

# North Country Notebook

George Vukelich



One of the great beauties of ice-fishing—and there are many—is its simplicity.

You make a hole in the ice and then you sit by it and wait for the fish to find you. Sometimes, when you are running out of patience and body heat, you move around and drill more holes and reset your tip-ups and perhaps do a little jigging, but in the end, you wind up sitting by a hole waiting for the fish to find you.

"Simplicity," Peter Matthiessen wrote in *The Snow Leopard*, "is the whole secret of well-being."

I was out on the ice the other day, "being simple" as Steady Eddy likes to put it, sitting and waiting and sharing the lake with a dozen other bundled humans, all within hailing distance, none within

the range of normal conversation, and so there was no normal conversation.

There was Silence.

Someone coming upon us for the first time could well conclude that some kind of class was being conducted here on the wind-scoured ice, some assembly of students all facing in the same direction, all practicing Something silently, Something that was the ultimate purpose of this frozen Zendo, this monastery without walls, this church without warmth.

What the Tibetan Buddhist calls "crazy wisdom," the non-Tibetan Buddhist is apt to call "crazy Stupidity." I think they are both right, because both are the same thing.

It's dumb to sit by that hole in the ice, hour after numbing hour, but when the

fish find you, it seems like the smartest thing in the world.

Jigging with an ungloved hand, waiting and watching the hooded, unmoving apparitions as they, too, wait, I had the fleeting flash that perhaps all those snowmobile suits out there were stuffed with Zen monks after all. For, as Peter Matthiessen has so wisely observed: *In keeping with its spare, clear, simple style, in its efforts to avoid religiosity, to encourage free-thinking and doubt, Zen makes bold use of contradiction, humor and irreverence, applauding the monk who burned up the wood altar Buddha to keep warm.*

The tip-ups lay like motionless prayer flags, waiting for wind. Waiting for Something, too.

In the cozy bait shop the day before, Steady Eddy had rigged those tip-ups himself: One for Northern. One for Wall-eye. The Old Pro doing it, he called it.

"You know," he said, spooling on line, "when people meet me for the first time they're shocked, because they always thought I was in my sixties."

I told him it was because he said wise things. And most people figured only Old Professionals said Wise Things.

That got us onto Charlie Bran and Lew Cornelius, a couple of Old Professionals if ever there were any, a couple of legends even while they lived.

Lew Cornelius had loved baseball, and when he managed the Monona Grove Lakers, he always wound up with the best players in the area on his teams. The Richters. The Bakkens. The players. Fred Milverstedt, who knew Lew on and off the Capital Times, could probably do a book on the Ole Sarge.

"I pitched for Lew one season," Steady said, "and he just *loved* practice. I don't mean he loved to run the practice. I mean he used to love to *watch* it."

Steady described how Lew would stand out behind the mound just watching everything and talking to the pitcher and "not manage."

"One time, it rained," Steady said, "and everybody left the field except Lew. He just stood there, looking up, getting soaked. He really hated to leave a ball diamond, no matter what."

On the ice, it came to me that even though he is gone now, Lew hasn't really left the ball diamonds, because they'll never stop playing that game. He's probably out there behind that pitcher's mound, waiting. Looking up.

It also came to me that Steady wasn't the first Laker to say that Lew watched his teams more than he "managed" them, and the Lakers were undoubtedly one of the most successful clubs ever in these parts. Lew had brilliant teams, yet not too many people ever accused the manager of being brilliant. But it must have been that when it looked like he wasn't really managing, he was really managing. When you watch something with love, the guru says, you are watching them with "soft eyes."

Day in and day out, Charlie Bran was probably the best fisherman the Madison lakes have ever seen—or ever will. You'd see Charlie in all kinds of weather, in all kinds of water, with all kinds of fish. With that willow-slim pole, he was Merlin with a magic wand, materializing fish out of places where no one else could materialize them. On the locks. The breakwaters. The open lakes.

"Just *watching* him," Russ said a lifetime ago on Mendota, "is like attending a clinic."

I don't know if Lew Cornelius and Charlie Bran knew each other well or at all, but the way Steady was linking them drove me to read again the Chinese poet Hsu Chi, dead these 700 years:

*The two old men  
Sit in silence together,  
Living in dim memories  
Of the past.  
They are lifelong friends  
And need no words  
To share their thoughts.*

*One quavers to the other  
"May you live a hundred years  
And may I live ninety-nine."*

*The other nods his old white head  
And gravely says:  
"Let us go home together  
And drink a cup of wine."*