

Gene Freeman Sentz

Gene was born in Richmond, VA January 25, 1941; he is the son of Alfred Freeman “Pete” and Margaret Josephine Billings Sentz.

Gene graduated from Hinton High School, Class of 1959. He majored in forestry and education at West Virginia University and the University of Montana.

He has dedicated his entire life to conservation of land and the well-being of mankind throughout the world in initiatives such as:

- Peace Corps forestry project in Nepal, 1964-66.
- Forest Service, Ninemile Ranger Station, 1967-68.
- USAID forestry project in Laos, 1968-69.
- Teacher, Job Corps, Ronan, MT 1970-71.
- Forest Service wilderness ranger in Bob Marshall Wilderness, 1971-73.
- Seasonal packer/guide for backcountry outfitters and ranchers, 1973-present.
- Dooley/Intermed health and immunization project in Nepal, 1981-82.
- Teacher, upper elementary grades, Choteau, MT, 1988-2006.
- Main conservation focus: 40 years advocating for a ‘wild’ Rocky Mountain Front. “Keep it Wild”.

2005 Cinnabar Foundation - Len & Sandy Sargent Stewardship Recipient (From The Cinnabar Foundation website)

The seventh Len and Sandy Sargent Stewardship Award honored Gene and Linda Sentz for demonstrating the importance of coupling conservation advocacy with community service.

As active participants in their community, Gene and Linda bring well-deserved credibility and power to the lengthy debate over the future of the Rocky Mountain Front. For nearly 20 years, their persistent, reliable and effective work has far exceeded what any other two people might hope to accomplish and have been instrumental in preserving the Front as a conservation masterpiece.

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As active and vocal opponents of oil and gas exploration along the Front, Gene and Linda demonstrate more than passion for landscape and an intimate knowledge of the resource issues fueling the debate over this wild place. They also are profoundly entwined and committed to the human community of the Rocky Mountain Front, helping their less fortunate neighbors by distributing food; raising money to help pay for basic needs, including heat, lights, childcare and housing; and literally holding the hands of the dying. The local Kiwanis Club affirmed the value of their community work by naming Linda Sentz, Choteau's 2004 "Citizen of the Year."

The Sentz's recognition for outstanding environmental achievement included a \$5,000 Special Award grant to the Montana Wilderness Association.

2020 Gene Sentz, Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame Inductee

(From the Billings Gazette - Brett French, Jan. 27, 2021)

Gene Sentz is one of 13 inductees in the 2020 class of the Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame. Lee Newspapers is highlighting inductees each week in the Outdoors section.

At age 79, Gene Sentz was rightfully proud to have hiked to the top of 9,392-foot high Rocky Mountain peak last year. It had been eight years since stents had been surgically implanted to keep his blood flowing after suffering a heart attack. "I haven't had a bit of trouble since," he said. Basking in the accomplishment atop that highest mountain in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, he met "another old fella," veteran peak bagger Cedron Jones. It turns out Jones is two months older than Sentz. So he feels compelled to hike the peak again this summer at age 80. Once described by a reporter as having the legs and lungs of a mountain goat.

"It's a really huge honor," he said. "I'm humbled at being in the same league with a lot of people I admire." He earned the recognition for his dogged 40-year fight to protect the Rocky Mountain Front, near his Choteau home. The conservation work began in 1977 with him sending letters to "everyone I could think of" to lobby Congress to protect the region. His work culminated in several victories. In 1997, the Forest Service banned mineral leasing on

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356,000 acres along the Front. In 2006, legislation banned oil and gas exploration. A year later the Forest Service issued a travel plan for the Front, and in 2014 the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act added 67,000 acres to the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and also created a 208,000-acre Conservation Management Area.

“It was Gene’s unwavering commitment to protect the Rocky Mountain Front that got the job done,” said fellow conservationist Bill Cunningham. “It was a remarkable achievement that wouldn’t have happened without his perseverance.”

The Front is a land far different from where Sentz grew up in West Virginia. His father, Albert Freeman “Pete” Sentz, loved to hunt and roam the hills, introducing his son Gene to wild country at an early age. His forested playground included what is now New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. “In those days we didn’t think of it as anything special,” he said.

His interest in forestry as a student at West Virginia University led him west to work summer jobs for the Forest Service. In the off-season he studied at the University of Montana. After that he developed an extensive resume of public service working as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal for two years, a year in Laos on a forest project and then teaching at the Job Corps in Ronan. He's also worked as a wilderness ranger, horse packer and guide. In these roles the influence of Sentz’s mother, Margaret Billings Sentz, can be seen. She was the daughter of a minister and a school teacher.

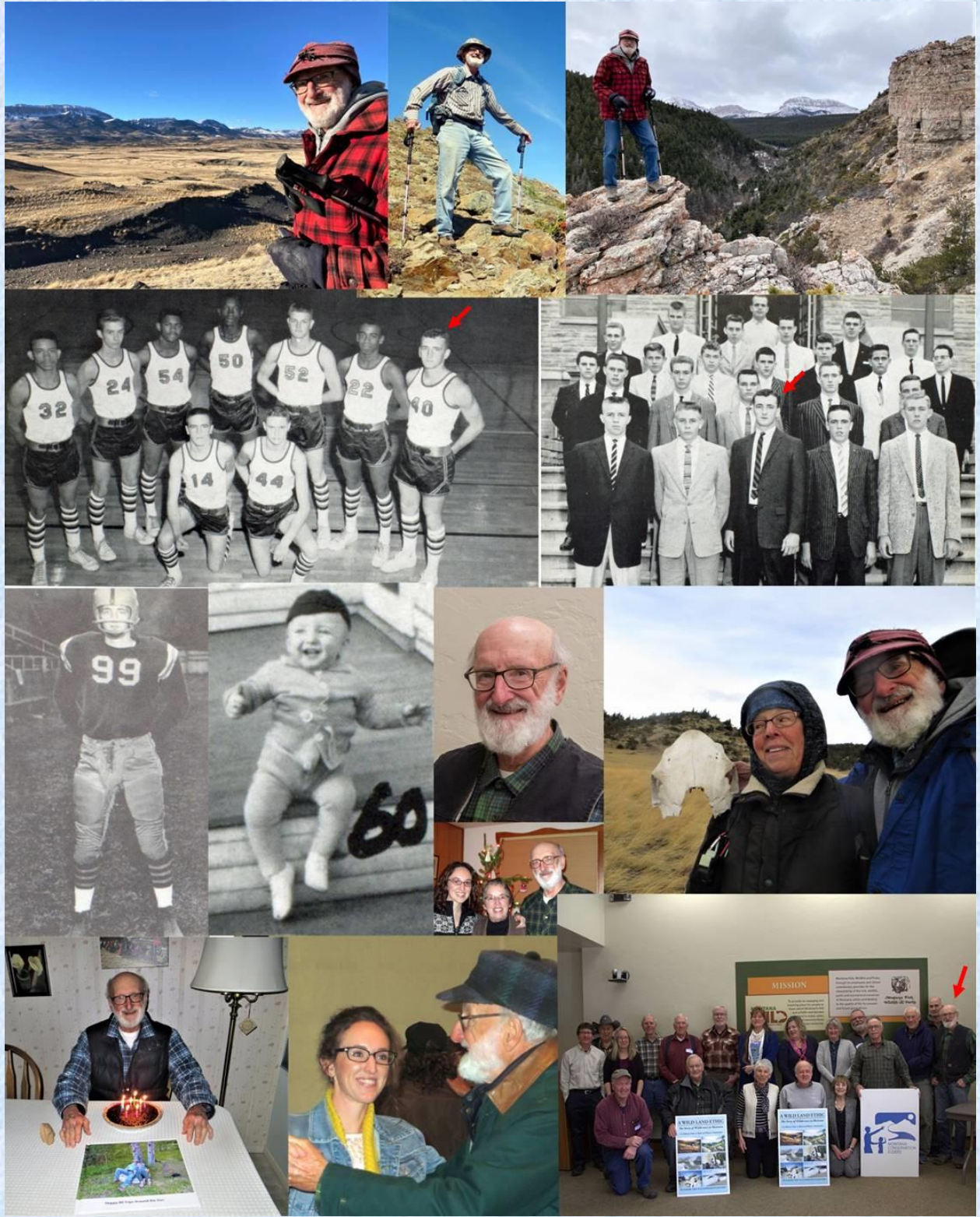
Looking ahead, Sentz sees the struggle for protecting wild places continuing with the state’s wilderness study areas and Sen. Jon Tester’s legislation to protect 336 miles of streams in the state under the Montana Headwaters Legacy Act. He calls climate change the “big elephant in the room.” For those new to the conservation struggle in Montana, Sentz recommends reading Dale Burke’s book “A Wildland Ethic: The History of Wilderness in Montana,” featuring 40 different authors including Sentz. “That’s a really nice overview of where we’ve been in conservation work in Montana,” he said. “I just hope there’s a lot of young people picking up where us old geezers left off.”

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Communicating is certainly easier these days with social media and the internet, he said, but there's also "so much other garbage on there" that it can be tough to break through the noise.

A few days before his interview, Sentz had been downhill skiing at nearby Teton Pass Ski Resort. For his 80th birthday, an ice-skating outing with his wife, Linda (who he met on his second trip to Nepal), was planned. "That guy can out-hike and out-climb anyone I know," Cunningham said.

Gene Freeman Sentz, We Salute You!



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