

George Vukelich's North Country

Don't look for the North Country on a map. You won't find it.

George Vukelich explains the North Country thus, "It's a state of mind as much as anything else. It's real, but it's not on a map."

Vukelich has made the North Country real for thousands of Wisconsin Public Radio listeners through NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK. Each Sunday night at 8:00 Papa Hambone, Vukelich's radio persona, invents "a little stressless place where you can feel a little unfettered...just floating, relaxed, almost like a period of meditation, almost Zen-like."

Water purls over water-smoothed gray, granite boulders.

"I want to give that sort of feeling that you've been somewhere.

Even if I don't know where the listeners have been, even if they don't know don't know where they've been, we all sense that we've been somewhere and shared something that was kind of quiet."

The tremolo of a loon rises from the mists.

"A little quiet pool...a quiet trout pool with maybe some life below the surface that you can't see...but you can sense that it is there."

The only sound is the creak of half-century-old pine trees.

"As Doc would say at the Legion bar, it's kind of like watching Father Himmelsbach skinnydip."

"What we want," says Vukelich, "is to communicate something to the listener, not always something really heavy, sometimes something very humorous, but always something within the context of North Country. In the main, I want people to feel entertained."

Vukelich excels at communicating. His book NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK, which he published himself, is in its second printing; he writes two weekly columns for the weekly Madison newspaper *Isthmus*; he writes and narrates his weekly radio program. He is also at work, with Rick Murphy, the producer of his radio program, on an audiocassette, *Pages from a North Country Notebook*, which will be available "by the end of the year."

"I don't let work cut into my life too much," Vukelich claims.

"With the drop of a hat, I can be out on a trout stream with no qualms at all. Besides, I'm never really loafing, I'm always working—sort of. When I'm fishing, I'm researching. I wrote a column once in which I said how proud my father from the Old Country would be of me because I had figured out how things worked in America. Here I am fishing, and getting paid for it!

"It was my father, the Old Man, who took me by my little hand and first took me to the North Country, said it reminded him of his native Yugoslavia. He ran a tavern and pool room in West Allis, and he loved to fish. He'd have my mother write a note in her labored handwriting to get me out of school: 'Dear Sister, Please excuse George. He is going fishing with his father.'

"I remember freezing my little buns in that wooden boat, the



George Vukelich

Photo by Brent Nicastr

river running cold and black in the darkness. My father clapping his hands and looking at me, almost glowing, 'Isn't this fun, Georgi!'

"If the trips had been just that, I don't think I would have developed my love of the outdoors. But we would go all over, and he took me to a lot of country, almost wilderness, lakes. It was through that that I began to sense that there was something here that I needed to know more about. I began to read and discover people like Aldo Leopold, Sigurd Olson, Loren Eiseley, John Muir.

"My father did it because it reminded him of home. I guess I do it because in a way it reminds me, too, of home. I shouldn't say home. It reminds me of a home country, a home place. There is a spiritual quality about the North Country. And he knew it, but couldn't articulate it. I know now what he was trying to tell me. And so, what I am trying to do is articulate it for other people."

Vukelich's not quite comfortable with being labeled an "outdoor writer." While some of his awards are for writing about the outdoors, he points out that they are awards for *writing*. He's been honored by The Milwaukee Press Club, the Wisconsin Academy of Arts, Letters and Sciences, and the Council of Wisconsin Writers. His prose and poetry have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Poet Lore*, *Best American Short Stories*, *Botteghe Oscure* of Rome, *Poet of India*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Wisconsin Trails*, *Madison Magazine*, *Milwaukee Magazine*, and *The Milwaukee Journal*.

As Steady Eddy would say, "The Seven-Foot Nun would be proud!"

The Seven-Foot Nun is responsible for starting Vukelich on his literary career. She struck a deal with the seven-year-old, Romanian-speaking Georgi: He wouldn't have to stand up and recite in class, where the kids laughed at his heavily accented English; instead, he could write his lessons.

"I thought that was the greatest thing since sliced bread," Vukelich reminisces. "So I wrote my papers, and I got very careful. They were meticulously written with dip pen and ink. And, just like anything else, if you do something, whether it's ice fishing or skiing or writing, you get fairly good at it. So I had that incentive, knowing that if I wasn't any good at it, the first to know would be the nun."

Paradoxically, his ambition to be a writer led him into one of the talkiest professions of all—radio announcer. "I had an accent until I got back from the Army. I came to the University at Madison on the GI Bill after World War II and majored in English. I was always interested in radio, but in writing for radio," Vukelich explains.

After graduation, Vukelich went north to the Academy of Radio Arts in Toronto to study writing for radio. "I had to take everything else, too—radio sound, speech, acting, announcing. The head of the school, Lorne Greene, told me I had one of the two worst voices he had ever heard. He worked with me for a year.

"After I got out of there I thought I could write for radio, but I couldn't make any money doing it, so I began working as an announcer. I did it for years and years and years—about 30, I think. I probably worked for all the stations in Madison."

In March 1984, after what he calls "not the greatest period in my life," Vukelich, Steady Eddy,

Sleepy Ed, the Seven-Foot Nun, Doc, Father Himmelsbach, and the rest of the gang made the move from commercial radio to Wisconsin Public Radio. Today he says, "I can't conceive of NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK being anywhere else except Wisconsin Public Radio."

Vukelich tries to live by the philosophical line that he was fond of quoting at the close of Wisconsin Public Radio's late, traveling variety show, AM SATURDAY, which he hosted for a year in the mid-1980s: "One, if you want to get along down here on the planet don't sweat the small stuff. Two, hey, down here on the planet it's all small stuff."

So priorities firmly in order, he'll put on his trademark hat, pack up his cane pole, and head north, perhaps to Three Lakes where his mother runs an "old-timey" resort (his father, the Old Man, died a number of years ago.) He'll launch the old wooden boat into "a little spring-hole lake without any people."

"I'll ask the Old Man to send me a fish; I'll ask Augie Derleth to send me a hawk. Here I am talking to two dead guys. But to me, when I'm out there in the woods, they aren't really dead."

As the hawk circles and the fish nibbles, Vukelich observes, "There is something about the North Country that is timeless, that is eternal, that sustains people more than any other part of the state. The North Country is healing. It will renew your spirit, if you let it."