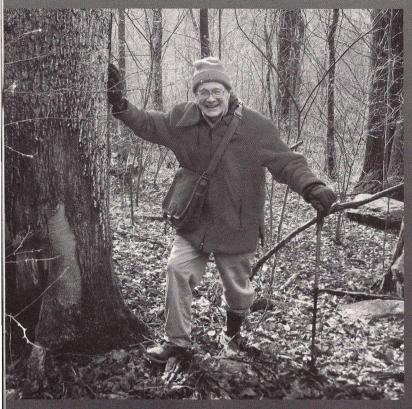## Leonard F. Wheat
### *Nov. 13, 1931 – May 11, 2014*



The man who knew the innermost secrets of Shenandoah National Park more than anyone else on earth is gone.

Leonard F. Wheat, 82, a PATC member since 1973 who died in May, was still off-trail hiking earlier this year, as he'd done for more than 50 years in Shenandoah and other nearby parks. He'd spend the entire day outdoors, tromping up and down mountains through brush and briars, limboing under fallen trees, hoisting legs over logs, in the mud and the damp and the cold and sometimes the miserable.

"I started bushwhacking when I ran out of trails," he said of his forays in Shenandoah. "I encountered abandoned trails that naturally had to be followed…"

Over the years, Len found every kind of relic scattered through the backcountry, from farm equipment to an apple-butter cauldron to standing log cabins to brick-lined wells. He also found waterfalls not mentioned on any map, cemeteries, a tunnel mine, three plane crash sites, an old CCC dynamite shack, a mill sluice and millstone, two steam engines, and other artifacts.

Len loved spending the day in the woods, to satisfy his own curiosity and to show younger folk the historical remnants of human habitation. Because of his photographic memory and vast experience, SNP staff sought him out to lead them on backcountry hikes to otherwise unknown sites of significance for historical recordkeeping.

In 1994, he wrote a book for PATC called "The 18 Cabins of Old Rag: A Field Guide for Bushwhackers," though he recently conceded that many of the routes he described are no longer passable. Aside from also regularly hiking in Prince William Forest Park, last year Len completed the final leg of the 275-mile Lake Superior Trail in Minnesota (where he grew up) at age 81.

He started each hiking day, Len said, with a slice of toast. For lunch, he ate one carrot and a piece of bread; sometimes some water. He carried his few things in a small army-green sack that he wore crosswise over his torso. For shoes, he preferred Red Wings, never with lug soles. One of the pairs he hiked in frequently, he said proudly, were more than 40 years old.

During these hikes, when he wasn't reciting the exact location of an artifact he'd found several decades earlier using cardinal directions, Len would sing from memory old jingles for Wheaties and Cream of Wheat; old-time songs like "Candy Kisses" from the 1940s; as well as—with a huge grin on his face—the Tom Lehrer Boy Scout song that included the line, "If you're looking for adventure of a new and different kind, and you come across a Girl Scout who is similarly inclined, don't be nervous, don't be flustered, don't be scared: Be prepared!"

At the end of a long day of hiking, Len never seemed any more fatigued or less jolly than when he showed up in the morning with a smile and the enthusiasm of a young boy. He liked to eat a big meal in a white-tablecloth restaurant, despite the lack of refinement of the motley crew that was his company. He ate heartily, seeming to fill up on his daily caloric needs all at once, and he nearly always finished with pie. Then he'd drive two hours home, scaring any fellow passengers half to death with his lead foot and slightly reckless ways.

"I like to bushwhack," this Harvard Ph.D. economist, poet, grammarian, ukulele player, composer, bridge player and author of seven books on philosophy and economics once told me, "because I get tired of taking the same blazed, maintained trails over and over. New places, new paths are always more interesting. The fun is in the searching and the discoveries."

Those of us who had the honor and pleasure of his company wanted to travel to these places with him because he was the key to doors we could not open by ourselves, about the park and about people and about the past. Rest in peace, Len Wheat. We will miss you.

—*Sue Eisenfeld*

*Sue Eisenfeld is the author of the forthcoming book, "Shenandoah: A Story of Conservation and Betrayal," for which Len was an essential information source, copyeditor and cheerleader.*