

Trout Shangri-La

A best-selling author
and former judge
preserves his bit of
wilderness in
Upper Michigan

By George Vukelich

THERE is a magical place somewhere south of Ishpeming in Michigan's Upper Peninsula where John Voelker owns some wild land and among his tenants — none of whom pay rent — are wild brook trout. The trout have a symbiotic relationship with the landlord. Without one, the other would be hard-pressed to survive.

Voelker owns 160 acres of wilderness surrounding the fabled (among anglers) Frenchman's Pond. For this retired jurist and author, the land is a refuge from too much civilization. It is also under siege by too much civilization.

As he guides the white Jeep Cherokee carrying his two visitors down the bumpy dirt tracks toward Shangri-La, we emerge where a logging operation has been clear-cutting right to where its property ends and Voelker's begins.

He doesn't say the vandals are at his very gates now. The logging operations, he says, do provide work for men who have less and less of it these days in these parts.

We leave the barren lands and enter Voelker country, not far from Lake Superior, maybe 15 miles or so, in his beloved Marquette County.

There is the forest, dark, mysterious and alive. A number of weathered wooden signs scream silent warnings to trespassers. One faded sign in particular catches photographer Brent Nicastro's eye. It reads "Home of the UP Cribbage Champ."

"I'm impressed," Brent says.

Brent lives in Madison but has a cabin up on the Sturgeon River backwaters in the Upper Peninsula, near Iron Mountain. When they're up in Michigan, to hear Brent tell it, all he and his wife, Nora, do is play cribbage.

"This is one of the few places left like this," our host says as the Jeep crawls through trees that brush and touch roof, hood and fenders. "It's a jungle, a northern jungle. It's also one of the few places around here that holds wild brook trout because the water's ice cold in here."

He shifts into neutral and the Jeep growls like a leashed animal. We roll past an open spot strewn with apples he has put out for his tenants.

"You put apples out for the deer?" I ask.

"I'd like to preserve this," he confides, "not only for the fish, but for the beautiful trees we've been driving through. I know there are places that you can give your land to and I suppose I could do that and get a team of 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 since they were kids and now they're grown. One's still in college. I've sworn them to try and save this place. With tears in their eyes, they have vowed to save the trees and the fish. End of statement."

The Jeep fords a trickle of water, straining for a toehold on the sloping rock outcropping.

"Oooh," Voelker says. "Look at what the bear did. LOOK at what the bear DID! That's a sugar plum bush. There's still a few bears around here. That bush was bending over before and now some bear just pulled it all down."

He seems pleased about that.

JOHN Voelker is more than a lawyer; he's a legend in Upper Michigan. He graduated from the University of Michigan, served as prosecuting attorney for Marquette County and sat "for a spell" as a justice on the Michigan Supreme Court.

In addition to writing 100 legal decisions in the three years he served, he also wrote books under the pen name Robert Traver, a practice he had started while a prosecutor. He used his mother's maiden name, figuring "the taxpayers might have thought it improper if the DA used his own."

He left the court to write books and fish trout full time. He has kept track of the books: eleven. He has not kept track of the trout, most of which are released to fight another day and another year.

As an author, he is particularly proud of the books

Trout Magic and *Trout Madness*, which have become classics in the literature of fly fishing. But it was his fourth book, the best-selling *Anatomy of a Murder*, that brought him fame, fortune and the leisure to enjoy his beloved Frenchman's Pond as often as he wants, which is every day of the season.

Anatomy was a Book of the Month Club selection and was made into a motion picture by Otto Preminger. The 1959 movie starred James Stewart, George C. Scott, Eve Arden, Ben Gazzara and Lee Remick, with an original score composed and performed by Duke Ellington.

The picture was shot on location in Voelker country, and it just may have been the biggest happening to come into the Upper Peninsula since the grayling (a cousin of the salmon) left. In the movie, Jimmy Stewart loved trout fishing, Italian cigars and jazz records just as John Voelker did in real life.

The legend has given up his Italian cigars since those palmy days, but he hasn't given up much else.

AT THE end of the trail, we park and walk down to one of the most famous fish camps on the planet, the storied shack overlooking the storied beaver flowage called Frenchman's Pond.

The pond surface is undimpled at the moment; not a single rise puddles the water, yet you sense that the brook trout hiding in the depths know that the landlord is back on the premises.

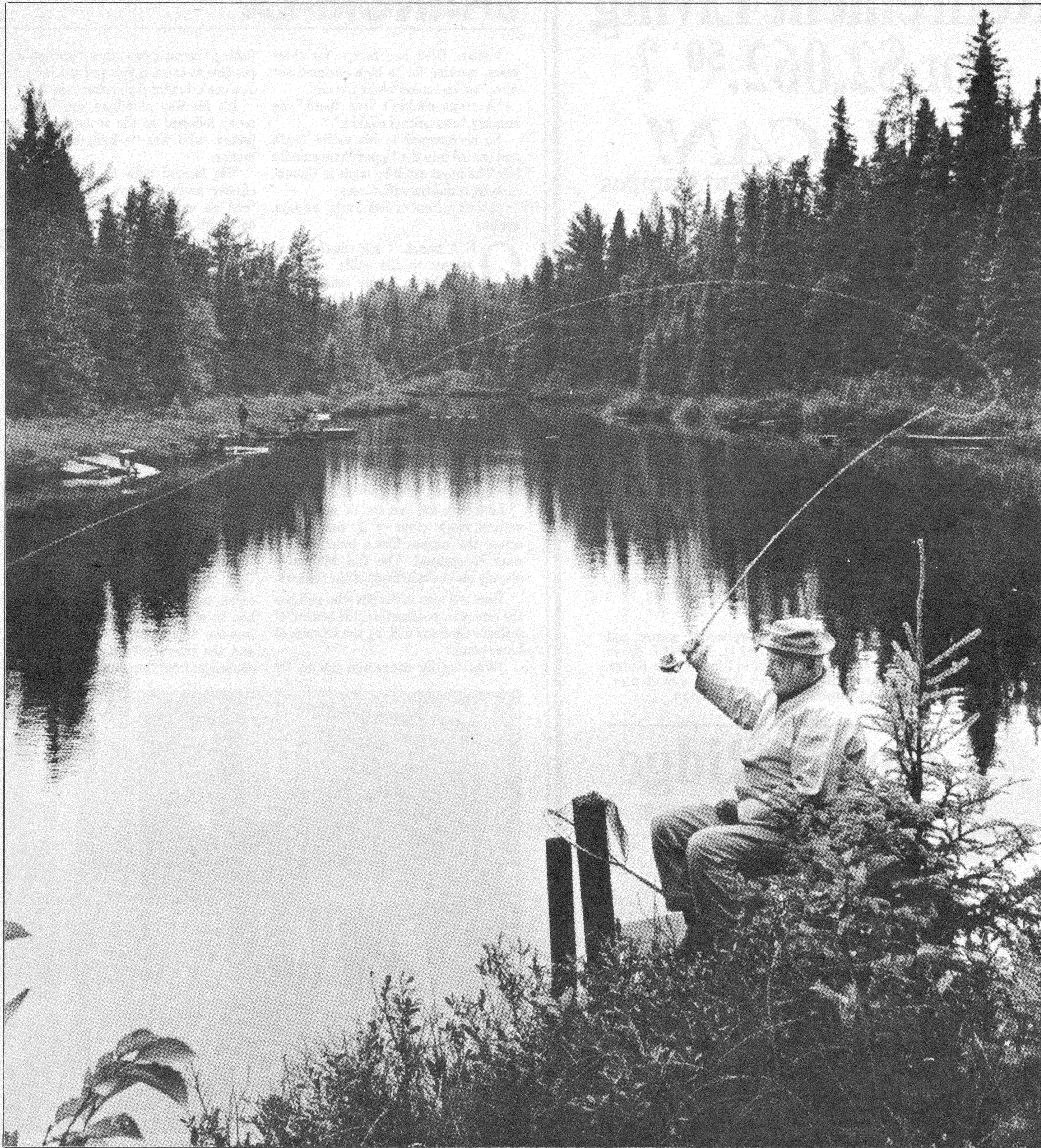
Voelker has a fine house, an elegant house in town, but this is where he truly lives, in the company of old friends who share his passions for chasing mushrooms and berries and trout — especially trout — in the enchanting country where he was a boy.

One of those friends is Charles Kuralt of CBS-TV who said last summer that in all the many years of doing his "On The Road" interviews, the greatest character, indeed, "the greatest man" he ever met was John Voelker.

"I think I got Charles Kuralt interested in fly fishing," Voelker allows.

Continued

Photography by Brent Nicastro



"This is one of the few places left like this," John Voelker says of the 160 acres of wilderness surrounding his Northern Michigan trout pond. "It's a jungle, a northern jungle. It's also one of the few places around here that holds wild brook trout because the water's ice cold."

SHANGRI-LA

Voelker lived in Chicago for three years, working for "a high-powered law firm," but he couldn't take the city.

"A trout couldn't live there," he laments, "and neither could I."

So he returned to his native heath and settled into the Upper Peninsula for life. The finest catch he made in Illinois, he boasts, was his wife, Grace.

"I took her out of Oak Park," he says, smiling.

ON A hunch, I ask whether this retreat to the wilds, and the wild trout, really isn't something spiritual, like going to chapel?

"Ah," John Voelker says with almost a brogue. "You'll have me in tears, Lad. It must be. It's the only church I go to. It could be."

Voelker asks if I want to borrow a fly rod and I say no, I just want to watch him. He shrugs, takes a seat on a casting platform and holds court. He puts on a demonstration worthy of a sports show, Big John Wayne with a lariat. Yet he's not showing off; he's fly fishing.

I ask for a roll cast and he sends that vertical magic circle of fly line rolling across the surface like a hula hoop. I want to applaud. The Old Master is playing his violin in front of the fiddlers.

Here is a man in his 80s who still has the arm, the coordination, the control of a Roger Clemens nicking the corners of home plate.

"What really converted me to fly

fishing," he says, "was that I learned it's possible to catch a fish and put it back. You can't do that if you shoot the fish."

It's his way of telling you that he never followed in the footsteps of his father, who was "a bang-bang" deer hunter.

"He hunted with an old .44 Winchester lever action," Voelker recalls, "and he must have shot hundreds of deer with it. All my brothers shot their deer with it, too."

"I own the gun now, but I have yet to shoot my first deer with it."

But in the old days, Voelker admits, he did hunt because his friends did. Voelker hunted partridge until his partridge-hunting friends began dying. Then the very last one died.

"The first time I went hunting after his funeral," Voelker remembers, "I was driving along and saw three partridge sitting on the roadside. I poked my gun out the window — that \$500 Remington over-and-under shotgun — and fired it straight up in the air! That was the parting shot of my hunting career."

"Like most of the others, it didn't hurt anything."

THE fly fishing this day doesn't hurt anything, either. A cold drizzle begins to fall and we repair to the cluttered shack for bourbon in a cup and a hand of cribbage between the Upper Peninsula champ and the presumptuous photographer challenger from the south.



Voelker spends as much time as possible at the "fish camp" — his expression for his refuge in the wilderness near Ishpeming.

He's famous for his best-selling book turned movie, *Anatomy of a Murder*, but Voelker takes special pride in his two fly-fishing classics, *Trout Magic* and *Trout Madness*.



"It was his suggestion that we play for money," Brent swears later. "Well, I beat him the first game for a quarter."

There is a break in the rain and they go back outside for more photography.

When they return, Brent skunks the old pro and so wins double: 50 cents. The third game is closer and Brent has a sweep and a dollar bill from the UP Cribbage Champ.

"I got lucky," Brent says. "I'm saving the same dollar so we can play for it the next time I see him. He's still The Champ and that sign can sure stay up."

Voelker is as gracious about losing at cribbage as he is about not catching any trout. Sometimes, that's just the way it goes. Fishermen get philosophical about their losses. Book writers, too.

"I've written 11 published books," Voelker replies when I inquire if he is writing anything now, "and I'm not planning to write another one."

"I say that's enough for one guy for a while, you know, for this incarnation."

He says he doesn't know if the writing takes too much energy out of him or what.

"I keep notes of stories I'm going to write," he says, "but it's always next week that I'm going to write them. After fishing season. After football season. After Christmas. After I finish reading these essays I'm reading by Ralph Ellison. After."

"I think the simplest explanation is that now I'm a genuine old --- and I'm running out of steam. You know, I've never been this old before. I'm 84, born around the turn of the century, although of later years, sometimes I get turned around about precisely which century."

"I might take a try at some non-fishing essays. After all, there are only so many things you can say about fishing — either you catch some or you don't and variants of that."

Sure, your honor, I think. But you already have said things about fishing that no one has ever said better because it simply cannot be said better.

In the preface to the book *Trout*

Magic, Robert Traver wrote the classic *Testament of a Fisherman* and broke the heart of every fishing writer on the planet.

"I fish," Traver-Voelker wrote, "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 being 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."

Brent Nicastro is right. That sign belongs right where it is, on the trail to Frenchman's Pond. John Voelker is still the champion. **W**

George Vukelich is a Madison writer and author of *North Country Notebook*, which was published last year.