

## Mudholes, Highway 61 and Congressman Oberstar

Years ago, travel on the roads of Lake County and the North Shore could be a challenge. Especially in the Spring. Mud holes would appear in the roads as the frost came out, creating mile-long troughs of muck that were monuments to the oil pan and muffler industries.

Old time pictures do very little justice to the trauma and stress encountered by those who ventured upon these roads. It was necessary to have a complete kit of tools if one was to travel, and this kit included essentials such as tall rubber boots, at least one jack in working condition, tire chains, a Swede saw, plenty of rope, a hand winch, and a Bible.

A couple traveling by car, perhaps on vacation, would come to the North Shore for relaxation and renewal in the spring freshness. Then they would encounter our roads. Cresting a hill or coming around a curve, the intrepid travelers would come upon one of these spring frost holes, and pause in amazement and wonder. Stretching before them was a trough of muck the consistency of oatmeal gumbo which locals dubbed the Sweet Residue of the Northern Loon. Sticking up in a random pattern thru the mess were rocks, sticks and logs. These were the evidences of previous travelers who had encountered the same hole, and had attempted to get through it. Having gotten stuck, these previous travelers had used a variety of techniques and methods to extract their auto from the morass. These methods usually involved jacking up the car and pushing logs, brush and rocks into the ruts and under the tires. Time was of the essence, as the car needed to be jacked up before the suction from the muck became more than the jack could lift.

Proving once again the truism about rushing fools and fearful angels, the latest victim of the sinkhole road chooses a set of ruts, grabs the shift lever, and guns the engine. "I think we can make it through that" he assures his hesitant wife. With wheels spinning, mud flying and the car fishtailing, he attempts to goose the car through the muck, until it jerks to a sudden stop, hung up on an unseen rock or stump.

Then would begin the process of attempted extraction, utilizing most of the tools and equipment so carefully packed. While jacking, rocking, sweating, pushing, grunting, and winching, he would try to keep clean and avoid the flying debris of the spinning wheels, while at the same time gently instruct his wife about how to rock the car by feathering the gas pedal. More often than not the entire episode ended with a thin-lipped wife stoically gripping the steering wheel of the motionless car while listening to a strong man weep as he sat on the running board, coated with a thick layer of Northern Loon Residue.

She fought the urge to say "I told you..."

It was then that they understood why they had brought the Bible.

Fortunately the days of mud-filled sink holes are mostly gone. But the roads in our region are still an issue. Especially Highway 61.

Which is why Congressman Oberstar visited us recently, to hear about Highway 61. This was my first time at such a meeting, and several things struck me.

I doubt the Papal Ring in Rome has ever been kissed with the persistent ardor and veneration shown to the Congressman by the majority of local politicians and employees of State Agencies. Had I known ahead of time the magnitude of the greatness into whose presence I had ventured, I would have bought a new shirt.

More important than that were a few of the reports given by local law enforcement and rescue personnel. They told of not being able to use their lights and sirens while going to an accident or emergency on Highway 61, because there was no room for cars to pull over. They told of the skills and techniques they had perfected in rolling cars back on their wheels when they rolled down ditches and embankments. Several could have, but didn't, talk about the task of notifying next-of-kin that their family member would never return from their vacation.

Highway 61 needs to be updated, improved and repaired. We will need Federal money to do it, as the estimated cost to finish the highway is \$150 million dollars. In 2015 dollars.

After listening to all the presentations and speeches while graciously accepting the laud and honor accorded to him by MN DOT and local elected officials, Congressman Oberstar said to us... "Good Luck". That, of course is not how he phrased it. (Why use two words when 200 will do?) But that was what he meant. Other than two short sections of road already slated for improvement, there isn't going to be any more work done on Highway 61 in the foreseeable future. MN DOT only plans on filling the worst of the pot holes.

The reasons were many, including but not limited to, President Geo W Bush being an anti-tax personification of both evil and stupidity; Governor Tim Pawlenty being dimmer than a 10 watt light bulb without the slightest grasp of matching funds projects, and the awful bi-partisan bickering and name-calling that pervades Washington and St Paul these days. It keeps anything significant from getting done.

The only word I have been able to use that begins to describe the entire meeting is "surreal." (Some of you think I'm making this all up; a few others wish I was.)

So, in spite of the tax dollars raised in Lake County and sent to Washington every month, none is coming back anytime soon to Lake County for the purpose of Highway Repair. All of the issues of safety, sanitation, commerce, recreation and security will continue as they have until a future election sweeps the Democrats to power and they are able, in a conciliatory bi-partisan atmosphere of good will and public good, to raise sufficient taxes so as to give us the funds needed.

Until then, perhaps we can get the Gideon's to hand out Bibles at the Information Center.