

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/

*George Vukelich***Flow Motion**

They were sitting around in the American Legion Bar up in Three Lakes the other night—"just watching the end of yet another era" is the way Steady Eddy puts it—and they got to discussing the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's plan to phase out the old primitive pit toilets used ever since Wisconsin became a pioneer in wayside development a half-century ago.

"Well, you know," Gene the bartender was saying, "the story is right here in the paper under the headline 'Outhouses To Go by the Wayside.' Cute, huh? They interviewed Ted Stephenson, state highway maintenance engineer, who says that the open-pit privies do not make for the most pleasant situation for users.

"Mr. Stephenson says, and I quote: 'In the next few years, we plan to relocate the holding tanks away from the structure in many of the rest areas. The rustic pit toilets are falling victim to modern sanitary standards and a new crop of more fastidious travelers who aren't used to roughing it.' End quote.

"Mr. Stephenson also says that plans call for spending \$200 million in the next 10 years for improving the facilities in 75 to 100 waysides in Wisconsin."

Gene waited for a reaction from his customers, all two of them: the good priest and the good doctor.

"'Fastidious travelers who aren't used to roughing it!'" Doc snorted. "You know, Norbert Blei over in Ellison Bay is always complaining that they're turning the whole of Door County into just another damned suburb of Chicago, and Norb is right as rain.

"They'll have roads built into every single body of water the size of a teacup. They'll fill in the marshes for condos and helicopter pads. Then they'll want the dairy cows all diapered up so you don't see them doing those gross things when you're looking at them from the interstate. I tell you, gentlemen, we are on a water slide to oblivion. It's enough to drive this native son to drink."

Gene got that squinty-eyed, crafty look he gets when he encounters worm fishermen leaving the stream as he's arriving and they are fishless and bitten to pieces because they didn't have mosquito netting, and they are full of curses for those "goddam, stupid trout." On days like this, Gene can barely wait to put his handied grasshopper into the water and the noxious rope of a cigar into his mouth.

"Well," Gene said to Father Himmelsbach, "if the chamber of commerce hears old native son here carrying on this way, they will not only drive him to drink, they will fly him there because that drink will be waiting for him in Yellow Knife, Moose Jaw or the surrounding suburbs. If we listened to crazies like native son, we'd still have moose on the main drag at high noon

and timber wolves at midnight. Look at him. Here's a man who has taken an oath to care for people, and you hear him talking like humanity is just another hatch of mayflies."

"I have never heard the good doctor put it in quite those terms," Father Himmelsbach said, "although on certain occasions, I have heard him refer to certain people as 'delinquents, deadbeats and creeps.' Of course, this usually only happens when they have ignored his bills all summer and then sent him postcards from Florida saying that they wished he was there. I am sure that happens in your line of work every now and then too. God knows it happens in mine. The Lord not only works in mysterious ways, He works in mysterious people."

"The Lord," Doc intoned solemnly, "works with more deadwood than a woodpecker."

"I do not presume to put words in our friend's blasphemous mouth," Father Himmelsbach said, "but it seems to me that what he is trying to tell us with his anguished cries is that one more tradition of the north country is about to fall..."

"It's like another guitar Mass for the tourists," Doc interrupted.



"And we see our beloved youthful haunts turning into another Disneyland, Great America, Wisconsin Dells. The authentic north country is going down the drain. Down the tubes, one might say."

"Our beloved chaplain here," Doc said, "speaks with the wisdom that filled the old visionaries when they decided to make bingo accessible in the pagan land long before the land ever knew a carp or a Lutheran.

"When he uses the phrase 'authentic north country,' the padre puts his pinkie finger on the problem. City people are running around the countryside and falling over themselves like lemmings looking for 'authenticity.' Authentic old log cabins, authentic old wooden boats, authentic old wooden fishing lures, authentic tables, crocks, rocks, socks, jocks—you name it. Folks want the feeling of the authentic stuff so badly that companies are making deadringer reproductions of the originals.

"Well, what I'm saying is that that the pit toilet is part of the old north country experience. What the hell, otherwise, you could just stay in your Chicagoland suburb and pretend you were in Boulder Junction."

"Life," Father Himmelsbach said, "is a crapshoot."

Gene refilled them and they drank to that. ■