

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

Freewheelin' Friends

I've had a soft spot in my heart for the Menominee people ever since that memorable bell-clear morning on the old reservation when I rode along with Henry Martel in his beat-up pickup truck to do a little trout fishing.

Henry, it must be remembered, once observed of his tribe with some sadness: "Indian is getting like the white man. If you can't reach it by car, to hell with it."

We were rolling merrily along the faded blacktop, not a car or a care in sight, when a tire—a whole *wheel*, actually—appeared as if by magic in front of us. I asked Henry what the hell it was.

With the wisdom of the old chiefs in his considered response, Henry said: "I think it's our front wheel."

Sure enough, the pickup sank to the ground on its right front axle as Henry deftly brought us to a screeching halt. Ahead, the truck wheel rolled along the empty road as though it had a little motor and a little driver inside.

"That son of a gun," Henry said in admiration. "It never just falls flat. It *always* rolls."

Henry lost a lot of wheels because he drove the old pickup all around the reservation: over beaver dams, down high-centered trails. His off-road acrobatics put terrific stress on the lug nuts and plates; eventually the holes widened, the nuts slipped out and the wheels—*wheels*—slipped off.

Not to worry. First Henry retrieved the errant wheel—"so it won't tie up traffic"—then he instructed me in the art of "Indian tracking." I was to walk back on my side of the road and scan the shoulder while Henry would do the

same on his side. He said we were looking for lug nuts and when we found three, that would be enough, because three would hold the wheel on.

It took us only 15 minutes; Henry found two and I tripped over one. He jacked up the truck, slipped the wheel back on, spaced out the three nuts, tightened them down, and we roared off as if nothing had happened.

"It's nothing," Henry said. "No big deal. Once *two* wheels fell off. That took some time. You need six nuts."



Well, you can see why I've got that soft spot for Henry and his people. They're as natural and free-spirited as the tumbling Wolf River and wise beyond any of us.

Hilary Waukau is like that too. I don't know if he has ever lost any wheels but I know he would cope because he's wise. He was born in Neopit in 1922 and has lived all his life on the Menominee Reservation, except for the 31 months he spent with the Marines in the Pacific during World War II. He has served seven Wisconsin governors on a variety of boards and commissions, was a member of the Menominee tribal government, and when the reservation was a Wisconsin county, he served seven years as a county supervisor.

A proclamation presented to him in Appleton last month cited his long record of service; it was signed on behalf of Wisconsin County Executives

and Administrators by county execs William O'Donnell of Milwaukee County, Leonard Ziolkowski of Racine County and Jonathan Barry of Dane County. Eau Claire County Administrator Ronald Wampler also signed the announcement.

Waukau's peers honored him for his contributions to the entire state of Wisconsin, not the least of which, I think, was a speech he made to the Wisconsin Counties Association in September 1984 on the subject of Indian treaty rights.

"We evolved treaties," Hilary Waukau said, "to protect the rights of our people so that we would have something to pass on to our children and grandchildren....I don't see anybody here protecting the Indian's point of view...."

"You ought to be very, very careful on how you handle this abrogation of treaty rights. You mention the Menominee people, yes. The Menominee people were terminated in 1961 by the result of an action by the United States Congress. This had a disastrous psychological, moral and physical effect on our people. We were restored to Trust status in 1973. We had something there that we believe is not 'ours'; it's for our children and grandchildren.

"I speak with a lot of sentiment when I urge you people to use caution when you petition the Congress of the United States to abrogate treaties. Now, if you abrogate this treaty here with the Indian people, what credit does this great country have in its dealings with foreign countries in abrogating treaties? These treaties were made in good faith by our people. We have kept our word!

"The treaties were enacted and written 'for as long as the sun sets, the water flows and the grass is green.' I have not seen any changes in that type of cycle there, but I can tell you this: When you look at the Indian's land and the white man's land, it's a difference of night and day. Our land is preserved as our forefathers handed it to us. You go across the reservation line and you see an area that is denuded. You have erosion problems. Your air is polluted. Your water is polluted. You have polluted the ground and now you're going to pollute *underground* with nuclear dumps.



Unless you people wake up soon and get the environment back on its feet, you're going to reach a point of no return and you're going to self-destruct, and I feel sorry for you.

"Again, I plead with you and urge you to give this Resolution 59 serious consideration and think of the ramifications on the Indian people. I have a briefcase full of clippings where you call us 'Smokies' and say you can find 'a trail of empty whiskey bottles.' What have we done to you that makes you feel that way towards us? We don't have hard feelings in our heart for you. In an Indian way, our hearts are happy. We extend happiness to everyone. We just want to have what is coming to us."

At the 1984 WCA Convention, Resolution 59 was adopted, urging Congress to limit Indian treaty rights. In March 1986, the WCA board of directors unanimously approved rescission of that 1984 convention resolution.

Henry Martel says: "White man is getting like the Indian. When the wheel falls off, walk back and find some lug nuts." ■