

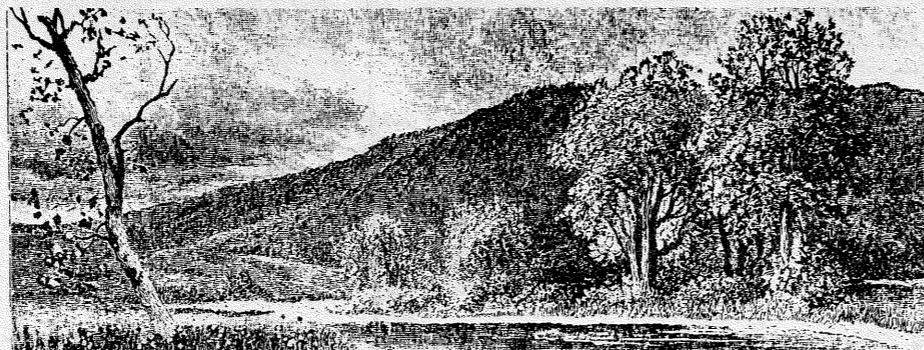
Roads with a View

Happenings in the
back country.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

We were cruising the Rustic Roads in Oneida and Vilas counties the other day—"getting off the highways and getting it on with the byways" is the way Steady Eddy puts it—and of course, many of the roads are peopled with ghosts.

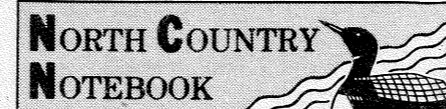
A lifetime ago, the Old Man trailed his



wooden boats behind the dinged-up fish car to the nameless bass lakes back in the boonies where no man had gone before, and that included the game wardens.

After he had his heart attack and the doctor told him to cut out the deer hunting, the Old Man and my mother drove the gravel roads that ran right up to the Michigan border, watching for partridge on the road shoulders and listening to the Wisconsin football game on the radio.

In those days, you saw a lot of old tarpa-



per shacks where Old Coots dwelt alone with their kerosene stoves and outside plumbing, living off the cut-over land like pack rats, survivors in the slashings of the great logging frenzy that had swept through the Big Woods like a war.

You saw a lot of deserted farms up in

that cut-over country, too. Pathetic, silent wooden houses, many of them hardly more than log cabins, their spines broken and cracked by the long north country winters, their roofs collapsed and crushed like the dreams the long-gone occupants must have had in another time, in another life.

Once, in the mist of a gray fall morning, a particular deserted farmhouse stuck in my mind because the empty windows facing the road along with the empty doorway beneath seemed to form a face, a human face, comical, yet frightening—the way carved pumpkins can be comical, yet frightening.

Abandoned farm. Abandoned house. Abandoned.

Just looking at that old house gave you the feeling that looking at old, old grave markers can give you. I wrote about that feeling for *Wisconsin Trails* back then.

Man walks his minute and then no more.

*The farm couple saw this kind of morn
in another year, a dead lost month.*

The house so new it smelled of wood.

His bride a warm and wondrous joy.

Did they love their land?

Did they love their life?

The strong young farmer

and his strong young wife?

Was his a windburned kindly face?

Was this a quiet, happy place?

Did they have children

and were some boys?

Did they keep Christmas with

homemade toys?

*No one knows, no one can say
except there is one truth here
plain as day.*

No one owns this land at all.

That is the lesson of the fall.

*The land owns us, not the other way
round.*

We are walking on eternal ground.

*The squirrel stores nuts in the rotting
floor.*

Man walks his moment

and then

no more.

We were on our way to Star Lake when we saw something we had never seen before in our lives. To orient you, Star Lake is northwest of Eagle River up in the Northern Highland American Legion Forest.

Gene, the bartender at Post 431 in Three Lakes, says it surprises some folks to learn that there's an American Legion Forest.

"It really shouldn't be that surprising," Gene says. "What the hell? The Legion has its own squirrels. Why shouldn't the Legion have its own trees?"

What we saw happened where County N joins County K.

At the junction, three or four ravens were in the middle of the road like church people at vespers. The ravens were feeding on a road kill. It was too small to be a deer, unless it was a fawn.

As we stopped, the ravens instantly took off, flapping, crying, revealing one huge bird still at the carcass, a bird we hadn't seen immediately, and I don't know why.

It was a bald eagle.

Slowly, reluctantly, it seemed, the bald eagle, too, left the carcass. The bird was heavy, mature. It seemed to lift just inches from the car hood, its eyes yellow as a cat's, a snake's. Its wings seemed to engulf the car, its sleek head white as an old man's, its body, its legs shaggy as a dog's, its beak curved as a scythe. I thought I saw blood on the beak, but I would not swear to it.

With all the birds gone, the carcass looked to be that of a porcupine, overturned, on its back, the smooth belly exposed and torn open. It was carrion, dead meat, and the eagle had fed on it wingtip-to-wingtip with the other eaters of carrion, with the other scavengers.

Back in Madison, on my walk around Lake Wingra, I cut through Vilas Park and looked in on the pair of bald eagles the zoo has penned in their steepled open-air cage.

I watched for half an hour and neither of the birds flew. They took turns running back and forth at each other like clumsy old men on old heavy legs. There were no porcupines to be seen. No sleek ravens, either. The eagles ran, waited. A keeper would bring them dead meat. I didn't want to see that. ■

George Vukelich's story "Coming of Age" appears in Lost River Press' recently published Harvest Moon: A Wisconsin Outdoor Anthology.