

As the Rivers Rise

Mother Nature teaches a lesson we have chosen not to learn.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

They were sitting around at the American Legion Bar up in Three Lakes the other night — “just trying to stay away from the water” is the way Steady Eddy puts it — and they got to discussing the great summer floods of 1993.

“Well, you know,” Gene the bartender was saying, “along the Mississippi River, the bartenders have whipped up a murky little concoction they call ‘Mississippi Mud.’ They showed a glass of it on TV, and it looked just like the tea-brown water right in our own Chain of Lakes.

“Of course, you put alcohol in anything and folks are gonna drink it. I remember at all those airfields in Europe guys would take de-icing fluid out of the planes to drink, and that stuff could kill you. They strained it through those long loaves of French bread. The Frenchies laughed at the GIs for doing that, but I’ve seen Frenchies dip their bread in wine and then swallow both the bread *and* the wine. I don’t know what gave them the right to laugh at somebody else.

“Judge not, that ye not be judged, as our good padre is always telling us.

What the hell, you have to have a sense of humor, particularly when you’re up the creek without a paddle and the water is up to your ass.

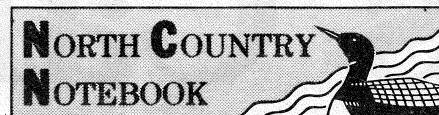
“Sure, the flooding is a tragedy, and my heart goes out to all those people who have lost everything — their homes, their farms, everything they own. I don’t know what I would do if I were in their shoes. Probably just get the hell to high ground and then cry my goddamn eyes out. Then, after I cried myself out, I sure hope I would be able to laugh and joke around again and not be so broken up that I’d just lie down and die. You gotta have a sense of humor, and I know that’s hard.

“I saw a story in the sports section about this minor-league baseball team, the Quad City River Bandits down in Davenport, Iowa. Well, Davenport is right on the Mississippi, and the river flooded the city. The baseball field is flooded too. All you can see is a John Deere tractor on top of the pitching mound, which has been under water since June 24. The team played some home games in Burlington, about 75 miles away. They might also play them in Clinton, which is about 35 miles away, or Cedar Rapids, which is about 80 miles away.

“One of the guys in the front office, which is also flooded, said that at first it was frustrating. And then he said: ‘But you have to have a good sense of humor.’ He also said that they’re calling their ballpark ‘Field of Streams.’

“Now, that’s funny! Can you believe that? Field of Streams! I love that team already. We should skip a couple of Brewer games and go see the Bandits. What the hell. They’re in the same league as Appleton, the Midwest League. That’s single-A ball. Come to think of it, just like the Brewers.

“Of course, as Al McGuire says, it ain’t all seashells and balloons. The Midwest League president said that the league could survive and go to other places. But the people who can’t go home and



who lost all their possessions are in a lot worse shape. Yeah, he got that right. I don’t think those folks are laughing right now. Maybe they never will again.”

Gene stared solemnly at his customers, all two of them: the good priest Himmelsbach and the good doctor.

“**W**ell, sir,” Doc began, “some starchy-eyed optimist — and I think Ronald Reagan quoted him — once said that a rising tide lifts all boats. What would he have to say about a rising river, I wonder.

“I think what we’re getting on the TV, and in all our own backwaters and back yards, is a crash course in Nature 101. We are seeing rivers and streams and creeks do exactly what they are supposed to when they overflow and flood. They are supposed to go into the flood plain.

“That, in this day and age, shouldn’t really surprise anybody anymore, since rivers and streams and creeks have been doing just that since the old days and the old ages.

“What does surprise me is that folks seem to think that when they build houses and stores and factories — and, yes, ballparks — somehow that changes things and the flood plain isn’t a flood plain anymore.

“And when the rivers pay you no mind and flood you out anyway, then somehow that makes the rivers evil. Some people even say it’s an act of God. I, of course, will always defer to the good Himmelsbach in matters involving the Deity, the good Himmelsbach being the duly constituted representative of the current Holy Roman Empire and its operating franchise in this — some say — godforsaken county of Oneida. Can an act of God be evil? What say you, good Himmelsbach? It’s enough to make Unitarians of us all.”

Gene slapped his forehead. The good Himmelsbach slapped the bar.

“I think we should change places this Sunday, Doc,” the priest said. “You stand in my place in the pulpit, and I’ll stand in your place in the trout stream.”

“He doesn’t stand in it,” Gene said. “He walks on it.”

“Ma Nature is teaching us an important lesson here,” Doc said. “She bangs us on the head with a two-by-four to get our attention, because this is serious stuff. This is life-and-death stuff. This is a hard lesson to learn because we have chosen since olden times not to learn an easier way.

“The lesson is: *Don’t build in the flood plain!*

“Don’t build houses, schools, stores, factories, villages, towns, cities or ballparks. Actually, I think Ma wouldn’t mind a little diamond with natural grass if you didn’t mind some natural rain-outs. But just a diamond. No stadium. No lights. No parking lots. Small bleachers. Next to a cornfield.”

They drank to Ma Nature and her two-by-fours. They drank also to poor, suffering humanity — fearful, watchful, waiting — all along the great, restless, rising waters of this world. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Sunday nights at 11:30 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA (970 AM).