

North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

We were sitting around at Bud Jordahl's the other day—just drinking the fat and chewing the coffee, as Steady Eddy likes to put it—and, as it always does, the conversation got around to The High Cost of Everything.

Bud said he and his son Jordie had been up goose hunting at Horicon, and Bud was flabbergasted at the cost.

"Of course, now," he admitted, "I hadn't been goose hunting in 22 years. I wanted Jordie to have the experience, and he wanted to go, so we went. Anyway, I realize things change, but, have you been goose hunting lately?"

I said I didn't really hunt the wild goose anymore. Mostly, Steady Eddy and I were content just to chase it.

"There is no way," Bud emphasized, "that a poor person can go goose hunting today in Wisconsin. Horicon, Grand River—at least, let's say it's damned expensive."

He ticked off the costs he had run up on his goose chase to Horicon.

"Federal stamp: \$7.50. State stamp: \$3.50. Small-game license: at least five bucks. The trip: figure 24¢ a mile to run a car today. A box of shells: about \$8. Then, if you do what Jordie and I did—we paid a farmer to hunt out of his bale blind—that's at least another \$10. Then you throw in the incidentals: food, breakfast—that's a lot of money."

"Never stop to figure out what your sport is costing you out there," Steady warns. "You start figuring by the pound and you wind up hunting in the supermarkets."

Steady is right. If you're talking about Cost Effectiveness, the way most people hunt and fish, it ain't—Charlie Bran and similar professionals excepted, of course. But a lot of people pursue their sports for reasons you never tumble onto until you try it yourself. Reasons so basic, so simple, you never find them in the four-color catalogs of the black-and-white textbooks.

I don't know if you were around when the late Gordon MacQuarrie was the Outdoor Editor for the Milwaukee Journal for 20 years, but he wrote something once that says it for almost everybody who likes to get back in the boonies.

"How would you like to hole up in a country," MacQuarrie asked his readers, "where you could choose, as you fell asleep, between duck hunting and partridge hunting, between small-mouths on a good river like the St. Croix or trout on another good one like the Brule, or between muskie fishing on the Chippewa flowage or cisco dipping in the dark for the fun of it? Or, if the mood came over you, just a spell of tramping around on deer trails with a hand ax and a gunny-sack, knocking down highly flammable pine knots out of trees that have lain on the ground for 70 years? I've had good times in this country doing nothing more

adventurous than filling a pail with blueberries or a couple of pails with cranberries."

For a spell, I was right there with Gordon MacQuarrie. Sweeping out the Old Duck Hunters' cabin. Trimming the wicks of the kerosene lamps, polishing their chimneys. Building a fire in the red brick fireplace for its companionship. Spreading the thick blankets on the two beds, setting the kitchen table, kindling the kitchen range to get the oatmeal started. It took, the President of the Old Duck Hunters always said, just three hours of slow steaming to make steel-cut oatmeal as acceptable to a man as to a horse.

"And if we keep raising fees," Bud Jordahl was saying, "low-income people are going to be priced right out of the market."

When Bud Jordahl uses the word *we*, in a very general way, it means all of us who love the boonies in this state. But more often it means, in a very specific way, the Natural Resources Board, the DNR Board on which he served from 1972 to 1977. It's a kind of reflex action, like flinching when nobody in your blind is shooting. He's now a UW professor, but the Board is in his blood.

"It costs more and more to get outdoors," Bud said. "Hunting licenses. Fishing licenses. Trout stamps. Boat registration. Camping fees. Park fees...."

He stopped and looked at me.

"Don't look at me," I said. "You're the professional."

"We should be buying up abandoned railroad corridors," Bud said. "That's top priority. We should have more access to open spaces, particularly near metropolitan areas. One example: more public fishing piers in Lake Michigan. And perhaps, *Primitive Facilities*."

I don't know why that last simple phrase turned me on so. It might have been the daydreaming with Gordon MacQuarrie. It might have been remembering that Bud had said more than once that a summer day on Lake Geneva was absolute chaos and that the Saturday morning of a Wisconsin deer hunt was a disgrace to the sport.

Primitive facilities. Away from the cities. Away from the noise. And when the great silences settle in, the weathered cabin door opens into another dimension.

"Perhaps here in an outdoor magazine devoted to fishing, hunting and kindred sports," Gordon MacQuarrie had set down long ago, "is no place to confess hunting was secondary out there in the sun-drenched hills.... What do those who ask why men go hunting know of the tryst a hunter keeps with the wind and the trees and the sky?...."

Log cabins, I said, no electricity. Wooden boats, Bud said, no motors.

I think there was something in the coffee. •