



# North Country

## Vukelich's home-spun writing comes through work, nature

**"North Country Notebook," by George Vukelich** (North Country Press: distributed by NorthWord, Inc., P.O. Box 128, Ashland, Wis., 54806: \$17.95 cloth; \$10.95 paper.

By Jocelyn Riley

Book reviewer

"Writing is like anything else," Madison author George Vukelich (pronounced voo-KELL-ik) said.

"It's just like doing pushups or fishing with a fly rod. The more you do of it, the better you get."

Vukelich has been practicing writing for many years, since the days when he started first grade in West Allis at "Holy Assumption, with the 7-foot nun."

Vukelich, whose name is Yugoslavian, grew up speaking Rumanian at home. When he started school he spoke with an accent. The other kids would laugh at him because of his accent when he stood up to recite in class.

"The nun (his teacher) kept me after school, and we struck a deal," he said. "If I would write my lesson and it was acceptable, I wouldn't have to stand up and recite. I thought — what a great deal."

Although Vukelich traces the beginning of his career as a writer back to that time, he didn't publish anything until many years later. He was in the Army (stationed in Europe), then studied creative writing at UW-Madison, shortly after World War II. After graduating with an English degree, Vukelich said he "bummed around the country, like most writers do."

He lived in New York and California. "I was on the road, but I didn't realize I was on the road until Kerouac" (Jack Kerouac

wrote about his travel experiences in "On The Road.")

Along the way, Vukelich began publishing fiction. One of his short stories was published as an "Atlantic First" and later reprinted in Martha Foley's Best American Short Stories of 1955. His only novel, "Fisher-man's Beach," came out in the early 1960s.

Vukelich returned to Madison during the early '50s to raise a family. He and his wife, Helen, have four daughters and one son. They have lived in the same house on the near West Side for almost 30 years.

Vukelich no longer writes fiction, although he is at work on a screenplay, tentatively titled "The Wood Pile." Vukelich hopes the screenplay will some day be made into a feature film.

Vukelich gave up writing fiction because, he said, "I don't know if I have that much to say. It's a tremendous investment of time for which you're not getting paid. I just don't feel compelled to do book-length fiction, although 'The Wood Pile' could be either" a novel or a screenplay.

"Writing is like being a worm," Vukelich said. "You crawl through life and digest and leave castings in your wake — and they may or may not be saleable."

Vukelich's earthy imagery is reminiscent of the writing for which he is best known. For many years Vukelich's "North Country Notebook" has appeared in various newspapers and magazines. Currently the weekly column is carried in Isthmus. An audio version is broadcast every Sunday night at 8 p.m. on statewide public radio (WHA and WERN in Madison).

Vukelich's folksy essays are dotted with characters like Steady Eddy. "I was out on the ice the other day, 'being simple' as Steady Eddy likes to put it, sitting and

waiting and sharing the lake with a dozen other bundled humans, all within hailing distance, none within the range of normal conversation, and so there was no normal conversation. There was silence," Vukelich writes in his newly published book, "North Country Notebook."

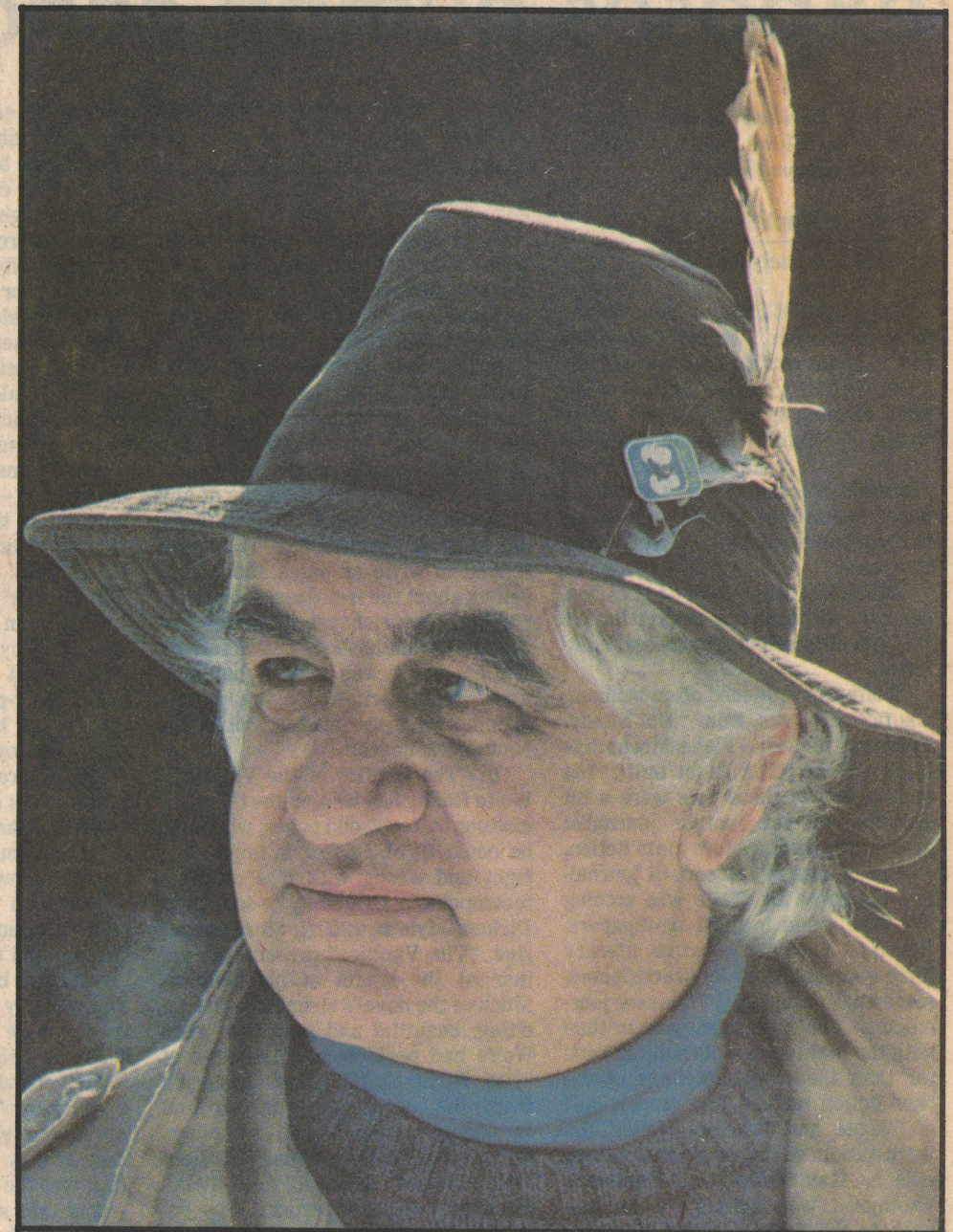
Vukelich claims the glibber-than-life Steady Eddy (he calls him "Steady" for short) is "real." Vukelich adds, though, Steady Eddy "says most of the stuff in the book is true although some is truer than others."

With the publication in book form of "North Country Notebook," Vukelich has added a new career: publisher. Vukelich and Stuart Hanisch formed a corporation called North Country Press to publish the book. Vukelich decided to take on the role of publisher because the editor who wanted to publish the book for a commercial house kept asking for changes. "He was really talking about a different book," Vukelich said. "I told him 'You write your book, and I'll write mine.'"

Vukelich's wife, Helen, who works as a congressional aide in Rep. Robert Kastemeier's Madison office, put the entire book onto 10 floppy disks. The book was also helped along by "the stalwart members of the Log Cabin Literary Society": Betty Durbin, Howard Mead, Jerry Minnich, and Phill Thill.

Vukelich's career as a publisher has proved successful. Since the book was published Nov. 28, 1987, the first printing of 5,000 paperback and 1,000 hardcover books has sold out; a second printing in the same quantities is currently in press.

A spinoff audio cassette version of the book, called "Pages from a North Country



To Vukelich, writing has been his way of life for almost a lifetime.

— State Journal photo by Carolyn Pflasterer

Notebook," is due to be released in a couple of months. Rick Murphy is the producer; Vukelich reads his own words; and the cassette (like the book) will be distributed by Tom and Pat Klein of NorthWord, Inc.

In addition to his new role as a publisher, Vukelich is continuing his career as a writer and interviewer. "If you listen to people,"

Vukelich said, "you're not only going to be a better writer, you're going to be a better person."

Vukelich likes to interview noncelebrities. "I think the sooner we stop talking to celebrities and statespeople," he said, "the sooner we'll have a grasp of what's going on."