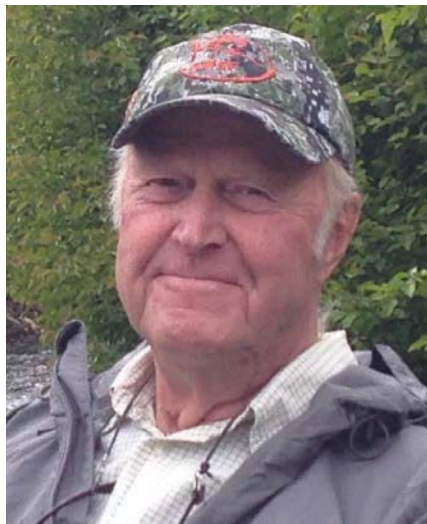


Tony Schoonen

1930–



Tony Schoonen's boyhood experiences shaped a conservation consciousness that in turn shaped today's extraordinary public access to Montana experiences coveted by hunters and anglers the world over. Tony was a resident of the Montana State Orphanage in Twin Bridges nearly from birth to about 14 years of age. As was the custom in the 1930s, local ranch folks would take in kids from the orphanage. It was Tony's good luck to live on the Seidensticker Ranch where the family raised him as their own.

When he was done with chores he roamed the Big Hole ranch with the single-shot shotgun and springer spaniel gifted to him by his ranch family.

These experiences – and one critical moment – set in motion a love of the outdoors and a life of conservation activism.

The moment came in the late 1950s, upon returning to the ranch from two years of service in the U.S. Army. Sylvester "Siv" Seidensticker, the ranch patriarch, had used heavy machinery to channel Big Hole River water to irrigation canals.

The backhoed channel moved irrigation water efficiently but it gnawed at Tony as much as the land. The practice seemed to knock the ranch – which Siv worked to improve for livestock and wildlife – off kilter.

For Tony, mulling over the imbalance led to a new conservation consciousness. In time, Tony would recognize that his caretaker, who he held in the highest regard, had turned toward efficiency but the unintended consequence degraded the river and its associated fish and wildlife habitat.

Multiply that imbalance by the probable scores of others and Tony had his life's work cut out for him. After earning his master's degree from the University of Montana-Western, Tony began a 30-year career as a teacher and principal that took him to Cardwell, Whitehall, and Butte. By the early 1960s, his was a familiar face at the Montana Legislature.

The year 1962 saw the passage of a law Tony championed to require highway construction to follow strict guidelines to protect streams. In 1974, a new state law ensured that streambeds would be protected and rivers wouldn't be diverted by construction activities. More than 20 years later, Tony and the Montana Coalition for Stream Access, prevailed in two U.S. District Court decisions and two Montana Supreme Court decisions giving the public access to rivers and streams below the high water mark.

Consider, though, Tony's signature political activities were aimed at recognizing and maintaining the public's right to use and conserve Montana's natural resources. If you hunt or fish or hike on school trust lands, or if you access a favorite stream at the public right of way at a bridge, you have Tony to thank.