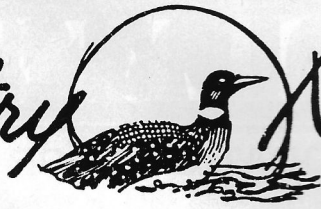


North Country Notebook



By GEORGE VUKELICH

SERIOUS FISH-CARS

In the good old days of yore, before the four-wheel-drive trucks and wagons opened up the backwoods like a gutted walleye, all the Old Coots who were serious about their fishing had serious fish-cars for the backwoods.

I got to pondering that the other day when we were driving up to Grandpa's Lake, the four of us packed into a little Honda like breadsticks.

"You are not a serious fisher," Steady Eddy told the breadstick who was driving. "Never mind your great gas mileage. This is a sobbing cry from your average, old-timey, run-of-the-woods North Country fish-car. I can get more fishing gear into my shaving kit. This is not a fish-car. This is a lunchbox."

The rest was silence. Well, almost. We were too embarrassed to talk big about fishing anymore, so we talked little about baseball. There wasn't another peep from Steady Eddy but we all knew he was right. My Old Man. His Old Man. Dynie Mansfield. Gordon MacQuarrie. Judge John Voelker, up in the U.P. *They were serious fishermen. They had serious fish-cars.*

The Judge said once of his fish-car, duly christened "Buckshot" with a bottle of beer broken across her radiator, "When I got her, she not only looked like a tramp, she was a tramp." The Judge was speaking for every serious Old Timer who fished. Each had his own "Buckshot."

The lights, brakes, horn, muffler and charger didn't work; you could throw a creel through the leaky roof; a wildcat had been let loose in the upholstery; the clanking engine sounded like the cardiac thumpings of an expiring thresher; a cardboard carton — appropriately advertising a deodorant — took the place of the glass missing from the driver's door; the windshield was cracked and completely fogged over like a pair of dime-store sun glasses, giving the driver a wavering, surrealist vision of the occasional larger objects he was able to behold.

Like all serious fish-car owners, The Judge admitted that a fish-car was not

only hard on your buns, it was even harder on your bankroll.

My Old Man could testify to that. I remember his love affair with an oxydized vintage Ford, but not being of a literary bent, he simply called it "The Ford." The car that sat inside the garage was simply called "The Chrysler."

The Old Man practically rebuilt the engine in The Ford, put on practically new tires and kept the inside as well-stocked as a plumber's truck with bins. The Ford was not your prototype *funky* fish-car in which the coffee can full of worms cooked in the noontday sun and then bonded to the very frame like Ziebart.

The Ford was a fish-car whose only blemishes came when it was parked under the lower branches of the pines while birds were parked in the higher branches.

Because of that symbiotic relationship, the Old Man took to parking his fish-car *inside* the garage. Blemishes didn't happen to The Ford anymore. Blemishes happened to The Chrysler.

Dynie Mansfield actually had an old Chrysler for his fish-car and that one sat out under the trees, too. Dynie started his Chrysler with a screwdriver which he kept in the glove compartment because how in hell could you walk around with a screwdriver on your key chain? Dynie said he was glad he lost the key, because a key-less fish-car is just a little bitty harder to steal — unless you're fishing in Chicago.

You could pack the backseats of those fish-cars with all the gear in the world because nobody sat back there. You sat in the front seats with the maps and the thermos bottles. The gear sat in the back.

In his book *Trout Madness*, The Judge listed some of the gear that he and Buckshot always carried. Standard equipment: Four fly rods and a spinning rod, all of which rode snugly on rubber slings suspended from the inside. (He didn't say the slings were surgical tubing, but Steady says: "Bet on it.") Binoculars, a camera, a magni-

fying glass (for studying the birds and the bees and the stomach contents of trout.)

Four sizes of flashlights (from pencil size to Lindbergh Beacon) and even one of those old Stonebridge candle lanterns for emergencies; waders and hip boots and low boat boots and of course, all the *usual* fishing gear (THAT would take a page by itself) complete with patching cement, ferule cement plus all the many odds and ends: eight miles of miscellaneous sizes and lengths of rope, a complete set of county maps showing all waters and sideroads; a bedroll and spare blanket, rain clothes, a complete change of woods clothes, a tarpaulin and pup tent, a Primus stove and nesting cook kit, assorted water canteens, a small portable ice box, grub for a week, mostly bottled or canned, and last "but not least," always a supply of beer and a bottle or two of whiskey.

"In addition," The Judge appends, "I carry two spare tires and some extra tubes, enough small parts to start a neighborhood garage, a hand-cranked tigger that could yank a Patton tank out of a mudhole, complete with assorted logging chains, snatch blocks and 'come-alongs' and U-bolts and towing cables, together with an old car axle to drive into the ground and use as a towing anchor in treeless terrain. I also carry enough tools and assorted junk to build and furnish a ranch house.

"On the roof, I carry my rubber boat and inside the car my boat gear, including anchors, jointed paddles, kapok cushions, air pump, etc. I carry two axes, one hatchet, one headhunting brush knife, two sizes of pruning shears for cleaning out difficult 'hot spots,' an all-size leather punch, two handsaws, nails and hammers and enough pry bars and wrecking tools to convict me of intended burglary..."

Remind me to tell you about Dynie's fish-car sometime. Dynie, who lived by the credo: If One is Good, Two is Better. ■