

The Railroad Jacket

It still holds lures,
tools, spark plugs,
and memories.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

The Old Man left me some of his favorite things when he died. A few rifles. A few shotguns. Fishing rods. And tackle boxes overflowing with old wooden Pikie Minnows and Bass Orenos

and bucktails that had taken more muskies out of the Chain of Lakes than hand grenades ever could.

"Ah, just so," Steady Eddy says, upon hearing the inventory, "and don't forget your nose in your list of legacies. Your Old Man also left you his nose. An honest Slavic nose. And, it must be said, bigger than the muskie baits he left you."

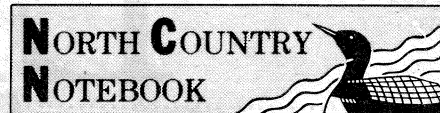
For the literal minded, let me hasten to add that it wasn't actually *his* nose the Old Man left me. The Old Man retained possession of his own nose when he died. "True, true," Steady says, "all true. But the nose in your possession is an exact replica."

Big noses ran in the Old Man's family—Steady Eddy says no pun intended. The family photographs from the Old Country are full of hard-eyed men with big noses looking at the camera the way sharks look at bait-fish. The women in the photographs, if anything, look tougher than the men. Their noses, while larger than Madon-

na's, are no larger than Angelica Huston's. No smaller, either.

"If you're gonna have a nose," the late, great Jimmy Durante used to say, "have a *nose!*"

But it's none of these priceless heirlooms that I want to tell you about today. Today I want to tell you about the



blue denim jacket the Old Man left me. The Railroad Jacket.

I don't know how it came to be called the Railroad Jacket. More properly, it should have been called the Fishing Jacket because that's what the Old Man mostly did when he was wearing it. He was mostly fishing and he was fishing mostly walleyes.

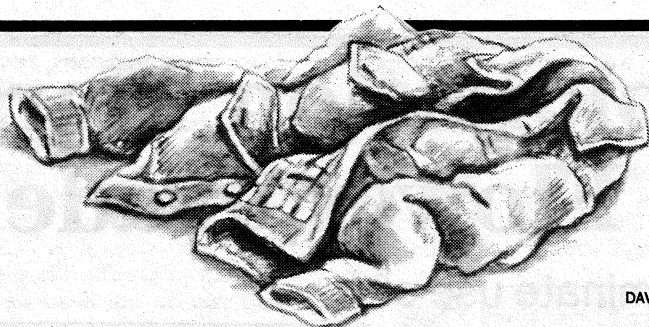
But the jacket just started out being called the Railroad Jacket, and when he told me to go get the Railroad Jacket I

knew what he meant, and I also knew he meant to go fishing walleyes. The Railroad Jacket.

I always guessed that old-timey railroad engineers used to wear something like that in the old-timey steam train days, and certainly when the Old Man wore the denim jacket with a red bandanna around his neck and a baseball cap on his head he looked like he was ready to run a steam train up to Ashland instead of running his wooden Thompson out to the gravel bar to fish walleyes.

The jacket is flannel-lined, "lined with a blanket," the Old Man said, and fitted with pockets galore so he could stuff everything he needed to fish walleyes in them, including pantry pockets for sandwiches, pieces of fruit and hard candy for "extra" energy for fighting the "extra-heavy" fish. The Old Man didn't really need to take a tackle box along for walleyes, and most times he didn't.

He carried lures, swivels, Number 6



DAVID MICHAEL MILLER

hooks and extra spools of 10-pound test line. "In case you get a muskie that takes the minnow," the Old Man philosophized. "You don't want to look foolish." That was all in one pocket.

In the other pockets, he carried needle-nose pliers, a knife, a nail clipper for trimming knots, extra spark plugs and shear pins for the outboard—"if it doesn't start, you don't want to look foolish. Or, if it starts and you hit something, same thing"—and a little flashlight for landing big fish when they came out of the total darkness and also for lighting up the minnow pail when he re-baited.

The jacket is a faded blue, and I can't remember it as being anything else but a faded blue. It is an honest faded blue. Faded by sun and rain and the Old Man's sweat, I think. This is not a dishonest faded blue, "stone-washed" in a contemptible attempt to achieve in an instant the hard-won, grizzled, lived-in look that only time can bestow upon blue denim, and indeed upon the Old Coots who wear blue denim in their line of work, or their line of play, as the case may be. What the Old Man's blue denim jacket has is character, even as the Old Man

had character. Both he and his beloved jacket came by it naturally.

The pockets got a little frayed and unraveled over the years, and our daughter Marty reinforced them with denim strips from a pair of blue jeans that ended up as cutoffs. The strips are the darkest blue on the whole jacket. Marty also sewed extra pockets inside the jacket.

The Old Man would be proud of Marty's improvements. Dynie Mansfield, too. Dynie, who always preached on the waters northwest of Winchester that "if one is good, then two is better."

"You can carry bait in there," Steady Eddy says. "Beer. Bratwurst. L.L. Bean would kill for this jacket."

I look at the Old Man's jacket lying in a heap where I left it, and in a flash I see it lying in a heap where he left it while he gets his rods and his gear and then sits down at the kitchen table to drink a coffee and wait for his sandwiches, which my mother is making for him and wrapping tightly in waxed paper.

"You want to fish walleyes?" he would ask me. "Couple hours? On the bar?"

More times than I care to remember I said no, not now. Later, maybe. Maybe, later. I don't know why I said no so often. What the hell did I have to do that was more important than going fishing with him? I don't know. I honestly don't know what could have been more important. I think about what I said, and I see his face when I said it, and I see his green wolf's eyes seeing right through me. He would nod and shrug okay, and he would take the sandwiches and thank Mom and he would go, carrying his rods and the Railroad Jacket.

"When will you be home?" Mom would ask.

"Soon." The Old Man would smile that bohunk smile. "Soon." ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Sunday nights at 11:30 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA (970 AM).