

Island of the Snakes

Sometimes
two-legged critters
slither about, too.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Ghost stories swirl over the Great Lakes like seagulls half-glimpsed in the gray mists. The image is fitting, for is it not true that seagulls are the souls of drowned sailors searching endlessly for their lost ships and their lost bodies? On the eve of Halloween, Steady thought we should retell one ghost story that appeared here years ago in another form, another shape—as ghosts are wont to do.

In the clammy morning mists, the island could be any of the Great Lakes

islands that lie hulking and silent as ships at anchor.

To see this island emerging from its shroud is to believe that you know this island, for have you not seen Rock Island emerging from a ghostly cocoon in the very same way on the very same kind of morning?

Yes. You have seen Rock Island and Plum Island and Mackinac and Washington and all the wild, wild outposts called the Apostles.

Islands are no mystery to you anymore. Because you have known so many in the past, it is natural to think that you know this island, too. Sand beach, gravel beach and the eternal gulls, searching, searching. It is an old story. When you've seen one island....

Well, I call this island Snake Island.

That is not the name on the lake chart, but it will do here. Snake Island.

It is a real place, a real island, anchored somewhere in Lake Michigan.

The woman, a Native American, grew up on the island. She was a little girl here, removed from the white man's world on the mainland.

She will tell you that it was "just an island." While she is not telling a lie, she is also not telling you the complete truth. This is "just an island" like all the others anchored in the great inland seas.

This island truly has snakes. Many, many snakes.

Slowly, it will slither into your consciousness that this island has more snakes than any island you know.

In the flat water below the rising mists, there are sticks and snags poking out of the surface, only they are not sticks and snags. They are the alert heads of snakes, watching.... They seem



like the periscopes of tiny submarines guarding the island. It is almost comical, but not really laughable. You do not laugh. They make you shiver.

There are snakes on the island, too. On the shores. On the trails. Steady Eddy says they are not poisonous, but he doesn't know what kind they are.

They really don't seem intent on bothering anybody. As Steady says, they could really bother you if they put their little minds to it. They just hang out on the land, and they hang out in the water, and it's kind of spooky the first time you see them. Especially in the mists out there.

Steady says the snakes remind him of the eels migrating to the Sargasso Sea to spawn in the seaweed and start the new generation. Maybe these island snakes are doing that. But an informed source told him that these snakes are on or around the island all the time. They aren't migrating there. They live there.

There's a place in Canada—in Manitoba, we think—that's been written up in National Geographic as a big gathering place for snakes. They migrate in for the winter and "just sort of ball up until spring," as Steady puts it.

"If you have to spend winter in Manitoba," he says, "you might as well spend it with snakes you know."

The Native American woman left her island to attend the white man's university in the city. She studied Native American Indian Studies—can you believe it, her major professor was a white man! She earned her degree and eventually became a teacher of Native American Indian Studies. She now teaches at her old university.

In the summer, she brings her students to her island. After they get used to the snakes, everyone settles in and learns about the Old Ways, and some of the students even go swimming with her in the lake. But not all do. However, all the students say that it is one of the most remarkable summers of their lives.

The story goes that when the Native American woman was a struggling student, she didn't have an easy time of it. She was, after all, a woman, a Native American, and poor on top of that. In those days before aids and scholarships, that was very hard. Then her major professor, a truly respected scholar in his field, published her work as his own original research. She was so dispirited, so disillusioned over his betrayal, that she was going to quit the white world and just go back to her island.

Then, very late one night after midnight, she got a telephone call. First she thought something bad must have happened in her family on the island.

But of all people, it was the professor calling. He sounded half crazy. She thought he must be drunk. He was yelling that he knew damn well where the snakes were coming from, and, goddamn her, she better STOP it! He hung up.

He called again about three in the morning and said the same thing, only he wasn't yelling, he was screaming!

Goddamn you! Goddamn you! Goddamn you!

His final call was desperate, hysterical. She could barely understand him. His basement, he was saying, was crawling with snakes!

The professor admitted publicly that he had stolen her work. Then he disappeared from sight. The Native American woman says she doesn't know where he went.

Steady Eddy says the professor turned out to be a real snake in the grass. He's probably hiding out and lying low—on an island somewhere. ■