

Ray Hart Obituary

Ray Hart passed away on his 97th birthday, which marked his 61st year as a resident of the North Fork community. Ray first came to Montana in 1965 with his wife and two sons in tow for a summer stay at the Old Ford Schoolhouse cabin, owned at the time by Bob Funk. Three months later Ray was hooked on the Polebridge lifestyle, and he was accepted by the locals in the traditional fashion of inviting him for a drink outside the Community Hall next to someone's pickup truck where the hootch was kept during the weekly square dances, and during which Ray was told about 1) where he could find huckleberries growing, and 2) what properties were up for sale in the area.

At the time Ray was a Professor of Theology at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, but within three years he left Vanderbilt, founded the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Montana, and purchased 42 acres of Harry Holcomb's original half section homestead just north of what was then Ford Ranger Station. Over the next 52 years Ray spent as much time as possible on the North Fork as he pursued a distinguished career at multiple universities. His passions involved the "holy trinity" of fishing, gardening, and cooking, all conducted in the company of a continuously lit pipe.

Ray's tenure on the North Fork began when many of the original homesteaders or their children were still living on their properties and contributing to the quirky vibrancy of the community. Ray served as vice president and then president of what at the time was the North Fork Improvement Association (now the North Fork Landowners Association) in 1968-1970. He worked closely with Bob Funk on getting the North Fork of the Flathead officially designated as a Wild and Scenic River. The work of preserving this unique ecosystem is today carried on by the North Fork Preservation Association, which Ray helped establish and supported to the end of his life.

Ray was part of the early "hippie in-migration" of the late 1960s and 1970s. He bolstered this "back to the land" movement with episodes of gardening in the buff to the delight of passersby on the North Fork Road. Rumors of photographs capturing his naked horticultural escapades continue to circulate to this day.

Ray's preservation efforts extended to improvements on his property. He rescued Esther Day's original homestead cabin and turned it into the kitchen for one of his structures. That structure also incorporated the well-traveled Frank Fisher barn, formerly located at the Polebridge turnoff, to house his library. The restored caretaker's cabin was the old customs house at the U.S.-Canadian border for many years.

Based on conversations with Esther during his early years on the North Fork, Ray was able to locate the remains of an irrigation pond she and her husband Ralph developed on the property. He utilized the resulting water rights to restore a pond to the property, although its purpose was fishing instead of raising crops, and its location was to the east of the original pond.

Ray retired from his last job with Boston University at a youthful 85. He published his last book two years later, in which he referred to his property as "Hart's Homestead" in typical North Fork tongue-in-cheek disregard for historical facts. Ray's last years on the North Fork were taken up by private scholarship, family gatherings, stewardship of his property, and serving the unique community that he enjoyed through diverse activities ranging from making stock during hunting season to having carolers in for songs and refreshments every Christmas.

Ray's professional legacy will be the Ray L. Hart School of Philosophy and Theology located in Rome, Italy. But for his North Fork legacy, a passage from his first book *Unfinished Man & The Imagination* is exemplary: "Only a pedant would forget that the only thing more important than theology in this world is fishing."