

The Troubled Sleep of Mel Ellis

They say on the front cover of the dust jacket that this is "the story of a warm friendship between a wild Mallard drake and the family of Mel Ellis.

Well. That may fool all the good old readers out in the suburbs but it won't fool all the good old boys out in Wisconsin's back forty.

We know that New York is very hip and those blurb writers could write glibly of widgeon and coot if need be, all the time wondering what the hell a widgeon and coot were.

I just don't want you to be put off by that Disney-landish blurb. This is not a simple, cute rubber duckie kind of story. Granted this is the story of a mallard duck but this is also a very serious statement by a man who is probably the most promising of all Wisconsin writers around. And this despite the fact that he is old enough to be your father.

Peg Leg Pete is a lot of stories. It's Little Lakes, where the Mel Ellis family lives, the famed 15 acre chunk of man-made ponds and woods a stone's throw from Milwaukee. It's the five Ellis daughters growing up tougher than boys and more sensitive than seismographs.

It's Gwen, Mel's second wife, who loves wild flowers and Mel Ellis more than any of God's other inventions. And it's the story of a heroically proportioned mallard duck.

On Dec. 13, 1966, young Dianne Ellis brought a mallard drake into the Ellis household. She had found him caught in a muskrat trap, his leg nearly severed and useless, his presence almost mystical.

Flanked by his sensitive — yet tough — women . . . "all five of my daughters and both of my wives (one, Bernice, had died) could pluck a bat from the bedroom drapes and ease it out the window, or pick up a mouse (dead or alive) or mend a head." Mel Ellis amputates the duck's shredded leg, cauterizes the wound and ushers in the era of Peg Leg Pete at Little Lakes.

Saving the drake was to Ellis a waste.

"I came from a father who had been a trapper, part-time market hunter, and as a boy, it had been part of my job to keep the larder well supplied with fish and game. I accomplished my job with zeal, almost a vengeance, and went on to become outdoor editor of a metropolitan newspaper, the Milwaukee Journal, and associate editor of a national hunting and fishing magazine, Field and Stream. During the course of these journalistic duties I, of course, killed more than a score of deer, many moose, elk . . . not to mention coyotes, mountain lions, jaguars . . . and boatloads of ducks, and wagonloads of pheasants, quail, grouse, doves . . . almost every animal and bird which could be legally hunted on our two continents. So mine, of course was somewhat of a jaundiced eye."

His girls' deep concern with the recovery of this particular duck disturbs Ellis. He notes that if this had been their first experience with a wounded or sick animal, he might have understood their concern. But they had had sick and injured animals by the score.

There had been foxes, opossums, seagulls, ducks of every species, scores of rabbits, many kinds of pigeons, pheasants, hawks, song birds . . . the list was endless.

"Perhaps," he says, "the most heart-rending experience for a child is the discovery that animals are at war with one another."

"A beloved dog crushes the life out of a soft, furry pet rabbit. A friendly coon kills a pet pigeon. A 'tame' seagull pecks the eyes out of a living fish.

"Right up to the moment of awful truth, the world of animals



BOOKS of the TIMES

By GEORGE VUKELICH

Peg Leg Pete

By Mel Ellis
Holt, Rinehart & Winston
169 pages

is soft and furry and bright-eyed. Then in an instant, there is red blood on the white fur."

But, Ellis writes, that was the way with life at Little Lakes and if you were going to police the inhabitants ("which we sometimes did in the beginning") then you might starve a litter of young mink because you killed a marauding mother, or you might let a hawk's eggs grow cold and lifeless because you shot the female to protect the cardinals . . . "So in the end, we decided against making any moral judgements of our neighbors and let nature's law of survival decide most issues."

Sometimes, you did interfere, like when the muskrats threatened to let everything go down the drain by ventilating the dike, or when the possums got so thick they were on the verge of stalking one another or when hordes of grackles broke the tender leaders on the spruce, or when a fierce cat got so good at the business of killing he did it mostly for the excitement.

Peg Leg Pete, of course, survives and is more duck on one leg than anybody else on two.

He drives off a red-shouldered hawk that was stalking him, he drives off a hard-nosed mink that was stalking another duck. He even survives a load of buckshot when everybody had given him up for dead.

It is this vision of a wounded, dying Peg Leg that brings terrible dreams to the troubled sleep of Mel Ellis.

" . . . it was the beginning of an autumnal day and in the dream, the sun was a bloody splash on the horizon. Wherever I looked, there were hunters. They stood elbow to elbow, waiting. Finally as the sun topped the horizon a whistle blew, and the army advanced, shooting.

"Everything which scurried along the ground or managed to become airborne fell before their fire. Hawks, herons, swans, rabbits, pheasants, deer, opossums . . . none were spared.

"They marched on and on through marsh after marsh, up into the woodlands and over the hills. They advanced through the valleys shoulder-to-shoulder, shooting. Then I came awake."

Awake, Ellis recalls his real life hunting experiences. He remembers the first any-deer season ever held in Wisconsin when a half-million hunters crashed into the north woods and he'd seen entire families fill their tag quotas with tiny fawns.

He remembers coming across moose carcass after moose carcass in Canada — left to rot by hunters who had come only to collect a trophy head.

He remembers the president of a large conservation club and how he had shot and hidden five buck deer beneath brush piles and then come back on the last day of the season to select the largest, leaving the rest to rot.

Home is the hunter, that's what you're reminded of in this

book. Home is the hunter. Mel Ellis has been on a very long journey. He's traveled with a wife named Bernice. And a wife named Gwen.

And daughters named SuZanne and Sharon, Mary, Dianne and Deborah. And a neighbor named Jerry Washicheck, Sr.

And crewmates on a Flying Fortress. And fishing buddies in Saskatchewan. And hundreds of hunting buddies in duck blinds and deer stands over a lifetime.

And there were dogs named Brig, Buck, Eekim and the immortal Rainey. And horses named Rebel Red and Taffy Candy and red-shouldered hawks called Teelon and Taalon and the wildest menagerie any man ever lived with since Noah set sail. And even Noah never had a crazy, one-legged duck named Pete.

"Your guns are getting dusty," Gwen tells her husband on the last page.

"I know," Mel Ellis says. "They need oil, too. Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow I'll take care of them."