



PENNSYLVANIA CONSERVATION
HERITAGE
PROJECT

Fact Sheet to accompany “Straight Talk: the Ralph Abele Story”

“Do your duty and fear no one”

— Ralph Abele

Growing up in Western Pennsylvania

Born August 13, 1921, Ralph grew up on a farm just outside of Pittsburgh where his parents fostered his love of hunting, fishing, and just being outdoors. He grew up during a period of increasing industrialization around Pittsburgh, watching natural areas he cared about become developed and streams becoming increasingly polluted.

Military Service

World War II was underway when Ralph graduated college in 1942; he then entered the Army. He served in armored units throughout Europe, becoming a decorated Army commander. His experience of very hard fighting taught him leadership skills and how to handle tough situations, which he drew upon in his later work positions.

Post-military life in Western Pennsylvania

After his military service he began his career in Pittsburgh in the food brokerage business, but it was just a job for him to support his family. He followed his outdoor passion by volunteering as a Boy Scout leader, involving tens of thousands of boys in conservation work throughout western and northcentral Pennsylvania. Ralph made the decision in his 30s that he wanted to leave the food business and pursue a career in protecting and restoring the environment.

First job in state government

In 1969, in response to the national growing environmental movement, the Pennsylvania State Assembly created the “Joint Legislative Air and Water Pollution Control and Conservation Committee,” and hired Ralph to be the Committee’s first director. He exhibited great consensus-building skills as he brought together state senators and representatives from both parties to support a dozen pieces of legislation aimed at cleaning up and protecting Pennsylvania’s environment.

Pennsylvania’s Environmental Rights Amendment

Legislation is passed regularly in the State Assembly, but a state constitutional amendment is rare as it takes a tremendous amount of statewide support from a broad representation of citizens and legislators. Once Ralph's Joint Legislative Committee had proposed a "Conservation Amendment," Ralph took it upon himself to build the needed support to get it passed. Working with Senator Franklin Kury and Department of Forests and Waters Secretary Maurice Goddard his tireless efforts resulted in Article 1, Section 27 getting passed by both the House and Senate and approved as a voter referendum. Once on the ballot, Ralph's efforts to garner public support paid off with a tremendous majority of voters approving it.

Executive Director of the PA Fish Commission*

* The Fish Commission added "Boat" to their name in 1991 after Ralph had retired.

Ralph took over the helm of the Pennsylvania Fish Commission in February of 1972. He became known as a very strong advocate of fisheries and all aquatic life, promoting the philosophy of "Resource First" when weighing decisions that would impact the environment. The "Don't Tread on Me" flag was his symbol of standing up for what is right against those who would further harm Pennsylvania's environment.

He worked hard to expand the outreach work of the Commission to better educate all citizens. His dream was to have an educated public with a conservation conscience that would advocate for strong environmental laws, protecting the valued natural resources of the Commonwealth.

Leading with Science

Ralph wanted science to lead the agency's decision-making, and used data and facts to stand behind the rulings of the agency that were often unpopular with industries looking to use aquatic resources for economic gain. He fought to restore damages that had occurred in the decades prior to his tenure with the Commission, such as working to restore shad to the Upper Susquehanna by constructing fish ladders and elevators on the four hydroelectric dams along the lower Susquehanna River. He fought for national policy changes, such as his suing the federal government to uphold the Federal Water Power Act and protect migratory fish passage.

Straight Talk

The executive director's monthly column in Pennsylvania Angler Magazine gave Ralph a public forum to speak his mind directly on issues of concern to him. He used the column to focus a spotlight on problems that needed to be addressed, or bad behavior regarding the state's waterways that needed to be changed. His directness about issues led to the column being titled "Straight Talk" in 1982, as it continues today.

Ralph's Legacy

In his final "Straight Talk" column in May of 1987, Ralph was emphatic that "All the greed and shortsightedness of the exploiters and developers—and that includes people in state and federal governments—will not prevail" if people with a strong conservation ethic stand up for what they believe and say "Why should we put up with this?"

Ralph turned the Commission into a full-bodied conservation agency that continues to lead the fight to restore and reclaim the environment. He served as a mentor for many conservation

professionals and other people he touched throughout his life who today practice the “Resource First” philosophy, who are fighting to protect and restore the environment and passing that ethic along to the next generation.

Additional Resources

“The Legacy of Ralph W. Abele,” Linda Steiner. Pennsylvania Angler & Boater magazine, May/June 2011, pp. 44-48.

http://fishandboat.com/anglerboater/2011ab/vol80num3_mayjune/06abele.pdf

Ralph W. Abele Biography by Cheryl K. Riley. Fish and Boat Commission website:

<http://fishandboat.com/images/people/abele/bio.htm>

Ralph W. Abele Conservation Heritage Award -- information and a list of past recipients:

<http://fishandboat.com/images/people/abele/00award.htm>

“Article 1, Section 27,” Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission Facebook/Straight Talk:

http://fishandboat.com/images/people/exec_dir/straight_talk/2014_05_06_article1.pdf

The Constitution of Pennsylvania:

www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/LI/consCheck.cfm?txtType=HTM&ttl=00&div=0&chpt=1

Dedication of Ralph W. Abele Pennsylvania Historical Marker, July 17, 2012. Includes video of remarks by: John Arway, Fish & Boat Commission; Franklin Kury, former Senator and Representative; Larry Schweiger, (then) National Wildlife Federation; Dennis Guise, Ralph W. Abele Conservation Scholarship Fund; Frederick Powell, PA Historical & Museum Commission; Cindy Dunn, DCNR; Ralph Abele Jr, on behalf of the family.

<http://paenvironmentdaily.blogspot.com/2012/07/ralph-w-abele-historic-marker-dedicated.html>

Past Issues of “Straight Talk” – Ralph Abele’s monthly column in *Pennsylvania Angler* magazine can be found in past issues from March 1972 – May 1987. The Executive Director’s column was formally titled “Straight Talk” beginning with the July 1982 issue.

<http://fishandboat.com/PaAnglerLegacyIssues.htm>

Fish and Boat Commission chronology of significant events in the history of the Commission from 1866 to present: <http://fishandboat.com/chrono.htm>

Local Speaker Ideas for Film Screening Event

Fish and Boat Commission regional office staff

Trout Unlimited, PA Bass Federation, or other fishing organizations

Migratory fish specialist or researcher (shad, eel, etc.)

Water quality scientist or researcher

Scout leader or members (both Boy and Girl Scouts)

County Conservation District staff

Watershed protection group representative

County or municipal land planner

Environmental Advisory Council member

Joint Legislative Air and Water Pollution Control and Conservation Committee staff person

Speaker on promoting leadership

Riverkeeper from various Pennsylvania Rivers (Delaware, Susquehanna, etc.)

Local environmental writer

Local or regional conservation organization