2020 INDUCTEE

GENE SENTZ

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Gene Sentz still hangs his hat in Choteau, where he worked as a fourth-grade teacher and wilderness packer.

That he can look beyond the prairie and still marvel at Ear Mountain is a testament to the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act of 2014, and Gene's spirited defense of the Rocky Mountain Front.

In 1977, Gene learned at an outfitters meeting that the U.S. Forest Service planned to issue oil and gas development leases up and down the Rocky Mountain Front.

The Rocky Mountain Front, a transition zone between the Rockies and Great Plains, is the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex's eastern buttress.

The news of oil and gas rigs blanketing every acre of the Lewis and Clark Forest prodded Gene to organize Friends of the Rocky Mountain Front. He knew deep down that the Front was the cradle of one of the most productive wildlife areas in the world. What was it to become?

The initial friends included Gene, a rancher, a taxidermist, an outfitter, a lawyer, and a back-country horseman.

The group pinned their Front protection hopes on the Wilderness Act of 1988 to protect 1.4 million acres in Montana. When President Reagan vetoed the bill, it was back to square one.

It took years of legwork, but by 1997, Forest Supervisor Gloria Flora banned mineral leasing on a total of 356,000 acres along the Front.

In 2006, Gene helped organize support to persuade Montana's senators to withdraw all Rocky Mountain Front mineral leases legislatively.

In 2007, the USFS issued a travel plan for the Front that focused on traditional recreation and minimized motorized use, a concession that created daylight for Gene to expand the Friends to include the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front.

In December 2014, the impossible emerged with the passage of the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act. It marked the first time in 31 years that Montana gained new wilderness designation. In part, the act added 67,000 acres to the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, protected public access, created a 208,000-acre Conservation Management Area that limits road-building while covering areas of motorized recreation and access for hunting, biking, timber thinning, and grazing.

Gene, humble to a fault, often credits his accomplishments to the support of his wife, Linda. And he accomplished it all as a volunteer. Gene dug into his wallet to fund visits to Montana's congressional delegation in Washington, D.C. He kept his loose-knit "friends" together via email. There were precious few meetings and no membership fees—just a passion for the Front as it was and as it will remain.

When a *High Country News* reporter asked a founding member of Friends of the Rocky Mountain Front about the protections offered by the new act, the man recalled thinking, "This is Gene Sentz's day." ★