

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

by George Vukelich

Our assignment was to photograph eagles for a University of Wisconsin film on the famous Wolf River and its environs. Our guide was Henry Martel, a Menominee who lives in Keshena, on the old Indian Reservation, now Wisconsin's newest county.

As Hank's battered Chevy pickup nosed along the rutted tracks, he checked the rear-view mirror regularly. The green University station wagon was still in view, bouncing along behind us. The overhanging branches flailed against our windshield like buggy whips.

Turning, I caught a glimpse of Professor Walt Meives hunched in the wagon, his cigar clenched in his teeth, his hands tight on the wheel.

"Indian road," Henry chuckled. "Built for Indian cars."

Now we climbed on to what appeared to be a long winding ridge that curved like a crescent through the thickening brush ahead.

"Old beaver dam," Henry said. "We're right on top of it." He waved to the right. "Years ago, that was all flooded. They built a pretty good lake right here."

The crowding growth bent and beat at our fenders and flanks with swishing clunks and raps and squeals. Henry told of hunting this back country ever since his grandfather first took him along.

"I was seven years old and you know, this country hasn't changed one bit back here. My grandfather would love that. You want to see this country, you walk in."

It was on his deer-hunting expeditions beyond the rutted road that Henry first saw the eagles. A male and a female.

Henry maintains that only a handful of Indians know the spot.

"Indians are getting like the white man," Henry smiles. "If you can't reach it by car, to hell with it."

We crossed the beaver dam and then we just ran out of road. Water and marsh stretched beyond.

"End of the line," Henry said, shutting off the ignition. "Now white man walk."

We got out and watched the wagon pull in behind us. Twigs and leaves and branches festooned the grill.

"No more road, Walt," Henry said.

"I got that feeling two miles back," he said.

Walt's crew — Jack Lund and Jerry Schmidt — piled out of the wagon, shaking their heads. While Walt loaded his camera on the tailgate, we all had coffee out of Henry's thermos. Then we pulled on the chest-high waders and picked up the photographic gear, tripod, tape recorder, and shotgun microphone. Walt cradled the precious 16 mm camera and we waded after Henry into the knee-deep water, past a profusion of pitcher plants. Back on high ground briefly, Hank pointed out deer signs along the trail. The mounded pellets were everywhere.

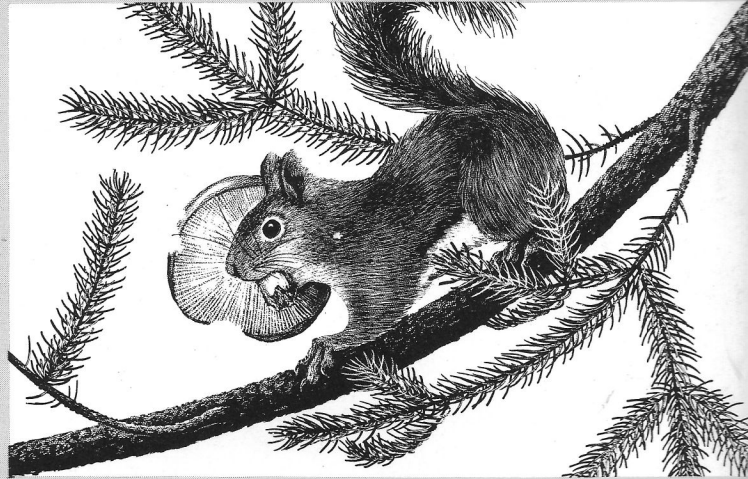
"Walt," Henry said, "you stand here in the fall and the deer will run over your camera."

"If I stand here in the fall," Walt replied, "I won't have the camera."

The terrain dipped again and we moved through the underbrush for what seemed an eternity. The country was more jungle-like than the usual Northern Wisconsin. Then the abandoned beaver pond burst into view. The opening was miles across. In the distance, the sun glistened on the scattered potholes.

"Ducks too," Walt murmured. "They should be thick in here in the fall."

"Thick," Hank agreed. "Mallards. Sometimes geese. Canadas."



Walt, a shotgun man from way back in Mellen, wanted to know who hunted here.

"Just me," Hank said. "And my brother-in-law."

"Let me know when there's an opening for another relative," Walt said. His eyes swept the stretching marshland and he sighed audibly.

We slugged through the wetlands for a full quarter of a mile further and then Henry stopped and pointed to a grove of white pines that soared like redwoods ahead.

"In there," he said. "In the pines. The eagles live there."

Even as he pointed, we heard the rusty-squeaking-hinge cry of the bald eagle, and a huge male rose into view, climbing, soaring above the grove. He wheeled, and the sun glanced off the broad white tail.

We stood for a full minute, watching, our chests heaving, the sweat stinging our eyes and dampening our shirts.

Walt checked the sun and set up shop in a clump of brush. He peered up at the diminishing speck.

The female, as though on cue, rose then and circled beneath her mate. The pair of them drew lazy figure-eights in the blue sky.

Walt and his crew spent the balance of the afternoon knee-deep in the water, squinting up into the sun and tracking the soaring birds until they became arm weary.

Hank and I pushed into the grove of white pine and hemlock and lay on our backs, smoking and talking and staring at the dizzying crowns.

"You come here," Henry said, "you don't need pills."

We stayed so long I lost track of time, talking of wilderness and eagles and the old Indian way of life. I had the feeling that Henry came to this place not only to hunt deer and ducks, but to watch and listen and remember. I had the feeling that Henry came to this place because his grandfather was here, very close, near by, all around.

These trees, after all, had never seen the white man's axe. They were ancient when his grandfather first saw them. These trees were not only links with the past; in a very real sense, they were the past. The trees and the eagles and the absence of the white man's world. In that moment I knew why the cleared campsites and the white man's trailers and outboard motors and superhighways and insect sprays were in the end bad medicine.

Finally we left the quiet place without saying a word and as we picked our way out there was only the deepening shadow and the constant rusty-hinge squeaking cry of the watchful eagles. Overhead and out of sight, and as free as the old grandfathers first found them.