

## A Cycle at its Zenith: Goodbye Old Friend

By Bill Stokes

*Editor's note: George Vukelich, noted Wisconsin writer, radio personality and longtime Wisconsin Outdoor Journal columnist, died suddenly on July 4. He was 67. Many of George's columns were set in the American Legion Bar in Three Lakes, where Gene the bartender and his two customers — Father Himmelsbach and Doc — discussed issues of the day.*

*With a tip of the hat to Steady Eddy, another of George's characters, and with a final hand clasp with George himself, the following is offered as a tribute to as fine a voice for Wisconsin conservation as has ever been raised.*

A few early snowflakes drifted down across the front window of the American Legion Bar in Three Lakes. "Just a little seasoning for the main course," as Steady Eddy would say.

Inside, Gene the bartender stuffed a bag of beer nuts into his already-stuffed knapsack, as his two customers waited impatiently by the door.

"If the barkeep doesn't hurry it up," Father Himmelsbach said, "we'll have to use flashlights to get out of town."

"To say nothing about finding our way out into the swamp."

"Hey," Gene said, "as the designated pack mule and guide for this expedition, I don't want to forget anything."

They were dressed in combinations of worn wool, blaze orange and Sorrels. Behind the set of their facial wrinkles, there was an odd glow, like the dim light from old campfire coals hit by a shifting wind.

Father Himmelsbach gazed out across Superior Street, smiled ever so slightly, and said: "It's the right thing we're doing here. Like the good book says, there is a time for all things, and this is our time."

Doc gave him a look, and then also turned to watch the

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snowflakes do their little death dances on the street.

"Cycles," Doc said. "That's what it's all about. Everything goes by cycles, just like the grouse."

"And isn't that a damn good thing," Gene said, as he hefted the knapsack and struggled to get it onto his shoulders. "Otherwise, there would be too many of everything."

"Like barkeeps," the father said.

Gene ignored him as he walked to the door, and the three of them stepped out of the Legion Bar and headed down the street. They paused once, and turned to give a casual salute to the flag that fluttered from the silver pole in front of the bar.

"It was a helluva run," Doc

said, shaking his head and glancing at his companions.

"We settled a lot of big issues," Gene said. "Everything from soup to nuts."

"Heavy on the nuts, I think," Father Himmelsbach said.

They resumed their walk, heading past stores and service stations. From his barbershop across the street, Ray Burzynski watched them disappear down the road, and he later said that he thought he saw Eddy join them down near Scott Remington's "Wild Wings" store.

Then, they were gone, headed out County Trunk A where it cuts through the big spruce swamp.

And that is the last anyone ever saw of them, except for the beer truck driver from Wausau, who said he came around the corner that day where the road curves into the thickest part of the swamp. Seems he saw these guys lined up for a deer drive.

The truck driver said he thought he recognized Gene, but what struck him as odd was that none of the hunters carried rifles.

"I slowed up, and then these guys just more or less evaporated into the spruce," the driver said. "It was like that movie where those old baseball players disappeared into the Iowa cornfield."

"There were five of them," the driver said. That puzzled people until they figured out that Father Himmelsbach, Doc, Gene and Steady Eddy would never make a move without their leader. Especially if they were going to disappear forever into the glorious mystery and natural harmony of a spruce swamp, they would certainly be accompanied by George Vukelich.

They sometimes raise a glass to that fact up at the Legion Bar in Three Lakes, and at other places where good people pause to remember a cycle at its zenith.

*Bill Stokes, a close friend of George Vukelich, was a longtime Madison newspaper writer.*