

North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

In a boyhood pantheon of heroes, Gordon MacQuarrie was one of my favorites.

This in no way slights Ted Gullic, the "Old Reliable" of the then-American Association Milwaukee Brewers, who terrorized Triple A pitching but who could never stick in the majors.

Or Don Hutson, the hipless Green Bay Packer who moved through the hapless Chicago Bear secondary like an otter through a trout hatchery.

Or Father Alphonse Kohler, the assistant priest-over at Holy Assumption who charmed the Ladies' Sodality right out of its sensible shoes and whose proficiency with a shotgun was an inspiration to all of us who aspired to be good priests and good wing shots, not necessarily in that order.

The beauty of Gordon MacQuarrie was that he was a writer, and what he wrote about was the outdoors.

He was the outdoor editor of the Milwaukee Journal for 20 years, and he got paid to go hunting and fishing and bumming around in the Wisconsin boonies. And when he wrote about it in the Journal something magical happened. You weren't reading a newspaper story with just the Five W's and the H—Who, What, When, Where, Why and How—you were reading something that seemed to belong in a book with all the other good and important stories that had that same magical quality. Only those writers were mostly dead.

Gordon MacQuarrie was alive, as was his wondrous fictitious organization, the Old Duck Hunters Association, Inc. (the Inc. stood for incorrigible), consisting of MacQuarrie, the chronicler, and his real-life father-in-law, the chroniclee.

On the printed page, his father-in-law, Al Peck, a car dealer from Superior, became the immortal duck-skiffing, trout-stalking old reprobate, the brown-mackinaw-clad "Mister President" with whom MacQuarrie and his readers shared the American Dream, the same dream Huck Finn shared with Tom Sawyer, that Butch shared with Sundance, that Steady Eddy shares with the world.

"Many times I have watched Mister President," Gordon MacQuarrie wrote, "in duck blinds, on trout streams, in upland bird cover, in deer woods—and have come to believe that the things of the outdoors which he symbolizes are a way of life."

"Mister President" first came to national prominence in the pages of Sports Afield, and he lives on in the anthology *Stories Of The Old Duck Hunters And Other Drivel*, compiled and edited by Zack Taylor, MacQuarrie's "friend and fan."

It is in this anthology, published by Stackpole Books of Harrisburg, Pa., that MacQuarrie's genius for what is now called

"environmental communication" is on display for all to marvel at.

It's like sneaking a peek into Mister President's creel as he hauls himself out of the Brule River—bitten and bludgeoned by adversity, tested beyond mortal endurance, yet as triumphant as Don Hutson ever was.

"Trout waters can be very personal places. The best trout streams are the ones you grow up with and then grow old with. Eventually they become like a familiar shotgun, or a faithful old setter or comfortable pair of shoes. You develop a profound affection for them, and you think maybe before you die you will even understand a little about them.

"We went downstream, he on the right bank, I on the left. At this putting-in place, high above the right bank, stretches the level top of an old logging railroad grade. The light was waning in the west, and the top of this embankment cut off the sky like a knife. Below this ran the churning river, far noisier and more mysterious than it had been an hour before.

"Certainly you must know how it is to come to a place like this. A place you know well. A place where you are on intimate terms with the smallest boulders, where yonder projecting limb once robbed you of a choice fly, where from beneath the undercut banks, the big ones prowl by night to claim the larger morsels of the darkness.

"Strange and utterly irresistible are such places to trout fishermen. There you had hold of a good one, Here you netted a smaller one. Down beyond the turn in the pool below the old snag pile, you lost still another. The spell of the approaching night silenced the President, but not for long.

"'One thing I can't figger out,' he said finally. His voice came to me from a point downstream, drifting over the purring waters in the sweet June air. 'How can a Scotch Presbyterian like you enjoy anything that's so much fun?'"

"He vanished into the gloom like some wise and ancient spirit of the river. I heard his wader brogues nick a rock as he stumbled, heard him cuss softly and then the river took me in...."

"But it is something to be alone in the bush with a .30-30 under your arm, the wind in the trees and the feeling that if there are such things as big cities, they must have existed in some ancient past. It is a fine thing to climb a rise, sit in the tumbleweeds, smoke a pipe and look off for miles at more of the same country you just came through.

"Some people ask why men go hunting. They must be the kind of people who seldom get far from the highways. What do they know of the trust a hunting man keeps with the wind and the trees and the sky? Hunting? The means are greater than the end and every hunter knows it."

Gordon MacQuarrie died, at 56, in 1956.

He is quoted extensively here because the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters—in its inexplicable wisdom—has seen fit to present North Country Notebook with an award in the name of Gordon MacQuarrie.

And I wanted you to share our feeling for what that name means.