

## SURVIVOR FIVE – The Tundra



Many of you have seen the phenomenally successful TV series *Survivor* but most of you don't know I haven't just survived one but FIVE adventures myself. During the *Rick Off The Record* hiatus this summer, I was coerced into accepting the challenge of participating in the latest gathering of my wife's family.

This gathering was to take place in the tundra of International Falls, Minnesota. Why there? That's where my in-laws, the Barthells, have chosen to live for the past half-century and where the band of three daughters and one son grew up.

A brief history of the Barthell *Survivor* Series:

It began back in the year 2001 when my in-laws decided they wanted to celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary by gathering the clan at their time-share condo in Orlando. Because the family is literally spread out across the United States, getting everyone together is difficult at best and requires a special occasion. Thus, *Survivor One – The Land of the Mouse* was the first.

Because the adventure was such a success (all who attended gave it a hearty thumbs up!), everyone agreed these gatherings should take place regularly. It was decided when one of the clan, spouses included, had a birthday (starting at 50) or an anniversary (at 20) that ended with a 0, that person(s) got to choose the next adventure site.

Survivor Two (2003) was Paola, Kansas; Survivor Three (2004) was Santa Maria, California; Survivor Four (2005) was Lansing, Iowa. There wasn't a zero in 2006 but this year, #1 son Fred turned 50 so he chose The Ice Box of the Nation.

What is strange about this location (although it is Fred's birthplace), he has lived in California now for so long he actually thinks he's a native and he HATES the cold. And he knew this was the one place that would make me cringe.

You see, my in-laws talked me into visiting them ONCE, in September of 2000 and it snowed! I vowed never to return unless MAYBE it was July. During our family conference where Fred announced International Falls as the site of the next gathering, before I could say anything, he sadistically said, "In JULY, Rick!"

So plans were made. We packed up my wife's Volvo station wagon (the Copenhagen Cadillac) and began our 700+ mile trip to the tundra by way of the Yooperland, Vesconsin, through Da Lute and on to Nordern Minnie S0ta.

It is amazing how beautiful this country is if we take a little time to look. The journey was interesting to say the least and I learned a lot along the way. Two must stops traveling anywhere in the U.P. are for pasties just across the bridge and sweet rolls at the Hill Top in L'Anse. We passed a sign that said Fudge Smoked Fish Pasties. I'm not sure if that's one, two or three food items.

Here's a bit of irony, we're heading for the tundra and went by two Hall of Fames: The U.S. National Ski and Snowboarding Hall of Fame in Ishpeming, MI. and the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame in Eveleth, MN. A coincidence? I think not.

As we cruised through the Seeney stretch listening to an Eagles CD belting out *Life In The Fast Lane*, I thought I spotted the biggest eagle in possibly the world – it turned out to be black receivers on a cell tower. But we did see eagles...more on that later.

Sometimes you see the most unexpected things. While traveling near Ashland, WS. I told my wife to remember this area and remind me on the return trip. When she asked why, I said I saw a "must take" picture.

We stopped on the way back for that picture – an outhouse with a satellite dish on the roof – I kid you not.



Another sight that amazed me in Minnesota – every other car or truck is pulling a boat trailer. Now, granted the state brags about being “the land of 10,000 lakes”, which is second to Alaska’s 3 million lakes but who’s really counting. However, Minnesota does have more boat registrations than probably the other 49 states combined. I’m beginning to think maybe the vehicles are sold with boat trailers on them – kinda like an accessory or added feature.

We went past about a thousand historical markers; something called the Laurentian Divide and right through the heart of the Mesabi Iron Range. There are simply named towns like Canyon, Cotton, Cook, Orr (Home of the Giant Bluegill) and Ray.

When we finally arrived in the great north tundra of International Falls it was a brisk 94°F ABOVE zero. The locals were in a panic because they thought there was a chance the permafrost would actually melt.

You must understand these people take pride in their cold weather. They not only brag (the city slogan is the Icebox of the Nation) but they also talk about their two seasons: winter and bad sledding! One of Minnesota’s most famous citizens, Garrison Keillor of the Prairie Home Companion says, “Minnesotans are the humblest people in the world. It’s hard to be arrogant when you’re freezing your ass off.”

There is a mild controversy about the location of the coldest place in the U.S. Several towns in the tundra of northern Minnesota all claim to be the coldest – places like Ely, Embarrass and Tower, which according to the U.S. National Climate Data Center holds the current record at – 60. International Falls claims it's title on consistency, which is being colder than “a witch's you know what” most of the time.

Most of the clan stayed in a B&B on Rainy Lake, which is 345 sq. miles of beautiful water, islands and great walleye fishing. It straddles the U.S./Canadian border and features the headquarters for Voyageur National Park.

We took the scenic two-hour (park ranger guided) boat tour of the lake, meaning we saw about 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of the total waterways but it was interesting to learn about the history of the early settlers, the mini-gold rush and bootlegging days of Prohibition. The ghost town of Rainy Lake City had one general store, one bank and 17 saloons.

There were several bald eagle nests and even a few resident eagles spotted from a distance. As we headed back to the landing (almost on cue, so much so that you'd suspect it was a hologram) a majestic eagle swooped down within 50 ft. of the boat and snatched a fish from the water. A great photo-op and I sat there with my mouth open wondering how they staged such a spectacular ending to the tour.

In the land of loons and moose we never saw a one although we did suspect hearing a few on our golf outing to the local links. I'll admit hitting a few shots into Canada but without having my passport, I chose not to go searching thus preventing a potential international incident.

All in all, Survivor Five was another big success. Not only did I survive but I had a good time also. You can imagine how uneventful the trip home was when the highlight was stopping to get a picture of an outhouse! But it was nice to get home too.

Next year my father-in-law turns eighty so the burden of choosing the locale for Survivor Six is on his shoulders. My niece is lobbying heavy for a beach house in San Diego. She gets my vote. I'm buying the little umbrellas for the drinks just in case.