

## NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

## Body Heat

When you live up in the north country in winter, you just naturally keep track of things, because you could wind up freezing your buns if you don't.

So you come to know when the ice on the lakes is strong enough to support you without a snowmobile, then with a snowmobile, and then, eventually, with the whole snowmobile club.

Three Lakes, Wis., is just full of folks who keep track of such things. They know when certain things are supposed to happen, and if those things don't happen on schedule they get antsy.

Well, the lakes froze over pretty much on schedule this year, but the Christmas creche over at St. Theresa's that's usually set up by this time *wasn't*.

Folks got to talking about it, especially those who go to Mass and were eyewitnesses. The eyewitnesses took it upon themselves to spread the truth into every nook and cranny of Oneida County, including the American Legion Bar.

The other night Gene Stepshinski was just about to close when Doc came in from a call in the country. They were sitting there, having "a toddy for the body," as Doc puts it, when Father Himmelsbach came in, looking, as Gene says, like a rabbit that just found out beagles weren't family.

Gene got out the brandy, poured a shot and asked him what was wrong. Father Himmelsbach knocked back the brandy and said:

"I can't find *Jesus*."

"God," Doc said. "That's like your pilot telling you he can't find O'Hare."

"The baby Jesus got lost," Father Himmelsbach said. "That's why the creche isn't up. I've been looking for a week."

"What you gotta do," Doc said, "is

ask St. Anthony. If St. Anthony can't find Jesus, we're all in trouble."

"Everybody else is there," Father Himmelsbach said. "Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the kings, the animals, the camels. Even the crib is there, but baby Jesus is missing."

"Listen," Gene said. "We'll lock up here and go have a look-see."

"Sure, Father," Doc said. "What could we lose?"

Father Himmelsbach didn't think that was so funny.



The church was warm and cozy, the heat clunking through the pipes like little animals scuttling in the darkness. Father Himmelsbach turned on the sanctuary lights and there it was: the manger at Bethlehem. It looked like a disaster area. Beneath the blue spruce branches, the carved wooden figures were scattered about. The boxes and tissue paper looked like windblown debris. Doc offered his professional opinion right away.

"You could say it was vandals," he said.

Gene began lining up the figures in the traditional arrangement, two lines radiating outward from the stable, with the manger in the center.

"Yeah," Doc said, "you notice right away the crib is empty."

Gene backed up and stood there, arms akimbo. Then he began tapping his lips with the forefinger of his right hand. He does that just before he climbs into a trout stream, too.

"I just looked *everywhere*," Father Himmelsbach said. "You can't replace

pieces like that anymore. You need an old-time carver."

"You know," Doc said, "the last time I was in a sanctuary I was getting married. And before that I was serving Mass. Back in the old days, before Rome changed all that and turned you guys around."

Gene looked as wooden as the figures he was staring at.

Father Himmelsbach scratched his head.

"We could skip the whole thing," he said, "but there'd be hell to pay. Another tradition shot. A guitar Mass for the old-timers."

"It all comes back to me, like riding a bicycle," Doc said. "Once you learn, you never forget. *Confiteor Deo omnipotenti, beate Mariae semper virgini, beato Michaeli archangelo, beato Johanni Baptistae, sanctis apostolis Petro et Paulo*. Didn't the Jesuits say that if they had the child for the first seven years of life, they had the child forever?"

"It's just amazing how you get imprinted," he said. "I haven't said a Latin prayer since I was a little boy, and there it is. It's all right there. I confess to almighty God, to blessed Mary ever virgin, to blessed Michael the archangel, to blessed John the Baptist, to the holy apostles Peter and Paul. The part I liked best was *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*: through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault. *Maxima*. To the max. Good time to try that one, Father."

Gene suddenly slapped his hands together, and it sounded like a pistol shot in the empty church. He leaped to the creche and began moving the wooden figures.

"We're talking about a cold night," he said. "Right? We're talking about a baby

in a stable—a newborn baby, right? Now, who in his right mind is not gonna be concerned for the kid in the cold? The night wind and the chill and the drafts?"

"We're talking *body heat*," Gene said. "These are folks who know all about cold nights and heat loss. We're talking survivors."

He moved the figures with a gentle touch, nudging them to make room for the others who huddled tightly around the creche, not only to worship, but to keep a little baby alive on a cold winter's night.



"You wrap the baby so you can barely see anything sticking out," Gene said. "Insulate him. Pile straw around him, over him. You get his mom right over him, and you get the sheep and the donkeys right up close so they're radiating heat like Coleman stoves. You get one row of shepherds up close, then another, another and another. You got a windbreak that won't quit. All you can see from out here is their backs. But you *know* a baby is in there. You take it on *faith*."

That's the way it is this Christmas in Three Lakes. Everybody crowding in, keeping the cold world off the Little One. When you think about it, that's the way it *should* be. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from *North Country Notebook* Sunday night at 8 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).