wilderness legislation into law.

A new volume of Zahniser's writings and speeches, "The Wilderness Writings of Howard Zahniser," was recently published by the University of Washington Press to coincide with last September's 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. Meticulously compiled and edited by Zahniser biographer Mark Harvey of North Dakota State University, the book represents the wide spectrum of Zahniser's work over the course of his career, from his early days in 1935 at the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey to his final

days as executive director at The Wilderness Society.

Though he was an able and prolific writer, because of his all-consuming work on the wilderness bill and premature passing, Zahniser never had the chance to write his comprehensive masterpiece, in the way that fellow wilderness advocate Aldo Leopold did with his "A Sand County Almanac" prior to his death in 1948. "The prospect for a post-wilderness bill period of book writing doesn't seem so good," Zahniser wrote to a friend in April of 1964, sensing his failing health.

"The Wilderness Writings of Howard Zahniser" goes far in ably filling some of that vacuum and would be enlightening reading for wilderness advocates, conservation professionals, agency managers of wilderness lands, students of 20th century American history and general audiences.

I was of course already familiar with Zahniser's efforts due to the fact that I have been working, with many others, toward having more wilderness designated in the Allegheny under the Wilderness Act since graduate school in the late 1990s (see pawild.org). However, in reading "The Wilderness Writings of Howard Zahniser" I have been pleasantly reminded of the exceedingly disciplined level of work that Zahniser engaged in over the course of his career.

In my mind Zahniser can be thought of as a latter-day Founding Father with the import and quality of his work, his intellectual and philosophical capacity, and acute aptitude with and love for the English language. His advocacy for wilderness, drafting of the Wilderness Act, shepherding of it through 66 rewrites and 19 public hearings before Congress, and tireless advocacy for wilderness with all who would listen is unparalleled, and Harvey's compilation provides a window into all of this and more.

There are 30 of Zahniser's works included in "The Wilderness Writings of Howard Zahniser," assembled roughly chronologically, with Harvey providing a brief scholarly introduction for each of them in order to set the proper context. Some entries may already be familiar to the reader; others are quite rare. This invaluable encapsulation of Zahniser's life work is eminently deserving of a prominent place on the bookshelf beside "A Sand County Almanac," "Desert Solitaire" by Edward Abbey and "Silent Spring" by Rachael Carson, the seminal works of fellow Pennsylvanian conservationists, Harvey's 2005 biography of Zahniser, "Wilderness Forever," and other literary conservation classics. And Howard Zahniser deserves higher regard and increased recognition not only in the pantheon of great American conservationists, but in the pantheon of great Americans.

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