

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

By GEORGE VUKELICH

GREETINGS

I'M YOUR NEW neighbor and I though I'd better introduce myself right off so you could see for yourself that I ought to fit in pretty well here and to allay your fears that this neck of the woods is going to hell in a handbasket.

I've been potsing around in the Wisconsin woods all my life and after the Seven Foot Nun taught me how to use a pencil I started writing about those woods. After she taught me how to sharpen the pencil, there was no holding me.

I got a lot of my love for the Wisconsin boonies from my Old Man who said that the north country here reminded him of his native Yugoslavia and that was a big reason he and my mother bought a little oldtimey resort with housekeeping cabins on Big Stone Lake across from Carl Marty's old Showboat and Northern-aire in the mid 1940s. The Old Man died fourteen years ago and is buried in Three Lakes. My mother ran the resort until she died this Spring at 80. She's right at his side again and that's fitting because that's the way they went through life.

The Old Man taught me how to fish and how to hunt and some of his lessons are unforgettable and God knows I've tried to forget them.

There was the first time he took me squirrel hunting in a Waukesha county oak woods and when he left me alone I fired off my .22 into a squirrel's nest. When he came back and found out what I'd done, he just calmly took the rifle away from me, unloaded it and literally wrapped it around a tree, saying that I was too damn dumb to go hunting just yet.

This was the same man who, because he couldn't write English, would have my mother write a note

to the Seven Foot Nun, who ran Holy Assumption grade school the way Patton would later run Third Army, saying: "Please excuse George from school. He is going fishing with his father." Then, off we would go in the cold Wisconsin springtime to fish the walleye run at New London, Fremont and the Shiocton flats.

I also got a lot of love for the Wisconsin boonies from Gordon MacQuarrie and Mel Ellis who were writing about the great outdoors for *The Milwaukee Journal* in those days. They were probably the finest outdoor writers in this hemisphere, and to think they were on the SAME paper at the SAME time, is, as Steady Eddy used to say down at the baitshop, just plain unthinkable.

I got to interview Mel Ellis at Little Lakes back in 1971 and I put that right in the same class as the interviews we did with Frank Lloyd Wright at Spring Green, Sigurd Olson at Ely, Minnesota and John D. Voelker at his beloved brookie-filled Frenchman's Pond in the Upper Peninsula.

I found out that day at Little Lakes why Mel Ellis was a great outdoor writer. It was because he was a great perceptive Being.

"I don't think we treated nature right when I was a boy," Mel said. "I don't think we have any concept of how to treat nature. Today, we know a lot more about how to treat nature than we did then. When the Horicon Marsh was going in, only a handful of people fought for it. Today, you could get thousands and thousands to back a project like that."

I asked Mel if he believed in God.

"I cannot but believe," he said, "that there is a governing force. The universe is too vast, too well regulated and too handily put together

not to have something guiding it. I have experienced nature as a deep, deep, significant feeling that I'm part of the earth. An owl at night or a coyote howling or a bright running stream are all part of me and I am part of them. We're all part of each other."

When it came to his profession of writing, Mel is one of three people in this life who gave me any worthwhile advice on how to do it. Mari Sandoz and August Derleth were the other two. They both said: "Go home and WRITE!" Mel took the advice one bootstep further. He said writing should "say something" to the reader.

"If you haven't got something to say," Mel said, "what the hell are you writing for? I think that everything you write should say something. I think you should try to teach as you go along, but in an off-hand way. The teaching should be incidental to a good story. I think you should show some side of life, good or bad, and let the reader do his own moralizing and draw his own conclusion."

North Country Notebook has been through a lot of changes, a lot of incarnations since it first started in the old *Wisconsin Tales and Trails* magazine back in the pleistocene. There's even an audio version carried around the state on Wisconsin Public Radio Sunday nights at 8 PM.

But, it's what it started out be – a lifelong pilgrimage along those blazed trails in the bush. My Old Man and Gordon MacQuarrie and Mel Ellis left some pretty big boot tracks in these parts and I like to think we're just following along, and taking time to smell the flowers while we do the fillets. Hope you think so, too. Happy to be here! 🐾