

North Country Notebook

by George Vukelich
Of The Capital Times Staff



Found: A job that pays you to go fishing

Veteran WIBA announcer starts new career with The Capital Times

IT DOESN'T SEEM possible.

A week ago I was Papa Hambone sitting comfortably in front of an Electro-voice microphone at WIBA and today I'm perched warily in front of a Harris Video Display Terminal at The Capital Times, hunting for the words to tell you how it feels to be so far from Fitchburg on a night like this.

Well, paisan, it feels like it felt that impressive December day on Lake Superior when the waves rolled right over the battened hatches on the big ore-carrier.

It feels like capsizing in the Wolf River and being fished-out by the endlessly resourceful Hank Martel.

It feels like what that cowboy felt when he saw the Grand Canyon for the very first time and managed to whisper, "Gawd Almighty. *Something* happened here."

AT AGE 49 ("Going on 17," my family assures me), I am changing jobs in mid-ocean and it is a little awesome. What the cowboy said goes double for me. And what Satchel Paige said goes triple.

As the oldest rookie on the roster, I plan to get by with a little help from my young friends here, including Cornelius, Kreisman, and the two Custers, Frank and George.

Actually, the shock is wearing off, and I am no longer quite as traumatized by the turn of events.

True, I don't work nights with Bob Banko anymore, but I still listen to him on the Five-Thirty and Ten O'Clock News, and his wife Jo has the desk opposite mine so Bob and I can exchange notes.

And if I really get homesick, I can always call him up and know that he'll clear all that sentimental stuff right out of my sinuses.

IF THE TRUTH be known, I'm just plain happy to be here, in this place, with these people, writing about the outdoors in particular, and folks in general.

It's not unlike the feeling you get when your musky pole is bent double and while you can't see anything yet, whatever it is, it's alive and pumping down there and it is definitely not a snag.

My only regret is that my father, The Old Man, is not here to see this circumstance come to pass. As a reader of skies and waters and subtle windshifts, he would see the fun in this job. The fun and the joy.

And he would see it from the perspective of an immigrant who found little fun or joy in the foundries of Old Milwaukee and who fled to the woods, the healing waters, every chance he could.

Thank God, he took me with him. "Georgi," he would say now if he could. "I am proud. Only a bohunk son would find a job that pays him to go fishing."

IN ADDITION TO The Old Man, I am indebted to an awful lot of folks who took



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their turns at preparing me for this job, and consequently when you read North Country Notebook, it's not just me you're reading, you are reading all of them, too.

Folks like Dynie Mansfield, Mel Ellis, Bob Resch, Bob Kneebone, Jim Nania, Randy Olson, Howard Mead, Buzz Holland, Gene Roark, Orié Loucks, Arthur Hasler, Libby and Jim Zimmerman, Norm Zimmerman, Don Reinfeldt, Hugh Iltis, John Nees, Walter Scott, Bob Schneider, Russ Colvin, Joe Golding, Karl Schmidt, Vern Arendt out of Port Washington, Sleepy Ed Stanzell and Gene Step up in Three Lakes, Hank Martel in Keshena, the fabled Le-Clair clan of Two Rivers, Sandy Nate of Fort Hope, Ontario ... the names bubble to the surface like an exploding Mayfly hatch.

An endless, endless circle of friends who taught me everything, literally everything, I know about anything.

THERE WAS MY father, The Old Man, who took me squirrel hunting in that Waukesha woods after I pestered him for a .22 Stevens single-shot and he lectured me on responsibility and manhood. Then he saw me firing into a squirrel's nest and he ripped the rifle away and wrapped it around a tree and said I was too damn dumb to go hunting just yet.

There was Hank Martel who loved the Indian way of life as only a Menominee can love it and who took me to see his beloved eagles that magical day. Into the trackless boonies of the old Reservation, past the abandoned beaver ponds, around a sea of pitcher plants, into the sacred pine grove below the aerie.

I told him I was honored that he had taken me to this hallowed grandfather place because probably not many white men had seen it. "Not many Indians either," he had snorted. "Indian is getting like the white man. If you can't reach it by car, the hell with it."

THERE WAS MY own grandfather, Vincent Foale, who came to this country from Romania and who never really learned the language here or needed to. I never saw him with a gun in his hands or a fishpole

either, but the summer after his wife Baba Julia died, he came up to stay with my folks at the Big Stone Lake on the Three Lakes chain and he spent the whole summer live-trapping rabbits with a wooden beer case. They were all unhurt, unmarked and unbelievably plump. He released every single one after he talked to them for little while in Romanian.

THERE WAS MY mother who used to fish walleyes with The Old Man all over the North Country: the Manitowish Chain, the Arbor Vitae, Fence Lake, Pelican, Planting Ground and all those places in Minnesota where the Johns were outside and the leeches kept her on the beach.

She would perch up in the bow of all those wooden roundbottoms like a fluffed-up sparrow and she would catch more fish than anybody except the Old Man. When he died, she gave up fishing altogether.

And, of course, there was, and is, Dynie Mansfield. He taught me as much about the great North Country as my own father did. And Dynie does it in English.

IF YOU LOVE the North Country as much as they do, stick around and set a spell. Any friend of mine is a friend of yours. I said it on the radio for the last time one week ago, and I write it in print for the first time today: "For good wine, for good food, for good friends, Thank God."