

# North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

You don't expect a canoe trip down Murphy's Creek to be all that memorable because Murphy's Creek is not exactly the Quetico—or, as Steady Eddy likes to put it, "No matter where you are on Murphy's, you are always up the crick."

This trip got memorable in a hurry. I fell in.

Hugo Percy and Barb and I had a leisurely Sunday breakfast at Mickie's—Madison's earliest Sunday-morning service, Steady calls it—and then we drove over to Wingra to launch the canoe below the dam.

Perce asked if I wanted to "ride or guide," and, since it was his canoe, in the tradition of the *voyageurs* of old, Perce was the *Bourgeois*, our trusted leader, and, as such, should sit in the stern. I should sit up front.

Then a funny thing happened on my way to the bow.

With Perce holding the canoe and Barb holding her breath, I put both hands on the gunwales, the left foot on the bank, the right foot over the gunwale.

It is at this precise point in the retelling of this little parable that Steady likes to observe, with his preacher's grin: *You should have gone to church.*

This bank on which my left foot placed not only its weight, but also its trust, was not a solid, safe bank like Randall—it was a slippery, unsafe bank, as befits a muskrat ramble. Muck and marl and greasy skids.

Perce says it was a thing of beauty. Like Steady Eddy in paratroop boots. Or Chevy Chase in street boots. Flat on my back, half-in, half-out of the water, I was impressed by Perce's cool. Steady would have complimented me on the nice slide and called me out. Not Perce.

"Anytime you're ready," he said.

They drove me home, I changed into dry clothes, dry shoes and went back to try it again.

We boarded without mishap. Barb said she would see us in two hours at crick mouth if our luck held. She drove off, chuckling. We were under way on what Perce is pleased to call his Annual Murphy's Crick Sewer Run.

In mid-channel, you see both shores, both eyesores, trashy with litter, littered with trash, the bottles, the cans, the plastic bits and pieces, the flotsam and jetsam that won't be flushed away because the bowl is stopped up now and overflowing.

"God," Perce said every now and again.

You can get very depressed looking at this, but you have to look. There is a great lesson in looking, looking, looking until the pain, the hurt that comes in through your eyes fills every space in your body, every space in your mind, and the ugly question floats in your consciousness like a Clorox bottle: *What kind of animal does this?*

The answer, also, is not beautiful: *The*

*highest animal, the most developed animal, does this.*

All over Madison this morning, higher animals sat in churches and prayed to God for God-knows-what. For things they needed. For things they thought they needed. For things probably far removed from a Godforsaken, desecrated little creek.

Higher animals. Sitting in church. Higher animals. Sitting in a canoe.

The problem of waste disposal, Calvin Rutstrum noted in *Challenge Of the Wilderness*, is that you can't actually "dispose" of anything. It builds up. It finally overwhelms. If all the solids, Rutstrum asserts, were separated from the sewage and burned, the resulting gases would soon make breathing impossible on earth. With all rivers in the nation now open sewers, central governments are demanding that some other means be provided for sewage disposal. Where such legislation has been put into effect, some industries have found another way. They drill several thousand feet into the earth and pump their industrial waste and sewage into the clear artesian water system.

"We have polluted," Rutstrum concludes, "the surface water, the air, the earth's upper crust, now we are in the process of polluting the inner earth. All are bound to merge into ultimate catastrophe. Then where?"

As we drifted past the debris, I remembered the words of George Mendoza, who said there was an ugly, narrow side to many fishermen, "but then is this not true of all men?"

He said a good friend was always warning him that time is running away and soon there will be no rivers and streams to fish, so "get to your dreams now before it's too late."

In *Secret Places Of Trout Fishermen*, Mendoza admits that he dreams of rivers and poetry and so is an escapist from the mechanical, sunless canyons of life where "politicians and morbid souls concerned only with money and power choke off the young."

In man's world, states George Mendoza, injustice is king. Cities are graveyards of dreams, the drawings of children become old and real too soon. Remember how they first appeared—Picasso's cow or Klee's cat thinking of a bird?

The killing of innocence comes soon through teachers and television. We are all like bats in a cave swirling in darkness, screaming at each other, afraid to move into the light of new adventures.

"I still find innocence in rivers," Mendoza insists, "because rivers make their own paths under the gliders of wind and stars. Sometimes I sit close beside a river and listen to it, listen to it all night, until the sound of water rushing over rocks takes me far away."

I close my eyes and listen to the sound of water in Murphy's Crick. •