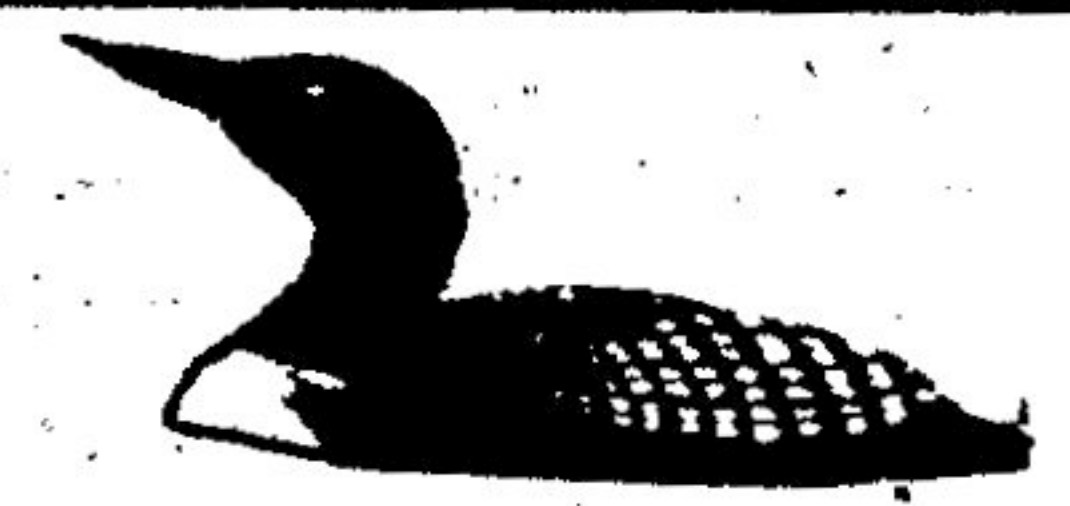


North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

The best thing about getting new boots is that you can throw the old ones away.

The worst thing about getting new boots is that you have to break them in.

I don't know why throwing stuff out makes some people happy, but I do know that I am one of those people.

Simplify, simplify, Henry David Thoreau admonishes everybody.

The Past, observes Carl Sandburg, is a bucket of ashes.

If you don't use it, says Steady Eddy, *you might as well lose it*.

I never realized I was one of those simplifying folk until the night I took part in an old North Country ritual on the banks of Ontario's Albany River at a little place called Ogoki Post.

We were coming off a canoe trip, camped across from the Cree village on our last night, just waiting for the bush plane to come get us in the morning.

After supper, we just kind of hung out around the campfire and told stories and watched the flames and the sky and told some more stories. We also finished off, as I recall, the last of Karl's Cooking-and-Medicinal Rum, and that's where the ritual came in.

Sandy Nate, our Cree guide out of Fort Hope, began rummaging around in his pack, pulled out a pair of pants, slipped out of the pants he was wearing and *threw them into the fire*.

He explained that sometimes clothes got so funky they were beyond washing, and it was really best to burn them. God, that made sense to me. I wound up burning most of the stuff in my duffle, not to mention the Hudson Bay socks that I had lived in for a week straight.

I can't explain the feeling of discovery. It was Thoreau, Carl Sandburg and Steady Eddy. I stood there in the Northern night, barefoot and bushy-tailed, wishing only that I had more balled-up laundry to throw into that cleansing fire. Talk about being *simplified*. If the canoe hadn't been aluminum, I might have pitched that in, too.

So, off with the old and on with the new.

Folks breaking in new boots, Steady says, remind him of folks who do everything in the world to get their lawns growing fast and high, and then they go out and cut the lawns down again.

There are honest differences and opinion about breaking in new boots.

"As sure as God made hot summers in Kansas," writes woods bum and Wilderness Camping editor Harry Roberts, "some damn fool is going to tell you that standing in a creek with new boots and wearing them dry is the only way to break in boots."

That's an old Army trick, Harry says, an invention born of necessity way back in WW I (not the Big One, Steady points out) that has somehow become part of Outdoor Boot Lore.

The WW I Army shoe, Harry notes,

while well-lasted (the Munson combination last is a lovely one for the narrow-heeled Americano) was often pinched in the throat and drawn too tightly in the spade, because the contractors could knock down a little material that way. Leather stretches when wet, so the doughboy soaked his boots, pulled on extra socks, and wore the boots until dry to stretch the throat and spade of the boot. That way it didn't cut his toes off with every step.

"This is not only unnecessary today," Harry insists, "but it can also be detrimental to the health of the boot, to say nothing of your feet."

Colin Fletcher, who is probably America's foremost authority on walking, says that soaking your boots in water and then wearing them "sounds like pretty drastic treatment to me," and he's never tried it.

"But one experienced mountaineer I know," Colin adds, "who had always felt as I do about the soaking theory, once tried it out as a crash program and found that it worked. Perhaps it's relevant, though, that he hasn't repeated it."

All he does to break in new boots, Colin says, is to take short, easy walks, with little or no load at first, and gradually increase load and distance. At the very beginning, even wearing boots around the house helps; the advantage of that, Colin advises, is that most good stores will exchange a poorly fitting pair that has not been worn outdoors.

Colin Fletcher, it should be pointed out, is not your average walker who trots the dog down to the corner hydrant and home again. Fletcher, "the man who walked through time" in the Grand Canyon and lived "the thousand-mile summer" in the desert and High Sierra country of California, knows walking from the ground up, and he is an inspiration to all who would follow in his footsteps.

"Any sudden small problem," Colin warns, "is liable to inflate without warning and fill the horizons of your tight little world....A single blister can blacken the most shining day. And if you are miles from anywhere, soaked through and shivering, with no confidence in your ability to contrive a warm, dry shelter for the night, you will be deaf to the music of raindrops drumming against your poncho and blind to the beauty of clouds swirling around sawtooth peaks.

"You must learn to deal with the practical details so efficiently," Colin says, "that they become second nature."

That leaves you free for the important things: watching cloud shadows...passing the time of day with a hummingbird...discovering that a grasshopper eats grass like spaghetti....

I wore my boots down to Hugh Percy's service station.

"New boots," Perce said. "You gotta wear 'em in the tub."