

Pigeon River Country Association

Newsletter

Fall 2021/Winter 2022



David Smethurst (1947 – 2021)

A founder of PRCA remembered

David Smethurst, one of the three founders of Pigeon River Country Association (PRCA) with the late Ford Kellum and Jerry Myers, died Nov. 5 at 74. Part of Dave's story is recounted in our book, *Pigeon River Country*:

From the moment a drill bit first penetrated the forest floor on May 27, 1970, to the summer of 1971, the oil industry drilled nineteen test wells in the Pigeon River State Forest, put five wells into production, and announced plans to drill as many as one well per every 80 acres, meaning up to one thousand wells in the remote forest.

"We figured this problem of oil drilling was too big for our little Audubon Club," Ford Kellum said. "So I got together with Jerry Myers and Dave Smethurst to organize to oppose this oil drilling. Dave looked like a potential leader and a smart man. So I asked him, 'Will you chair this outfit, whatever we call it?' and he said, 'Sure, I'll be glad to.' We called it the Pigeon River Country Association," which held its first meeting in January 1972. At the time, Ford was a recently retired wildlife biologist, Jerry a fisheries specialist for the forest, and Dave a young teacher in Gaylord and manager with his wife, Sue, of the Blue Lakes Ranch adjacent to the forest.

In 2017, Dave Smethurst had a conversation with Arch Reeves, another long-time Pigeon advocate, and with Ned Caveney. Video is available in the Discovery Center and at dalefranz.org website. Here is some of what Dave said:

[Someone said to Dave,] “I don’t understand this Big Wild thing. You want a wilderness?” And I explained to him that, no, a wilderness is land that shows no evidence of being touched by man, and we, purposely back when we started all this, wanted the Pigeon River Country to be a working forest—but a working forest that gave the *feeling* of wildness.”

“In the Pigeon, if you walk for 15 minutes, you can pretty much be alone.”

“I’ve never been to the interior of Yellowstone National Park—I can’t do it any more—but I know it’s there. That’s good enough for me.”

“[Michigan has] all these different resources, but you can’t do everything at the same place ... the Pigeon is...the place for solitary recreation. It’s back to P.S. Lovejoy: the place to explore on our own.”

Ned Caveney met Dave in 1974 when Ned began his assignment as the first area forester for the newly designated Pigeon River Country State Forest. It was the beginning of “a very special relation,” Ned said at Dave’s Nov. 13, 2021, funeral. Ned said:

Dave was “a civilian conservation hero. He didn’t do these things alone—he led groups like the Pigeon River Country Association.” Ned said Dave arrived in northern Michigan when the special place identified some years before--what P.S. Lovejoy called the Big Wild—was changing with the oil and gas drilling that began in 1970. Dave was appointed chair of a citizen’s advisory group by Governor Milliken in 1975. He was instrumental in the compromise that protected two-thirds of the PRC, restricting oil and gas activity to one third of the forest. “The value of solitude, wildlife values, were handled under that plan,” Ned said.

In 1975 there were less than 200 elk in the forest. Under a management plan that Dave and

the citizens’ board advised on, by 1984 the elk herd had recovered enough that the state began an elk hunting season that has been continued every year since.

Ned mentioned Dave’s contribution to the agreement that led to removal of the Song of the Morning dam on the Pigeon River, to the public support for replacing the forest headquarters after a fire with a “unique state office building in Michigan” for its use of local timber and thoughtful design, and to the quiet air space agreement with the Michigan National Guard facilities located in Grayling—which steers military aircraft flight corridors away from the PRC.

Dave Smethurst “was most deserving” of the P.S. Lovejoy award he received. “He was almost a full-time citizen conservationist” who was a good listener. “I never saw Dave lose his cool. He did not let emotion override reason and he stuck with it to the best possible conclusion.”

Ned said, “I was most fortunate that I was born in the time of Dave and Sue Smethurst. Dave helped me be the best professional conservationist I could be.”

Paul Rose, current chair of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council, sent the following:

It is with great sadness that I share the news of the passing of Dave Smethurst. In addition to being a wonderful husband and father, Dave was a lifelong conservationist and a charter member of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council who considered these lands and waters a home for his heart.

Professionally, Dave was an educator and, for a time, was employed by Blue Lakes Club whose original lands are now a part of the Pigeon River State Forest. An avid upland game hunter and angler, Dave was also among the organizational founders of the Headwaters Chapter of Trout Unlimited, was active in the Michigan Council of Trout Unlimited and many other conservation-related initiatives. The Advisory Council had the privilege of honoring Dave with the first-ever P.S. Lovejoy award at our Centennial celebration of Pigeon River Country.

For many of us who survive his conservation legacy, we remember Dave as a conservation mentor. Much of what we do today in our advisory role to the Department of Natural Resources has been shaped by Dave's wisdom and passion for the forests, waters, and wildlife which call the "Big Wild" their home.

Many who lived and loved the Big Wild are now gone - few, however, leave impressions which are found within both the people and the place.



Jerry Myers, Ford Kellum and Dave Smethurst organize the Pigeon River Country Association at the forest headquarters in 1971.

Undated photo from Odawa history files.



Viewing video

Several video selections of a 2017 conversation by Smethurst, Reeves, and Caveney are available at the dalefranz.org website.

Cell phone instructions: Scroll down and click on *Other work*, then click on *View Videos*, then click on the image of the horse tilting his head (but not on the "play" button). Several of the 17 videos listed contain comments by Dave Smethurst, starting with *Association Leads the Fight*.

Computer instructions: Scroll toward bottom, click on *Other work*, click on *View Videos* under *Discovering the Forest*. Then click on the smaller images. The videos with Dave Smethurst start with *Association Leads the Fight*, which is in row 2, column 3.

Through a lens—selectively Native American exhibits taking shape for the Discovery Center

In preparing exhibits for the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center about Native Americans, a major challenge has been what parts of a rich heritage to leave out of the telling. Here is an example of what will appear on the walls, along with the more comprehensive text by Eric Hemenway, Odawa tribal historian, from which the display was excerpted and modified by Sandy Franz, Rudi Edel, and Craig Kasmer, the interpreter at Hartwick Pines:

Time Before Us: The Natural World as Kin

The story begins with the land and the water.

The Odawa/Ottawa, Ojibway/Chippewa and Potawatomi are collectively known as the Anishnaabek, “the Good People”. Their creation beliefs center around Gitchi-Gumek, the Great Lakes. One tells how the Anishnaabek came east on a sacred migration to the lakes. Another places the origin of the people on Mackinac Island.

The Anishnaabek called the Great Lakes home for thousands of years before Europeans arrived, and the Pigeon River Country was Odawa land for centuries before it was ceded to the U. S. government in 1836. The Odawa traveled this bountiful country on foot and by the PRC’s three rivers, trapping, hunting, fishing, and foraging.

The Odawa revere the natural world as family. Birds and animals are “brother and sister”; the earth is “mother of all” and home to the ancestors. This kinship connection with all living things, and those who have gone before, fosters a sustainable relationship between the people and the land.

The Anishnaabek alter their lifestyles to fit their environment, rather than altering the environment to their needs, allowing the natural world to regenerate and sustain future generations.

The People’s beliefs about land stewardship were vastly different from Europeans’, whose beliefs allowed owning the land and drastically changing it. These differences clashed over time and still do to this day.

Eric’s longer text:

A Time Before Us – The Land and All Our Relations

The Gitchi-Gumek (Great Lakes) is at the center of Anishnaabe creation beliefs. Various beliefs are held among the Anishnaabek. One tradition states how the Anishnaabek came from the east on a sacred migration, eventually settling in their present day locations. Another belief puts Mackinac Island as place of origin for the people. No matter the belief, the common thread is the land and water.

One of the key reasons the Anishnaabek have maintained a place in the Great Lakes for thousands of years is their relationship with their environment. The world around them, the plants, animals, land, and water, are seen as relations. This view of kinship fosters respect and understanding between the people and the land. The Anishnaabek would alter their lifestyles to fit their environment. They would not alter the environment to fit their lives. The results were a sustainable way of living that provided not only for the Anishnaabek, but their kin around them. This approach to being with the land was vastly different than that of Europeans, who believed in land ownership and drastically changing lands. These beliefs and practices of interacting with the land would clash over time and still do to this day.

A part of the extended family of the Anishnaabek is the clan system. Clans vary from community to community throughout the Anishnaabek communities in the Great Lakes. Other tribes across North America also have clans but differ from those of the Anishnaabek, based on their homelands.

In northern Michigan, the Odawa have numerous clans that are still recognized to this day. Like the differences between the beliefs from community to community, the same flexibility applies to individuals. Some clans for the Odawa of Northern Michigan include bear, eagle, turtle, wolf, loon, martin, and crane. Many of these animals can be found here at Pigeon River.

Volunteers turn out to tune up the facilities

The Discovery Center and nearby buildings around the forest headquarters are maintained by volunteers who continue to support the forest valued for its quiet, remote nature. An email from Rudi Edel to the workbee team in August offers a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes:

Workbee Team: once again, thank you for your dedication and hard work. It was a great day today. Besides our work, everyone socialized "outdoors" and enjoyed a great meal. In the past 3 weeks, the following was done:

Staff House: (1) All basement windows were insulated, sealed/closed off with T111 and then caulked and stained. (2) The floor was removed from under the kitchen sink and new cross members were installed and then a new floor made from plywood. The floor was given a coat of enamel paint to seal it (and it is still wet).

Discovery Center: (1) Six of the vertical panels for the new Native American exhibit were installed and stained. The last panel will be finished this week before Thursday's educational class on beavers. (2) Sandi E and Sandy F analyzed some exhibits to make them more kid-friendly. This will be a project to complete this year. (3) Rick used his chainsaw all day and cleaned up the north end of the building area to the river, enhancing the "Cathedral Window" view from inside the building. It looks great out there. (4) The pathway was sprayed to kill vegetation in preparation for the Day of Caring on September 10th when we shovel, rake and smooth out the 312-foot pathway.

Small Residence: (1) A new waterproof top was built over the outside entrance to the basement (there is no longer any water in the basement!). (2) The new gutter system was studied and measurements with angles recorded, resulting in Bruce and Tammy designing spacers at their home workshop, staining the same, and then a team returning to the building on August 30th to install the new gutter system. (3) The outside grounds were picked up and raked and are now ready for Lucas to brush hog close to the building to clean it up. (4) Moss was removed from the porch area also.

The Discovery Center was closed to the public on Nov. 2 for the winter. Its covid-shortened run that began July 17 brought 918 visitors. There were five educational classes, one on beavers, one on elk and grasslands, one on photography, one on mycology for adults and another for youth, which included a hot dog roast for 31 children, supervised by one adult for every four children.

A master naturalist course through Michigan State University was offered on Zoom, due to covid. With the success of 29 of 30 students

finishing the class, MSU has already asked to offer the course again in 2022.

The Discovery Center is expected to reopen to the public in March 2022.

And Rudi reported this update:

With the recent addition of high-speed internet, all volunteers can now switch their cell phone to WIFI phone use and have full service. In addition, your smart phone and/or computer will have full access to the internet at a very fast speed. With this fiber line, more educational opportunities and/or methods of presenting information can be explored.

A personal note from the editor

For some of us, life has given us a pretty long run and we now find the topic is not so much living life as it is contemplating the end of it. Individually, we may have a lot of time to do this, many years, but not all of us. If we are of a mind to actually think about this, we might make some accounting of our circumstances. We likely experience some diminishments physically and/or mentally, changes that we can no longer expect will get better. This leads me, for one, to identifying some of the blessings that remain. Pigeon River Country is one of those.

Pigeon River Country is a place we can visit without leaving home, especially if we have previously spent time in it. It brings to mind a space rich with its own dimensions, of walks taken in many kinds of weather, of life independently carrying on its own dramas. Despite storms or inconveniences that may come along, it offers solace in a difficult world, a concert of bird song, moving wind, flowing water, rustling trees, insect hums, a glimpse of wildlife, and a variety of experiences special to whatever our own path has provided us.

As Dave Smethurst observed, "I know it's there. That's good enough for me."

Membership renewal reminder

Membership dues help provide a scholarship to a student intern who assists the forest manager in the summer, and help us protect the wild character of the PRC. Your membership expiration date is on your mailing label or email sending this newsletter. Please keep your membership current. Thank you!



Visit our websites at <http://www.pigeonriver.org>
<https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org>

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