

# CODE BREAKER

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Many pledge loyalty to a social group. A handful are misanthropes, true to themselves. And some feel a duty to defend the undefended: the forest. Who do you pledge allegiance to?

Note: Specific locations have not been mentioned and names have been changed to protect key contributors to this article, though all events contained herein are entirely true.

- Synonymous with untamed beauty, the Adirondack Park of New York State is the largest piece of public land in the Lower 48. Clocking in at 5.9-million acres, it's a unique quilt of private and public property 100 miles wide and more than 130 miles deep. With such impressive dimensions, many feel the "Big Sky" moniker is as applicable to New York as it is to Montana.

Bigger is often better, so one would only assume the 230 downhill ski runs, 350 kilometers of maintained cross country ski routes and 1,500

miles of foot trails inside this park would offer enough for every skier who brings their boards to the Adirondacks. But some skiers – even some park residents – feel the Adirondack landscape is not good enough as is. Such was the case with an Adirondack backcountry skier named Terry Trudeau.

In October 2005, two men, Jeff McRand and Jared Roy, were hiking under a gorgeous blue sky, off-trail in the McKenzie Mountain Wilderness Area, a jumble of peaks nestled above Lake

Placid, the Olympic Village. This same day, Terry Trudeau was in the McKenzie Mountain Wilderness Area, moving off-trail just like Jeff and Jared. It was an extreme case of coincidence. To have two parties of off-trail navigators within the same Adirondack county, let alone the same clump of woods, is well nigh impossible.

As Jeff and Jared hiked off the north side of a peak, they entered an enormous birch glade. They paused as Jared spoke. "Man, this is a gorgeous forest. Glad we decided to drop off the back side of this-" But his words were cut short, noticing the glade was not formed by nature, but by man.

Stump after stump revealed someone had been falling trees at a feverish pace. He then noticed, only 300 feet in front of them, a man rolling cut up sections of a large paper birch into a hole. This was Terry.

Upon descending to him, the taller of the two, Jeff, asked a simple question. "Sooo...

whaddya doin'?" When no answer was given, Jeff stared at Terry with intense interest, squinting and thinking. Eventually he said slowly, "I know you... you're Terry Trudeau."

Terry's identity was confirmed by his own silence. "Man, Terry," Jeff surmised, "this just isn't your day. You might be in a heap of trouble."

Going back and forth the parties traded pointed questions for vague answers, Terry slowly revealing he'd been visiting the wilderness area for years with axes and handsaws (in addition to his Stihl 036 chainsaw that lay half-hidden in the brush), cutting ski trails and backcountry glades; very illegal activities.

In Terry's opinion, God's design of the Adirondacks and the skiing infrastructure put in place by humans were just not good enough for him. But he had only one question for Jeff and Jared, his ace in the hole.

"You guys backcountry skiers?" He received nods numbering two. Then, Terry smiled.

"Great! That means we can keep this just between us, right? I mean, there's no need to tell McKay about this," referring to the local forest ranger. "This is fine skiing here, boys." Obviously, Terry was employing the "skier's code." The this-is-our-dirty-little-secret wink.

Fortunately, Jeff and Jared knew right from wrong, Jeff retorting with a smile, "Like I said Terry, this just isn't your day."

The men left Terry to his very worrisome expressions, continued their descent and scouted another peak before they called it a day. When they got back to Jeff's place that night, one reached for the phone book, the other for the phone.

Jeff's finger ran down the M's. "MacKay, MacKay... MacKay. Here it is. Up on Ardsley Road? Pete?"

"That's him."

Jared dialed, looked at Jeff, and then sat up straight when a voice on the other end offered a

friendly, "Hello."

"Hi, is this Pete MacKay? I'm glad I caught you. Sorry to bother you. I'm Jared Roy. I live over in Placid. Do you have a moment? Great. Well, me and my buddy just met this guy way up in the McKenzies when we were out looking for deer sign. Yeah," Jared said with a laugh, "I know; we didn't expect to see anyone up there either."

After several minutes of narration, Jared reached the end of the story. "So when we got back here we picked up the phone."

Ranger MacKay had only one question. "Jared, do you or Jeff know who this guy was?"

After he heard the name, MacKay went silent. It was a bittersweet moment for him. Though it appeared a boat load of trees were cut down – trees set aside 120 years ago as "forever wild" in the state constitution – the good news was that Terry was the guy, *the* guy, the rangers had been trying to catch for a decade. It was a

huge score.

And true to Jeff's oration, it really wasn't Terry's day. 500 counts of "cutting and/or injuring trees" were eventually brought against Terry due to the men reporting what they saw. The photos the ranger took of the glades the very next day didn't make Terry look so good either. When the dust settled, the squeaky wheels of justice rolled out a \$5,000 civil penalty for Terry's pruning binge. However, many park residents think he got off easy. Others see him as a victim; a near martyr.

From one Adirondacker came, "If he was an ATV'er? My God! The poor bastard would have been lynched. Everyone hates four-wheelers. This guy got off wicked easy. Definitely not fair."

Here, though an ATV wasn't involved, somehow the rider felt the victim for he knows he would have been nailed to the judge's bench. I have to be honest in that this rider is right: he probably would've been lynched, unlike the skier.

But a backcountry skier countered, "Shit, there's nowhere to ski!" In this response, Terry is not to blame. No, it's the Department of Environmental Conservation; the agency that maintains park trails. According to many Adirondack backcountry skiers, Terry was the victim since all hiking trails are not cut eight feet wide for skiers. They begged the question, 'What was he supposed to do?' as if skiing 230 downhill runs, 350 kilometers of cross country ski trails and 1,500 miles of foot trails was an unreasonable option for Terry.

The blame game is as well-fed in the Adirondack Park as it is in Yellowstone, Glacier, the Great Smokies or Grand Canyon. From contractors to climbers, Wal-Mart to the Wilderness Society, groups care more about criminalizing and debasing other groups than they do about identifying environmental damage and actually doing something about it.

No one I interviewed said anything to the

effect of, 'that's terrible' or, 'those poor trees.' Case after case, people either went after the skier or defended their own pack.

Since I mentioned he was a skier early on in this piece, you probably had a measured like or dislike for Terry even before I let you know the damage he caused or the penalty he received. I'll admit though, I probably would have done the same as you.

So I've made a pact with myself to be more objective. If I pick up a paper and see an article about a particular group that did something offensive to the land, or if I read an article like this one on your computer screen, I'll try not to choose sides like the people I interviewed did. I'll only ask what's an admirable outcome: defending someone in the wrong because I identify with them or defending the land that brings me so much joy.

It doesn't matter what part of the country this story took place in. Land is land. The

important thing is that when you examine Terry's case objectively you'll be able to see him not as a backcountry skier, but as a man who only thought public land wasn't good enough for him. And reminding themselves of this – who Terry really was that day – Jeff and Jared say they never regret throwing skier's code to the wind and calling Pete MacKay the moment they got in the door. «« **ES** »»