

North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

"There's something about Wisconsin," Mel Ellis told me once, "that produces a certain kind of 'nature' writer. I don't know what it is, but it's there."

Mel's observation burrowed into the back of my head like a wood tick you can't reach and no one else can find, so you just live with it.

Steady Eddy thinks it's spending all that time out in the sun without a hat.

As I was talking to photographer Rick Smith the other day, the wood tick stirred. I told Rick about it. He didn't think it was too crazy.

"I think that's probably true," he said. "I also think somebody could make a motion picture about it."

Now, you get photographers cranked up and they'll talk your ears off. James Roy Miller always said it was because they spent so much time alone and in the dark—and sniffing chemicals to boot.

Rick said everybody knew Aldo Leopold had Wisconsin roots, but not everybody knew John Muir did, too. And almost everybody who knew about Sigurd Olson associated him with the Quetico-Superior canoe country, but Sig was raised in northern Wisconsin and graduated from the University right here in Madison. Leopold was responsible for "The Land Ethic." Muir for the National Park System and Olson for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area.

"You talk about voices in the wilderness," Steady says.

And that doesn't include a raft of other Wisconsin nature writers who come out of the same tradition, whether they realize it or not: the late Gordon MacQuarrie, who raised outdoors writing to a high art; Mel Ellis, who kept it there; August Derleth, who wrote so lovingly of the Wisconsin River country; Roy Lukes, who did likewise up in Door County; Dion Henderson; Larry Van Goethem; the irrepressible Fran Hamerstrom.

The more Rick talked, the more sense it all made. And when you read these Wisconsin writers, they all begin to sound like Thoreau. Just noodling, just for starters, consider some of their words:

Aldo Leopold: "Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth the cost in things natural, wild and free. For us in the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasqueflower is a right as inalienable as free speech."

John Muir: "Wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and the flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls, and every bird song, wind song and tremendous storm song of the rocks

in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own, and sings our love."

Sigurd Olson: "I named this place Listening Point because only when one comes to listen, only when one is aware and still, can things be seen and heard. Everyone has a listening-point somewhere. It does not have to be in the north or close to the wilderness, but some place of quiet where the universe can be contemplated with awe.

Gordon MacQuarrie: "You cannot shoot a pine knot, or eat it, but it is a lovely thing and makes a fire that will burn the bottom out of a stove if you are not careful. Burning pine knots smell as fine as the South's pungent lightwood. Once I gave an artist a sack of pine knots and he refused to burn them and rubbed and polished them into wondrous birdlike forms, and many called them art. Me, I just pick them up and burn them."

Mel Ellis: "I cannot but believe that there is a governing force. The universe is too vast, too well regulated and too handily put together not to have something guiding it. I have experienced nature as a deep, deep significant feeling that I am part of the earth. An owl at night or a coyote howling or a bright stream running are all part of me and I am part of them. We're all part of each other."

August Derleth: "When first I walked there, I had little conception of the vast diversity of nature. I went at first to get away from myself and the occupations of the day; but soon...I went quite frankly to learn, a slow process..."

Roy Lukes: "I long for the dream of the impossible—the day when foxes and rough-legged hawks, as well as other pursued animals, will be capable of shooting back. Just imagine how this would reduce the number of 'sportsmen' in the field."

Dion Henderson: "You see the Aeshnid female, fresh from her nuptial flight, drilling into the lily stem at the waterline to place the eggs that hold promise of next summer's flights and suddenly you are reassured. Nothing truly ends. All this will come again."

Larry Van Goethem: "The earth is our natural home; we do untold damage to the earth and ourselves to deny it by encasing ourselves in plastic, steel and du Pont 501 nylon."

Frances Hamerstrom: "Early one morning, the eagles both looked ready for copulation. For once, Chrys' behavior in Grendel's presence, although not outright seductive, could be described as amiable, and she needed to move only a few feet to be within his reach. Grendel was bobbing his head making intention movements as though to mount her. I gave them nesting material, hoping for charming stick play between them, and quickly untied Chrys' leash. Violence."

Steady says it should make a great movie. It's the wildest bunch of Badgers since the Bud commercial. •