Sierra

GRASSROOTS PROFILE

The Gadfly Botanist of Plumas County

Jane Braxton Little

WAYNE DAKAN breaks away from a group hiking along Hungry Creek, a tributary of the Feather River in northeastern California. In five resolute strides, he crosses a clearing to an old Douglas fir. Straightening his back against its eight-foot girth, he fixes his steely blue stare on a man wearing a U.S. Forest Service uniform.

"Now you can't tell me you bureaucrats have thought of anything to do with this old boy that's any better than what he's already been doing for the last 400 years," Dakan says.

For more than half a century, Dakan, now 76, has stood between the forests of Feather River country and the human civilization whose meddling, he says, has gone to the point of destruction. He is Plumas County's unofficial botanist and patriarch of its environmental movement. During the 54 years he has lived near the North Fork of the Feather River, Dakan has expressed awe and despair while surveying its descent from pristine alpine meadows in Lassen National Park to rice fields in the Sacramento Valley.

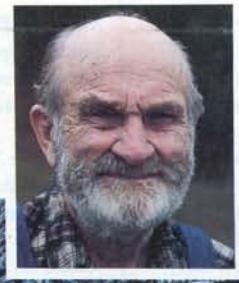
"I've watched this river die in my lifetime," Dakan says. "It's a marvelously complex ecosystem that we've turned into a sewer. Everybody who's come along has dumped something into it."

Dakan is an outspoken champion of environmental causes ranging from nuclear disarmament and population control to protection of African grasslands, but he has reserved his most passionate polemics for environmental preservation in Plumas County. He has vociferously attacked clearcutting in national forests, industrial dumping into streams, and herbicide spraying on forests, as well as hydroelectric dams on wilderness rivers and disruptive sonic booms over quiet valleys. He has also been thrown out of public hearings for cursing, evicted from a local sawmill for trespassing, and imprisoned—"for thinking," he thinks.

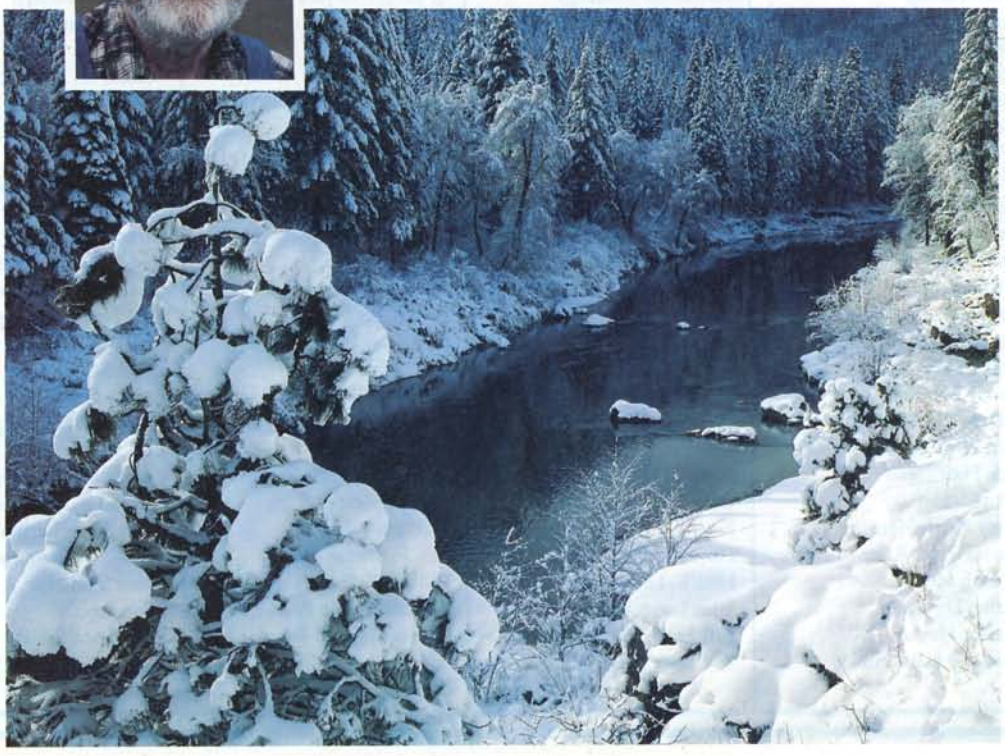
"There's no question that Wayne Dakan is the most unpopular person living in Plumas County," says environmentalist attorney Michael Jackson of Quincy, the county seat. "Some people love him, but many more hate him, and he couldn't care less. I don't think he ever gave a thought to how people react to what he says. He is here as a living witness to what has been destroyed."

Dakan has appeared at countless local, state, and federal hearings, shaking a gnarled fist at bureaucrats on behalf of the soil, the moss, the trees, and the insects that cannot speak for themselves. His complaints about tannin that was dumped into Mill Creek by an East Quincy sawmill forced the lumber company, under the threat of a cease-and-desist order filed by the California Water Quality Control Board, to redesign its settling-pond system.

His regular discourses on a local radio talk show range from poisonous jabs at the "Hollywood clown" now playing with the Washington circus, to attacks on Star Wars ("a relief program for the munitions industry"). Recently he has focused on commercial rafting on the Middle Fork of the Feather River, amassing an arsenal of facts to docu-



"Not very many people like to hear what I have to say, but I don't believe they've got the message yet."
—Wayne Dakan



PHILIP HYDE; JANE BRAXTON LITTLE (INSET)

Indian Creek—part of Wayne Dakan's Sierra territory.

ment the sport's potential damage to plants and fish. He aims the facts like darts at companies wanting to transport paying customers down a remote 32-mile stretch of the Middle Fork that was designated a wild and scenic river in 1968. The Forest Service has now banned the commercial ventures.

"This is a wonderful forest," Dakan says. "Just look at the soil! It's the placenta of all life. But mankind destroys everything he touches. We're like a bull in a china shop. What we haven't broken up, we've messed on."

Dakan's friendship with the mixed-conifer forest of Plumas County began in the mid-1930s. A native of Nebraska, he left home in 1927 before completing his senior year of high school. After several seasons "on the tramp," he hopped off a freight train and found a permanent home in Feather River country near Quincy.

Dakan first worked as a gold miner, establishing his diggings on Dixon Creek near the Middle Fork of the Feather River at the height of the Depression. He survived on 50 cents a day and lived in a crude log cabin that was a five-hour walk from the closest town. The few nuggets he found bought his grub, but the plant life nourished him.

"I'd always been interested in the woods," he says. "I asked a lot of questions that nobody could answer. That's how I got started: I bought a book and figured things out for myself."

The book was Willis Linn Jepson's *Manual of Flowering Plants of California*. "It was my bible for years and years," Dakan says, reverently removing the frayed volume from a narrow shelf that also holds Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Gary Snyder's *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, *The Art of Andrew Wyeth*, and *More Joy of Sex*. It was Jepson's book that Dakan took to the woods with him until he learned to identify every plant he saw.

"He was very meticulous in his self-teaching," says Kingsley Stern, botany professor at California State University at Chico. "When you contact Wayne about local flora, you get the response of a formally trained person—someone who has dug into his material."

"Plumas County is Wayne's territory," says John Thomas Howell, curator emeritus of botany at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. "He is the outstanding local student of the flora there, and a spokesman for the area."

Biologists on two continents know Dakan for his studies of three kinds of spiders that live in *Darlingtonia californica*, a rare species of pitcher plant abundant in Butterfly Valley near Quincy. During the summer of 1968, he took advantage of some time without a job (following "a little labor dispute" with his boss) to move to Butterfly Valley. There he set up his tent in a stand of Douglas fir and pine trees. By autumn, with his microscope on a cast-iron stove abandoned by loggers and his library in an unused oven, he became thoroughly familiar with the pitcher plant and its spiders. His efforts to protect the plant from roads and logging helped persuade the Forest Service to designate 500 acres of habitat as the Butterfly Valley Botanical Area.

Dakan has used both his reading and his instincts to find at least one plant that California botanists had presumed lost: *Boykinia ranunculifolia*, a small, rock-breaking herb in the saxifrage family. Rebecca Merritt Austin, Plumas County's pioneer botanist, first discovered the plant in California in 1877, but no one had seen it in California since then until Dakan rediscovered it.

"I got to thinking it over," Dakan says. "She gave the location as Spanish Peak, but I didn't believe that old girl ever got up on Spanish Peak. It was too steep, and without roads she would have had to hitch up her skirts just to walk. I'll betcha she was connected with a mining outfit at Silver Lake."

So he walked an abandoned ditch he found flowing into Silver Lake. "And there was that little saxifrage," Dakan says. "A real healthy patch of it growing just like it had been, without any help, since 1877."

"Wayne has a keen sense of observation," says the Academy of Sciences' Howell. "What he finds, he's able to communicate to both plant lover and scientist. One of his main joys and services is taking professional botanists, who maybe would never see them, to look at the rare plants he finds."

Almost all of Dakan's discoveries

have been made in solitude. When the winter of 1941 closed in on the Sierra Nevada, Dakan was alone in a friend's cabin near Lassen Peak. He passed the time with the Harvard Classics—Pepys, Voltaire, Rousseau—and reflected on the war blasting away in other parts of the world. One night he simply threw his draft card into the wood stove.

"I was probably the first person to ever burn my draft card," he says with a grin.

He spent the next four years building an irrigation project at a government camp in Colorado with other men who shared his objections to war. Dakan's pacifism was part of his emerging environmental philosophy.

"All life is hitched together, from the tiniest amoeba to the farthest star," Dakan says. "It didn't make sense for a boy trying to live off the Feather River system to go across the ocean to kill boys living off the Rhine River system. If I was going to kill someone, I had plenty of enemies right here."

MICHAEL YOST

Dakan collects a Sierra Nevada plant specimen for the Plumas County herbarium in Quincy.

After World War II he worked as a signal maintainer for Western Pacific Railroad Company between Oakland, California, and Salt Lake City. The job gave him a chance to botanize in the Feather River Canyon, and soon provided him his first exposure to herbicides and environmental protest. In the early 1950s both the railroad and Pacific Gas and Electric Company began to spray their rights-of-way with chemicals that killed the vegetation.

"We had to work in the stuff," recalls Dakan. "None of us knew exactly what it was doing to us, but I was conscious of the plants, and I knew it was no damn good. Whole mountainsides wilted overnight. The fishing was still good then, but we began seeing deformed fish after they sprayed. I started hollering about it, carrying on with every official I ever met. I never did see eye to eye with any one of them, and I told one road master he ought to be in jail."

That was a decade before the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. "When that came along," Dakan says, "she gave us the dope on all that stuff they were spraying. After that, we had some ammunition. Everybody up and down the Feather River Canyon was excited about it, but what could we do?"

Dakan made many of his coworkers realize the dangers of herbicides, and years later he convinced Friends of Plumas Wilderness, a group formed in 1970 to create a local wilderness area, to take a stand opposing the spraying. Still, it was another decade before he and fellow environmentalists had any real success halting herbicide use in the forest.

"Wayne knew what was going on, and he was very concerned about it," says Michael Yost, a Feather River College forestry instructor in Quincy. "But he didn't know what to do. He felt all alone."

When the community college was founded in 1969, it brought different people to Plumas County, "people not interested just in logging, but in what's really going on out there," Dakan says. He joined college students and instructors to form the nucleus of a community group that eventually convinced the Plumas County supervisors to ban the use of the herbicide 2,4-D on county property, and forced the Forest Service to suspend spraying on national forest lands in California.

"I never thought much about being part of any movement," Dakan says. "I always just said what I thought. One day I found that some of the kids were listening."

If Dakan helped create a Plumas County environmental movement, it was more of an eruption than a founding, says environmentalist Jackson. And what Dakan's "kids" heard was less instruction than rage.

"He's more like a voice from the wilderness than a teacher," Jackson says. "I see no difference between Thoreau and Wayne except that Thoreau wrote and Wayne shouts. He's a big old red fir tree who happens to have a very loud voice and speaks in English."

Dakan's studies of rare and endangered plants helped Friends of Plumas Wilderness protect a national forest roadless area near Spanish Peak until 1984, when Congress designated 21,000 acres of the Plumas National Forest as the Bucks Lake Wilderness Area. More recently, the group has been involved in a fight against a Forest Service proposal to dramatically increase clearcutting throughout the agency's California lands during the next ten years.

"Wayne has been a conscience to us," says Lloyd Britton, who retired in 1987 after 15 years as Plumas Forest supervisor. "His rather extreme views as a preservationist represent a side of the community we have to look at. In some rare instances, we actually agreed."

Despite policy differences, the Forest Service recognizes Dakan's expertise as a plant taxonomist and in 1973 asked him to help establish a reference collection of vascular plants in Plumas County. Dakan contributed nearly 800 of the 1,400 keyed, carded, and classified local species housed at the Plumas Forest office in Quincy. He named the collection the Rebecca Merritt Austin Memorial Herbarium.

Dakan calls the slender, 69-page checklist of Plumas County plants that he has been assembling his life's work, and he continually adds to his "hay pile" of pressed plants still to be mounted and moved to the herbarium. But he is no longer as interested in individual species

as in the broader ecological community.

"We can't just look at plants," he says. "We've got to look at the soil, the air, the water—the whole damn business. We've already lost the redwoods and the salmon, and now the California condor. When the environment gets so bad the buzzards are destroyed, you know we're in trouble."

Because he has studied Plumas County plants and animals for 50 years, witnessing their many changes, Dakan serves as a historian for the local environment. He can remember what specific places were like before they were degraded, says Yost. Aside from that, his primary role in the Plumas County environmental movement has been more as gadfly than mentor.

"His purity may be the reason we've done a better job here than some environmentalists have done elsewhere," Jackson says. "This man believes that agriculture was wrong in the beginning. He's not even talking about industrial man. He's trying to drag us all back 20,000 years—to make us a hunter-gatherer society."

Among some of his friends, Dakan is known as a raconteur whose stories are sprinkled with scatology, labor songs from the Wobbly era, and elaborate quotations from Rousseau, Shaw, Muir, and Toynbee. His Lone Pine Ranch is a one-acre lot in East Quincy graced by a two-and-half-room travel trailer with a tacked-on, enclosed porch. Sheltered there are his plant presses, microscope, glass gallon jars of home-dried fruits and mushrooms, and back issues of the *The Progressive* and *Mother Jones*.

To his critics, Dakan is a tiresome old man whose public diatribes are predictable down to the fist-shaking that always accompanies them. But critics' jeers have never bothered Dakan.

"I'm not an ordinary sort of character," Dakan says. "Not very many people like to hear what I have to say, but I don't believe they've got the message yet. They don't understand what the hell's going on. They don't think anything's important about the environment—they think it doesn't matter if we lose the spotted owl or the pitcher plant. I think it does."

JANE BRAXTON LITTLE *is a freelance writer living in Plumas County, California.*