

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

In Memory of Clifton Merritt, Father of Jewel Basin

By Keith Hammer

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It is easy to take our public lands for granted, including those set aside to preserve opportunities for quiet hiking, skiing and snowshoeing. Jewel Basin Hiking Area in the northern Swan Range is one such area, increasingly popular among hikers and skiers because of its pristine alpine setting and its prohibitions against the road building, logging, motorcycles, and snowmobiles that threaten it.

Such areas do not receive protected status, however, without the hard work of dedicated citizens willing to tackle both the political and administrative process such designation requires. Clifton Merritt led the citizens' charge in the late 1960's to protect Jewel Basin, overcame the Forest Service's resistance to do so, and dedicated his life to the preservation of wilderness.

Clif passed away August 12, 2008 at the age of 89. Those of us who knew and worked with Clif will miss him. Those of us who enjoy the great outdoors and our public lands will forever benefit from his work and legacy.

Clif grew up working cattle ranches near Gates of the mountains along the upper Missouri River, where he also observed that his best fishing and hunting was found beyond the end of the road. His citizen work in conservation got its start in the Flathead, where he helped start Flathead Wildlife and was involved with other citizen efforts to conserve fish, wildlife and wilderness.

Clif worked as national field director for The Wilderness Society from 1964 to 1978, where he helped pass the Wilderness Act of 1964. He carried forward the work of Bob Marshall, a Forest Service forester who in 1928 surveyed on foot and later wrote regulations to protect what would become the Jewel Basin Hiking Area, Bob Marshall Wilderness, and Mission Mountain Wilderness.

Kathryn McKay wrote the following in her 1994 "Trails of the Past: Historical Overview of the Flathead National Forest:"

"Clif Merritt and other Flathead Valley residents had urged that the area now known as Jewel Basin be designated as wilderness. . . The Flathead National Forest arranged a trip to the area for lumbermen, ranchers, sportsmen, and others, and as a result the group recommended that the best use of the area was for wilderness-type recreation. In 1970 the Forest Service classified the Jewel Basin as a Special Roadless Area."

Clif helped start a number of groups dedicated to protecting fish, wildlife and wildlands and, over the years, was deeply involved in efforts to designate the Scapegoat, Absaroka-Beartooth, River of No Return, Lee Metcalf, and many other areas as wilderness.

In June 2008, The Wilderness Society bestowed upon Clif its highest citizen honor, the Robert Marshall Award. The year prior, the University of Montana awarded Clif an honorary doctorate degree for his lifelong work and dedication. He drew a standing ovation during commencement ceremonies when he said he hoped others would carry on the work of protecting wilderness.

Therein lies our charge and how we can best honor Clifton Merritt. May we remain civically active and hike with clear intent, forever recognizing the wilderness values of our public lands and working to protect them.

Happy trails, Clif.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Clif Merritt receives a hug of appreciation at a May 2007 reception for his receipt of an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Montana. Keith Hammer photo.