My father and mother, Howard and Alice Zahniser, named our cabin *Mateskared* not long after they bought the place in August 1946 from Harold and Pansy Allen. It sits at the end of a road off Route 8 in Bakers Mills, Warren County.

The late New York State conservationist Paul Schaefer partly owned the land to the west of our place. Paul served as middleman on the deal because our family lived in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. We were a two-day drive from the Adirondack State Park in those days. I was not yet one year old.

When the deal went through, Paul, who had first invited our family to the Adirondacks earlier that summer, composed and sent my parents this telegram:

“Yours are the woods, waters, and wildlife of an Adirondack cabinland—up at the end of the trail where the wilderness begins, where a long peaceful valley meets the rocky buttresses of Crane and a sea of peaks rolls on to a far horizon. May you always cherish these rough untillable acres as a wild deer loves a sunny mountain ledge or an eagle the boundless reaches of sky.”

Paul and my father, who was known as Zahnie, both loved words. *Mateskared* is composed of the first syllables of the names of the four children in our
family, in order of birth: Mathias, Esther, Karen, and Edward.

“Is that an Indian name?” people sometimes ask? It’s fully as Indian as many Indian names bandied about the American scene.

As in most things Adirondack, Zahnie took the naming notion from Paul Schaefer. Paul’s parents’ summer camp lies down the hill and across the road. It is called Cragorehol, from the first syllables of mountain names: Crane, Gore, Eleventh, and Height of Land. Children of Paul’s late sister Gertrude Fogarty now own Cragorehol.

In 1946 this hillside plot was still subsistence farmland. Paul Schaefer’s well crafted telegram described it as “where the wilderness begins”—nature—and as “these rough, untillable acres”—culture. Indeed it was agri-culture attempted in the brevity we know as human time. Both qualities of Mateskared, the natural and the cultural, ring true this half a century since my parents implanted this cabin land in our family story.

My father borrowed the money to buy Mateskared in August 1946 from the bank in Washington, D.C., that already held a mortgage, initiated in 1943, on our home in what was then the far-out northwest suburb of Hyattsville, Maryland. To make fiscal matters even less likely, my father had left a secure management job with the federal government in late September 1945. He had taken a cut in pay and veritable erasure of benefits to go to work for The Wilderness Society. The Society was a fledgling wildlands conservation outfit organized around Adirondacker Robert “Bob” Marshall in 1935.

When Zahnie changed jobs my mother Alice was pregnant with me, their fourth child. I was to be birthed in the Wilderness Society milieu. Questioned about my father’s leaving federal employment for a fledgling group with a fringe interest, my mother said she told him he should do whatever made him happy.

I can’t imagine the word collateral even coming up in the conversation between my father and his banker about a second-home loan—especially if the banker was at all compassionate.

“Oh, you’re not with the Agriculture department anymore?”

“No, I’m now the executive secretary of The Wilderness Society and editor of its quarterly magazine, The Living Wilderness.”

“The Wilderness Society. . . what is that?”

“It’s the national conservation organization founded in 1935 by millionaire philanthropist Robert Marshall." (National meant its members lived in several states; millionaire did not mean that Bob Marshall, who had died in 1939, had left all his money to The Wilderness Society . . . .)
“Con-ver-SA-tion organization?”

“No, con-ser-VA-tion organization.”

Their conversation about conservation—Zahnie was to enunciate and explain that distinction many times early in his early wilderness advocacy career—then broke down into a show-and-tell.

Zahnie pulled out a road map of New York State and the U.S. Geological Survey topographic quadrangle map for the Thirteenth Lake area of the Adirondack State Park. He also produced black-and-white photographs of the cabin and the view—of Crane Mountain—photographed from right below the cabin. He impressed on the banker how close the property was to New York City, the most populous area in these United States: location, location, location.

New to The Wilderness Society, Zahnie was effectively in on-the-job training to become, ten years later, the architect and chief lobbyist for the drive for national wilderness preservation legislation that would result in the Wilderness Act of 1964. This lobbying effort would require eight years. It would take place just several blocks from his Washington, D.C. bank.

What my father and mother both had in common with Mateskared was that they too had grown up substantially off the money economy. My parents’ families had not been subsistence farmers, however. They had been fervent but largely unsalaried laborers in the vineyards of evangelical Christianity.

By 1946 my father had 15 years of experience in print and broadcast public relations and editing and writing. Now he was in training to be a surprisingly successful organizer and lobbyist for a little-known and apparently anti-economic cause, wilderness preservation. The cause merely called into question the Great American Idea of Progress. But Zahnie had grown up in a household committed both physically and metaphysically to witnessing daily to other souls.

I’m surprised that banker didn’t lend my father the Mateskared purchase money out of his own pocket.

My father’s culture heroes were three poets—Dante Aligheri, William Blake, and Henry David Thoreau—and the Hebrew Scriptures’ Book of Job. Thoreau is not now well known as a poet, but that is how he launched the rocky literary career that time would rescue from the drydocks of Parnassus.

Zahnie’s triumvirate of poetic heroes was a more consistent crew than first glance might suggest. Dante’s Comedy—only later mis-labeled “Divine”, supposing it religious allegory—has a wilderness subtheme. As Nicholas Kilmer, one of its many translators, reads the poem, it has political drive to. (Dante wrote it in exile from his native city-state, Florence, Italy.) Dante broke with
literary and cultural tradition by writing in vernacular Italian rather than Latin, the language of serious writing then. Dante opens with an idea of the forest edge and “a dark wood”—selva oscura—as a boundary between civilization and wilderness.

English poet and engraver William Blake prophetically railed against the heretical idolatry of elevating rationalism to the level of a metaphysic. Thoreau fenced with human foibles, trying to ferret out how wildness is a tonic that promises no less than the preservation of the world.

Sitting at his Mateskared writing table, also at a boundary of nature and culture like Dante delineated, my father worked on several of the sixty-some drafts through which, over eight years, he shepherded the wording of the succession of wilderness bills. Four months after his death on May 5, 1964, they eventuated in establishing the National Wilderness Preservation System.

At his writing table Zahnie could lean back and look over out the double-hung cabin window at Crane Mountain. Who knows what thoughts its isolated granitic monolith inspired? Do one or two reside in that wilderness statute that now embraces over 109 million acres of federal public lands protected as “an enduring resource of wilderness?”

The Wilderness Act called into question—revised, even—the very notion of Progress against which both William Blake and Henry Thoreau had railed. But in 1946 that lay 19 years in the future. In 1947, however, Zahnie would apprentice himself to Paul Schaefer to learn, in the Adirondacks, the grassroots skills he would need to build a national coalition of support for federal legislation to protect wilderness as wild by law.