

You'll Be Missed, John Voelker

Michigan's U.P. says farewell to a native son.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

The Upper Peninsula of Michigan is a little lonelier, a little emptier this March morning. One of its favorite sons, the legendary, lovable John Voelker died in Negaunee County last Monday at age 87.

He was found dead in his car. Witnesses said he was slumped over the wheel when the car rolled into a snowbank. Police think it was a heart attack.

A lot of trout fisher folk, especially the ones who can read, cried when they heard.

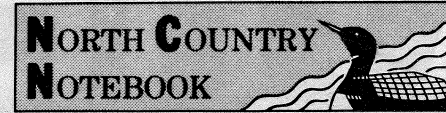
Most of the world knew John Voelker as a former justice on the Michigan Supreme Court who wrote a book about a murder case he had been involved in while a defense attorney for Marquette County. The book was *Anatomy of a Murder*, which became a national best seller and a Book-of-the-Month Club selection.

The book intrigued folks because it

explored the legal concept of "irresistible impulse" that the defense attorney cited on behalf of his client, an airman charged with killing a man who had been involved with the airman's wife.

The book also intrigued folks because its author "Robert Traver" turned out to be John Voelker, a local boy who grew up to practice law and trout-fishing in his beloved U.P. He also loved jazz and Italian cigars. He had left a Chicago law firm because there were no trout streams there.

His fame—and fortune—grew when *Anatomy of a Murder* was made into a motion picture in 1959 and filmed in the U.P. Starring in the picture were James Stewart, George C. Scott, Eve Arden, Ben Gazzara and Lee Remick. Duke



Most folks knew him as a murder writer.

We knew him as the Old Master of trout fishing.

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Ellington wrote the original score and also performed it. Otto Preminger produced and directed.

A lot of folks will remember John Voelker for *Anatomy of a Murder*. But that was only one of 11 books he wrote, and, if truth be known, the genius and humor of John Voelker really bursts forth—like a *hexagenia* hatch—in his troutfishing books *Trout Magic* and *Trout Madness*.

In the autumn of 1987, the Milwaukee Journal sent us up to interview the Grand Old Master, of whom Charles Kuralt said, "In all the years of doing 'On the Road' for CBS-TV, the greatest character, indeed, the greatest man, I ever met was John Voelker."

When Brent Nicastro and I reminded Voelker of that assessment, he smiled a preacher's grin. "I think," he said, "I

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got Charles Kuralt interested in fly fishing."

Voelker drove us out to Frenchman's Pond in the white Jeep Cherokee, going slowly, almost hugging the highway shoulder so all the traffic passed us. The back of the Cherokee was stuffed to overflowing with all the trout gear that money could buy. Dynie Mansfield would have loved it, Dynie whose credo was, "If one is good, *two* is better."

It's a pity they never met. Then again, since Monday, maybe they have.

On the dirt scratch of a trail leading

into Frenchman's Pond, a faded old sign proclaimed: "Home of the U.P. Cribbage Champ." Brent, who owns his own U.P. cribbage cabin on the Sturgeon River flowage near Iron Mountain, was impressed, as dreamy young challengers can be.

I was more impressed by the flycasting exhibition the old champ put on for us at the pond. Brent's camera recorded it all. I asked to see the Master's roll cast, and he sent that magic circle of flyline rolling across the surface like a hula-hoop. I wanted to applaud. The Old Master was playing his violin in front of the fiddlers.

Frenchman's Pond is surrounded by 160 acres of wilderness that protects the waters cold enough to grow native brook trout. "I know there are places you can give your land to," John Voelker told us, "and I suppose I could do that and get lawyers to draw up a 104-page will that says, '*Do not cut trees!*' and '*Do not do this!*' and '*Do not do that!*'"

"But I have two grandsons, and they just love it up here. They've been coming up here since they were kids, and I've sworn them to try and save the place. With tears in their eyes, they have vowed."

In the preface to *Trout Magic*, Voelker wrote "Testament of a Fisherman" and broke the heart of every fishing writer on the planet.

"I fish," he said, "because I love to, because I love the environs where trout are found, which are invariably

beautiful, and hate the environs where crowds of people are found, which are invariably ugly; because of all the television commercials, cocktail parties and assorted social posturing I thus escape; because, in a world where most men seem to spend their lives doing things they hate, my fishing is at once an endless source of delight and an act of small rebellion; because trout do not lie or cheat and cannot be bought or bribed or impressed by power, but respond only to quietude and humility and endless patience; because I suspect that men are going along this way for the last time, and I for one don't want to waste the trip; because mercifully there are no telephones on trout waters; because only in the woods can I find solitude without loneliness; because bourbon out of an old tin cup always tastes better out there; because maybe one day I will catch a mermaid; and finally, not because I regard fishing as so terribly important but because I suspect that so many of the other concerns of men are equally unimportant—and not nearly so much fun."

Another miracle happened at Frenchman's Pond that day. Nicaastro beat Voelker three straight in cribbage. Nicaastro still has the money but he has always insisted that only John Voelker deserves that sign. Amen. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Sunday nights at 10 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).