

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/*George Vukelich*

# The Christmas Spirit

The night before Christmas has a magic that no other night has—with the exception, Steady Eddy says, of those late witching hours on the trout streams of summer, when the mayflies are hatching and the trout are beginning to roll like porpoises.

There is a great feeling of expectancy in the air: Something strange, something out of the ordinary is about to happen. It's a very joyous time in one sense, because Christmas means vacation from school, presents, food and cookies—and watching the uncles drink plum wine and apricot brandy on Christmas Day after the goose dinner and, as a matter of fact, before the goose dinner, too. It's out of the ordinary because the family only does it once a year.

The strange part is the part you can't really see.

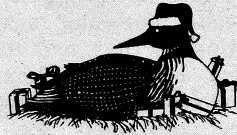
You know the feeling? It's like going from room to room and all the lights are on and you expect to meet someone or see someone—and all you ever meet is silence and all you ever see is just the room.

It happens only during the Christmas season, never in the summer, spring or fall. It's a spooky feeling. I think it's much spookier than Halloween. Most people, when you mention spooks or ghosts, think of Halloween; I always think of Christmas. The night before Christmas.

People say: "Well, you were a child. You were expecting Santa."

As Charlie Kaiser would tell them: "We weren't children very long. The bigger kids were always telling us

about the birds and the bees and Santa Claus."



I remember finding presents from Santa in my parents' closet a week before Christmas, and I felt so guilty I told the priest about it in confession and he said it wasn't a sin.

Charlie not only found Christmas presents in his folks' closet—he opened the presents and then rewrapped them. He never mentioned that in confession, he said, because he didn't feel guilty about it. He just looked surprised on Christmas morning and said that was exactly what he wanted.

His parents weren't so dumb, though. One Christmas they switched presents on him. He never again saw the batch he had opened in their closet, and his surprise on that Christmas morning was genuine. Once you met Charlie's mother and father, you knew where Charlie got his sense of humor.

The funny thing is that after we found out about Santa Claus and didn't expect him any more, the mystery only deepened. A sort of hush, a quiet set in about mid-afternoon on Christmas Eve, and it didn't really matter where we were at the time.

We could be in the piney woods on snowshoes just swishing along in the white silence, and it would come to us that we should be very watchful, because we might see something very unusual before we reached the cabin. We would start looking for something

in the trees. Then we would swear that there was something just out of sight, just out of reach, aware of us, even as we were aware of it, whatever it was.

People like those who frequent the American Legion Bar in Three Lakes scoff, and suggest that we probably had either too much brandy or not enough, although the good Father Himmelsbach would come to our defense, noting that the original tenants of the forests "who had no brandy" also felt there was something out there. They called it Wendigo—a spirit that haunted the forests, silent as the ravens when the snow shrouds their land. Bless me, and you, Father.

But the spirit of Christmas Eve is not the Wendigo, because the Wendigo only happens outside in the woods, while that spooky spirit of Christmas Eve happens inside, outside, everywhere. You can be on a Nicolet ski trail or on a fog-bound Door County beach or in your own house or cabin, and that something creeps up on you, and you just know it's real, that it exists.



I think folks were more open about this in the olden days. The old-time Christmas literature is full of ghosts and spirits and spooky things going bump in the dark, things that whisper of a strange country away from the warmth of the Christmas kitchen.

You can get arguments from people

inside Christendom—and outside, too—about what it is we're celebrating here. Folks say that we're really continuing a good pagan tradition that started out marking the winter solstice when the pickings were lean, but the wise old elders knew it wasn't the end of the world: Although the rations were getting shorter, the days were getting longer, and if the populace was encouraged to keep on ingesting the fermented stuff, the winter would pass more quickly.

"The way it does," Steady Eddy says, "to this very day at the American Legion Bar."

Some folks say that the 25th of December is not the birthday of Jesus Christ. Others say: "That's right, it's not." Then, they add that no day in the year is the birthday of Jesus Christ because Jesus Christ is a myth.

"Whatever," Steady says. "You get all these Christians celebrating a Jewish birthday, that's a miracle by itself."

Just past midnight, technically Christmas Day. All the grown children home for the holidays are upstairs, asleep in the rooms of their childhood. In the living room, the mate with whom you have decorated 29 Christmas trees puts on the last few ornaments the children left for you to hang. The colored lights reflect in the window glass, a magic forest glimmering just beyond. There is mystery in the air. ■

*George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Sunday night at 8 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).*