

# North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

It came to me on the ice the other day: a kind of vision the shamans have.

The wind raised great snow devils on the field of ice. They rose and dropped, and you could follow the waves of crystals as they flowed across the ice like some living force on the face of a dead planet. As the waves passed over my iced-beaded Sorel boots, I felt an invisible cold on my face and then it was gone, and I was toasty warm everywhere else as usual.

I wriggled my toes in the ice-crusting boots and hung out with my feet: dry, warm, hibernating in their little cocoons of wool socks and felt liners, and the rubber-leather miracles that were as warm as igloos.

That's when it came to me. *The vision.*

I looked at my feet and saw them the way they were all the winters I was growing up. They weren't encased in Sorel boots. They were encased in the knee-high clammy constructions called High Cuts. God, I shivered at the thought, and I realized that a whole generation of us had grown up with wet, cold, clammy feet in those damned leather boots because they gave away a pocket knife with the boots and we all convinced our mothers that the boots were the best thing since Wonder Bread.

We wore high cuts and corduroy knickers, and we all should have perished in the snows of yesteryear except for a basic law of life. As Dnyie Mansfield always put it: *The good Lord watches over the Dumb Ones.*

And Catholic kids weren't the only ones.

George Schaller, in his book *Stones Of Silence*, an account of his journeys in the Himalayas, writes of thinly clad Sherpas,

one in knickers and tennis shoes "like a school boy on a picnic."

"I tell him to put on his boots," Schaller reports, "but he replies that he has no boots, that the money I gave him to buy a pair in Kathmandu was spent on other things. To cross passes nearly 18,000 feet high in midwinter in tennis shoes is a good way to freeze toes, I note dourly, and hand him my last clean pair of wool socks."

Calvin Rutstrum thinks we have a "cold and snow fear complex," and he says that most people try to avoid winter altogether by either staying inside the house or heading for the warmer climates.

In his book *Paradise Below Zero*, one of the seminal texts on winter camping, Rutstrum says that the birth some winters ago of a baby in a Minneapolis snowdrift—the result of an auto accident while the mother was en route to the hospital—tends to point up the cold and snow fear complex.

"Newspaper reporters," Rutstrum recalls, "sought to give the story high, sensational human interest until the receiving room personnel of the hospital played it down as insignificant."

"The doctor receiving the mother and baby in his care," Rutstrum emphasizes, "stated that the baby could not have been born under more viable conditions—that many babies might have been saved had they been born in a fresh snowdrift rather than in the questionable asepsis of a modern home or hospital."

It's probably all true, but Steady Eddy feels that any doctor as candid as that one is now probably a plumber somewhere or doing maintenance welding on the Alaska pipeline.

"As a boy," Rutstrum boasts, "I experienced great exhilaration on the arrival of winter. After more than half a century, I have not lost it. While perhaps for wholesome acceptance of winter one needs a healthy, robust body that craves vigorous action and diversion from the too often physically enervating, comfortable norm, what seems the most important requirement of all is an understanding of the physiological relationship of mind and body as it adapts to the little-understood exigencies of cold and snow."

What all that means, Steady says, is that grade school kids make angels in the snow and high school kids wear tennies in the snow and Old Guys still wear their funny, heatless snap-brim hats like their fathers before them.

Seventy to 80% of your body heat, the experts say, can be lost through your head.

"And if you've got a big head," Steady shrugs, "God only knows...."

Inside the thermal underwear, inside the windproof snowmobile suit, I watched the pictures inside my head.

There we are, in the seventh grade, Charlie Kaiser and all the rest of us, sopping wet and smelling like wet feathers, rosy-cheeked and runny-nosed, the radiators hissing, the wooden floors creaking, the smell of damp in the air: Of leather, wool and corduroy; the Seven-Foot Nun noting any deviation from the norm—a handful of snow saved from Outside, an icicle, saved and shoved under someone's dry seat or down someone's dry neck. Devil's work. She always saw Charlie clearly, and Charlie behind his thick glasses had to cock his head and squint when he tried to see her at all.

The Seven-Foot Nun always stood outside the boys' john, supervising our entry and egress, four boys at a time, because there were four urinals (and for the longest time in that innocent age we

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never knew how she knew that) and not too much time for dawdling or "monkey business."

Charlie, first free spirit we ever knew, like a puppy put out to piddle, loved to rush around in there, flushing all the Johns in sequence, ratcheting down all the paper towel dispensers, running water in all the sinks and generally creating an uproar.

He would giggle insanely, as outside the Seven-Foot Nun warned, then pleaded, then cajoled, then threatened and then—one unforgettable day, she not only did all that, *she also walked into the john, grabbed Charlie by the ear and marched us all out.*

Shocked. Shaken. Never to be secure again.

Now, that. That was a cold day.