

## NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

# Rebel Redux

We visited the other day with the woman Mel Ellis called "the Rebel Queen" in his legendary newspaper column titled "Notes from Little Lakes."

Little Lakes was a 15-acre chunk of Eden—a piece of the north country in the shadow of downtown Milwaukee—where Mel wrote for the Journal.

The Rebel Queen was Mel's wife, Gwen. Their five daughters were—and still are—known to thousands of Journal readers as "the Rebels."

The Rebels are gone from Little Lakes now, leading their lives away from here—the place where they learned how to take care of horses, skin muskrats and nurse crippled mallards back to health.

Mel Ellis is gone from Little Lakes, too, and yet he's still there. It was his wish that his ashes be scattered on the property. When he died last September, the family had a simple ceremony and did just that.

You can almost hear his voice on the breeze that stirs the water of Spring Pond, that murmurs high in the impressive pines, that whispers low through the carpet of jewelweed.

"The jewelweed," Gwen Ellis said, "was Mel's favorite wildflower."

She said that a lot of people thought of Mel only as a hunter and fisherman. But that was only one side of him, one little facet of him.

He was also an extraordinary father.

"He called the girls 'rebels,'" Gwen said, "because they didn't grow up the 'normal' way at Little Lakes.

"Instead of pretty clothes, fancy shoes and curly hair, they went barefoot and gave their attention to the animals on the place. They shoveled manure—just the opposite of what a girl is supposed to be.

"So they were rebels, as society would look on them. These five daughters were not normal little girls.

"I think that's another reason that Mel could get along just fine without sons: because his daughters were not the norm.

"He never identified them by name in the Milwaukee Journal columns because that might have hurt them at school or out in the world. He just wrote about Rebel Number One or Rebel Number Two or Three, Four, or Five, so people never knew who did what or whatever.

"We had a rule here that you had to be finished with breakfast by 8 o'clock, and then we would work until noon. That was the time of the Dutch elm disease, and we had to take hundreds of trees down all by ourselves because we priced what it would cost to pay somebody to take them down and it was preposterous! That's when Mel learned how to use a chain saw.

"So we worked outside—on the trees, mending fences, planting trees, trapping muskrats, fixing up the damage muskrats do.

"Then, we had huge cages out here at that time, and they held all the animals we were trying to save. People would bring us animals that were hurt or injured—rabbits, ducks, kingfishers, you name it. I can't think of an animal that the kids didn't bring back to life if they could.



"The girls were busy from sunrise to sunset. They just didn't grow up sitting around and enjoying Little Lakes. They had to help take care of it.

"Our kids also saw the compassion that Mel had for animals. They never saw him do anything cruel to a creature on the place, no matter what kind of a pest it was, because Mel never did anything cruel.

"There was a Mel the outside world knew, Mel the writer and all that. Here, he was our Mel."

The Rebels are grown up and scattered now—Waukesha, Illinois, California—and Gwen says they are as proud of Mel as he was of them, when he dedicated *Sermons In Stone* to each of them:

"To each child on leaving home:

"You cannot stay forever. It is the way of the world, so you must go. And now I only hope that during the days you were with me, I wrapped your hearts tenderly in the dewy, green leaves of home so they will stay fresh for planting. Then, when the season is right, root yourselves and the years will grow strong dreams.

"But, if at first you come upon barren soil, know that somewhere there are lush valleys. Know also that come deserts or mountains, lands far or near, whether one flower or wide-flung fields and high forests...know that you, too, are of the earth and it will comfort you.

"Try for truth, of course, but then if you do not find it, know that it is there in the snail and the earthworm, in the lily and the oak tree, in the stars and moon on ruffled waters.

"Then, should you be wearing sackcloth or satin, understand that your origins are as humble as the solitary blade that struggles from a crack to spread grass on concrete; never falter because you are as strong as the roots that split the rocks.

"And do not grieve. Rather rejoice that you go. Because out there are mountain peaks of such grandeur as you have never imagined. And be not afraid. The sun is everywhere." ■