

The Abele Memorial Glen

by Terry Brady

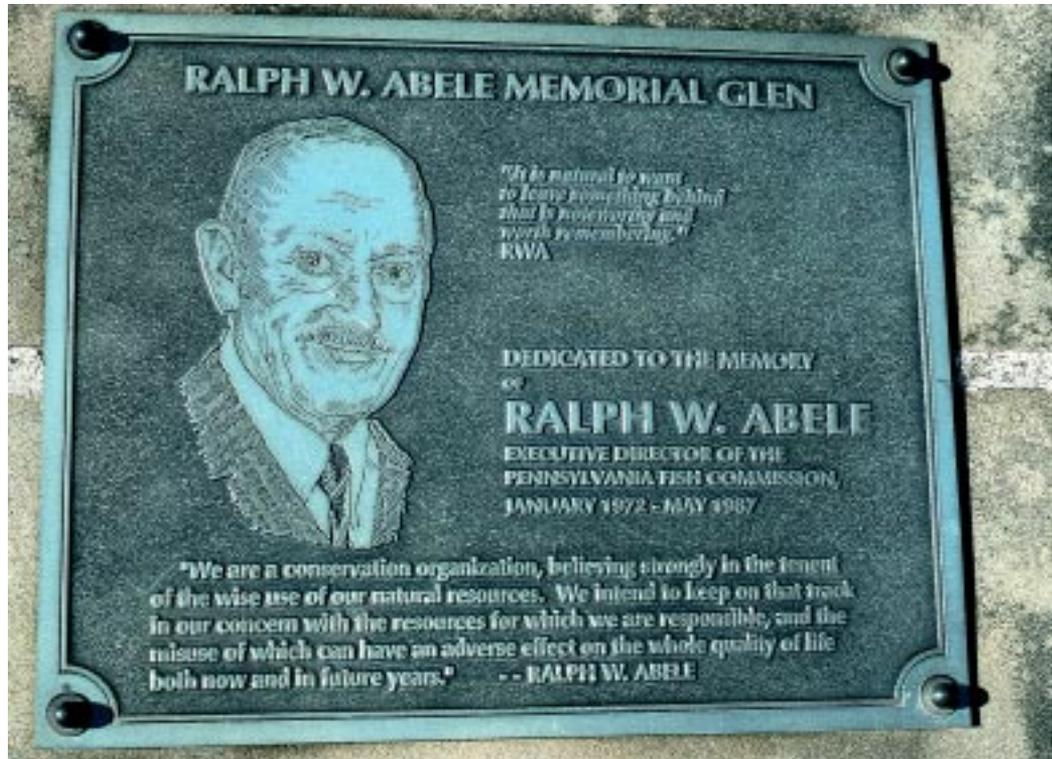


photo-Terry Brady

The new year brings a new mantle of white to the valley. It blankets the frozen stream, bows the limbs on shrouding hemlocks, and prompts a squeal of laughter from young hikers as it tumbles down their backs. Fueled by the energy of youth, drawn by the solitude of their goal, the trio of teenaged girls from Mifflinburg pauses to celebrate both. They ask a passing cross-country skier to capture the moment on film.

A new season ushers in new sights and sounds to the stretch of waterway. Skunk cabbage pushes up through recently thawed loam, and tree frogs sound the first tentative peeps from the flood plain. Tomorrow will bring the trout fishermen; today belongs to a Middleburg canoeist. The water is high; the rapids, tricky. Raw winds and the threat of sleet leave her face flushed; the five-mile float leaves her smiling.

It's a long drive from Jefferson County to the Union-Mifflin County line, but the annual pilgrimage beckons the angler several times each summer. He knows they will be there: The stately hardwoods lining his favorite stream, the carpenter ants filling the limbs of those trees, and the wild trout eagerly feeding on the ants that fell from above. His notorious cork-bodied ant, floated gingerly under an overhang, never lets him down.

The hunter's moon is on the rise when the 78-year-old woodsman crosses the stream on rocks known since childhood. His quarry is the white-tailed deer, but this day he takes back to his cabin only a memory. The Shippensburg resident remembers every detail: The background gurgle of the stream yielding to the crunch of paws on dry leaves; the ripple of muscle; the hint of silver in the fur of the brutish, dark form that slips by him ever so close. He had seen black bears in the woods before, but this one leaves him savoring both the time and the place.

From his vantage point, not far from the bank of Penns Creek, Ralph W. Abele sees all of these visitors. The first rays of sunlight stream down from White Mountain to highlight a smile on the conservationist's face. You don't have to look very far or listen very hard to see and hear what Abele might be saying:

"I fought for the future, and you are it," Abele could well tell the angler and canoeist, the hiker and hunter. "Enjoy your visit; respect what is here. And I'm glad you came."

A former executive director of the then Pennsylvania Fish Commission who died in 1990, Abele, of course, joins the myriad of Penns Creek visitors only in spirit. And what a spirit it was.

"It is natural to want to leave something behind that is noteworthy and worth remembering."

So says a message inscribed in a modest monument of bronze and native stone that was erected to honor the man who headed the Fish Commission from January 1972 to May 1987. At the Ralph W. Abele Memorial Glen, words tell you about the man, but visitors to this stockpile of natural wonders tell you about his message.

"It's incredible. The beauty, the solitude and the wildlife," said Mary Klaue of Middleburg, after guiding her canoe through high spring waters pulsing through the memorial glen. "It's been a great day. Already we've seen a mink, some Canada geese and several ospreys."

The day was raw when the Williamsport librarian followed a familiar scenario: Launch at Coburn, pull out at Weikert; and in between, glide through the glen and enjoy some of the most scenic paddling the state has to offer. Above Klaue, small seas of sandstone tumble from flanking Paddy and White mountains. Around her some of the most remote boundaries of Union, Centre and Mifflin

counties merge. And below her flow the powerful waters of a wild trout fishery.

"This is our stream day," said Klaue, whose breaks from work are devoted to canoeing Pennsylvania streams and rivers. "We'll run this stretch of Penns Creek several times a year, but we picked today because of trout season opening tomorrow."

The day was indeed Klaue's. The next day, thousands of anglers would line Penns Creek, joining Ralph Baylor of Shippensburg in a spring rite he has observed the past 70 years. Catching and killing trout is not paramount with this streamside visitor. He comes merely to welcome another new season.

The spring of Baylor's life was seared by fires of the hell that was the Normandy invasion. His autumn now is brightened by the sights, sounds and scents of a natural cathedral as he walks a short distance from his beloved Montour Rod and Gun Club cabin to the land of his neighbor. There he recalls the evening walks with his late wife; the lunker

brownie that swiped at his spinner and missed; the monster black bear that ambled down from the wilderness area of White Mountain.

Walk with Baylor, 78, and he'll point out something else that is very special to him. It's a survey stake noting where his club's ground ends and property of the Fish and Boat Commission begins. Without that, he says, most of his treasured outdoor memories probably would not have been possible.

"I understand there were other outfits from the Philadelphia area that wanted to buy that land, but they wouldn't sell it to them," recalled Baylor, "and we are glad the Fish and Boat Commission got it because now we realize nothing can be built up there."





Glad, too, is the steady stream of visitors now passing Baylor's vantage point on his cabin front porch. It's a far cry from the days of his youth when the only passerby traveled by rail.

"We had the train running up through here then, the 'Pennsy' running from Sunbury to Coburn where it would turn around and come back down," Baylor recalled. "One of the members of this cabin used to have that route then, and he'd throw out the paper from the cabin of his steam engine."

The rails have yielded to a trail, and Baylor now receives greetings from anglers, hikers, hunters, bikers, birders, canoeists and kayakers. All passing Baylor's cabin, bound for the Ralph W. Abele Memorial Glen.

"When I first started coming up here as a child, there wasn't anyone else here then," Baylor said. "We were the last cabin back and then there was nothing. Nowadays, we're seeing so many more people fishing, hunting and walking, and people just coming to the area to see nature.

"There's also probably more people fishing out back in the special regulation waters, fly fishing and just fishing for fun, than there used to be when you were allowed to keep the trout. There

are always cars parked up there on the Commission lot, regardless of the season, even in winter."

At best, what these anglers and others could have found was a string of private cabins fronting Penns Creek; at worst, a gauntlet of "No Trespassing" signs. Instead, they step into the Ralph W. Abele Memorial Glen and its 430 pristine acres of woodlands, stretched along a 2.5-mile reach of a Class A wild trout stream flowing through Centre, Union and Mifflin counties.

The name is a fitting tribute to both the man and the resources he fought to protect, said Fred Johnson, a retired 15-year employee of the Fish Commission who served under Abele as water resources coordinator. Among Johnson's duties more than 20 years ago was a "white paper" tabulating the bounties of the stream flowing behind his Union County cabin, as well as the land that flanked it.

"Ralph read that and said, 'I want to get that so bad I can taste it,'" Johnson, 72, recalled. "And when Ralph grabbed something, he went to work on it."

And work on it he did. Spearheading negotiations, overseeing grant applications, Abele nailed down a historic land purchase that let the Commission take over ownership of 430 acres of streamside property



from the estate of the late state forester, Raymond B. Winter. The agency's then executive director saw the \$42,000 purchase paying priceless future dividends.

"He would come up the first day of trout season and I would host him every year at the cabin," Johnson said. "That seemed to cement his ties to the stream. He just loved it here, and I don't think any other particular region held that same interest for him."

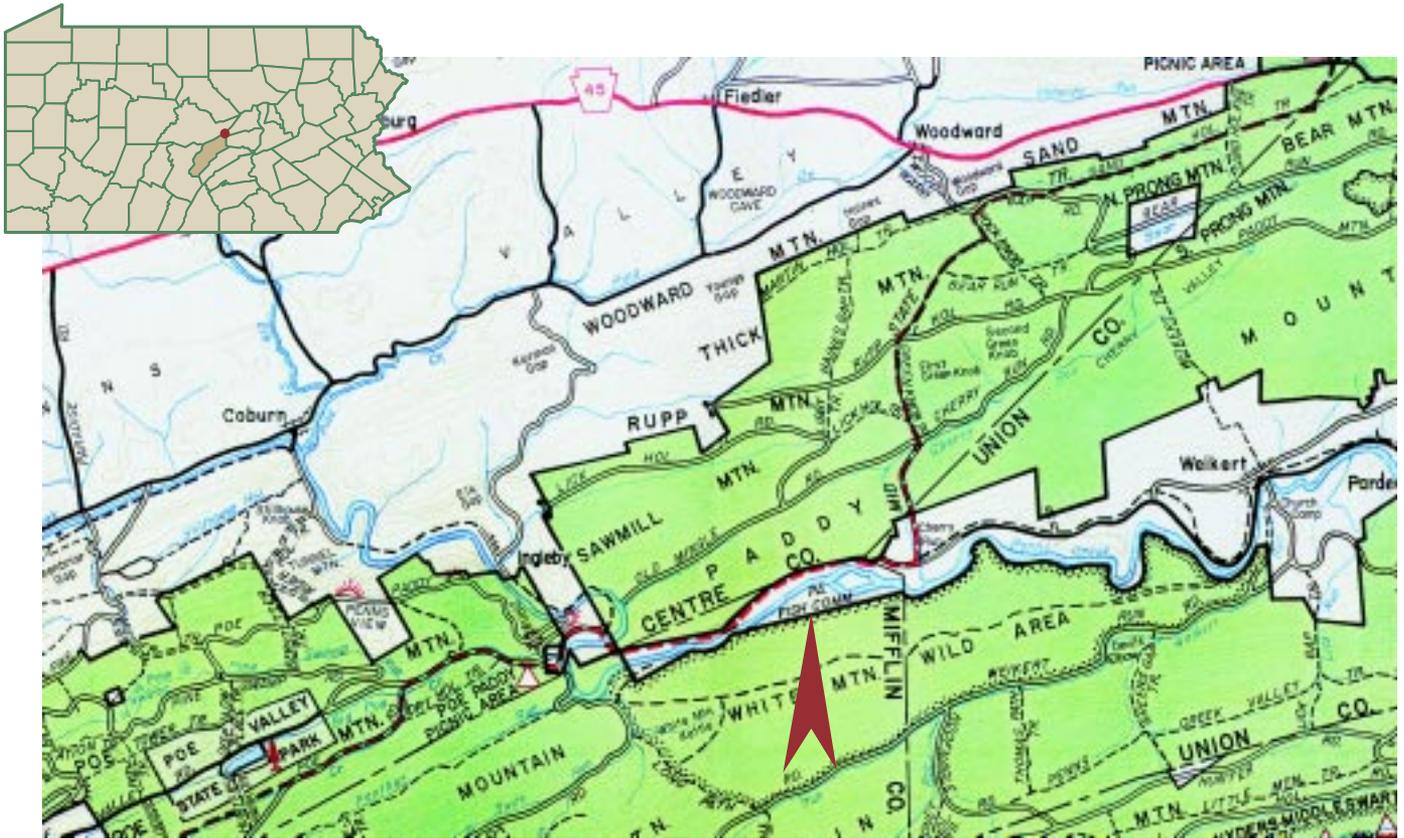
After Abele died in 1990 at the age of 68, the decision to dedicate the Commission tract and erect a monument in his honor "was an easy one," Johnson said.

"It puts together all the feelings that Ralph had for a trout stream that did not have to be stocked. He recognized the values of fisheries science and wild trout waters."

And for it, his colleagues and friends recognized him. At the April 1991 dedication of the glen, former Commissioner Leonard A. Green noted:

"It is fitting that this 430 acres with its nationally recognized fishery that Ralph loved and visited on so many occasions should be named in his memory. It is an appropriate tribute to this great man and his many contributions to the ecology of Pennsylvania."

And what might rank as the greatest of those contributions by the man who was revered by many, feared by some, and remembered by Johnson and others as so straightforward and honest?



“Restoration of the shad,” answered Abele’s former co-worker. “He worked very hard to bring the shad back. And after that, I probably would say water quality.”

If “Resource First” was to be the Commission’s new marching order, Abele made sure everyone heard the command. “That was Ralph. He did that,” said Johnson.

“Lord of the Fish.” That’s what the *Philadelphia Inquirer* labeled Abele in an April 1982 profile that detailed his attempts to restore shad to the Susquehanna River, put teeth in existing environmental laws, and focus on the well-being of the state’s entire ecosystem. That article was reprinted in the August 1996 *Pennsylvania Angler*. How he accomplished the above might best be summed up in the newspaper’s published comment from Peter S. Duncan, former executive director of the Pennsylvania Game Commission:

“Ralph knew how to give the opposition the sleeves out of his vest.”

It was his trademark style, and anglers like the late Bob Davis of Big Run, Jefferson County, loved him for it. From 1934 until his death in 1997, Davis was a continuous subscriber to the *Angler*. For some 15 years he turned first to his favorite writing by his favorite executive director. Sometimes fiery, always eloquent, it was Abele’s “Straight Talk.”

“He never dodged the bullet. He took on the polluters and others head-on,” said Davis in late 1996, when he was 83. It was a style appreciated by the man who co-founded the Allegheny Mountain Chapter of Trout Unlimited, a unit known for battling mining and lumbering abuse of waterways.

But Davis’ respect for Abele extended far beyond that, miles away to some of the senior angler’s favorite pools on Penns Creek now preserved under Commission stewardship. There, Abele’s foresight and Davis’ fly fishing ability worked magic together in the twilight of the fly fisherman’s travels:

“I used to drive down and fish the special-regulation area of Penns Creek two or three times a week,” Davis recalled.

PA&B regular contributor Dave Wolf knows those magic moments on Penns Creek: As a child, he fished from its banks with his grandparents. As an accomplished fly-fishing adult, he savored its fabled green drake hatch.

“The glen was an area that we had totally dedicated to Ralph because he had fought so hard to preserve it,” Wolf said. “Without a doubt, that is the greatest acquisition the Fish Commission has ever made.”

“I think just for the solitude and the quietness, and to be able to fish a stream that is filled with wild fish,” said the outdoors writer and fly fisherman. “That has to be one of the most beautiful valleys in the state. In Pennsylvania, I get the feeling it is as close to a wilderness area as you can get. And I also get the feeling that some fishermen don’t appreciate what they have there.”

Some, perhaps, but not all. Regardless of the season, memorial glen visitors are drawn to the Abele monument. There, in an inviting clearing with a panoramic view of Penns Creek, they will rest in their quest for beauty in the foliage, exercise on the trails and in the rapids, and wild trout and whitetails in the water and forest. Perhaps some will read the words of the man who helped make their pursuits possible, and savor his message.

It’s a simple one, really, says Johnson, Abele’s former co-worker who knew both the man and the land and water for so long:

“Mother Nature is, indeed, the best housekeeper,” said Johnson. “I look across the creek and I see that we have done some pretty good things in protecting what we have. It’s just good to know that these things will be preserved and protected.” □