

By Will Maines

AH, 2011, WE HARDLY knew ye.

Just yesterday we were shooting up fireworks and exchanging champagne toasts as the midnight clock rang in the first seconds of your first day.

Now, in just a few brief days, you will be gone, consigned to the same place all the years of history have gone, to the vagaries of our memories.

Some people can tell you what practically every year of their life has brought to them with amazing accuracy and precision. That would be those people who are given to journaling or, as some call it, keeping diaries.

They can tell you what phase of the moon it was on that fateful evening of January 12, 1902, when they caught that 12-pound walleye that is still the largest of their career. Not only that, they'll tell you exactly how many snowflakes were coming down when the fish struck, who their fishing companions were and how inebriated they all were at that momentous time in history. Me, aside from weekly ramblings in this column and others I have written dating back to the mid-1970s, prefer not to carve my personal outdoor history in slate for students of history to analyze.

Thing is, I prefer keeping memories in my head so that each time I tell a true story, I can use the elasticity of memory to shape it in whatever manner the situation calls for.

As the years slide by, I keep all those stories in my head and my heart, treasuring each today as much or more as the day I made them happen.

So it was that this year, this 365 days of 2011, added several more stories to my collection.

They included new places and new people. They also included several of the old, usual suspects that over the years have given me hundreds of stories to tell.

On balance, it was a good year, but then, what year is not?

I enjoyed a good winter of skiing, a year when there was no pressure to ski often, hard and long, in order to get myself ready for the torture test that the American Birkebeiner is for me. To tell the truth, it felt good to go out on a cold winter afternoon and ski only five or six miles if that is all I felt like doing, and it was often a lot more fun stopping along the way to check out deer, turkey, ermine or wolf tracks which during most years and most outings I would have skipped over with barely a glance as I thought of little else than getting my body ready for the Birkie.

I never ice fished all winter until a nice warm spell in March got me out jigging for bluegills and perch—with a substantial amount of success, I might add.

With my freezer having long since been emptied of those sweet-tasting fish, it was a real treat to put a platter of panfried fillets on the supper table several times during those late-winter days. Spring brought with it turkey season, both here in Wisconsin and in Illinois. For the time I put into chasing turkeys in both states without putting so much as a tail feather in the stew pot, I never enjoyed two hunts more.

Turkeys kind of take control of me each spring, have for the past 10 years or so especially, and even if a season ends with nothing but close calls and thunderous gobbles raising the hackles on the back of my neck, I could hardly call such expeditions a failure.

I fished more times with more people last summer than perhaps ever before. I fished with old friends and new friends, people who fish a lot and people who were fishing almost for the first time.

I watched old veterans act like little kids catching bluegills and bass one after the other, returning all to the water none the worse for wear and tear, and I watched newcomers shake with amazement at the powerful strike generated by a northern pike of no more than 3 pounds. I got hugs from new friends when our fishing outings ended—one of the perks of taking women fishing and leaving their husbands on shore to watch—and I got high fives at the end of fishing trips from teenagers who otherwise would have thought it to be a major blow to their coolness to even be seen in the same area code as an old jack pine savage like me.

North Dakota was a place of joy in October, as it always is, even though my time at duck camp wasn't always pleasant due to one of the worst colds I've ever had that plagued me for almost the entire trip.

Funny though, how a pile of duck breasts swimming in butter or wrapped in tortillas can make you forget all about such trifles as sniffles, sneezes and aching bones.

Perhaps a fitting caper to this fine year of 2011 was the opening day of deer season in November.

I'd been suffering through a three-year buck drought, but you, oh season of 2011, you weren't about to let me suffer any longer. You gave me only 26 minutes of your nine days, but what a minute that last one was when a nine-pointer got in front of my sights.

I've already told the story a hundred times or more, each time adding or subtracting details as the need arises and, by the time 2012 ends, that buck will probably have met his fate in a thousand or more ways.

Now, very shortly, it will be time to close the book, so to speak, on 2011. Ah, we hardly knew ye. __PUBLIC__