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Extraordinary life: Jim Perkins was an idea man with ‘a special kind of luck’



Jim Perkins, a Kent resident, was a successful writer, editor, television producer, outdoorsman and environmentalist. (Richard Messina / The Hartford Courant)

Jim Perkins was an exuberant polymath, a successful writer, editor, television producer, outdoorsman and environmentalist. He described himself as someone who could move words and pictures, and maintained that his achievements were the result of chance, “a special kind of luck ... occurring over and over... most times good, sometimes not, but happening so often,” he wrote in his autobiography, “By Way of Luck,” published in 2015.

“He was the guy who gets things done, very attractive, very self-confident,” said his wife, Judy.

James N. Perkins, 85, died April 16 in Kent of complications of strokes.

Perkins and his wife moved to Kent in 1985 as weekenders and became an integral part of the tiny rural community. After learning that a small Native American tribe was seeking federal recognition and claimed sovereignty over 400 acres of land in Kent — including part of the Kent School and the Preston Mountain Club, he relied on his writing, marketing and network-building skills to help defeat its claim. As vice-president of Town Action to Save Kent, or TASK, Perkins helped hire high-powered lobbyists and mount a campaign that ultimately led to the defeat of the 17th century Schaghticoke tribe’s claims.

When he lived in New Milford, he established the town's Inland Wetlands Commission and was president of the Housatonic Valley Association, one of the largest conservation and preservation groups in New England. He formed a partnership to acquire and repurpose local commercial properties that were distressed and helped organize the Kent Film Festival.

He was born Aug. 9, 1933, in Littleton, N.H., where his parents, Nicholas and Lucia Perkins, both born in Greece, ran a small restaurant. Ethnically, they were Vlachs, a minority group whose language evolved from Latin.

Perkins grew up outside — skiing, hiking, camping, climbing trees, exploring the White Mountains. The Depression was hitting his small town hard, and times were tough, said Perkins' school friend Bob Rowe, when "you were lucky to have 25 cents a week." His youth fostered a lifelong commitment to conservation.

His mother's ambitions for her only son drove her to research boarding schools where he would get a better education, and she talked the Williston School in Easthampton, Mass., into admitting him as a scholarship student. From there, he went to Dartmouth, where he joined the swim team. Corey Ford, a popular nature writer and local Dartmouth booster, offered to put up team members over the Christmas break, and that relationship helped propel Perkins' future.

Perkins believed that many of his achievements were the result of being in the right place at the right time. But he was also astute in seeking out mentors or colleagues who could — and did — help him move on to the next step.



Jim Perkins, a founder of TASK, a group of Kent residents organized to stop the federal recognition of the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation, attended a 2005 press conference in Washington with Gov. Jodi Rell, Sen. Chris Dodd,

Sen. Joe Lieberman and most of the Connecticut congressional delegation. Perkins is pictured between Lieberman and Rell. (Richard Messina / The Hartford Courant)

Ford was frequently published in the high circulation magazines Saturday Evening Post and Field and Stream, and he recognized Perkins' flair for writing. The pair traveled frequently to fish for salmon in Ireland or shoot quail in Mexico, leading to articles in the Post or Field and Stream with shared bylines, beginning while Perkins was still in college.

Perkins joined the Air Force after graduating in 1955 and initially wanted to become a pilot, but Ford, who had many deep ties to Air Force brass, helped him get an assignment to the Public Affairs office in Washington.

Senior Air Force officers were seeking ways to counteract a bill in Congress that would have opened up the 30 million acres managed by the Department of Defense to development by private mining, logging and agricultural interests. A general asked his subordinates for ideas on how the Air Force could respond. Perkins was a very junior officer.

The following day, Perkins proposed that the Air Force commit to preserving its millions of acres by developing land, water, wildlife and timber management programs. To help sell the proposal, he suggested enlisting support from leading conservation groups that might help defeat the bill. To his — and everyone else's — surprise, four-star generals bought the idea and told Perkins and Ford, who was a reserve Air Force officer, to prepare the groundwork to implement it. The plan, which has been copied by the other services, has preserved millions of acres for recreation and preservation.

"He was always a can-do person," said Joe Mathewson, a college friend. "He loved a challenge." Perkins was awarded the U.S. Commendation Medal in recognition of his contributions.

After leaving the Air Force, Perkins joined Doubleday & Co. book publishers as an editor, where he worked his way up to manager of its profitable book club division — but ended up being fired after five years. Within a week, he had a new job with a different publisher. Perkins relied on his contacts, an instinct for what would sell and his ability to quickly edit or rewrite sub-par manuscripts. He made friends and connections easily.

This helped him achieve success — and then go on to the next exciting challenge. He worked for Curtis Publishing Co., publisher of the Saturday Evening Post, and ended up in the book publishing arm of Playboy, where he became a big admirer of Hugh Hefner's business sense. These jobs were followed by stints with other publishers, where Perkins brought his innovative ideas and energy.

He was imaginative, brusque, fearless and iconoclastic and gained many admirers in the book publishing, magazine and direct marketing world, but by the time he was 40, he decided to quit his job. "I was in the wrong business, and further, corporate America held no promise for me," he wrote.

He moved to Chicago, where the three daughters from his first marriage were living. He started a marketing agency. Though he had no experience in the emerging field of cable television, he created the "Home Shopping Show," where advertisers demonstrated their products, and helped create the Arts and Entertainment and Lifetime channels.

Many of Perkins' ideas — seen as impossible to implement at the time, or non-starters commercially — have become part of today's media. He predicted that cable would revolutionize advertising. In the early 1980s, he wrote a business plan for a 24-hour food channel. "He got laughed at, because no one wanted to

listen to recipes 24 hours a day,” said his sister, Pam Perkins (even though his proposals included much more than recipes.) He suggested creating an online para-mutual racing program — “Now being done,” she said. He pioneered a home shopping network — but “they sold it.” Today, the Home Shopping Network and QVC are evidence of his acute marketing instincts.

“He was always ahead of his time,” said Pam Perkins. “He told me in 1986, ‘One day, our telephones are going to be little computers in our hand. Those numbers are going to be what connects you to people.’ His creativity really surpassed his time.”

Perkins is survived by his wife, his three daughters from an earlier marriage, Susan Perkins Stark, Karen Perkins and Elizabeth Perkins; eight grandchildren, and his sister Pam Perkins. His sister Nitsa Bailey died earlier.

“He was always positive,” said his daughter Susan. “He was all about the lemonade, and not about the lemons.”