Remembering Paul Schaefer
By David Gibson, Partner with Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve

I was privileged to know Paul Schaefer for nearly a decade at the close of his life. He was my early mentor in all things Adirondack. In 1987 I was fortunate to have been selected executive director of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, the organization Paul served as a Vice-President. Each Friday I would try to stop by his house to learn more about his and Adirondack history. John Warren’s blog about the Moose River Plains suggests the great influence Paul had in preventing the Plains from being flooded by the proposed Higley and Panther Mountain dams. Among the highlights in my career was seeing Paul presented with the Governor’s Environmental Achievement Award in 1994 – just one of many recognitions he received in 65 years of tireless, leading work for wilderness conditions in the Adirondacks.

For those who don’t know, Paul Schaefer’s coalitions not only preserved the Moose River Plains, but 30 other valleys from inundation by dams in the 1940s and 50s; saved the Upper Hudson River from four large dams in the 1960s, the largest of which would have flooded the valley all the way to Newcomb; and fought and achieved designated Wilderness and Wild, Scenic and Recreational River legislation in the 1970s, among many other achievements.

Paul Schaefer hunted white-tailed deer every fall in the Siamese Ponds Wilderness Area near his Adirondack cabin, a hunting club which he founded in 1931. He always credited the sportsmen and women of New York State, and their organized clubs united within the NYS Conservation Council, for providing legions of people who would stand up to save wild Adirondack habitat threatened by the dam builders, and to support wilderness preservation.

Joe Martens, Gov. Mario M. Cuomo’s Secretary for Energy and the Environment, called me one day in 1994 to give me advance notice that Paul Schaefer, then 85, would be receiving the Governor’s award, and asking for background. Joe knew Paul pretty well himself. It was decided to present the award as part of a well-attended conference we were sponsoring in honor of the Centennial of Article XIV of the NYS Constitution (known as the Forever Wild clause). The conference was to be held at YMCA Silver Bay Conference Center above Lake George. On the big day in early October, the conference was going full-tilt with speakers and panelists. Bob Bendick, then a DEC Deputy Commissioner, was in the middle of a presentation when we all heard the whop-whop-whop of a helicopter over by the lake. Everybody knew the Governor was arriving, and Bob understood it was pointless for him to continue. “I feel like the warm-up band to the Rolling Stones,” he told us, and everybody made for the doors. Out on the great lawn above Lake George stood the State chopper, blades still rotating. The Governor emerged with his small entourage and, surrounded, slowly made his way to Morse Hall where the award presentation would take place.

All were in their seats, chaos had given way to order, and introductions made. The mood was electric, the applause for the Governor resounding. His speech was pure Mario. Joe
Martens had prepared him well. Departing frequently from his prepared remarks, the Governor humorously and eloquently painted a picture of Paul Schaefer and all he had contributed to the Adirondacks, to the wilderness of the great Empire State. The Governor also humorously reminded us that even those Republicans in the North Country who might be inclined to vote for him that fall would suffer a “palsy” when they reached for the Democratic lever.

When he was done, Cuomo asked Paul to join him on the podium to accept the award. All his life, Paul instinctively knew when to make a stand, and when to speak. A year earlier, in 1993, Paul rose to speak after Governor Cuomo during a bill signing ceremony on Lake Champlain. The audience had held its collective breath at this breach of protocol, but to Paul this was simply getting in critical points at the right moment – when they would be remembered.

Now, Paul took the stage to present Governor Cuomo with, of all things, a beaver gavel! Paul’s friend Ken Rimany had fashioned this for Paul, taking a beaver chew as the gavel’s head and fashioning it tightly onto a stick from a beaver dam, and then writing the words of Article 14 on the gavel’s head. Paul told the Governor how all his life he had admired the beaver, the state’s finest and sole wilderness engineer, and that only the beavers, meeting in secret, could have engineered this gavel for the Governor. Cuomo smiled but, not to be outdone, he responded “any beaver can make a beaver gavel, Paul, but only a Governor can present a Governor’s award.”

The exchange made, the Governor departed, leaving us to wonder about his political fate, and leaving Paul time to gather with some friends to tell tales and, as Paul was inclined to say, “add it all up.” It was Paul’s final award. He died on July 14, 1996 following surgery on a knee he had damaged decades earlier while investigating caves along the shores of the Upper Hudson River during his successful efforts to preserve the Hudson Gorge from flooding. He and his wife Carolyn are buried in the Keene Cemetery. His spirit has inspired all of us who knew him to continue his work and extend his legacy on behalf of the New York State Forest Preserve in the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains.