

Mel Ellis leaned forward in the leather easy chair and packed his pipe. "Wisconsin," he said, "with its seasons, breeds a certain type of guy and a certain type of writing and a certain tempo that other states aren't likely to get." He smiled ever so slightly, and added, "Southern Illinois is not likely to breed it with its soggy winters."

He let us ponder that while he lit his pipe. "There's a briskness and a flowering and a richness all through the state of Wisconsin. It seems to bring forth guys like Aldo Leopold, and it gives them a different slant on life."

We were at Little Lakes, the fifteen-acre chunk of Eden that Ellis maintains smack in the middle of Big Bend, a village roughly fifteen miles southwest of downtown Milwaukee. We had spent the morning walking the Ellis vest-pocket wilderness with its resident rainbow trout, its mallards, and its pine-fringed ponds. Now, from the snug living room, we watched birds swirl around the chock-full feeders as the first real storm of the season moved in.

There's a quiet, wiry toughness about Mel Ellis. It doesn't surprise you to learn he flew thirty-one combat missions as a gunner and radioman on B-17's out of England during World War II. It *does* surprise you to learn that beneath that lean, weather-beaten hide there beats the heart of a poet.

"A lot of people have influenced me," he said, "a lot of events, a lot of environmental factors. But I think the greatest single influence in my life was the Rock River, the mysterious river."

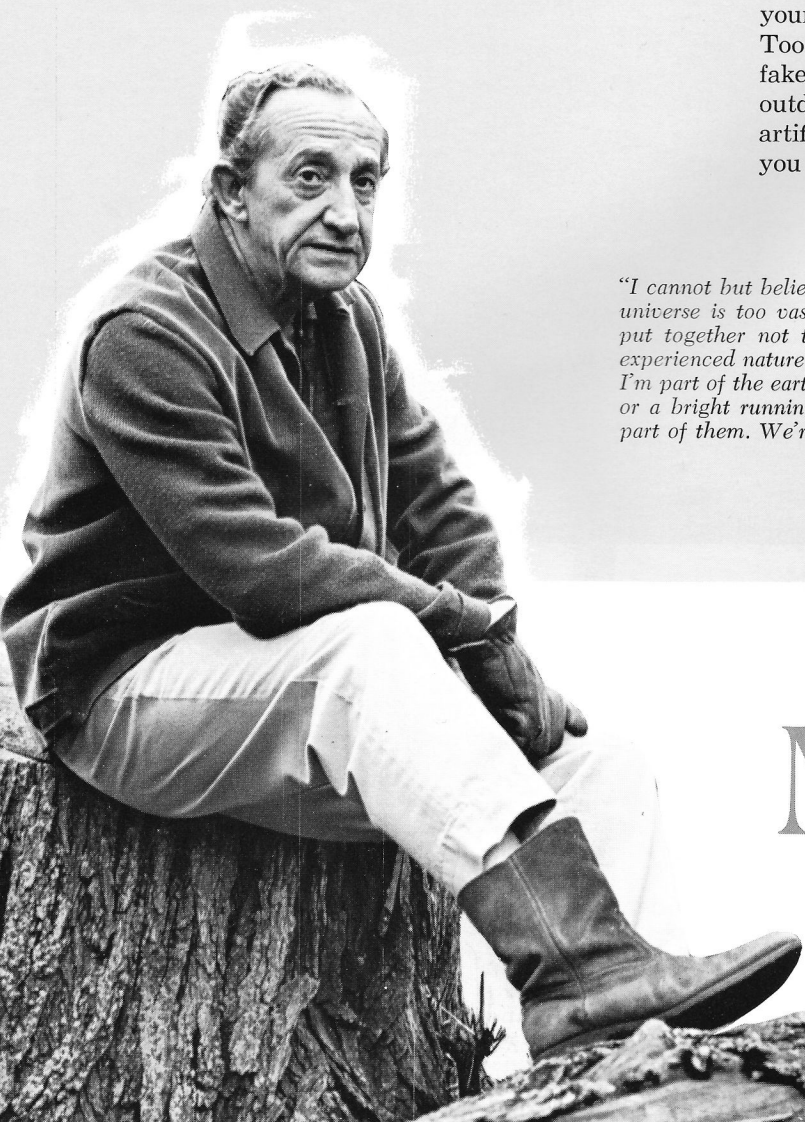
Ellis was born on a farm outside Beaver Dam in 1912, one of three boys and two girls. His father was as much a trapper and market hunter as he was a farmer. "My father knew the out-of-doors," Ellis remembered, "as well as he knew the inside of the barn. He wasn't an educated naturalist; he was a natural naturalist who picked up the lore of the out-of-doors from seeing it and living it and being a part of it. I became interested in it through him. He made it possible for all of us to live on the river." The new Ellis book, *The Mysterious River*, chronicles those formative years.

As a writer, Mel Ellis has actually crammed two careers into one lifetime. The first, that of outdoor writer, culminated in a successful association of almost fourteen years with *The Milwaukee Journal*. And the second, that of novelist, began after he had left the *Journal*.

Looking back now on his newspaper time, he feels that it was too long. "It cast me into a mold that is still hard to break. When I'm writing a book, I find that my chapters are written like essays. I got into such a pattern of writing 1,000-word pieces, 1,500-word pieces, 2,000-word pieces that I couldn't think in anything but those word limits. Deadlines became such a driving force that I never leaned back and really thought things out."

I reminded him that a lot of people regard the outdoor writer as one of the last free spirits running loose in our society. "Well," he said, "you're under the wire all the time. You're writing maybe eight, ten, twelve pieces a week. Sometimes you have three, four pieces in the same Sunday paper besides a daily column. Then there's something about the outdoor writer's life that somehow or other makes him a bankrupt idealist. After a while your senses are dulled. You don't care. You lose interest. Too many people. Too much commercialism. Too much fakery. Even the Indians are debauched. It isn't the outdoor world I learned to love in my youth. It's an artificial world and you either get out or it will drive you to drink.

*"I cannot but believe that there is a governing force. The universe is too vast, too well regulated, and too handily put together not to have something guiding it. I have experienced nature as a deep, deep, significant feeling that I'm part of the earth. An owl at night or a coyote howling or a bright running stream are all part of me and I am part of them. We're all part of each other."*



# Mel Ellis

"Anyway, what started out to be one of the finest jobs in the world turned out to be a trap. After ten years, well, I'd seen it all and done it all, and I was getting pretty bored with the whole proposition. I was on the road 80 percent of the time. I wasn't home when any of my kids were born. . . ." He leaves unsaid the fact that for three hard years he knew his wife was dying of cancer.

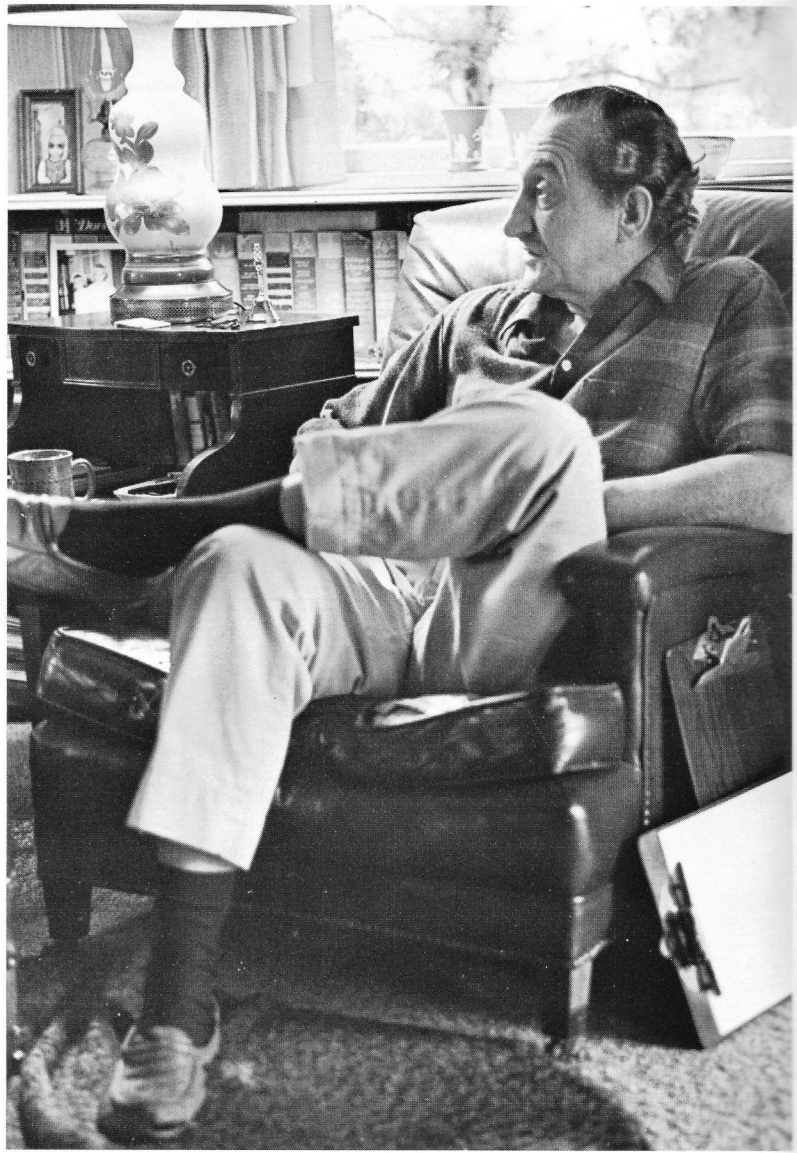
His career at *The Milwaukee Journal* closed with the death of his wife. He left the paper. He even left Little Lakes for a spell. It was a rough period. He fought his way through it by free-lance writing. He continued his contributions to *Field and Stream* as an associate editor. He resumed the "Notes from Little Lakes" column for the *Sunday Journal*. And eventually, he remarried. "Gwen," he said with quiet pride, "is a wonderful woman, and she knows how to handle me. She had a child and I had four and our family's getting along great."

The Ellis career as a novelist began in 1967, when agent Larry Sternig called to say Dutton was sponsoring a \$10,000 nature-book contest. "What Larry said," Ellis laughed, "was 'Why the hell don't you write a book for them?' The deadline was about a month away, but I sat down and in three weeks I turned out *Run, Rainey, Run*. That's how I wrote my first book."

Dutton didn't take the book, so Sternig sent it on to Holt, Rinehart and Winston. They not only took it, but said immediately that they wanted another. Ellis was launched as a writer of books, a writer who in four short years has nine titles in print. It has changed his life drastically.

"I don't leave the house," he chuckled. "I don't get to Milwaukee more than three, four times a year. I'm home. I do all my work at home. Once a year I come out to a dozen or so autograph parties and that's about the extent of it."

His book-writing schedule calls for a solid five hours at the typewriter, five days a week. "When I'm on a book," he said, "I get up at 7 or 7:30. I drink a pot of coffee and read—anything, just something to get me cooking—until 8:30. I get the mail, and then I work until noon. Regardless. After lunch, a walk. I'm back at the typewriter at 1, and I work until 3. After work," Ellis continues, "I run two miles. Then I take my shower and get cleaned up for supper." Saturdays are devoted to magazine work and newspaper columns. Sundays, he divides in two. The mornings are for mail, the rest for relaxation.



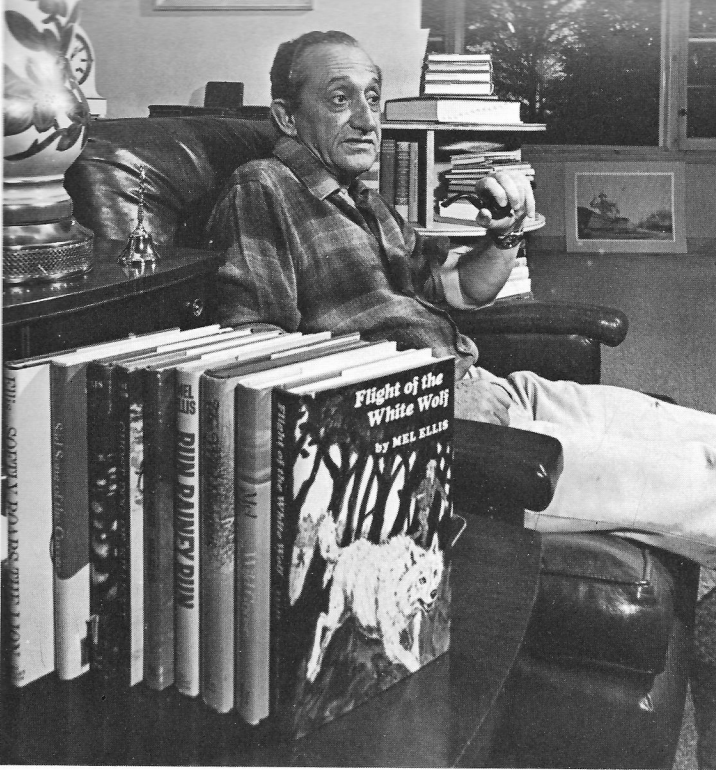
*"I don't think we treated nature right when I was a boy. I don't think we had any concept of how to treat nature. Today we know a lot more about how to treat nature than we did then. When the Horicon Marsh was going in, only a handful of people fought for it. Today you could get thousands and thousands to back a project like that."*

# of Little Lakes

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VERN ARENDT





*"If you haven't got something to say, what the hell are you writing for? I think that everything you write should say something. I think you should try to teach as you go along, but in an offhand way. The teaching should be incidental to a good story. I think that you should show some side of life, good or bad, and let the reader do his own moralizing and draw his own conclusions."*

Ellis averages around 3,500 words a day. He thinks he averaged more on *Run, Rainey, Run*, but he allows that *Rainey* was waiting to be written. Without pain. Without sweat. Patience in writing, Ellis admits, is not one of his virtues. He barrels through his books as fast as he can, and that's where the pain comes in.

"I probably would do 200 percent better if I let the book sit around the house for a few months, but I don't have the patience for it. It probably goes back to the newspaper training. When a thing is done, it's done. I don't want to see it anymore. I don't want to hear it anymore. I don't want to read it anymore. I've had it with that book."

I asked him the obvious question: How does such a tight writing schedule affect his hunting and fishing time? "Well," he answered, "I can walk out of my door to the ponds and be back with a meal of fish in three minutes, so there's no challenge there. I've got to the point where about the only fishing I really like is stream fishing, dry-fly fishing in particular. I still love grayling fishing in some of the rivers near the Arctic Circle, and I go up there once in a while. I especially love Hatchet Lake in northern Saskatchewan."

He knocked the dottle from his pipe and was silent for a moment. "Hunting? I still like hunting, particularly good wing shooting. I like good duck shooting, especially bluebill shooting. I like to hunt quail, except that you have to go south, and then you have to hunt over dogs that aren't your own. I like ruffed grouse hunting, too."

He cleared his pipe and unfolded the tobacco pouch. "But it's getting tough for me to kill," he continued. "I've got a theory that eventually no one will shoot anything or kill anything. It's just a matter of becoming civilized. Hunting is a barbaric throwback. We've been

hunters for tens of thousands of years longer than we've been anything else, and if we don't get rid of this hunting instinct in the actual hunting of game, we get rid of it in the field of business, or sport, or some other field. We've been hunters so long we don't know what else to be. Someday we are going to be civilized, but it's going to be another thousand, two thousand, five thousand years. If man is still around then, he is going to be civilized."

Outside, the rain was coming down in curtains, and I got the good feeling I always had at my grandfather's farm when a storm hit and Grandma baked bread and the fruit cellar bulged with full Mason jars and there was the smell of new hay and musky animals in the quiet barn. That was all dead now. I thought of the Ellis pony feeding in his protected stall, the three hunting dogs in their clean-swept kennel, the lunker rainbows in their ponds. And I thought of the Ellis girls, the Rebels of whom he is so very proud, who learned here how to skin a muskrat, take a stitch out of a horse's wound, and listen thoughtfully to screech owls.

I asked Mel Ellis if Little Lakes could survive. "It's going to be subdivided someday," he said. "I won't subdivide it, but it will be. I don't see any possibility for holding on to it the way it is. They're going to build up around it. It will suffocate from taxes. The freeway is a mile and a half from us now. We go looking at other places, some of them in other states."

I told him I was sorry. Truly sorry. "Well," he laughed, "it's been said if a man has a good dog and a good woman, he has it made. I've been luckier than most. I've had several good dogs and three—counting my mother—very wonderful, concerned, and loving women. And now, a new life at an age when most men are ready to retire."

Later, on the way back to Madison, I thought of Little Lakes and my grandfather's farm, and it all got merged together. It was a strange feeling, but a good feeling. My grandfather, too, had been a lean, wiry, tough one. He had hunted only wild mushrooms and live-trapped his rabbits with a wooden box. He never understood too much English, but I think he would have understood Mel Ellis. What a meeting that would have been.

### The Mel Ellis Bookshelf

From Holt, Rinehart and Winston:

*Sad Song of the Coyote*

*Run, Rainey, Run*

*Softly Roars the Lion*

*Ironhead*

*Wild Goose, Brother Goose*

*The Wild Runners*

*Flight of the White Wolf*

*The Mysterious River* (available in autumn)

From Four Winds Press:

*When Lightning Strikes*

*Ghost Dog of Killicut*

Several of Mel Ellis' books are available through our Wisconsin Bookshelf. Check the form at the front of the magazine for specific titles.