

# North Country Notebook



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## Farewell, Mel

We didn't realize it at the time, but it was a high-water mark, the unfolding of the Good Old Days right before our eyes: Gordon MacQuarrie and Mel Ellis both writing on the outdoors at the same time in the Milwaukee Journal.

They were the absolute best: Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth in the same line-up, Hank Aaron and Eddie Matthews with the old Braves, Paul Hornung and Jimmy Taylor with the old Packers.

MacQuarrie died in 1956, and last Saturday Mel Ellis joined him. Mel was 72.

We bumped into Mel Ellis a few times over the years and took great joy in discovering that he, like Sigurd Olson, talked in real life exactly as he wrote.

He was the genuine article, unpretentious as an old mackinaw jacket and just as effective in keeping the chill off when you tramped the "15-acre chunk of Eden" that he called "Little Lakes."

I interviewed him a few years back for Wisconsin Trails, and before we ever got a word down on paper we spent the whole morning just roaming like a couple of kids (which he knew we were).

"I don't think we treated nature right when I was a boy," Mel Ellis said. "I don't think we had any concept of how to treat nature. Today, we know a lot more about how to treat nature than we did then. When the Horicon Marsh was going in, only a handful of people fought for it. Today, you could get thousands and thousands to back a project like that."

Little Lakes was a dream world, a magic kingdom with pine-fringed ponds and mallards and rainbow trout. It was Mel's hide-

away from the 20th century, as it was for all of us who read his "Notes from Little Lakes." All of us who hate the process that pollutes the waters and the pine forests and the people for yet another dollar.

Little Lakes was a protest against all that. It was Mel's effort to preserve and to re-create what all of us who flee to the boonies—especially those of us who write about those boonies—are destroying with bulldozers and concrete glaciers.

We got to talking about the outdoor writer's life and how a lot of folks envied that job, since a lot of folks figured that the outdoor writer was one of the last free spirits running around loose, getting paid to hunt and fish and poke around in the boonies. It was like Studs Terkel getting paid to talk.

"Well," Mel said, "you're under the wire all the time. You're writing maybe eight, 10, 12 pieces a week. Sometimes you have three, four pieces in the same Sunday paper besides a daily column.

"Then there's something about the outdoor writer's life that somehow makes him a bankrupt idealist. After a while, your senses are dulled. You don't care. Too much commercialism. Too much fakery. Even the

Indians are debauched. It isn't the outdoor world I learned to love in my youth. It's an artificial world, and you either get out of it or it will drive you to drink."

He said that what started out to be one of the finest jobs in the world turned out to be a trap. After 10 years at the Journal, he had "seen it all and done it all and was getting pretty bored with the whole proposition."

"I was on the road 80% of the time," he said. "I wasn't home when any of my kids were born." He left unsaid that for three hard years his wife had been dying of cancer.

His career at the Journal closed with the death of his wife. He left the paper. He even left Little Lakes for a spell. It was "a rough period," he said, and he fought his way through it by free-lancing. He continued his contributions to Field & Stream, resumed the "Notes from Little Lakes" column in the Sunday Journal and remarried.

"Gwen," he said, "is a wonderful woman, and she knows how to handle me. She had a child and I had four, and our family's getting along great.

"It's been said that if a man has a good dog and a good woman, he has it made. I've been luckier than most. I've had several

good dogs and three—counting my mother—very wonderful, concerned and loving women. And now, a new life at an age when most men are ready to retire."

That "new life" was writing books.

His first book was *Run, Rainey, Run*, a tribute to his legendary German short-haired pointer. Those that followed were also outdoors books, and he said he didn't write them just for the money.

"If you haven't got something to say," he said, "what the hell are you writing for? I think everything you write should say *something*. I think you should try to teach as you go along, but in an offhand way. The teaching should be incidental to a good story. I think that you should show some side of life, good or bad, and let the readers draw their own conclusions."

Of all the things Mel Ellis talked about that morning at Little Lakes—hunting and fishing and family—I think this was most memorable:

"I cannot but believe that there is a governing force," he said. "The universe is too vast, too well regulated and too handily put together not to have something guiding it. I have experienced nature as a deep, deep, significant feeling that I'm part of the earth. An owl at night or a coyote howling or a bright, running stream are all part of me and I am part of them. We are all part of each other."

You have only to close your eyes to be part of them again—Gordon MacQuarrie and Mel Ellis, dressed to fish the Brule this fall, poised to slip into the cold, noisy torrent, and flipping a coin to determine who fishes upstream and who fishes down. •