

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

by George Vukelich



Winter is a tough time in the north country. After all, if a man isn't careful, he could freeze to death right in his own front yard. You have to have a healthy respect for a land that could kill you without batting an eye. In the drowsing days of August, you could unbuckle your berry pail and snooze in the deepest woods and wake up with nothing worse than chigger bites on your bottom. Now, to doze off in this same spot would cost you your life.

And yet if the season brings out the worst in the weather, it also seems to bring out the best in people. The north country folks seem friendlier after the first frost. In the summertime, the tinselly facade of commercialism tends to obscure the real nature of the north. To this Old Indian, the north isn't really parking meters. And it's not sprawling asphalt parking lots either. The summer people with their 50 H. P. runabouts are not the north. The north is the people who stay up here when no one else will. And the weather brings out the best in them. The winter has its blessings.

Life slows down a little, like a trout stream filling up with skim ice. The main thing is to keep the place warm. The kindling must be dry. The logs can't be too wet. The fireplace is not the most efficient way of heating a home. But certainly, it is the most romantic. Here are the last of the year's visitors, the hunters prowling along the firelanes kicking up the fat partridge. The riflemen waiting along the deer stands and the sounds of shooting carrying on the wind for miles.

THE PINE-WINEY TREES: This Old Indian isn't much for artificial Christmas trees; be it aluminum, spunglass or beaten gold. It's as comedian Danny Thomas says, "If you're gonna have a nose, have a nose." If you're gonna have a Christmas tree, have a Christmas tree. This Old Indian has been around too long, I fear, and it's difficult to work up an excitement for a "tree" that was turned out on a lathe like a truck axle. The smell of stainless steel doesn't do a thing for you if you were weaned on the pine-winey smell of the real thing that actually had roots and sap and grew in the good Wisconsin ground. The artificial trees I lump with artificial flowers, fake fireplaces and all other deceptions and foolings. And it's good to know that the Old Indian is not alone. The folks who clamor for real Christmas trees have spawned a fairly important industry in Wisconsin. (See this issue page 6)

AN OPEN LETTER TO SANTA CLAUS:

Ma says you're busy and to keep this short and sweet Pa would like some big new shoe pacs for his big old feet —

Also he could use some shells for his .410
And the tip of his fly rod is busted again.
Ma doesn't want anything but you know her —
Could you bring her a parka and trim it with fur?
Or maybe some perfume or maybe cologne
Or a small kitchen radio (with no scratchy tone.)
Gramps, he just grunts and doesn't say what he wants —

(He just sits there rocking, dreaming back on old haunts.)

He is really a very hard-to-order-for kind of old man —
But he smokes Half-and-Half and you might bring him a can —

I don't think Mollie needs anything, (you know, Mollie, our beagle.)

But Pa says her puppies need papers because the whole litter is legal.

(Pa says they should have papers when folks come to buy —

But you could tell they're all beagles if you were blind in one eye.)

I guess that about does it, and have a nice trip —
Pa says you're welcome to stop for a nip.

I couldn't think of anything special to ask for (for me)
So — I'll meet you as usual down under the tree.

SMALL FRY ON SKIS: What's an ideal Christmas present for youngsters of six? Dolls? Drums? Chinese checkers? Some Wisconsin ski instructors have definite ideas on the subject. Six years, it seems, is a good age to start the youngsters skiing.

"Before that," says John Kronsoble, "they lack co-ordination and an understanding of what they're supposed to do." Kronsoble is director of the ski school at Little Switzerland, located at Slinger. "Kids are natural mimics," he says. "They imitate the instructor, they copy each other. They are strongly competitive."

Mary Ellen Christiansen, who is manager of the Wunderberg ski area near West Bend didn't even wait until her daughter was six. "We started her when she was three and a half — and we really tried to teach her skiing. But she didn't like it so we let her alone to play by herself on skis. A year later, she came up and asked for lessons."

Ray Stemper, ski school director at Brule Mountain, Michigan, has an admonition for all instructors. "Make sure they have fun," he says. "It shouldn't seem like work. Get them singing — let them race. Break up the instruction with some kind of game on skis every 15 minutes or so."

The instructors are all agreed on one point — children learn best when they're in a group about the same age and a competent teacher is handling the pack. Kids, it seems, learn the least from their parents. (As the father of four daughters, I attest wholeheartedly to the truth of that observation.)

Now, to outfit a six-year old should cost around \$20 to \$30, — for skis, boots and poles. Many parents are reluctant to invest that kind of money for gear which may be outgrown after one season.

One trick, Kronsoble notes, is to buy the boots a little too large and fill up the void with felt inner-soles, and an extra pair of socks. Then, the following year the padding can be removed.

So, properly equipped, and well instructed, your not-so-little six-year old may be schussing past you like a bird. Does all this make you feel old? I should say. What is this younger generation coming to. Come Christmas day, there the Old Indians will sit. Beating the drum. Cradling the doll. Jumping the Chinese checker and wondering where all the small fry went.

A non-skiing Merry Christmas to your house too.