# Footloose

# Wooden boats had character

North Country Notebook

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By George Vukelich

A friend of mine who was raised up in the North Country of long ago just bought himself a wooden guide boat from that era. It's a classic and he means to restore it.

I think he also means to restore a bit of his youth.

"They don't build fishing boats," he laments, "like they used to."

Indeed, they don't. They build them now of aluminum. Or fiberglass. Or plastics. But rarely of wood. Wood is expensive. Requires caulking. Painting. Maintenance. A wooden boat makes as much sense in our plastic society as a wooden airplane.

Yet, I remember the time when the only fishing boats you saw on the northern lakes were wooden boats. They were all handformed, delicately ribbed, beautiful as canoes, with brass fittings to boot. The oars were handcarved too. Those oldtimey boats had as much character as the fishermen — and women — who rowed them and loved them.

Not just the Williamson family on Trout Lake. But George Kennedy over in Minocqua. John Weiss, the Dobbs clan and the Stanzils on the Three Lakes Chain. Charlie Boy on the Big Arbor Vitae. Doc Olson on the Little Arbor Vitae. Big Porter Dean over in Boulder Junction. And Dynie Mansfield from Little Trout to the Michigan border and beyond.

There were flat bottom boats and round bottom boats and then there were the guide boats, all wooden, all painted green and all serious fishing craft. I spent all of my boyhood in them.

Those were the days when walleyes had to be 15 inches long to be legal, the bag limit was seven fish and the Old Man would catch both limits while I was learning how. When we heard an outboard motor on the lake, we'd stop and gawk for twenty minutes.

Those were also the days when the anchor was a paint can full of cement tied to about 75-feet of clothesline.

Just now I remember the time on Big Arbor Vitae when the Old Man ordered me to drop the anchor as we drifted in over the bar.

"Deep here," I said as the line raced out over the gunwhale. Then, as if uninvolved, I watched in horror-stricken paralysis as the unsecured end of the line disappeared over the side.

"But," the Old Man said, tapping a finger to his head, "not deep here."

God knows how many wooden boats I not only rowed, but scraped and caulked and painted for the Old Man. The resort always had eight or 10 or a dozen around and in the Springtime I hated them all. I cursed them all as I caulked them and I prayed for a maintenance-free boat that would just take care of itself.

My friend who was raised up in the North Country of long ago says he was the same way. And now that he's older, wiser and pretty well-fixed, he has collected a pile of Pfleuger Supreme reels you wouldn't believe. And his first wooden guide boat.

His kids are praying pretty hard.