

Hambone creates a special world

By Steve Burkholder
Special to The Journal

Madison, Wis. — In his columns, where characters like Steady Eddy, the Professor, Dinah Ann, Guacamole and Bugs live, he calls himself simply "the bohunk."

Webster's would note that "bohunk" is short for Bohemian-Hungarian and means someone of South Central European descent. It also means an unskilled laborer.

And the dictionary adds that the word is considered vulgar and often employed to insult.

But South Milwaukee-born writer George A. Vukelich — better known to Madisonians as "Papa Hambone," the former disc jockey and current outdoors writer — doesn't use it that way.

The word crops up often in his speech. Being the son of a Croatian and a Rumanian, both immigrants to this country, Vukelich would say that his ethnic and class background has had a lot to do with where he is today and how he looks at the world.

English not easy

Vukelich, the possessor of a rich, radio voice and a mischievous, Tom Sawyer smile that breaks out often, also wields an agile pen.

But it wasn't always like that. English didn't come easy, he said.

In an interview, Vukelich recalled his childhood in West Allis, where the Vukelich family moved when he was very young. It was the 1930s.

"We're talking about a family having a portrait of FDR on the wall as if he were the Pope," said Vukelich, leaning forward in a wicker chair in his study. "We're talking 69th and Greenfield in West Allis. Pressed Steel, Kearney and Trecker, Allis-Chalmers.

"We're talking bohunks," he added with finality.

Around Vukelich in his rustic, woodpaneled refuge are the memorabilia of his life, and of others before him. There are stacks of books from floor to ceiling, maybe 25 fishing rods, old minnow nets and bait buckets that once belonged to his dad, a fatigue jacket with a peace sign on it, and posters and pictures, mostly of the outdoor life.

Spoke Rumanian

Since he was a youngster, he had wanted to be a writer, he recalled. But he grew up speaking Rumanian.

"I sounded like I just got off the boat," said the writer who now produces the eloquent, somewhat mystical, and often funny outdoors columns in the Madison weekly Isthmus and Madison, the monthly magazine.

Before writing for those publications, Vukelich wrote for the Capital Times and the now defunct Madison Press Connection, as well as doing "The World of Hambone" and other music-and-talk shows for WIBA and a variety of radio stations.

He said he thought about writing all the time.

"I loved words," said Vukelich. "I think a lot of it came from the nuns."

The nuns Vukelich refers to were his teachers at Holy Assumption School, who, seeing him laughed at by other students when he rose to recite in something resembling English, allowed him to turn in all his assignments in written form.

Gift from the nuns

"So I worked on my writing. I got to be very proficient at expressing myself in words," he recalls.

"That was the gift that nun gave me," Vukelich says in gratitude to one particular sister, wherever she is.

Echoes of loons' lonely calls, the splashes of a fish being landed, and horse sense delivered in strong Wisconsin accents are clear sounds in Vukelich's writings.

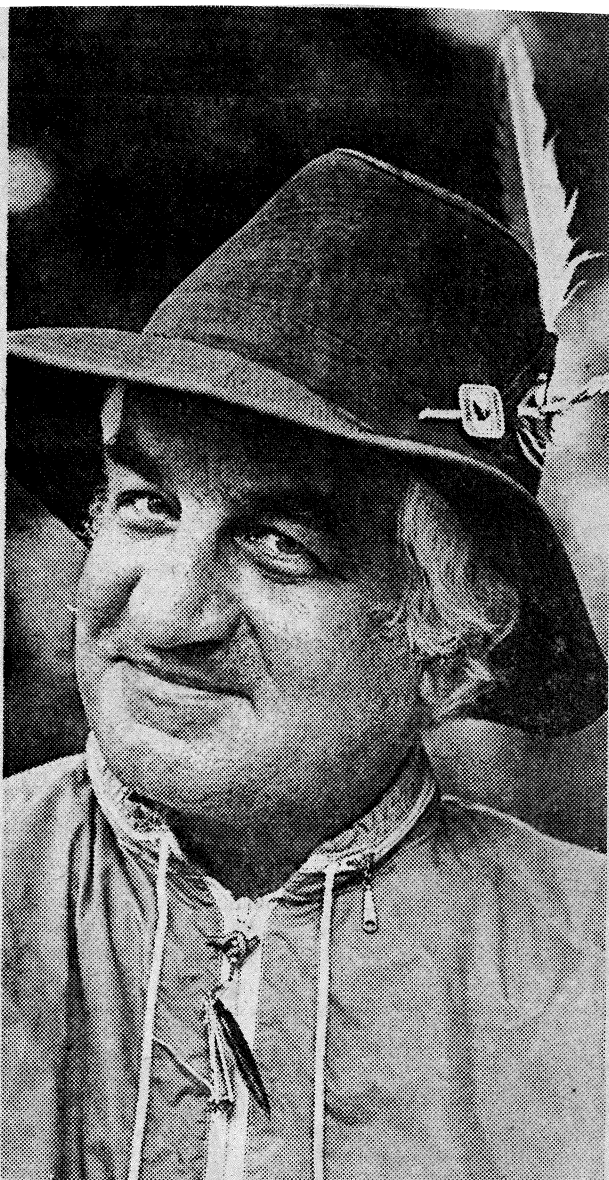
He got his love of the outdoors from his father, who loved to spend time in northern Wisconsin because it reminded him of the lakes and woods of his native Yugoslavia.

Vukelich often accompanied his father on the trips.

"Every spring we would go up fot, freezing my butt off, and wishing I was anywhere else.

"And my father would say, 'Now isn't this fun?'"

Mentioned often in his columns are other Wisconsinites who, before him, were moved by nature and expressed their wonder in words. He calls their style "spiritual," something that has appeal beyond our borders.



—Photo by Brent Nicastro

George Vukelich with his favorite fishing hat

"It's very interesting to me that some of the finest nature writing anywhere comes from Wisconsin," he mused. Sigurd Olson, the philosopher-voyageur, Aldo Leopold, author of "Sand County Almanac," and John Muir, the naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club, head his list.

* * *

After serving in World War II, Vukelich studied for three years at the University of Wisconsin — Madison. He then spent a year in intensive study of nuts-and-bolts radio broadcasting and radio theater in Toronto, Ontario.

His teacher was Lorne Greene, who would later gain fame as a star of TV's "Bonanza."

"He paid me a great compliment," Vukelich said. "He said I had the second worst voice he had ever heard. The worst was also an American, from Pittsburgh. Also a bohunk. So there we were."

Vukelich's style improved and he returned to Madison, where he found work in radio and, with time, some controversy.

During the Vietnam War, Vukelich was host for a program called "Vietnam Seminar," in which experts and non-experts of varying political stances would give a talk and listeners could call in and respond. His views became increasingly antiwar.

Vietnam, he says, "created a climate in America where more and more people don't believe what their government is telling them. And more and more people don't believe in the government itself."

Vukelich's nickname "Hambone," by the way, comes from his disc jockey days. American slaves, not being able to afford musical instruments of their own, used to make music by slapping their hands and legs. It was called "hamboning."

"Because I didn't play an instrument," he says, a friend called him "Hambone," a name that has stuck.

When he married and became a family man and father of five, "Papa" was added.

"Papa Hambone, the spiritual bohunk," as Vukelich's Steady Eddy might say.