

# The Journey to Sheboygan

Thoughts about the Old Man, his garage, trophies and the things we hold dear.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

We were up in Sheboygan the other night sharing the warm hospitality that the Friends of the Mead Library throw over you like a down comforter.

"I keep telling you," Steady Eddy says, "you start hanging out with people who can read and it's gonna change your luck."

The Mead Library is a marvelous facility with galleries and meeting rooms and a magical children's book section big as all Oz.

My mother always said that if you wanted to really know about people you should excuse yourself and ask to see the "facilities." Well, I didn't use all the facilities, but the one I used was a NASA-clean room.

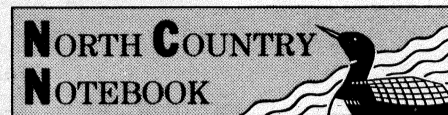
"So naturally," Steady says, "you felt better about these Sheboygan hosts immediately, keeping in mind, of course, that there are no such facilities aboard our other Sheboygan host, the good ship Dumper Dan. That would drive your mother crazy."

That drives a lot of us crazy.

I told the assemblage that it was a revelation to finally see the inside of the Mead Library in view of the fact

that we had been sailing past the library for years in the darkneses of 4 a.m. en route to a rendezvous with the Dumper Dan and its young captain, who is a dead ringer for Robin Yount at 20.

We read some passages from North Country Notebook to the Friends. Then



we just talked to each other about life and nature and where we all fit in. They brought up John Muir and Sigurd Olson and Aldo Leopold, and they made you feel like you were at the Legion Bar on a chilly October night waiting for the TV and/or the cribbage board to warm up.

"These are your kind of folks," Steady likes to say. "It's like sharing your bag of Beer Nuts."

Because our north country is locked up and deserted and we're on the verge of another deer season, I shared "The Old Man's Garage" with the Friends. You could tell that it got through to them, because they all once had a father like the Old Man too.

The Old Man's garage contained your typical north country inventory: a workbench that ran the length of a wall, overflowing with pails of nails and screws, coffee cans full of nuts and bolts, pliers, hammers, chisels, wrenches—all the tools you ever needed to drill a well or put in plumbing or wire a house or pour concrete or saw up logs or weld or paint or catch fish or butcher a deer.

It was the Old Man's garage, not the big house next to it, that contained the Old Man's essence, his spirit.

From cane poles to Coleman lanterns, from outboard motors to shotgun shells, from icefishing tip-ups to rain ponchos, that endless clutter drew me like a magnet. I spent countless hours poking around, amazed at what I discovered because what I discovered was the Old Man.

He's gone now and the clutter is gone, and the garage is so neat and un-lived-in he wouldn't recognize it. The deer head is still there, though; it even got to hang in the summer porch of the big house for a while. It watches over the cold, lifeless garage with its cold, lifeless eyes.

A trophy, Aldo Leopold tried to teach us in *A Sand County Almanac*, whether it be a bird's egg, a mess of trout, a basket of mushrooms, the photograph of a bear, the pressed specimen of a wildflower or a note tucked into the cairn on a mountain peak, is a certificate.

"It attests," Aldo said, "that its owner has been somewhere and done something—exercised skill, persistence or discrimination in the age-old feat of overcoming, outwitting or reducing to possession. These connotations that attach to the trophy usually far exceed its physical value."

I told the Friends that I had only to close my eyes and there I was, up in the Old Man's garage, the concrete clean-swept, the workbench neat and empty because no one works there anymore, the car gone to Florida for the winter. There we are, just the two of us in this place.

I stare up at the trophy buck.

The trophy buck stares down at me.

We are each of us strange artifacts of another time, another life. Do we comprehend each other?

Some men—and women—nodded their heads, and I figured they were deer hunters or had been deer hunters and they knew about dead fathers and trophies in north country garages.

They put me in mind of an Old Coot I encountered when North Country Notebook was published in book form back in Christmastime of 1987, and we were up at Conkey's bookstore in Appleton signing books. Cold, bitter day, cold enough to freeze your buns and frost your other parts. People standing around, drinking coffee and talking books. The door flies open and in stomps the Old Coot: Red lumber jacket, red wool cap with the earflaps tied on top, face like a piece of raw meat, an icicle hanging from his nose. The apparition cooled your coffee.

The Coot said he came to get his book signed. He said he didn't buy the book, "the kids give it" for Christmas.

"I don't read books," he announced, "but I'm readin' this one. Yes, sir. Keep it in the john." The coffee-drinkers looked over. "You bet," the Coot said. "Just right for the john. Not too long. No big story. Just a couple short ones. Just right for the john."

Steady says that's the best review you can get.

I said goodbye to the Friends of Mead, started the car and turned on the radio for Game 3 from San Francisco. ■