

## As Sigurd Olson finds out

# Ely can get very cold

ELY, Minn. — “The prophet,” some prophet once lamented, “is without honour in his own land.”

Especially, in this North Land, where it sometimes seems the glacier and the ancient cold touched everything: Stones. And sands. And the souls of people.

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who eventually spent more of the year in Taliesen West than in Taliesen East, was forever being unappreciated by shopkeepers in particular and other moral folks in general when he summered in Spring Green and kept telling the “pole and wire boys” where they could stick their transformers.

Painter Georgia O’Keeffe from out near Sun Prairie also migrated to the Great American West and the city fathers, who once had the kindness and the warmth to name a local park after her, then changed their minds and took it all back: The name. The kindness. And the warm spot.

And here, on the very front stoop of the glacier itself, an old North Country guide, Sigurd F. Olson, is about as honored, in some local quarters, as a porcupine doing a number in your sleeping bag.

Sigurd Olson, as you probably have heard, supports H.R. 2820, a bill introduced in the House of Representatives by Congressman Donald Fraser of Minneapolis. The bill would ban all motorboats, snowmobiles and logging in the million-acre Boundary Waters Canoe Area.

The Fraser bill is co-sponsored by over 40 other congressmen, excluding Wisconsin Congressman Bob Kastenmeier of the 2nd District. Kastenmeier, however, sits on the subcommittee that will hold hearings on proposed legislation for the BWCA and has already stated that he will vote for the Fraser bill.

**IN THE MADISON** area, all this pro-environment stuff would earn you the Rutabaga Legion of Merit with clusters.

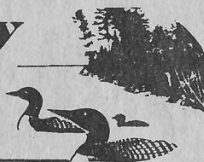
In the real world of Ely, Minnesota, a lot of folks are just plain ticked off.

It’s hard for us who worship Sig Olson from afar to encounter folks, his friends and neighbors, upclose and uptight, who

### **North Country notebook**

by **George Vukelich**

Of The Capital Times Staff



not only think Sigurd Olson has clay feet. Some of them will tell you, in no uncertain terms, that he has a clay head to match.

What follows is, as the pollsters say, a random sample. The quotes are accurate. I daresay you could match them up with the people who uttered them on your next trip up here.

At Bill Rom’s Canoe Country Outfitters, three lean, tanned young packers, who in their forest green shirts looked like Sig Olson must have looked 60 years ago:

—“**Sig Olson had his good times back in the bush in the old days. Now his time has passed and he wants to lockup the country for everybody else.**”

—“A lot of the local people are mad at Sig Olson because he supports this Fraser bill. Ask anybody here, ask the people from the Forest Service how they feel about that bill. The people still respect Sig Olson because he was always a good speaker for this country, but they think he’s dead wrong this time.”

—“**The Fraser bill says we can’t use outboard motors in the summer and snow machines in the winter. Hell, I don’t think Fraser has ever been up in this country or he would know what he was talking about. We’ve got motorized routes now on the big lakes and if they take those away, how are you going to travel them? People drown there in canoes now. And how can snow machines have ‘environmental impact’ when they travel on frozen lakes?**”

At the motel, the sparkling desk clerk who looked like she had just stepped from a Finnish sauna:

—“I’m not mad at Sig Olson or anything. But I just think he’s wrong. There isn’t any tourist business in the winter time and there really isn’t much for the local people to do. If the

local people can’t snowmobile on the lakes it makes it hard. There’s just nothing then.”

**THERE ARE** A half-dozen or so Vukelichs listed in the Ely telephone directory and to go with our random samplings, I figured we could use an un-random one. Besides, my father, the Old Man, had been through this country with a pick and shovel about the same time Sig Olson first did it with a pack and paddle and maybe we were all related.

I called them up, identified myself and asked about the Old Man, my father.

It turns out that all the Vukelichs in Ely are related except one family, but nobody knew or remembered a Frank Vukelich. Why didn’t I check with the Croatians on the Range? And there were a lot of Vukelichs over in Crosby, too.

I then asked each of my non-relatives about their good neighbor, Sigurd Olson. Everybody talked but nobody wanted to be quoted directly so they are not being quoted directly. They are being quoted *indirectly*. And probably only over in Crosby will anybody know exactly who is saying what.

Oh, yes. Some of the following words are from men. And some are from women.

—“**Sig Olson was a big outlaw. He made two trips into the woods and now he thinks he’s a big expert.**”

—“You wait till the hearings up here in July. More than 50% of the local people are against Fraser and Sig Olson.”

—“**I believe in environment. I also believe an oldtimer should be allowed to take a motor into the boundary waters. Nobody can tell me Sig Olson didn’t have his motors back in there. And I don’t believe snowmobiles do one bit of damage to the environment either.**”

—“The local people pay taxes. They pay a license for their snowmobiles. Why should they be prevented from having their recreation in the wintertime?”

—“**Maybe some snowmobilers throw some cans. You always have a few bad apples. Everybody has them. You take**

(Continued on page 23)

# North Country Notebook

*(Continued from page 21)*

the Boy Scout camp over on Burntside Lake. They're paddling pigs. Too many scouts per counsellor. They cut down trees. Leave campsites a mess. They litter. They are slobs!"

**OUTSIDE, A YOUNG** man was checking the tiedowns that held an oxidized canoe high on a dusty van with Ohio plates. Yes. He knew all about the Fraser bill. Yes. He knew about the Oberstar bill, too. He had written to his congressman urging him to please co-sponsor the Fraser bill.

"I've been coming up here since 1966," the young man said. "I know what they say about Sigurd Olson. And the BWCA. And motors. And all of it. Well, they're wrong."

*That* comforted me. Not even people bearing my own name had been more comforting this day.

As a matter of fact, it was even more comforting than the little tonic water we had later on at Vertin's Cafe. Sitting there in downtown Ely, waiting for the walleye special to arrive and watching all the proud s burnt faces around us.

