



'HE WAS STUBBORN': BULLOCK, FAMILY, FRIENDS HONOR PIONEER CONSERVATIONIST SCHOONEN AT REOPENED FISHING ACCESS

Thursday, September 24, 2020, was the kind of day on the Big Hole River in Montana that Tony Schoonen would have appreciated.

Clouds swirled through a blessedly smoke-free blue sky like stoneflies in rippling water behind dark boulders. The wind would have kept lesser mortals from casting with any precision, but Schoonen would have played his girdle bug just above the rocky riverbed, and likely would have been rewarded with the day's best trout.

On Thursday, it was Montana's turn to appreciate Schoonen, a longtime crusader for public access to Montana's public lands and waters who died last October at age 89.

Montana Governor Steve Bullock stood next to the river at Mallon's west of Wise River, a place Schoonen fought for years to establish as a public fishing access. He announced the reopening of the long-sought access for walk-in anglers, and said expanded access at the site was still being sought.

Also, Bullock announced that the Notch Bottom Fishing Access on the lower Big Hole would be renamed the Tony Schoonen Fishing Access, and displayed a sign with Schoonen's name that will be posted there.

The selection of the Notch Bottom site for the renaming is especially apt. Along with the late angling giant George Grant, an unlikely coalition of local ranchers and landowners, and an

upstart organization called Trout Unlimited, Schoonen successfully fought in the 1960s against the proposed Raichle Dam at Notch Bottom, which would have flooded much of the river valley.

"Today, the 150-mile-long Big Hole remains among the few free-flowing wild trout rivers in the United States," Bullock said Thursday.

"Nobody understood the importance of fighting for access to public lands, so they remain open to all of us, the way Tony did," the governor said.

He cited several other landmark changes that Schoonen had a hand in creating, including the stream access law (he was a co-founder of the Montana Stream Access coalition), access to state trust lands for hunters and other recreationists, block management hunting

regulations, forest service planning, and more.

Bullock mentioned that two decades ago, when he was an assistant attorney general, he was tasked by Attorney General Joe Mazurek with drafting an opinion confirming access to Montana streams and rivers from public rights of way.

"I was in federal court—a baby lawyer—and a guy named William Perry Pendley with the Mountain States Legal Foundation was trying to get rid of our stream access laws." I stood up and said, 'I'm Steve Bullock and I represent the people of Montana'—which is a pretty heady thing when you're two or three years out of law school—and these streams and rivers belong to all of us."

Thursday's tribute was a sweet moment for a windswept gathering of Schoonen's

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family members, close friends and fellow conservationists.

Martha Williams, director of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, said "Tony had me on speed dial." She added, "I'll miss that delightful voice saying, 'Martha, this is Tony Schoonen.'"

She called Schoonen "a mentor to me," and said she admired his relentless fighting to improve access to public lands and waters.

Jack Schoonen, Tony's son, thanked the crowd for assembling at the fishing access site, and said, "the biggest takeaway is that my father's life was a monumental commitment of time and money to the cause of public access."

"My dad was born in a generation of honesty, integrity and passion. He realized early on the value of our public lands and waters in Montana. His passion for over 60 years was the conservation of and ensuring public access to those lands and waters. He and others from that same generation who shared the same passion helped form the foundation of Montana's second largest economic revenue stream, outdoor recreation and tourism. Montana's public land and water along with public access are central to that revenue stream. While those folks, including my dad, left a great legacy they also left some mighty big shoes to fill."

- TONY SCHOONEN, JR.

BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

He said, “Much of his life’s work was done while raising four kids as a single breadwinner.” Jack Schoonen said he grew up in a house in which both parents taught him the value of public lands, education, and social justice.

“My father was given countless awards for his work, but recognition was never the driving force. His purpose in life was to protect

those things that make life in Montana worthwhile—for all of its residents, with the common man having as much right as the rich and famous. Tony was not liked by all, but he was respected by most.”

Among the family members present Thursday was Ginger, the chocolate Lab who was almost always at Tony’s side in his final years. ■

RIGHT: Martha Williams (top, left), Director of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks spoke at the event, as well as Roy Morris (middle, left), President of the George Grant chapter of Trout Unlimited, A group Tony Schoonen helped found. **BELOW:** Tony’s son Jack Schoonen with Tony’s dog Ginger, daughter Becky Schoonen Bennett, son-in-law Dan Bennett, Governor Steve Bullock, Tony’s daughter Maggie Schoonen, oldest son Tony, Jr. with his wife Jennifer and daughters Brookelynn and Carli.

