

# NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

by George Vukelich

Last year, *Wisconsin Tales and Trails* published, for the first time, a North Country Boy's Christmas Letter to Santa. The boy and Santa are each a year older now and we wouldn't publish the letter again except for one little mitigating circumstance: informed sources report that the boy and Santa still believe in each other. This could become a tradition because my father believes in both of them.

Dear Santa:

Ma says you're busy and to keep this short and sweet  
Pa would like some big new shoe pacs for his big old feet—  
Also he could use some shells for his .410  
And the tip of his fly rod is busted again.

Ma doesn't want anything but you know her—  
Could you bring her a parka and trim it with fur?

Or maybe some perfume or maybe cologne  
Or a small kitchen radio (with no scratchy tone).

Gramps, he just grunts and doesn't say what he wants—  
(He just sits there rocking, dreaming back on old haunts.)

He really is a very hard-to-order-for kind of old man—  
But he smokes Half-and-Half and you might bring him a can—  
I don't think Mollie needs anything, (You know, Mollie, our  
beagle).

But Pa says her puppies need papers because the whole litter  
is legal.

(Pa says they should have papers when folks come to buy—  
But you could tell they're all beagles if you were blind in  
one eye.)

I guess that about does it, and have a nice trip—

Pa says you're welcome to stop for a nip.

I couldn't think of anything special to ask for (for me)

So—I'll meet you as usual down under the tree.

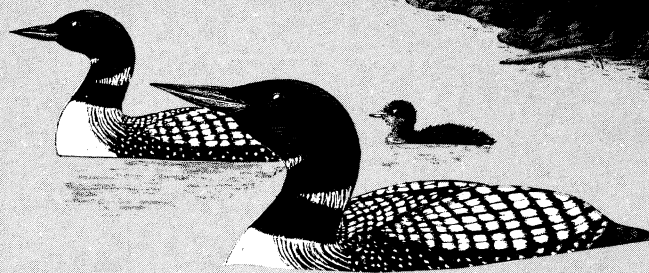
**North Country Christmas.** At this Christmas time it is fitting and meet that we report a little-known fact that captures the spirit of the season and goes Scrooge's Christmas turkey a few dozen better. A group of Chicago-area sportsmen who have long fished the wilderness waters of Wisconsin's Menominee County, wherein dwell two thousand Indians, have taken it upon themselves to thank the Indians for their friendship in a way that would make Old Ebenezer chortle in glee. The big-city fishermen, who insist on anonymity here, provide the Menominees with an annual Christmas party.

They buy all the fixings for the feast, charter a plane, and fly the fixings, along with a renowned Milwaukee area chef (who volunteers his service) up to the old Indian reservation.

"They've been good to us," some of the Chicago boys shrug. "It's just our way of saying Merry Christmas." The chef agrees. The Christmas party was his idea in the first place. "I do not fish myself, but I have reasons, too. I come from the old country and I am a member of a minority group. This country has been very good to me, a naturalized citizen, and so I am happy to fix Christmas dinner for a minority group that is native American." He waved his hand over the fully packed dining room. People were standing in line waiting to get a table. "I don't do it for publicity or advertising. That is why you are not to use my name." His blue eyes bored into mine. "We do not do this for that. If I could dance, I would dance for them. I am a chef and so I cook for them. My Chicago friends have money and they say, spend the money and make a good Christmas dinner. They say it makes everybody feel good and that is what Christmas is all about."

He paused and watched my face closely.

"You write this," he said. "You put, it is a bunch of friends getting together for Christmas dinner. That is what Christmas is all about."



**The great silence** has settled over our north country again. The lakes are locked and tight as so many beaver pelts stretched in the racks. The backroads are drifted over and abandoned. The summer cottages are shuttered and battened down with planks over the chimneys to keep the squirrels out. It is a lonely place. Unless a man has inner resources—and a mountainous cache of split oak chunks—this season can drive him to the very brink. One old retired Bayfish County sailor who dwells in monastic simplicity overlooking his beloved Lake Superior has no illusions about his country. "She's like a ship that you get to love. But to stay with her all winter long, you have to keep a sharp watch and be prepared to abandon ship on a minute's notice. I keep my gear packed and sleep in my longjohns." Another old professional who lived all his life in the Eagle River area of Vilas County and who is now buried there once put it this way: "The winter up here will make a realist out of anybody real quick. It's like a rattlesnake. Pretty as a colored picture postcard. But you take your eye off it for a minute and it can kill you dead." I think it's a fair statement that the folks who live up here all winter long do have inner resources. They're not surprised when the high lines snap under the weight of ice and sleet. That's why they keep fresh batteries in the power lanterns and kersosene in the old lamps. They're concerned, but not crushed, when the driving storms bog down even the huge plows for days on end. The most dependable pickup truck is utterly useless when the drifts are higher than the cab, but a man on skis or snowshoes can always make it to town or to the ranger station if he absolutely has to make it. The old trappers had the problem of winter survival honed down to a fine science. "I was a 4-F," an old snowshoeing trapline man once told me, "long before the Army ever used the classification. I always had enough food to last me until I could reach a cache where there was more. I took care not to get frostbit or frozen. I kept my feet dry and I feared a cabin fire like the plague. You either learned how to live with this country or you didn't. The ones who didn't got burned out or starved or froze to death. I knew some of them. You can love this country or hate it and still get by. That doesn't make too much difference. The one thing you can't do is ignore this country. She's got rules and you better believe it."

I think the one quality the oldtimers had in common was the ability to be by themselves. For months and months on end. Not everybody has that, and I suppose that's one reason we build cities and cozy up close as bees in a hive. It fosters the comforting feeling that we are now snug and safe and secure. The oldtimers up here just smile and compare that to the warm drowsy feeling that can lull you into a death by freezing. And I guess that's why some people just won't leave this north country. For love or money. My father always said that you didn't have to be crazy to stay here through the north country winter. But it helps.