

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

by George Vukelich

It was a funny Fall.

We had snow squalls the first week of October and seventy-degree weather in November. The Old Man anchored over the brush pile in the Big Stone Lake and got himself a nice sunburn while he filled up on walleyes. They ran around seventeen to twenty inches long and he got them on small mud minnows fished right above the pile. He caught three small-mouth bass there that are worth noting too. They went over six pounds apiece and are big bass in the north country, considering the long winter season that cuts down the food supply considerably.

The Old Man is, in the best sense of the phrase, a meat fisherman. He loves to fish walleye and he hates to come home empty and he would eat walleye three times a day if left to his own devices.

Now when I was younger and foolish as a beagle pup, I tended to scorn the Old Man's walleye fishing methods as unsporting. I'd sit in the bow with a tackle box big as a steamer trunk and cast out the finest artificial lures concocted by the brain of mortal man. The Old Man in the stern had his two rods and the battered minnow bucket. And nine times out of ten, he would outfish me.

When he had his limit, he would look over and ask me if I'd like a minnow.

"This is more sporting," I'd answer.

He would keep those green eyes on me and in their depths would be something I could never put my finger on. It was always hard to tell whether he was laughing at me or was feeling sorry for me.

"Sporting," he would say, savoring the word. "Sporting. I fish with one hook. You've got three treble hooks on that plug. Nine hooks on that plug. That makes you nine times as sporting as me?"

"If I was a meat fisherman, I'd use minnows."

"Meat fisherman? The best fisherman I know are meat fishermen. The Indians are meat fishermen. You know better fishermen than the Indians?"

"It's easy with minnows."

"Not easy. Maybe easier. But what's wrong with making it easier on yourself? Winter comes, you put on longjohns but that doesn't make the winter easy."

I could report variations of this dialogue that spanned twenty-five years and would fill a book. Countless mornings and spring rains and snow squalls and thousands of fish. Now I fish walleyes with one rod and one spare, and the tackle I take you could stuff into a tobacco pouch.

The Old Man taught me something that you don't read in the magazines. Fishing is more than a sport, it is a philosophy.

"You have to think like a fish," he says, "a smart one."

It has made the fishing easier. Not easy, easier.

I think I now understand that old guy in the stern just as he must have always understood me. And in recent years when both rods are alive and pumping with fish, the Old Man will fix his green eyes — deep and laughing as ever — on me as he reaches for the net between us.

"When you get to be our age," he will say, "angels talk to you."

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The North Country Boy's Letter

Dear Santa,
Yup, this was the year my folks had another,
so I'm writing you now for my new baby brother;
he looks like a puppy, all curled up and funny,
he can't blow his nose and it's always real runny.
It's hard to know what he could use,
he's so little he doesn't wear shoes.
He's just too tiny for skates or for skis —
If we took him ice fishing, he'd likely just freeze.
Pa says one day I can teach him to shoot
my shotgun for Canadas and mallard and coot.
Ma says plenty of time for the guns and the shells;
she even looks happy when he wets and he yells.
Gramps holds him too and gets him to coo —
When they get talking, you can't tell who's who.
It's really a strange kind of Christmas this year;
Pa says it's because I'm getting right near
to being grownup.
Pa says you are really right near it
when you understand that the Christmas spirit
is wanting good things, not for yourself but others.
Brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers.
Pa say you get to love the whole world more
and that's what Christmas is really for.
He says Santa lives in the heart and the head —
He says you're like Grandma, alive and yet dead.
Grandpa said that was right and true
and yet said I should write to you.
Anyway, whatever present you picked out for me,
Mark it for our baby when you come to our tree.

In this time of Family and Festivity, we extend to you the Season's Greeting in the words of an old British Naval Toast:

"For good food, for good wine, for good friends, thank God." Merry Christmas, Friend.