

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

Burnout

Gene Moran moved along the edge of the gravel lane, dragging behind him, like an Indian *travois*, a burning stalk that left little wavelets of flame in its wake. As the flames grew hotter and higher, you could hear the crackling and popping.

"Sizzles," Gene said, "just like bacon in the pan."

It did resemble a grease fire: bubbling, building, flaring up into a blaze that began to flow, a living organism devouring the great prairie in its path.



Gene and his crew at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum were burning off Curtis Prairie on this golden, blue day. An ancient fire engine, loaded with water and ready to pump if the fire got beyond the control of the foot crew with their Indian back pumps, was parked within a spark's throw. "The piddle pushers," Steady Eddy calls the technology.

As Gene set the backfire into the little wind, the heat forced you to move along smartly because the superheated air hit your exposed skin like a blast of hot tar.

The figures of the crew disappeared into the billowing white-gray smoke. "Vaporized" was the word that came to mind: *That's what the end of the world will look like*. Only compared with that fire, this fire was an ice cube.

Two figures reappeared, undulating in the shimmering heat, unnatural images in funhouse mirrors. They too seemed to flow more than walk, like aliens, or survivors on an alien planet.

They came closer. One of the figures was a woman; she and her partner wetted down the higher growth on the downwind side of the backfire, always checking behind them. Then everything cleared, and you could see the arc of the fire on the far side moving to join with the other side. It is all one, the Old Ones said. It is a great circle.

It's funny now, when you look back on it, to realize that so much of what you were taught as "gospel" turns out to be

untrue. Turns out, really, to be lies. Turns out to be, as Steady Eddy so succinctly puts it, *loonshit*. Which, Steady notes, is like all the other kinds, except that you never notice it when you're swimming. It's only when you touch bottom that you realize it's been there all the time, waiting to be discovered.

Generations of Americans were taught that fire was the most "unnatural" act that could take place out there where the Three Bears (Smokey, Yogi and Peter) lived.

You used to hear about smoke-jumpers in the U.S. Forest Service parachuting down to fight some fire out west. The wind would shift and the fires would catch them, killing them before they had a chance to get away or dig into a bank or get to water.

I don't know how many smoke-jumpers died out there, but there were a

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lot of them. Now, we shake our heads at that dumb stuff and say *one* would be too many. They died doing their duty, putting out forest fires.

These days, if fire threatens human habitation, the Forest Service is more likely to use aerial tankers. If the fire doesn't threaten human habitation, they're just as likely to let the fire burn itself out.

In the old days, folks didn't always know that some species of trees and plants need the heat generated by fire in order to regenerate themselves.

When fire comes to a land, a whole ecosystem arises like the Phoenix out of the ashes.

It's like beavers coming to a stream

and flooding the valley. A whole ecosystem is started up there too, but, as Steady Eddy points out, this one usually doesn't come full cycle these days because the trout fishers will yell about the beavers ruining Class I trout habitat. The DNR will trap the beavers and dynamite their dams, and you can bet your graphite rod that if the DNR doesn't do it, somebody else will. As Steady says: "If beavers would only learn to hit dry flies, they'd find a whole new constituency."



In the old days, everyone living on the fringe of the Nicolet National Forest had Indian back pumps filled and ready to go during the fire season. Everybody was a volunteer, and when a forest fire broke out, the ranger rang up the party line, and whoever could go would go.

They used to say, those cynics at the American Legion Bar, that some fire-fighters (who got paid only when they fought a fire) were actually starting fires in order to get paid! An out-of-the-way 40-acre fire somewhere that wouldn't hurt anything might even help the ecology (although the U.S. ranger was the only one around who might have heard of the word "ecology").

I remember accompanying the Old Man in response to one of the ranger's calls for some help with a fire in the Big Fork country. They brought a Caterpillar in, trenched off three sides (the fourth side was wild lake frontage) and let the fire burn itself out. It was about a 40-acre fire.

Somebody said it was a good thing that this woods burned, because all it had was useless trees, and now that it was burnt over, you'd have a nice berry patch in there. Close to home, too.

On the way out of the Arboretum, I opened the car windows because I smelled heavily of smoke. On the radio, some nut was saying we needed the MX to show the Russians we really mean business. ■