

One Hundred Years Ago: Early Letters from the John S. Apperson Collection

By Ellen Apperson Brown

Frank Graham, Jr., in his definitive history, *The Adirondack Park* (Knopf, 1978), gave a wonderful overview of the issues and ideas that influenced the development of New York's six million acre forest preserve, and of the key individuals who led the way. Graham's comments about the contributions of both John Apperson and Paul Schaefer were based on two interviews with Schaefer, in 1975 and '76, and on materials found in the Paul Schaefer Library (now known as the Adirondack Research Library). In his chapter entitled, *A Wilderness Philosophy*, Graham described the wilderness movement when John S. Apperson first appeared on the scene, about 1915:

...a new element, which may fairly be characterized as "the Schenectady force," was making itself felt in the Adirondacks. Its leader was John S. Apperson, a bachelor and an engineer who specialized in patents for the General Electric Company in that city in upstate New York... Apperson was originally a Virginian, but he came to the Adirondacks early in this century to view a canoe race and fell in love with the northern mountains... His favorite part of the mountains was on their fringe at Lake George. There he had a cabin to which he retreated when he was not involved with some passionate struggle to defend the Forever Wild Clause...

Apperson pursued his devotion methodically, like the engineer he was, disdaining sentimentalism and vague rhetoric for hard facts. Before sending a stinging letter to a state official or presenting a statement at a public hearing, he spent days going over the site of the controversy, grasping details of law and topography that would often put the experts to rout...

Scholars now have an opportunity to dig much deeper into the Apperson story. The young activist made a very deliberate effort to leave a paper trail, making carbon copies of thousands of letters. Several of his devoted friends organized and preserved these letters, along with his photographs, slides, films and publications, and they are safely stored at the Adirondack Research Library, in Niskayuna. This article, by Ellen Apperson Brown (his great-niece) is designed to offer up to the public a sampling of his delightful correspondence, revealing his personality, style, and intellect, and illustrating his original and highly effective techniques for "getting things done."

Here are a few letters he wrote in 1911, exactly one hundred years ago. As a young engineer at GE, in Schenectady, Apperson (along with scores of friends and colleagues) had established a routine of taking excursions, by train, to either Lake George or to some other Adirondack destination – for camping, hiking, and skiing. Apparently they encountered a problem with the D&H Railroad's baggage policy, restricting them from checking camping gear. Never one to take *no* for an answer, Apperson decided to inquire about the policy, starting with the General Baggage Master, at the D&H Railroad Co., in Albany. Here is a transcript of a letter he sent in mid August, 1911.

Schenectady, N.Y., Aug. 16, 1911

General Baggage Master
D & H Railroad Co.
Albany, N.Y.
Dear Sir:

Your local representative refused on several occasions to check bags because they contained among other things material used for camping purposes. The shape and construction of the bag comparatively has no bearing in the matter. For example I presented a bag securely made of heavy water proof canvass with two handles, with double wrapped top, making it as easy to handle and as safe as a dress suit case. This was refused on the grounds that it contained among other things some camping equipments. Shortly afterwards I saw checked a number of flimsy bags, two of which I made special note of, check numbers were 612926 and 612928. These were made of ordinary black oil-cloth, without handles and insecurely held together. I mention this merely to bring out the point I wish to know about, and that is whether your local representative put the proper interpretation on your circular letters which he claims to be guided by.

I am asking that you advise me definitely on this point, since this materially effects the outings and vacations of a number of people, including my own.

Thanking you in advance for your prompt attention, I remain,
Very truly yours,
J. S. Apperson

Just a few days later, he received this reply:

The Delaware and Hudson Company
Office of the General Baggage Department
Albany, New York
August 19, 1911

Mr. J. S. Apperson
118 Park Avenue
Schenectady, N.Y.

Dear Sir: -

Replying to your inquiry of August 15th beg to say that we do not accept camp equipage for transportation via baggage service, irrespective of the receptacle in which it is packed.

If the contents of the bag you mention consisted entirely of camp equipage, our Baggage Agent was justified under our rules in declining to check it. If however, it contained personal effects, wearing apparel etc., it could have been handled as baggage.

Some years ago we did accept campers' outfits but as we found that we were being imposed upon in that we were handling boxes of food stuffs, cooking utensils and like paraphernalia, not too securely packed, it became necessary for us to modify our rules in this respect.

Trusting this will explain the matter to your satisfaction, I remain,
Yours truly,
C.E. Durkee
General Baggage Agent

This baggage agent probably thought the subject was closed, but not so for our young engineer and friends. They must have discussed the problem thoroughly and asked themselves a few questions: "Who else is irritated by this luggage policy?" and "Where can we turn for help?" They eventually took their concerns up the ladder at the General Electric Company, making the argument, no doubt, that this policy adversely affected the pursuit of weekend recreation for hundreds of its engineers. On December 18, 1911, Apperson obtained a copy of a letter sent from the General Electric Company (General Offices)... to the D&H agent:

General Electric Company
Principal Office
Schenectady, N.Y.

December 18, 1911

Mr. C.E. Durkee, Gen. Baggage Agent

I take great pleasure in introducing to you herewith, our Mr. Apperson, who desires a conference in connection with future arrangements for handling campers' outfits as baggage, if such a plan can consistently be arranged by you.

Anything you can do for Mr. Apperson will be very much appreciated by both him and the writer.

Hoping that you are very well, and that we may have the pleasure of seeing you over here in the near future, I am,

Very truly yours,
W.D. Manson

Apperson was pushing his agenda on more than one front, because the next day he wrote the following letter to a Mr. Ezra Fitch, President of the Abercrombie & Fitch Company, in New York:

118 Park Avenue
Schenectady, N.Y.
December 19, 1911

Mr. Ezra H. Fitch, President
Abercrombie & Fitch Company
57 Reade Street, New York
Dear Sir:

You agreed at my request over the long distance 'phone, to delay for the present any further action about the refusal of the D&H Railroad to check camping equipment.

I have just had a conference with Mr. W.J. Mullin, General Traffic Manager of the D. & H. Co., and Major Gifford, our traffic manager, and others, and after making clear our transportation difficulties, it was practically agreed that all articles, including skis, excepting canoes, could be checked with reasonable restrictions which can be made to protect the Railroad Company. This will make possible, camping trips we are unable to take at present on account of the inconvenience and delay in getting articles through via express company.

Mr. Mullin requests me to write him in detail, just what we want to carry and what shape we think it should be in, to avoid breakage and trouble to their road.

It was suggested that this might be for certain months of the year but since we camp all times of the year, no particular time will be specified. We are very enthusiastic over the prospects of being able to get our skis through, and I wish to thank you for the interest shown.

In case you have not already taken the matter up with the New York Central, it might be well for me to confer with them on the same basis that I have with the Delaware and Hudson Company and would like to have you advise me in this connection at your earliest opportunity.

Very truly yours,

Power and Mining Engineering Department

JSA AMB

Notice the strategy of recruiting others to the cause, and asking them to exert gentle pressure. Mr. Manson (GE) seemed to have an established working relationship with Mr. Durkee (D&H). These two men were in a position to try and resolve a logistical problem between the two corporate giants. It was a problem for all GE engineers, not just a fringe group's oddball request.

As always, Apperson had done his homework, anticipating every detail and possible objection, about the various types of gear anyone might want to ship by train. He even went so far as to include skis, but exclude canoes!

The letter to Mr. Fitch, of the highly successful retail establishment in New York City, demonstrates his clever back-up plan, asking the retailer to exert pressure on the D&H railroad to change their baggage rules. It is easy to imagine, too, that JSA was already well known to Mr. Fitch, as a regular customer. I'm not sure if any of the Schenectady crowd had plans to travel on the New York Central to reach camping destinations, but they were definitely thinking ahead.

Over the next ten or fifteen years, as outdoor enthusiasts began purchasing automobiles, there would be less interest in the policies of the D&H railroad. But for these young men (and women) at GE, in 1911, Apperson had won a significant battle to correct a nuisance, solve a logistical problem, and ensure that others in his generation could enjoy the pleasures of camping and other forms of recreation in the Adirondacks.

Author's note: Future articles will include letters offering insights into his capacity to make friends with people of considerable power and influence, including George Foster Peabody, Governor Alfred E. Smith, and Eleanor Roosevelt.