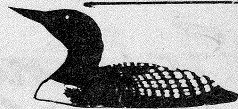


# North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

21-11-85

## Debat

The other day Steady Eddy was on "A.M. Saturday" (the cultural melange that originates from Madison's posh Club de Wash every Saturday morning and is broadcast live over the Wisconsin Public Radio network) discussing the introduction of "rosy reds": the little orange-colored minnows that are now available to the fishing community in the Badger State.

Steady's appearance on the program did not go unnoticed by the regulars at the American Legion Bar in Three Lakes, where, as Gene the bartender says, "Public radio is the sole link to the outside world, unless you count the 700 Club and the L. L. Bean catalogs."

They were just sitting around the other night discussing the impact the little orange-colored minnows would have on their well-worn, time-tested lifestyles.

"I think," Gene said for openers, "that when they've got orange-colored minnows in the bait shops, they're going after the yuppie market."

He waited for a reaction from his customers, all two of them: the good doctor and the good priest.

"You think it's some kind of a plot, do you?" Doc asked. "Something hatched by the multinational minnow conglomerates?"

"Well," Gene said, "you got thousands of ice fisherfolk out there—most of them men—and most of them wear those cute blaze-orange snowmobile suits. You get the picture?"

"I like how that Steady Eddy defined fishing," Father Joe said. "A jerk at one end of the line waiting for a jerk at the other. That's pretty good."

"Let us note," Doc said to Gene, "that the last observation emanated from the lips of an individual who has been striving for decades to have this humble community accept him, seriously, as 'a fisher of men.'"

Gene put his elbow on the bar and rested his chin in his hand, because that way the fingers covered up his smile.

"Now," Doc said to Gene, "if I know the way your mind works, this, I would say, is the way your mind is working: In view of the fact that we Americans will buy almost anything if it looks nice—and looking 'nice,' we come to find out, is a matter of being color-coordinated, as we know from our cars, kitchens, bathrooms, and jogging sweats, not to mention the matching shoes you can buy so people will think you're a jogger—you're saying that more people will go ice-fishing if the bait is color-coordinated with the clothing?"

"Yup," Gene said.

Father Joe looked perplexed.

"What if you ice-fish in a blue snowmobile suit?" he asked.

"Like you do?" Doc said.

"You'll be able to buy blue minnows,"

Gene said. "It's all genetic. If they can change your basic dace minnow into a veritable goldfish, then blue is just around the corner. Likewise pink, purple or chartreuse. The orange minnows aren't going to catch fish, Father. They're going to catch the folks who will buy Gucci snowmobile suits.

Pardon me, Father, but God knows what's coming."

"On the other hand," Doc said, "there is a very practical side to using an orange minnow in the tea-brown waters of our beloved Chain of Lakes, as anyone who has ever used a goldfish for bait can attest."

"You?" Father Joe said. "You used a goldfish for bait?"

"Not me," Doc said, "for as we all know, using goldfish for bait is against the law, and as we also all know, this is a law-abiding community. And so it follows that my answer to your question is a resounding 'no.' Never have I used a goldfish for bait, although I did contemplate swallowing one in my halcyon student days in Madison, when the freshmen wore beanies and the seniors swallowed goldfish.

"However, I have encountered, in my missions to the afflicted, certain unsavory characters who admitted to such criminal behavior. Of course, this was in that time of long ago, when the daily bag limit on walleyes was seven fish per person, and each fish had to be 15 inches long."

"The good old days," Father Joe said.

"That's right," Doc said. "When your Mass was in Latin and our prescriptions likewise. The goldfish, I was informed, worked like a charm. Unfortunately, the goldfish is also a card-carrying member of the carp family, and carp could very well take over the world if they felt like it, so the state authorities decided to outlaw the use of goldfish as bait.

"But fishermen are always looking for an edge," Doc said. "A little something to help out. You know, fish aren't that dumb. It's not just a safety pin and a string anymore. Mono-filament line. Sonar. Depth-finders. Artificial baits, soft as licorice, smelling so sweet you could eat them yourself.

"You remember when everybody spit on the bait for luck? Well, I remember my father, taking me out for walleyes in an old wooden round-bottom. He was from the old school, and he always fished walleyes with a big nightcrawler on a June-bug spinner.

"Now, he did two things out there on the water that he never did at home. He smoked his pipe—he said it was to keep the mosquitoes away from us—and he chewed tobacco. Some old-timer showed him how the nightcrawlers really squirmed and got active if you spit on them with a mouthful of chaw."

"Oh, gross!" Gene said.

"That reminds me," Doc said, "of Frank over at Three Lakes Haven who told about taking his brother John fishing for the first time. John didn't chew, but he spit on the nightcrawlers for luck. And he was losing them, regularly, without hooking a fish, let alone landing one. After he lost about a dozen, Frank said, 'Let's see how you put the worm on the hook.' So John showed him. He draped the worm over the hook like a noodle, spat on it for luck, and carefully lowered it into the water. When John found out what he was doing wrong, he gave up fishing forever."

Gene jumped up, slapped his hands and said the house was buying.