

Letter From the Northwoods

by JoAn Melchild

Just East of the Indian's Nose



Eleven years ago, I moved to Northwest Wisconsin, a region called the Wisconsin Indianhead because it is shaped like the profile of an Indian chief. I live just east of the nose.

After a career of publishing magazines and editing newspapers in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, I decided to take a retirement job editing a newspaper in a small Wisconsin town of fewer than 2,000 people. How pleasant it would be to leave the hustle, bustle, and high crime of the city! No more daily struggles with traffic. A place where I could retire in the quiet beauty of rolling woods and lakes. I even rented a cabin near a lovely little lake eight miles from town, where my young collie and I could commune with nature.

But it didn't take long to discover that Northwest Wisconsin was a foreign country, totally unlike anyplace I had been before. And my idyllic surroundings soon revealed some problems. There were wood ticks, not the regular kind, but tiny little deer ticks that passed on Lyme disease if you weren't vigilant in getting them off. The collie got Lyme disease and could barely walk until I took him to a vet for treatment. The dog also tangled with a porcupine and got quills in his nose, got sprayed by a skunk, and raccoons kept swiping his dog food after carefully washing each piece in his water dish. A sturdy, determined, and large family of mice who had been making the cabin their home for a couple of years defied every attempt to get rid of them. A gentle doe and her two fawns came to visit frequently.

The next thing I discovered was that editing a newspaper in a highly volatile community wasn't exactly a piece of cake. If I printed anything that people disagreed with, I received an angry phone call. Some letters to the editor would have been the basis for a libel suit

if I had printed them, and when I didn't print them, I received more angry phone calls. I had half of the town mad at me one week and the other half the next. Fortunately, the previous owner of the paper, who had been the editor for many years, stopped by daily for coffee and helped me avoid many pitfalls. I also discovered I did not have a nine to five job. I started receiving calls at my residence as early as 7:00 A.M. on Sunday.

Many people assume that if you are here, you have always been here, and therefore you don't need addresses or directions—other than “turn where the old cheese factory used to be, you can't miss it.” For most of its lengthy lifetime, the paper had run ads without addresses, and I met some resistance from the staff when I insisted on an address for each ad. After all, I explained, some dumb out-of-towner like myself might want to find the business, and the area could use the tourism dollars.

My first deer-hunting season was memorable. Close-shaven men suddenly turned into bearded characters sporting flannel shirts and boots. As I was living in a densely wooded area, I was warned by the natives to wear orange and tie an orange scarf around my collie's neck. Or, better yet, stay indoors. When the season started, I felt like I was in a war zone. Bearded men wearing camouflage suits and blaze orange hats and carrying guns passed through my yard. Guns went off in the distance, and a few were entirely too close. I wore a bright orange sweatshirt to travel the 20 feet from the cabin to the garage. The dog was scared to death. Hunters who had shot their deer draped the animal on the fender or put it in the back of the pickup truck and stopped by a saloon in town to do a little celebrating and show off their trophy.

Then winter settled upon the Northwoods. I had only moved 90 miles north-east of the Twin Cities, but that short distance added two months to winter. It was snowing by the end of September, and the ice was still on the lakes at the first of May. The first day that the temperature was way below zero, the bathtub in my rented cabin spouted a gusher of ice and dead leaves from the drain. When I tried to call the owners, their son told me they were on a sailboat trip off the southern coast of Florida. It seems the bathtub and laundry tubs drained through a pipe onto

the ground alongside the cabin. A little heat tape fixed the situation. The electric heat was a bit iffy, too, and I often came home to a very cold house. I spent a lot of that first winter on the couch covered with a heavy quilt. Sweatsuits, long underwear, wool socks, and a pair of Alaskan reindeer slippers were standard at-home apparel.

But native northwestern Wisconsinites who are snowmobilers love the snow. Snowmobile trails, all carefully groomed and marked with miniature highway signs, crisscross the area and connect with other trails in northern Wisconsin. One hearty group of men made an annual 200-mile snowmobile trip to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The restaurants and bars near the snowmobile trails do a land-office business during the snowmobile season. Rural dances bring the snowmobilers out, and I have watched them dancing the polka in their snowmobile boots, their snowmobile suits unzipped to the waist to allow ventilation, their empty sleeves twirling to the music.

When the ice thickens, ice-fishing shacks appear on the numerous lakes in the Wisconsin Indianhead region. A large lake near where I live hosts the Wisconsin state ice-fishing tournament, which attracts 1,200 fishermen. Each person is allowed to drill three holes in the ice; they may bring sleds and portable icehouses as well as their vehicles. A beer garden, weighing station, and bratwurst stand are also set up on the ice. I was extremely nervous that first winter and wouldn't drive my car out on the ice. I really expected to see the entire entourage sink into 90 feet of water, but it hasn't happened yet.

I lived through that first winter, but the cabin was sold in the spring, so I bought a 100-year-old house in town and rehabbed it. Then the newspaper was sold, so I found other work, but I stayed in Northwest Wisconsin. There are too many things going on that I would miss. There are still bears up here, and while I have only seen one (from the safety of my car), I had empathy for the man in Cameron, Wisconsin, who let his poodle out early in the morning and had a bear grab the dog from the deck. The owner tried to defend the poodle but got mauled himself. The bear took the poodle into the woods, and the dog hasn't been seen since. Another man had his

dog out for a walk near Spooner when he heard the dog running up behind him at top speed. The dog ran right past him. When the man turned around, he found himself face to face with a black bear up on its hind legs. The man pushed the bear; the bear took a swipe and scratched him; but they both ended up going in different directions. More recently, a 14-year-old Boy Scout had to have 196 stitches after a bear hauled the boy, his tent, and his sleeping bag 78 feet into the woods.

Weddings in northwestern Wisconsin are social events. Some get carried away. A bachelor party at Murphy's Bar and Grill in Dresser, Wisconsin, turned into a 50-man bar brawl that led to 16 arrests by officers in nearly 20 units. The Dresser police chief got punched while trying to break up the brawl. There was no report on how the wedding turned out.

But newlyweds here are practical. The local Farm and Fleet store that sells farm supplies, work clothes, lawnmowers, and dog food features a bride and groom registry that is very popular. Their ads proclaim: "At last, a place for the groom to register too!"

This area still has church suppers, potlucks, barbecues, and a popular regional dish of bratwurst smothered with sauerkraut. There are old-time dances: I attended one on a farm on the Fourth of July. It was over 90 degrees, but Mr. Morgan, a one-man band, kept playing polkas, two-steps, and waltzes from his stand in a pole barn. Despite the heat, the people kept dancing—and Mr. Morgan kept playing.

The Ceska Opera House in Haugen, Wisconsin, has been in operation for over 100 years. It features variety shows by local talent, from a violin player to a college professor completely decked out in a Scottish kilt playing the bagpipes. My favorite was a lady dressed in a black cow suit, dangling a shocking pink udder while she played a trumpet solo.

Even more astounding to an out-of-towner is the way the folks up north raise money for charity. My first "chicken drop" fundraiser at a rural saloon was an eye-opener. I grew up on a farm in South Dakota, so I am familiar with the personal habits of chickens—I just never expected to be betting on them. The floor of a fenced area was marked off into numbered squares, and the participants bet on the numbers. Then a well-fed chicken was placed in the pen, and whatever numbered square the chicken re-

lieved itself on was a winner. Since that time, I have seen a "cow drop" in a parking lot divided into squares, and a bunny drop, which was a little less predictable.

What really makes northwestern Wisconsin a special place is the people. Many are descendants of the loggers or farmers who struggled to survive in this area a hundred years ago. There is ethnic diversity, yet a proud clannishness as well. I live in an Italian community that has some of the best Italian food I have ever eaten. Another community features "Scandinavian Saturday" where the best in local Scandinavian food and crafts are on sale. People quietly work on their rural acreages growing berries, raising produce, building boats, painting, woodcarving, making pottery, designing crossword puzzles, or carving out a new golf course. There are as many stories as there are people, and it doesn't end. For a photo-journalist, it is a wonderful place to be.

JoAn Melchird writes from Cumberland, Wisconsin.

Letter From Spain

by Brian Kirkpatrick

The Tribe Above Madrid



The sun was low as the luxurious chartered bus labored up the steep dirt track to the wedding reception in the hills above Madrid. We walked up the last of the slope from the buses to the lawn in front of the hunting lodge, where we looked down on the distant city. Middle-aged men and young girls circulated among us in uniforms, carrying trays with sliced Spanish ham streaked with fat, drinks, canapés, and small sliced sausages in hollowed-out bread. As the sun set, the groom explained that the half-finished house on the hilltop behind us—the highest point in sight—was a weekend retreat for Franco that was never completed because of the dictator's death. We stayed on the lawn until dark, then we moved into the tent attached to the side of the lodge for the formal dinner.

There was a hint of the evening's message when I heard that the priest who presided at the wedding had officiated at

the weddings of the bride's mother and grandmother. Surely, it should have been clear to me when the men of the *tuna*, friends of the groom wearing medieval short pants and mantles, threw their cloaks on the ground at the church door and sang to the bride and groom. During supper, the *tuna*—half fraternity, half glee club, each man a member for life—periodically burst into ribald or romantic song, the members seated at their table, playing guitars and small instruments similar to mandolins. I should have noticed that all the Spaniards knew the words and sang along. The point was obvious, but with my American eyes I couldn't see it, even when the *tuna* surrounded the bride, the groom, and their parents at the head table to sing, then made the groom stand and serenade his new wife.

After we'd eaten, the bride and groom walked from table to table with Cuban cigars, and waiters with *Fra Angelica* and *liquor de manzana verde* circulated among the tables. When the cigar smoke and the roar of conversation drove me out into the night, I looked down on distant Madrid and watched the fireworks of the festival of San Isidro slowly rise and bloom above the city. Finally, at midnight, the party moved into the main hall, where the skins and skulls of game hung on the walls.

The world of the bride and groom was educated, cosmopolitan, international; their guests included psychiatrists, social workers, and lawyers from Scotland, Colombia, the United States, Great Britain, and Argentina. I was in the new Europe, where half the room spoke English and many of the foreigners, Spanish. The groom spoke three languages; his father spoke five. The DJ played disco and American music from the 70's and 80's, and Americans, North and South, mixed with Europeans on the dance floor. It was the kind of dancing any American would have recognized, that formless combination of disco and frug and nameless things we don't take any time to learn, because there is nearly nothing to be learned.

But after half an hour the music changed, as Spain, having failed to reach me, resorted to a more direct method. The DJ played a passionate music one could only call Spanish: castanets, guitars, a sensuous, serious sound. Nothing was said, no announcement was made, but the Spanish women all moved to the center of the room, the men stepped