

10-28-93

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SHORTGRASS:

Early in my September journey to Minnesota, I learned I was in a big country. The shoreline of Lake Superior alone stretches over a thousand miles. From Duluth on the west tip of the lake the road goes north and eastward past Grand Portage into Canada close to Thunder Bay, Ontario, through a limitless expanse of lakes and forests and small outposts.

The lush farmland of the more densely settled parts of the state fades away into heavy woods, and a lingering history of the Northwest Fur Company and the days of the traders, Indians and French voyagers takes over.

At Grand Portage, so named because the last link by canoe required a portage of eight miles, the Northwest Company headquartered for annual directors' meetings and a huge gathering of all the trappers and scores of red men. Scotchmen in beaver hats mingled with braves topped in beaded headdresses; dances and feasts lasted late into the nights.

So the story is told today, bellowing squaw men burned their loneliness out of crocks of raw whiskey and proper Scots gentlemen danced reels and reels with young Indian girls. The big finale, however, occurred when the company discovered after eight years that their base was in the United States and had to be moved to Canadian ground forever, abandoning what today is a national park.

On my days spent driving and walking up the lake shore, the scene was a drama of quiet woodlands breaking out into fierce blasts of winds off the waters. Morning temperatures fell to a chilled 18 degrees, splotches of snow froze to fir trees, and all the glories of autumn colors flared into golds and reds and yellows.

Crowds dwindled as I progressed northward. However, in one of the remote parts of the area, the Gun Flint Trail, the last flush of summer visitors congregated for the leaf changes.

One morning on a walk, I found a gold watch inscribed, "To Lisa, love Fred." Local custom mandated turning the watch in at the lodge. After one leaves Duluth, hotel keys are issued only to placate tourists from the urban world.

The lady at the desk checked through the register. Lisa, at least, had to have been around the lodge as other facilities were miles away. I asked her not to worry. Lisa might have been mad enough at Fred that she faked losing her watch. After stick-on off-the-shoulder tatoos for strapless gowns and swimwear became fashionable, replacing the old indelible pen and ink tatoos, words inscribed on the backs of watches also lost their meanings.

I didn't want to act like a know-it-all, but I told the desk clerk that if this Lisa turned out to be like the Lisa May who married my college roommate down in Austin, she'd always be so late she'd need a calendar more than a wristwatch.

My cabin at Gunflint Lodge was built by the founders back in 1923. The son still owns the property. He said some guests found the cabin too rustic for their tastes, but he figured ranchers like myself from down on the Mexican border preferred modest accommodations like a hand-hewn log cabin.

Not to miss an opening, I explained that the ranch houses out close to the Chihuahua Desert are made from thorn-side-out sotol cactus stalks cured in Pecos River alkali water and floored from adobe clay, wet down and mixed in the blood of antelopes killed off the edges of steep cliffs bordering the Rio Grande.

The "is that so?" of his reply signalled a definite end to our conversation. From then on, every time I passed by his office he buried his head deep in his book work.

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