

Under the Influence

A Great Spirit watches over those divided by two worlds.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

A remembrance of other winters on this frozen bay....

The Indians would drive all the way from the reservation up to Otto Trychak's Bar on Big Stone Lake because Otto's was the only bar that would serve them. Sometimes, Otto didn't open up his place until 6 o'clock in the evening or so, and in winter it was dark at 6 o'clock—actually, in the winter, it was dark at 4 o'clock—and it was something to see when the Indians rolled into the gravel parking lot out front in one of their old beat-up clunkers.

There were usually no headlights working on the clunker, taillights either, for that matter. It was a typical Indian car that the Lakota medicine man Archie Fire Lane Deer describes as "no brakes, no windows and no lights."

You would hear the old Indian car long before you saw it, and then, if you really strained your eyes, you could make out this dark lump turning off Highway 32, and you could hear the clattering of gravel as the lump came crunching into the icy, stone-covered parking lot and moaned to a stop just short of Otto's plate glass window. There, the tortured engine coughed and choked, the car shivering and shuddering like an old horse, and then the engine just quit.

You knew the driver didn't turn off the key because the car had no key. It had to be hot wired every time it was started because only God knew where the key was.

You always knew who it was out there in the parking lot. "It's the Indians," Otto would say, without even looking up from the cribbage board or from the beer taps or from watching the TV or from whatever. "It's the Indians, God bless 'em. They made it again."

Out in the parking lot, there would be people tumbling and spilling out of all the doors except the one on the driver's side. That door was tied shut with a piece of rope because the hinges were sprung and there was no lock or latch at all, and you just couldn't believe it. The driver came out through the space where there should have been a window.

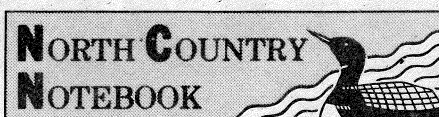
We'd sit at the bar and watch the Indians getting out of the car. Sleepy Ed Stanzil said it reminded him of the circus when that little clown car pulled up in front of the stands and coughed to a stop and then all those clowns came piling and spilling out like gumdrops. That's what always happened at Otto's when the Indians unloaded.

We're talking, I don't know, eight, 10—a dozen?—full-grown people, and some of them really big dudes, jammed inside that clunker so tight the driver had to hang out the window to see where he was driving.

Then you think, Jesus! That's the way he probably drove up all the way from the reservation. Up Highway 32. No lights at all. And then you'd think about them going back the same way after the bar closed up, just all beered up, and by then the winter night would be as dark as the bottom of Big Stone Lake under the ice, and there they'd all be, drunker than skunks, and right then and there you just knew there was a Great Spirit watching over them and especially watching over the driver.

It reminded you of what Dynie Mansfield used to say when he was sitting in the stern, catching all the walleyes, and you were sitting up in the bow, getting skunked, again, and just watching him bring in one fat, golden-brown fish after another. It always got you so frustrated that you could scream. How the hell could he be doing it again? Catching all the fish? AGAIN!

You watched Dynie like a pitcher watches a fast runner on first, and you tried to do every single thing he was



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doing. When he saw what you were doing, he even showed you in slow motion exactly what he was doing. He showed you how he hooked the fathead minnow on the jig. He showed you how he cast it out ever so gently, wafting it to a spot just in front of the reeds. He told you exactly how deep he was fishing, and you did all that, and there you parted company.

Dynie would raise his rod tip and then it would bend double like a bow, and you sat there and prayed that it would be dark soon so at least you wouldn't have to watch all that success, which, it must be said, he never flaunted.

Dynie could always sense how you were feeling, and he always tried to convince you that he wasn't catching all the walleyes because he was such a good walleye fisherman. It was just luck that he happened to be catching all the fish, again.

He said that with the straightest face you ever saw, and he said it as though he absolutely believed it all.

"That's right, coach," Dynie would say humbly. "The Good Lord watches over the dumb ones."

But the Indians weren't dumb. They were caught between two cultures. In those days, the Indian kids had to go to high school in Shawano, and that sure as hell was no picnic then.

They took crap from the white kids for being too Indian in their ways and then on the reservation they took crap from some of the Old Ones because they weren't Indian enough in their ways.

It was no wonder that the young guys raced up and down the reservation roads at night and killed themselves when they went off the road and smashed into trees in that beautiful stretch of Wolf River country that is still so haunted by the Old Days and Old Ways.

I remember being invited into an Old One's house and the kitchen sink was full and overflowing with the biggest mess of trout I'd ever seen in my young life. I just gasped!

"Oh, trout are all right," the Old One had said. "But when it comes to the good eating fish, I'll take crappies every time."

I thought the Old One might be kidding, but in those days I was just too dumb to really know for sure. ■