

On the Path

Bill Worf: Father of Wilderness Stewardship

By Keith Hammer

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Bill Worf, the “Father of Wilderness Stewardship,” recently celebrated his 84th birthday with fellow wilderness advocates in Missoula. Born on a ranch near Forsyth, Montana, his love of the outdoors would lead him through a career with the Forest Service, where he wrote the agency’s regulations for wilderness management. In his retirement, he would co-found the nonprofit Wilderness Watch to monitor federal management and enforce the maintenance of wilderness character required by the 1964 Wilderness Act.

When his family was starved out of their ranch after the Great Depression, Bill joined the U.S. Marines at age 17. He fought at Iwo Jima during World War II. After the war, he moved to Missoula, attending the University of Montana on the GI Bill to become a forester.

He rose through the ranks of the Forest Service and became supervisor of the Bridger-Teton National Forest in Wyoming in the early 1960’s. While there, he led Howard Zahniser, the leading author of the 1964 Wilderness Act, on a weeklong tour of the backcountry.

After passage of the Wilderness Act, the agency summoned Bill to Washington, D.C. to write the regulations that would guide management under the Act. He became the point man on wilderness and soon was on a first-name basis with Senators, Congressmen, conservationists, lobbyists, and President Johnson’s cabinet secretaries. Bill returned to Missoula in 1969 to serve as Forest Service Regional Director for Wilderness, Recreation and Lands.

Bill’s regulations have stood the test of time and today remain the basis for best wilderness management practices. But good regulations mean little if they are not followed and enforced. After retiring from the Forest Service, Bill became keenly aware of managers ignoring or end-running the regulations written to maintain true wilderness character in a tremendously popular National Wilderness Preservation System that had grown from an initial 9 million acres to 110 million acres in 756 different Wildernesses from Florida to Alaska.

In 1989 and frustrated with the failure of larger national groups to protect Wilderness, Bill threw in the first \$20 and co-founded Wilderness Watch over lunch in a small café in Missoula, along with Bobbie Cross Guns and Jim Dayton. The nonprofit group watch-dogs the four federal agencies that manage America’s investment in wilderness and has established an exemplary track record in protecting the true character of Wilderness from an onslaught of permanent structures, camp caches, dams, and motorized intrusions.

As Bill and Bobbie Cross Guns write in their Founders Message: “Congress gave specific direction to these agencies, saying. ‘[E]ach agency administering any area designated as wilderness shall be responsible for preserving the wilderness character of the area and shall so administer such area for such other purposes for which it may

have been established as also to preserve its wilderness character.' This means that the evidence of man's works must not be allowed to become any more visible than it was at the time the land was designated as Wilderness and added to the System."

Montana is blessed with a strong Wilderness legacy, both in terms of designated Wilderness areas and dedicated wilderness advocates. Bill Worf is joined on the board of Wilderness Watch by Darby, Montana's Stuart Brandborg, who was Executive Director of the Wilderness Society from 1964-1974 and was a leader in the successful campaign to pass the Wilderness Act. Brandborg was awarded an honorary PhD from the University of Montana last spring for his dedicated conservation work.

Montana's Clif Merritt, once hired by Brandborg to work for The Wilderness Society on grassroots wilderness campaigns in the Rocky Mountain West, was also honored by U of M with an honorary PhD for his conservation work in 2007. Among Clif's successes were the 270,000-acre Scapegoat additions to the Bob Marshall Wilderness in 1972. Clif died in 2008, but not before receiving The Wilderness Society's highest honor – the Bob Marshall Award. The late Dr. Loren Kreck of Columbia Falls worked alongside Merritt to secure the Scapegoat and Great Bear Wildernesses, as well as to get the Swan Range's Jewel Basin designated a Hiking Area and proposed for Wilderness designation in the Flathead Forest Plan.

All of these dedicated advocates have carried the torch for Wilderness their entire adult lives and it falls upon all of us to learn from their life work and share in the carrying of that torch. We can learn more from the words of Bill Worf and Bobbie Cross Guns by visiting <http://www.wildernesswatch.org/pdf/FoundersMessage.pdf>. Happy Birthday and Thank You to Bill Worf, the Father of Wilderness Stewardship!

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.



Bill Worf, right, congratulates the late Clif Merritt on receiving an honorary PhD from the U of M in 2007. Keith Hammer Photo.