

Cinnabar Founders Inducted into Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame

Len and Sandy Sargent & Phil and Robin Tawney

In December 2018, the Montana conservation community honored Cinnabar’s founders and current board president by inducting them into the Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame (MOHOF). Posthumously inducted were Len and Sandy Sargent and Phil Tawney. Phil’s wife and current board president, Robin Tawney Nichols, also was inducted.

According to MOHOF founding executive committee member Jim Posewitz, “The Montana Outdoor Hall

of Fame was established to recognize that Montana’s precious outdoor amenities came to our time carried by individuals who cared, showed up, and stood up on their behalf. They are amenities that, in the words of Theodore Roosevelt, ‘add to the beauty of living and therefore to the joy of life.’”

Posewitz is a 2016 MOHOF inductee and emeritus board member of the Cinnabar Foundation.

Len & Sandy Sargent

In recognizing the Sargents, Montana Historical Society Director Bruce Whittenberg spoke of their vision and generosity in developing a model to ensure funding for emerging grassroots conservation groups and issues within Montana and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. “The Sargents filled that void in Montana by creating a historical legacy of activist philanthropy,” he said.

Len and Sandy had a Hollywood movie-type love story. Though they met in the 1940s, it took almost 30 years for the stars to align. Timing was everything. Len was newly retired from teaching math and coaching football, hockey and baseball at the Taft School in Washington Depot, Connecticut. Sandy was divorced and living in Denver with her two children. The couple rekindled their attraction and married in 1969,

moving to Len’s ranch at the far end of Cinnabar Basin. Their environmental activism soon began over efforts to prevent a federal dam that would impound the Yellowstone River at Allen Spur near Livingston, Montana. The Sargents also became fierce wilderness advocates for the Absaroka-Beartooth country and became well-recognized lobbyists at Montana’s biennial legislature. After more than a decade of individual contributions to conservation organizations, the Sargents established the Cinnabar Foundation to provide more extensive and systematic funding to those groups. Since its inception, the Foundation has funded more than 300 conservation organizations with more than 1,900 projects totaling over \$8 million.

“The Sargents were always between the barricade and the balcony in every environmental fight – articulate and passionate about saving Montana’s natural landscape,” Whittenberg marveled.

After the Hall of Fame ceremony, the Sargents’ daughter-in-law Judi Stauffer, remarked: “Len and Sandy inspired me deeply. They innately knew that to bring a big vision to fruition—like ensuring continuous funding for conservation efforts in Montana and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem—required building and nurturing networks of people and communities through meaningful service, education, advocacy and philanthropy. And, they didn’t shy away from rolling up their sleeves and working tirelessly to get a job done.”



Robin Tawney Nichols accepting the Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame award on behalf of her late husband Phil Tawney and herself.



The Sargents’ daughter, Kerri Hart, accepting the Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame award on behalf of her parents.

Phil Tawney & Robin Tawney Nichols

Around the same time period, University of Montana students Phil and Robin headed to Helena, Montana, to work as interns during the 1971 state legislative session. They returned two winters later, having been recruited by Don Aldrich, Montana’s lone conservation lobbyist and executive director of the Montana Wildlife Federation. Calling themselves the Environmental Lobby, the three spent days lobbying lawmakers and nights phoning activists across the state to rally grassroots support for or against pending legislation. That experience led the Tawneys and others to create the Montana Environmental Center (MEIC) in 1973.

“As MEIC’s first staff,” Bruce Whittenberg said, “Phil and Robin were in the middle of crafting or reforming nearly every law (in the 1970s) that had anything to do with protecting land and water in Montana.” This included laws to protect air and water quality, requiring mining reclamation, and detailing environmental standards for energy production and subdivision development, control for instream flows, and more. This, too, is where the trajectories of the Tawneys and Sargents

intersected as Len and Sandy became full-time MEIC volunteers throughout several legislative sessions.

In the 1980s, having earned a law degree from the University of Montana, Phil became the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation’s first legal counsel, and a founding board member of the Cinnabar Foundation. His work lives on at the Foundation and across hundreds of thousands of acres of wildlife habitat conserved by RMEF.

Meanwhile, Robin wrote magazine articles about Montana’s complex conservation issues and published children’s and family guides to Yellowstone National Park. Since Phil’s passing in 1995, Robin has continued to write and is co-author of “Len and Sandy Sargent: A Legacy of Activist Philanthropy.” She assumed Phil’s seat on the Cinnabar Foundation board and has served as chair since Len Sargent’s death in 1997.