

A Door County Local Yokel

Cousin Kinsey sees changing times for his home.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

We were up in Door County the other evening helping our Cousin Kinsey and his wife Shirley celebrate yet another wedding anniversary.

Actually, Cousin Kinsey is not my cousin by blood. His mother and my wife's mother were sisters, and so my wife and Kinsey are cousins by blood.

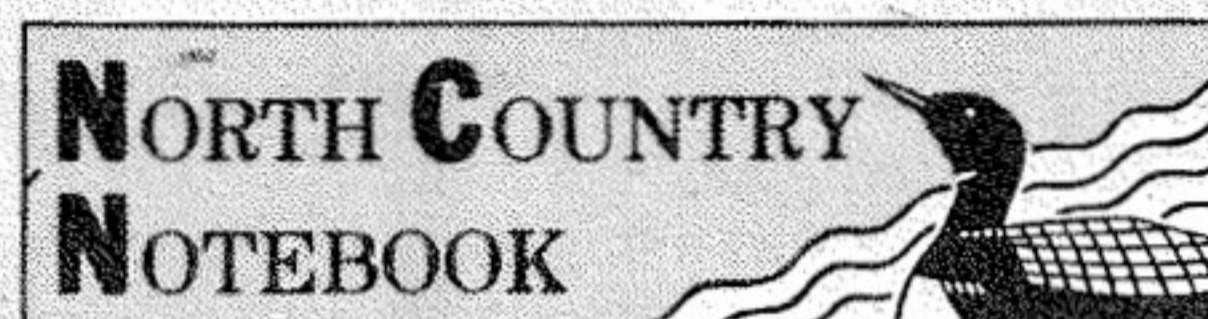
"Your status in the Johnson clan," Steady Eddy says, "is that of 'honorary cousin.' The blue-eyed people have made you an honorary blue-eyed person."

This was a surprise dinner planned by

the children of Shirley and Kinsey to be held at Andrae's in Sturgeon Bay. We would be quartered in the small dining room because the local Lions Club would be denned up in the large dining room.

Before dinner, we shared the barroom with the Lions. Most of them stood. Most of us sat. The Lions looked well-fed, sleek and colorful in sleeveless yellow vests that looked like the life jackets boaters and canoeists wear on the water. The Lions' jackets were much thinner than boaters' jackets because they contained no flotation material at all, none being needed, of course, as the Lions seemed disinclined to go anywhere near water this evening.

Cousin Kinsey knew each Lion by name. It really seems that he knows everyone in Sturgeon Bay by name. After all, he was born and raised there, leaving it only for brief periods. One time he



went to the Army and attended the Pacific war against the empire of Japan. Another time he went to Madison and attended the University of Wisconsin, against his better judgment.

He knows the best places to eat in Door County, and he says Andrae's is one of them. Birmingham's up on the bay side is another—"for lunch and for their Friday night fish fry, especially if you like perch."

He also knows the best places to see wildflowers in the county, including yellow lady slippers in profusion. He'll even tell you where, once he's certain you aren't going to tell everybody and his brother—or sister—or do something dumb with the information like put it in the newspaper.

Cousin Kinsey takes pride in identifying himself as a local yokel. He says he's been stopped on the streets so often by tourists for directions and information that he's thinking of getting a T-shirt made up with "Local Yokel" printed on it.

Incidentally, I don't think Cousin Kinsey was completely surprised by the "surprise dinner." Like fishermen who can locate fish by the smell of the water in which they school, I think Cousin Kinsey can locate relatives by the smell of the intrigue in which they do likewise.

A delicate little bell tinkled, and the Lions finished their drinks. "Belling the cats," Steady Eddy calls that tradition. The Lions filed—like lambs—out of the bar and padded toward their dinners, which you sensed included meat. Cousin Kinsey's sister, Marianne Kellman, steered us around, and I wound up sitting next to Cousin Kinsey. It is a high honor. Especially, Steady adds, for a lowly person.

Cousin Kinsey spent a lifetime in the cherry business in Door County. He started out picking cherries in the orchards, and when he retired he was managing orchards. As his father had done.

"The cherry business is kaput up here for now," Cousin Kinsey said. "Shipbuilding is kaput too."

The cherry business, he explains, is dependent upon many factors: The weather, which can affect a whole crop. The price on the market. The competition from the orchards over in Michigan.

A lot of factors. Last year the cherry crop was down millions of pounds from what it had been. *Millions of pounds!*

"Cherries are kaput for right now," he repeated. "But they'll come back."

"It's like commercial fishing out in Lake Michigan. The fishermen have good years, and they have bad years, but the fishing manages to hang on. Well, the cherry business is like that too. It'll come back."

"Now, shipbuilding up here," he continued, "the big shipbuilding, building the new lake carriers, that's all done now for the next 40 years."

He explains that the shipyard has finished building all the carriers the industry figures it needs for those next four decades. So thousands of people who built those boats were let go because they simply weren't needed anymore.

We might not see another lake boat on the ways in Sturgeon Bay in our lifetime. Forty years! Although that's not really so old for a boat—I remember sailing as a deckhand on a United States Steel ore carrier that was older than that. The Norman B. Ream was 50, but she was kept up and was seaworthy enough to last another 50, provided a November storm didn't catch her and do her in first. That's always a possibility even for a brand-new state-of-the-art boat.

"Oh, the new carriers will come into the yard for maintenance," Cousin Kinsey said. "But you don't need thousands of workers to do maintenance. There'll be a little work, but no big shipbuilding. They even let the engineering staff go, and those are the people who design the ships."

So where does Door County look for money, for jobs? Tourism? Gift Shops? Condos? Cousin Kinsey shrugged.

Writer Norb Blei, who fled Chicago years ago to live in Ellison Bay, would understand that Door County shrug. Blei has lived here year-round long enough now to think like the locals think.

"There's enough of this country being raped every day," Norb Blei wrote, "for commercial reasons. Where do we go, where do we turn when we have nowhere, nothing...no trees, no lakes, no quiet space? I hate to see Door County become the very citified landscape that people are fleeing."

Cousin Kinsey thinks likewise. So do his cousins. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Saturdays at 8:30 p.m. on Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA (970 AM).