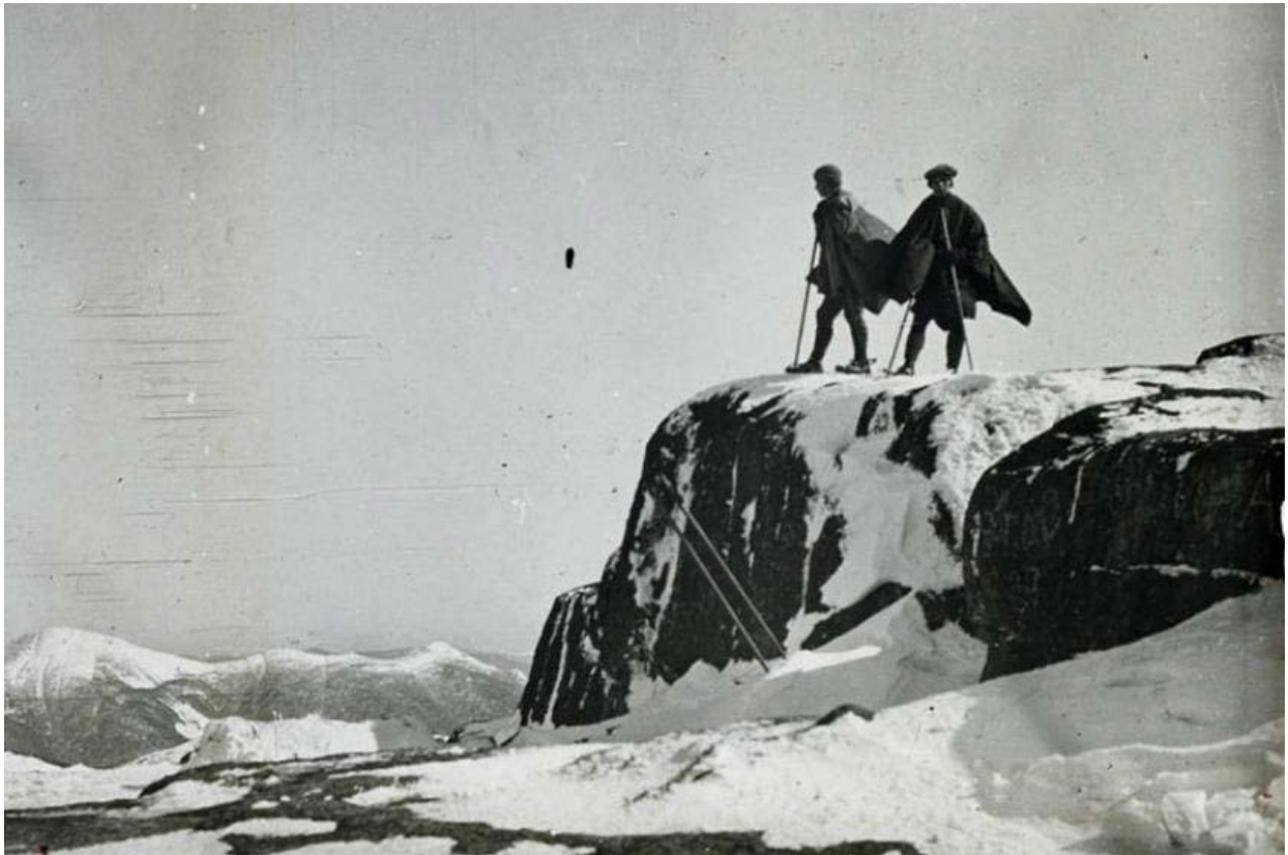


Engineer ignited GE connection to Adirondacks

By **Bill Buell**,
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John Apperson Jr. and friend Irving Langmuir on a winter trek up Mount Marcy in 1912. Photographer: Courtesy Union College

Editor's note: In week seven of our series on [General Electric's 125th anniversary](#), we take a look back at the life of John Apperson, a longtime GE engineer best known for his relentless efforts to protect Lake George and its beauty for generations to come.

In April of 1914, John Apperson became the first person to ski down Mt. Washington's legendary Tuckerman Ravine. It was just one of many challenges the longtime General Electric employee met head on during a lifetime of passionate environmental activism.

A Virginia native who never finished his college education, Apperson showed up in Schenectady at the turn of the century and spent nearly a half-century

working at GE, trained by the company as an engineer in the Power and Mining Department. He retired in 1947, but by that time was known more as a preservationist and conservation activist, his life-long love for the outdoors having shaped him into an ardent defender of all things natural, particularly Lake George and the Adirondacks.

"You could say he was high maintenance, but I would say, more than anyone around at that time, he was passionate and committed to the issues that interested him," said Ellen Brown, a grandniece of Apperson who has produced a book about him entitled "John Apperson's Lake George," released earlier this year by Arcadia Publishing. "He would spare no expense and was completely dedicated to the cause. He was very clever, understood human nature, and worked his way around issues in ways that some people might have regarded as devious or underhanded."

To some, Apperson's "devious or underhanded" tactics were sometimes outright illegal. But according to Dave Gibson of the non-profit group, Adirondack Wild: Friend of the Forest Preserve, Apperson is the individual most responsible for preserving Lake George and its beauty for generations to come.

"Wealthy people, not ordinary citizens, would begin building on state land next to the lake, and John would go up there on the weekends and tear them down," said Gibson. "He became pretty infamous to some rich landowners and the sheriff up there, and it caused him some trouble. He was also embarrassing the conservation department because they weren't doing their job, and finally they put an end to it. But if it wasn't for John, there would have been buildings up on what is now the Forest Preserve."

One of those buildings belonged to a GE executive, and if not for the efforts of Nobel Prize-winning chemist Irving Langmuir, Apperson would have lost his job. Langmuir, the story goes, told GE brass, "If Apperson goes, Langmuir goes."

Along with sparking Langmuir's interest in the outdoors, it was Apperson who got the Schaefer family involved in environmental activism. Vincent Schaefer was a chemist/meteorologist who developed cloud seeding while at GE, and his brother Paul was a Schenectady home builder who became known as the "John Muir of the Adirondacks" because of his many contributions to the Adirondack Park.

"Apperson inspired Paul Schaefer and so many other young people in the 1920s and '30s to do something to make sure the land would be safe," said Gibson. "He also got Langmuir to help out financially a few times, and they also worked on shoreline issues together. He would pull together dozens of volunteers and he would make sure they documented everything. If you went on a hike, you were supposed to have a camera with you and you were supposed to use it."

"Apperson would have a dozen things going on at once," continued Gibson. "He was the one who spoke in front of the state legislature showing them how the park's borders could be expanded. Because of him there were more than a million acres added to the park. He went to extremes sometimes, but he believed that extremism for nature was perfectly fine."

Gibson never met Apperson, who died in 1963 at the age of 84. But he did get to know Paul Schaefer very well, and a number of others who knew him.

"They called him 'Appie,' and while I never met him I did have the pleasure of meeting many of his disciples, and I treasure those moments, talking to them about him," said Gibson. "The stories are incredible. He's such an important figure to the history of the Adirondacks and Lake George, but he didn't seek the limelight. He was just in love with Lake George and didn't want to see it spoiled by development."

Brown, meanwhile, did get to know Apperson very well as a young girl. He died when she was 12.

"He was my grandfather's brother, but he was also like a grandfather to me," she said. "He had a reputation for being a bit of a loner, but he was very ambitious and very energetic. He was an activist who never let go, but he must have been very charismatic because he developed this huge following at GE. He was the one who started bringing people up there to go hiking in the summer and skiing in the winter. He was an incredibly effective leader, and Langmuir often had the funds to make things happen for him. I think he deserves to be remembered as the one who launched the preservation movement in New York State."

At GE, Apperson, who never married, went from an engineering trainee to become the second most senior engineer in the Power and Mining Department. Following World War I he moved into a management position, overseeing various problem-solving functions for the company. Rudy Dehn, now 97, worked for GE for four decades and got to know Apperson very well, both as a work colleague and an outdoor enthusiast.

"I was a youngster relative to him, and I always looked up to him as one of the earlier generations of environmentalists," said Dehn, one of the founders of the Schenectady Chapter of the Adirondack Mountain Club. "But he was rigid. I wouldn't say caustic, but maybe terse in his language. He was like, 'this is the way it's going to be, and don't bother me with anything else.' He had very strong principles and he didn't want to deviate from them. People like that save a lot things, like Lake George, so in that way Appie was right."