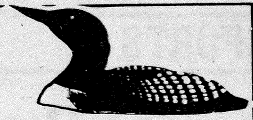


# North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

We were up in John Muir country with Marion Moran the other day watching the great goose flights bugling over the crisp hills like loosened hound dogs on the hunt.

As we skirted Ennis Lake—the “Fountain Lake” of John Muir’s boyhood—the very air rang with the vibrations of the past.

The air rings the same way on the Wisconsin at Sauk City, where you expect to see Augie Derleth walking the railroad trestle.

The air rings at Aldo Leopold’s Shack.

It rings all through Sigurd Olson’s North Country.

Some call it “The Pipes of Pan,” the voice of earth. Some say it is the spirit essence of the person who once walked this place, clinging like burrs and sticktights to the clothing of newcomers.

John Muir once walked in this place. And it sings.

Before he went off to the University in Madison where a memorial stone acknowledges his passage; before a glacier in Alaska and a redwood grove in California were named after him. Before he became “the father of our National Park System.”

Before all that, John Muir was a boy here, and growing up under his Scots father couldn’t have been all sunfish and wild-berry-picking.

“His father was harsh,” Marion said. “That was the way then. Sometimes you think it’s a miracle that John Muir grew up to become what he did.”

Linnie Marsh Wolfe, in her biography *The Life of John Muir* (University of Wisconsin Press), tells of the time the Muir family was digging a well and his father sent young John down in a bucket to chisel through the hard sandstone.

“...So the boy hacked away, day after day, by the light of a candle lantern, at the bottom of the three-foot bore.

“One morning, when the well was nearly eighty feet deep, a death-like faintness seized him. He called feebly for help. His father, leaning over the top, heard him and sharply commanded him to get back in the bucket. John, slumping into it, was hauled up and carried into the house, unconscious.

“Already it was being said among the neighbors: ‘Old Man Muir works his children like cattle.’

“The next day, the boy was in the well again. When he had chiseled out ten additional feet, he struck the nether springs with an abundance of pure water.”

As a grown man, John Muir recounted that brush with death.

“Once, I was let down into a deep well into which choke-damp had settled,” he wrote, “and nearly lost my life. The deeper I was immersed in the invisible poison, the less capable I became of willing measures of escape from it. And in just this condition are those who toil or dawdle or dissipate in crowded towns, in the sinks of commerce or pleasure.”

The iron entered John Muir’s soul, Wolfe judges, when he saw “pious people” ruthless in their treatment of human beings and animals in their charge. It caused him to revolt, early, against religion.

His first active rebellion, she writes, stemmed from his father’s callousness in overdriving the horse, Nob, to get from one religious meeting to another.

When the poor beast, slowly dying of pneumonia, followed them about the farm as if dumbly pleading for help, John began seriously to question a religion so devoid of love.

Another grief came when his father sold their pony, Jack, to someone bound for the California goldmines. The money that he got for the pony meant more to the father than the happiness of his children.

The trail widened and the flattened gentians in the deep tire tracks made you hurt. A four-wheel-drive vehicle had twisted and powered through here as cruelly as a thing devoid of love.

The air rang with violence.

I straightened up a few of the gentians and leaned them against their clumpmates.

They stood like walking wounded, in shock.

That was the horror of the ATVs, Marion said, the All Terrain Vehicles. They got into the back country and just tore up plant communities that took years and years to stabilize. The ATVs upset a natural balance in the backwoods and set off a disruptive, destructive cycle that continued long after they were back on the paved roads, their bumpers trailing grass of Parnassus, the fringed gentians mashed down in their mud cleats.

Marion pointed to the erosion starting to gully the hillside, tiny feeder cricks coming into the main channel. The land was coming apart here, fissured, veined.

Do the drivers of ATVs know who John Muir was?

Would it make any difference?

When John Muir was importuning the ATV mentalities of his time to set aside forests and waters and mountains “for the good of the people for all time,” he argued:

“... Nearly all our forests in the West are on mountains and cover and protect the fountains of the rivers. They are being more and more invaded and, of course, fires are multiplied; five to ten times as much lumber is burned as is used, to say nothing of the waste of lowlands by destructive floods. As sheep advance, flowers, vegetation, grass, soil, plenty, and poetry vanish.”

The best way to see John Muir country is in the company of naturalist Marion Moran, who teaches for UW-Extension. Know who John Muir was. It makes a difference. Ask any gentian.