

*Pigeon River Country*

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# *Pigeon River Country*

A MICHIGAN FOREST

DALE CLARKE FRANZ

*Revised Edition*

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*To* FORD KELLUM  
*who expressed what was in all our hearts*



## Preface

*Among changes addressed in this revised edition are a shift in the scientific community away from believing only humans think and have feelings and growing disappointment that formal agreement failed to stop hydrocarbon pressures arising to bedevil the forest. Potentially powerful threats emerged in mid-2007, too late for examination in our book: Oil and gas promoters now suggest that the Pigeon's off-limits resources be exploited to provide inexpensive energy for environmentally friendly technologies like solar panels, which take much energy to make. Even though it would override protections long in place, the idea appealed to some in a state facing one of the most severe money crunches in the nation. "Every generation has to fight anew to protect the Pigeon and places like it," Ken Glasser, chairman of the Otsego County Board of Commissioners, said.*

*There are two new chapters, "Ecology" and "Animals and People," plus an afterword, "Presence." We solve the mystery of the dam spill. We describe how global warming will likely affect this forest. A richer understanding of life forms gives us a new perspective on why places like the Pigeon River Country are so special. We give additional emphasis to threats from overuse and how many of its qualities can be enjoyed in other natural settings.*

This is not a book to stuff into your pocket for a trip to the woods. It's one to curl up with on a winter evening by the fire. Of course, some forest surroundings can enhance any book. The first time I saw Lewis Thomas's *Lives of a Cell* in a shop near my Philadelphia apartment, I dismissed it for some forgotten intellectual reason. After moving to the north woods, a friend sent me a copy, and I remember a wonderful afternoon spent leaning against a pine stump in the Pigeon River Country waiting with my camera for deer to step into a clearing and reading that the giant clam, if he had a mind to, might be dismayed that he has incorporated so much of the

plant world into his own complex clamhood while plant cells and algae might have tinges of conscience that it was they who had captured the clam on the most satisfying terms.

The forest is nearly a world apart from our normal experience. This book was first proposed as a guide to the Pigeon River Country but a more substantial concept soon emerged, reflecting a depth of affection for this forest impossible to ignore. The book is about Walter Babcock growing up in the Pigeon River Country and saying, “We took some schooling, missed a lot of it.” It is about Sam Titus and a herd of elk listening to Bach on her car radio. It is about spruces pointing into the sky and winterberries nestled in the snow.

In one sense, this is a regional history, full of colloquialisms and peculiarities of this precise place. In another sense, this book is about forests everywhere and about people going into them. It is a book of the heart, an examination of how the Pigeon River Country is meaningful.

A visit to the forest would be enriched by the use of field guides such as those listed in the bibliographic notes at the end of this book. A map is essential.

In 1995, Joe Jarecki, the Pigeon River Country unit manager, noted there was concern on the advisory council about the aesthetics of putting boardwalks where established pathways passed through sensitive wetlands. He cautioned that such concern for wild settings should not slip into making the Pigeon River Country “inaccessible to people, because people control the PRC’s destiny, and in our society, management strategies on public lands must ultimately be supported by the public, or they will eventually be overruled.” The aim, he said, must be to encourage uses that have the least impact possible and, at the same time, promote “a love and understanding of wild areas so there will be support to continue to manage the PRC as a wild area.” He said some access to wetlands, the most fragile places in the forest, is essential to providing people who are uncomfortable in wild areas the opportunity to experience them.

Inviting people to the remote forest has a certain irony since we run the risk of diminishing that which we would enjoy. We take the risk in the belief that what we encourage is a sensitivity that will, in turn, sustain and nurture our natural places.



## *Acknowledgments*

*This book is invitational, not exhaustive*, as Sibley Hoobler put it. It suggests we tread lightly, leave few footprints, remain unnoticed. Many people who participated in the stories told here are not named. One of the Interlochen Arts Academy students who spent ten days camping in the snow near Pigeon Bridge campground in March 1972 was Kathy Bramer. Later, as a student in the master's program in environmental advocacy at the University of Michigan in 1976, Kathy worked as an intern for Roger Conner on the Pigeon River project. Like so many others, she devoted countless hours to the Pigeon River Country. Among them were Jim Welsch, Linda Myers, the early participants in the Pigeon River Country Association, and others too numerous to name. Among the many within the Department of Natural Resources who made their association with the forest more than an occupation are Bob Strong, Rita Rennie, and Doug Whitcomb.

Others, through their sensitivity and kindness, helped in the preparation of this book. We especially thank Rosemary Martek, William Granlund, Rick Packman, the family of Sandra Mosier, Doug Truax, and the staffs of the Otsego County Library, the Department of Natural Resources district office, and the Shell Oil Company production office. A special thanks to Mike Delp for his encouragement and to members of the Gaylord Area Council for the Arts writers workshop.

This project would not have received the long and careful attention that it has without the full-hearted and loving support of Sandra Myers Franz.

This is more than a book to those of us involved in the Pigeon River Country. It is people collecting photographs, saving scraps of paper, taping interviews, writing letters, caring. We dedicate the book to Ford Kel-

lum because he spoke so clearly from the heart. Among many who have been inspirational in their devotion to the forest is Jerry Myers, who at 89 in 2007 continued to think and talk about the Pigeon River Country as one of our outdoor places deserving all the love we can give.

Joe Jarecki gave generously of his time and knowledge for the revised edition and provided invaluable electronic data files. Larry Leefers transferred minutes of all the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council meetings to electronic files. Richard Kropf also spent years attending advisory council meetings and putting material into electronic form. A whole cast of people has given much time to the forest since our first edition. They will remain mostly unsung heroes since this is an update, not a new book detailing all the many important issues of the last two decades.

Note: This book sometimes uses *north woods* and *northern Michigan* synonymously with *northern lower Michigan*. We hope anyone from the Upper Peninsula who feels territorial about the first two terms will forgive the generalization and perhaps be proud that those in a similar but southerly area identify themselves with northern concepts. Some names change over time. Fisherman's Trail is variously known as Fisherman Trail and now usually as Fisherman Road. Cornwell, as in the mill, became Cornwall Lake and Cornwall Creek Flooding.

Some of the science underpinning parts of the revised edition represents a personal journey of mine in trying to understand the most profound elements of a forest experience. My longtime friend Tom Stillings, who plays a rollicking beat on piano and banjo, applied his mathematical skills in tweaking scientific points, most of which did not survive in the text through my final editing.

I'm grateful for the generosity of several dear friends who worked their way through early drafts of new material. When John and Marge Compton, who could tackle any serious subject with ease, found some material dense, they were kind enough to say so, starting me on a path toward becoming more succinct. Our son, Dale Jr., was the first to read any of my manuscript and gave me great encouragement by not admitting any puzzlement and recounting afterward some of my most precious points. Our other son, Douglas, and daughters-in-law, Dawn and Ninette, in their attempts to fit early draft readings into their busy lives, provided a reminder that books need to be relevant and engaging. Ninette cast a keen eye on my efforts to summarize the revised edition. My wife, Sandy, demonstrated great strength by applying her considerable editing skills and urging me toward material not found in other books. As one points out in

these pieces, any flaws remaining are entirely my own, for I sometimes did not follow good advice well.

Glen Sheppard, longtime editor of the *Northwoods Call* (“dedicated to the proposition that there is only one side to any issue involving natural resources . . . Nature’s!”), got me interested in the Pigeon River Country shortly after I moved to northern Michigan in 1976. Glen wrote in a 2006 editorial that sprawl does more harm than global warming. We treat both of them as part of the same problem. John Hilton, editor of the *Ann Arbor Observer*, set aside time to read the ecology chapter and provided encouragement. Global warming will change our forests severely. In facing this most serious environmental issue, we need guidance. Possibly there’s some in the Pigeon experience.

We have updated material where appropriate, but in many places we have left unchanged the phrasing from the first edition since in most respects it is still current. Forest conditions change minute by minute, so a lot of what we say about it can be considered historical, representative, or indicative rather than exactly matching anyone’s moments spent there. Chapters written by contributors contain updates in brackets and italics. Harold D. Mahan said his chapter remains timely. Gerald F. Myers declined the invitation to update but supplied several leads for new material about the Pigeon. The other four contributors, Sibley Hoobler, Ford Kellum, Eugene E. Ochsner, and L. K. Titus, are no longer with us. They have been mourned by many. Notes from 1986, with a few corrections by Ford and Gene, showed up as I went through my old files one last time, as though they were still giving me a helping hand.

Members of the Pigeon River Country Association were among many enthusiasts for this revised edition. Some, who joined after 1985, have been unable to obtain a copy of the first edition. The forest headquarters over the years has continued to receive requests for the book, and Amazon.com, which was posting at high prices the few used copies available, specifically asked the association if the book could be made available again. George Barker of Trout Unlimited asked permission to quote from Doug Mummert’s chapter for a public presentation. Such interest and support finally inspired me to prepare the revision I had long anticipated. For reasons enumerated in the text, the book is more relevant now than it was two decades ago.

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