

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/*George Vukelich*

# Goodbye, Gene

It was a bluebird day at the Arboretum, and there we were, gathered inside the McKay Center like a covey of quail in the shade, and there was Gene Moran too. We were sipping punch and waiting for the cake to be cut.

You just know that it had to be something out of the ordinary to get Gene Moran inside on an afternoon like this, and indeed it was.

The punch and the cake were for him. Gene Moran was retiring after 32 years with the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, the last 18 as grounds supervisor of its more than 1,200 acres. The retirement party cut the last cord that bound him to this magical place in the middle of a city.

Gene has been cutting cords for some time. After living for years in a little house on Arboretum Lane where birds came to the feeders and deer came to the backyard, he and his wife, Marion, moved to an old farm in the Baraboo hills last fall. He's been commuting ever since.

"It's a pretty drive," he says, "a little longer when the ferry's closed for the winter."

From the window of the center, the Beltine traffic glistened through the distant pines like a flashing, rapid river. In the near distance, the prairie was looking lush and healthy, a sea of grass with birds skimming its rolling surface like ocean fliers hunting for baitfish.

It's hard to imagine that all this had been farmland, cultivated and worked pretty hard—"right into the ground,"

Steady Eddy says—when all those university professors, Aldo Leopold and John Curtis and the like, got the idea to "restore" it. Luckily for them—and us—they had at their disposal the strong backs of all those tough young men in the Civilian Conservation Corps, who dug in with picks and shovels and planted trees, prairie grasses and wildflowers, and truly healed the land.



One of Gene's more spectacular duties at the Arboretum has been to supervise the burning of this very prairie. He always counted down his time to retirement by the number of "burns" he had left. I think the first time he mentioned it there were eight burns left. I think it was eight. Whatever he said, it does seem as though he said it only yesterday afternoon. It comes as a shock to realize that this man in the clean, cool summer shirt has burned off that prairie for the last time.

Gene Moran taught us much about the art of prairie fires. I remember being with him and his crew as they burned off the Curtis Prairie on golden, blue days. The flames raced through the dry stalks and hulls and pods like a flash flood from some fiery cloudburst, the smoke billowing high and churning into storm clouds. I used to pretend that we were all Plains Indians firing the grasses to stampede the great herds of bison to

their deaths as they stumbled and tumbled in panic, helter-skelter, over the deadly buffalo jumps where the fires and the grasses ended and eternity began.

I don't think Gene was thinking about buffalo jumps because he was always watching the fireline, supervising the backfiring, watching the wind, watching the flow of sparks, watching the crew with their shovels and back-pumps. The man knew how to burn off a prairie, and he did it beautifully.

Director Greg Armstrong said pretty much the same thing when he presented Gene with an enlarged, framed picture of a man in the middle of a prairie fire. It looked like a conductor surrounded by his orchestra. Of course, the man in the middle was Gene.

"Gene never burned down a house," Armstrong said.

Gene says that some of the magic left the Arboretum over the years. In the old days, you used to see red and gray foxes, and there was a feeling of wildness there. It's "citized" now, he says. Too many people. Too much impact. It's like that all over.

Gene observed a lot of scientists in his time—professors, graduate students and researchers. He doesn't hold a whole lot of them in high regard. Only some.

When I complained to Gene about "the prairie makers" who would turn the whole damn state into grasslands if you didn't watch them, he heard me

out and said a lot of folks were that way, even scientists and "naturalists." They didn't all see the big picture. They didn't see that all life was part of the circle.

"They aren't all Aldo Leopold," he said.

Then he told me about a scientist who had been researching something to do with apple trees, so he planted some little trees and was keeping tabs on them.

Well, Gene says, this scientist had planted his stuff early in the spring, before the surrounding trees had leafed out and finally they did, and suddenly his research project was in the shade, literally.



"It was a big oak," Gene said. "It just threw a big shadow over everything. The man got very angry."

Instead of moving his project into the sunlight, Gene says, the man went to the Arboretum administration, bitching about that oak tree. The administration sent down the order to remove the tree. It was removed. Cut down.

"That oak," Gene says, "turned out to be 82 years old and healthy."

I watch Gene now and part of me is sad. Not for him, but for all those old oak trees of the world and, as Steady Eddy says, "for all the goddamn idiots who have degrees up to here and absolutely no brains at all, it would seem." ■