

Interviewer: We're ready. It's August 9, 2007. We're here in Stockbridge with Jim Nadler. Go ahead. Start out with who you are, where and when you were born, family background, or that kind of stuff.

Jim Nadler: Hi, I'm Jim Nadler. I was born in Chilton. I'm a son of a longtime fishing relation.

Interviewer: How old are you?

JN: Sixty-eight.

Interviewer: Sixty-eight. Okay, so that places your birth year at what? 1940?

Mary Ellen Nadler: May 23<sup>rd</sup>.

JN: '39 I was born in.

Interviewer: 1939.

JN: I lived with my folks until they moved out on the farm for eight years in Jericho.

Interviewer: How'd you get into spearing?

JN: Spearing? My dad was a longtime fisherman. His dad was. I guess that's – kind of gets passed on. Oh, my grandpa was – we make spears. My grandpa was the pioneer, you might say, of making a spear, which is called the Nadler spear.

Interviewer: It has its own name.

JN: Then, back in the late 1800s, I believe, he started a little blacksmith shop on a farm that he owned.

Interviewer: Did he start making them as a young guy, or was he older and retired from the farm when he started doing that kind of thing?

JN: No, he would have done it as a young individual. I think it was kind of a means to extra income. As far as I know, the spears he did make – he made three-tine, mainly four-tine in later years with the flying barbs. What I see on his records, his first spears sold for \$2.50, but I think the handle was extra. I'm not sure.

Interviewer: So guys just bought the spear and made their own handles?

JN: Sometimes.

Interviewer: If they didn't want to [inaudible].

JN: But yeah, he made them, though, too. And gaff hooks he would make. I think they weren't all sold at his place. He would put them in business places, like bars and that, to be sold.

Interviewer: That was mostly in Chilton?

JN: Along the east shore, to lake – [inaudible] questions.

Interviewer: Okay. So he sold that one that was \$2.50 or whatever. Was that in the 1800s still, or was that –?

JN: Well, I couldn't tell you that.

Interviewer: Okay. I thought maybe you would know since you knew it was \$2.50. So he made the – let's talk about how he constructed his, how he constructed his first spears – the materials. Did he weld them? How did he make them?

JN: Well, his first spears were mainly made out of – call it key stock probably. It was quarter by five-sixteenths. Why it was five-sixteenth? Because he cut in on the five-sixteenth side to have a little more material to work with, to bend the barb out.

Interviewer: So that's how he made his barbs? He cut into the steel and bent it out.

JN: With a hacksaw. Yes.

Interviewer: With a hacksaw. Wow. That's laborious. I see on some of them he had the two holes up at the head of the spear. What were those for?

JN: Tie the rope on.

Interviewer: To tie the rope. How would you –? How do you tie it to it? What knots do you use? How do you loop it through?

JN: Well, any good knot holds. You usually run it through (boat holds?) and bring it back through and maybe knot it twice. Each one has – different guys have their own way of doing it. I go around twice, and then I even put a fish line through the ropes, to make sure it don't open up.

Interviewer: Do you have a hole at the top of your spear, too, where you run it through? Where you tie a knot?

JN: Yes, the eye hook.

Interviewer: Is that just for hanging it up, or do you pull the rope through there and tie a knot?

JN: No, the rope is tied to that so that when the head releases from the spear, the two stay together. Plus, if you can hang from that eye hook, too, on your shandy – some do it with an eye hook, and others got a bracket off the handle that they hook it on the floor with.

Interviewer: He passed this down to your father?

JN: Well, yes, mainly, I suppose. My dad was quite a blacksmith himself. He did maintenance work for a company, and it was just – he could figure that out. I'm sure he had seen his dad make spears, too. I don't know if you ever helped him or not. That's how I got started into it. I started helping my dad make spears when he started in, but that was mainly after he retired at about age – what the heck was it? – sixty-seven, he retired. But then, when he passed on at seventy-two, well, here these parts were laying around, so I thought I'd just assemble what he had laying there. Then I made some parts myself and just kept on making and assembling.

Interviewer: Did he sell them for sale, too, around the east shore just like your grandpa did?

JN: He did not make that many of them. It was mainly on an order thing. It was word of mouth that he would make spears. Somebody would come and approach him if they needed one.

MEN: It was just a hobby-type thing.

JN: He'd make it up, yes.

Interviewer: So the Nadler spear is still for sale around the east shore?

JN: Sure. Somewhere [inaudible].

Interviewer: Do you do the same thing as your father did, where you just do it on a come to you and ask for one basis? How does that work?

JN: Yes, it's mainly word of mouth.

MEN: It's your hobby, your spare time.

JN: I improved it a little bit over what my dad did, or my dad improved it a little over his dad. I improved it a little over my dad. My dad even told me once I make a better and a nicer spear than what he did.

Interviewer: How so?

JN: Well, just the finishing work. See, he believed in – when I made the five-tine with the two stationary barbs in it, I cut it out on a bandsaw, where he still was cutting in with a hacksaw and bending it out.

Interviewer: Your dad?

JN: Yes. Even on the flying barbs, I did a little nicer job. I was a little better welder than he was.

Interviewer: Your grandpa never welded, right? They didn't weld back then.

JN: Only on a blacksmith weld.

Interviewer: Which is where you would –?

JN: Heat the two pieces of iron up in the forge, and then you would hammer them together.

Interviewer: So if your grandpa didn't – if he didn't weld the tines to the head and everything like that, how did he get him to stay in one –? How did he assemble it if he didn't weld it?

JN: Well, he took one piece of iron, which would have been – say if he wanted the tines to be eight inches long, he would have to take a sixteen-inch piece of iron. Then he put the points – put a point on each end, and then he would bend that piece of iron U-shaped. On a four-tine, he would have to do that with two different pieces of iron. The outside iron would have to be longer than the inside because of the horseshoe. Then he had a piece of iron, which was – I'll say it was called a head, which goes into the handle of the spear. That had to be at least a half-inch square, so he could drill and file that out. So the two spear tines would go into that head, and then he would have a wedge made up that he would drive in there to tighten them all together and put a pin in there and hold it tight.

Interviewer: Your dad kept the same sort of format, but instead of bending them, he just started welding tines right to the headpiece?

JN: That's correct. The tines and the head were separate, made separate, and then it was welded together, the tines onto the head.

Interviewer: Your grandpa made three and four tine ones, and you guys still make three and four? Or do you make larger ones now?

JN: I just make five-tine now.

Interviewer: Five tine ones?

JN: They work. The guys that use them wouldn't use anything else. They claim it's the best spear on the lake. Well, I wouldn't go quite that far. Maybe in the top ten.

Interviewer: I didn't realize that flying barbs are so old. Your grandpa started making flying barb ones. And how long ago do you think that could have been?

JN: I don't know how far that would go back. I'll bet you he probably had to be making them in 19 – around in the 1930s. I'm sure you did already.

Interviewer: Making the flying –?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: Rather than just hacksawing in and bending him out, he actually started making the flying barb ones.

JN: I don't know where he got that idea. If he came up on it on his own, I don't know. But I know my dad told me once when he came back from fishing – he told his dad that the handle was too light, and he got the fish up on the floor; it fell off. He told me that his dad told him, “*Du bist verrückt*,” which is German for “you're crazy.” So the next day, grandpa went fishing. The kids all called him "Pa." He came home, didn't say nothing to my dad, went out to his blacksmith shop, and was working out there. Well, my dad did the chores. So when he got done, he thought he'd go over there and see what was going on. Well, here was Pa putting more lead in the handle.

Interviewer: “Maybe they're right.”

JN: [laughter] So I don't know if he lost the fish or what happened. Anyways, he found out he needed more lead.

Interviewer: So from the spearhead, they had a metal piece and then a wood piece onto that?

JN: Correct.

Interviewer: What did he use? What did your grandpa use? And do you use the same kind of stuff?

JN: My grandpa made them – that was the start. That's the way he always made them, too. He had weight on the bottom and then a wooden handle. But he used lead, which I since got away from. I use a solid steel shaft, which amounts to that weight.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. How heavy are your spears about? Do you even know?

JN: The handle is ten pounds, and then with the head on, it comes to about twelve.

Interviewer: Twelve pounds? Yeah.

JN: That that way it's – you wouldn't need one that heavy, but then you got to be pushing it. So I always figure just a little bit heavier. If a guy's children start out fishing and just more or less drop the spear, it's still heavy enough to go into the fish and get it.

Interviewer: Do you remember the first time you went sturgeon spearing? If so, can you remember the story? Can you walk us through the first time you ever went?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: It doesn't have to be where you just were along, where your dad would take you along when you were three or four years old. But the first time, you actually speared yourself.

JN: Yes, I believe I was twelve years old. My dad and I went out fishing. We each had a shack because we borrowed a shack on the weekends. My dad couldn't fish during the week because he was working and we were in school. So some neighbors would use our shack with their shack during the week. Then on the weekend, when we could fish, they wouldn't go. Then we could use their shack and our shack. So my daddy fished in one shack; I fished in the other. It was thirty-three pounds come right in the hole by the decoy, and I pulled that out, and I ran down my dad – “Now what do I do?” [laughter] So then, he just went up and tagged it and then said, “Okay, go back to fishing again.”

Interviewer: So the first year, you were twelve years old, and you got one.

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: It was a thirty-three-pounder.

JN: That was with that three-tine spear that I missed the fish with.

Interviewer: You've missed one with that one, and you got the first one you ever threw, though.

JN: Well, I got the first fish I seen, but in later years – well, fish that weren't in the hole I couldn't hit with that three-tine spear, so then my dad welded a tine on each side of the spear to make it a five-tine spear. Well, then it worked better.

Interviewer: Worked better for you? Was that right out here off Stockbridge?

JN: No, that was at Brothertown because we lived at Jericho at that time. That's just - [you] go down straight west on H, and you hit the lake.

Interviewer: Do you still fish the same spot, or do you move around a lot? How do you decide where you're going to go?

JN: I live in Stockbridge, so that's where I go.

Interviewer: You go in Stockbridge. Do you have your favorite spot on the lake every time, or is it always different?

JN: A little bit. Depends upon the water, the clarity a little bit, if you stay in or out a little bit. I used to mainly fish at the one-mile mark, pretty well straight out. Years ago, when I fished with some other guys, they moved around, so I moved with them. They mainly stayed in between Mud Creek, and we went down to County Park already. But we never went across the lake. We would always stay in, not more than five miles out.

Interviewer: Not more than five miles out? How wide is it at this point? Neenah straight across, is it? Or no, a little north, I guess. How wide is it? If you're five miles out, are you halfway across? Are you more than that?

JN: It's about twelve miles across.

Interviewer: Twelve miles across. So I've heard a couple of people have different – when we talk to people, they have the different spearing techniques. Some people just have their spearhead a little bit into the water, and then they throw it. Then some people get it all the way down as close as they can, and they just push it. How do you do it?

JN: Right from the top. Our spirits sit in the water about two feet from the top of the shanty floor, and you just push it or throw it.

Interviewer: So yours is hanging from the shanty?

JN: No, I got a hook on mine. That's how we were brought up. Hook it on the floor, then you just pick it up off the floor, and then just give it a push.

Interviewer: Okay, so you have it about two feet into the water, you maybe go down a little bit more, and then you just push it in?

JN: That's pretty close.

Interviewer: Yeah. I know one guy; he says he tries to get that thing as close as he can to it because he says they don't move very fast, and you don't even have to be – you just kind of move it down there, and he just –

MEN: They move fast.

Interviewer: – pushes it down.

F: They move fast.

MEN: He's never seen a fast one, yes. By the time you grab the spear, the fish was through the hole, and you can wheel it out there after that fish, and sometimes you'll hit him right back by the tail.

Interviewer: When they're moving fast, is that because they're spooked? Somehow they saw you move.

JN: I don't know if something had to scare it, or he just decided to go from point A to B a little faster that day. With putting the spear close to the fish, I think that's got something to do with the old-timers. When they fished, [they] didn't have a rope on their spears; they had them long handles. Because I heard that from – old-timers say that they'd feed it down to get within about a foot or two from the fish, and then they just kept hanging on to the handle. Then, with your body force, push it into the fish.

Interviewer: That does seem a little bit true because the guy that was telling me that was almost eighty, and he had learned it from his dad. He was one of those guys that get down pretty close and pushes it in there.

JN: See, he'd have to have a longer handle in order to do that. My handles are seven feet. Well, sure, you could get it down there a ways, but then you're on the end of your handle. I don't see where you'd get much thrust.

Interviewer: He also had a rope, at this point, too, on his. He had fifty, sixty feet of slack just in case it would run on him.

JN: That's a good idea. Some guys only use thirty feet of rope. "Well, the lake is only twenty feet deep. Why do you want more rope?" Well, what if you get a hundred-pounder, and he decides he's going to take off, and you don't have a good hit, so you want to be able to play with him a little bit.

Interviewer: So use that fifty, sixty feet, too? Is that what you do?

JN: Eighty feet, I use.

Interviewer: Eighty feet, you use?

JN: I got a spool where I wind it up so it don't get messed up, and then just run a little off and put it on the bar on the side of what you're going to need. Go from there.

Interviewer: Did you build your own shanty?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: Is it your dad's? Or you built your own? He had his own?

JN: Yeah, my dad made his own shanties. I made three for ourselves.

Interviewer: For your kids?

JN: Yeah.

Interviewer: You make all the spears for your —? Do any of your kids make spears yet?

JN: Well, I'm hoping there'll be a fourth-generation as Tim and Scott. They, once in a while, just help me a little bit. I think they're interested. They want to learn because someday I ain't going to be doing it. Where it is a tradition, a third-generation, it would be nice to keep it going.

Interviewer: Is it pretty clear in their mind that you're the third generation, and it's pretty clear they're the fourth?



JN: They know that.

F: A little pressure.

Interviewer: Well, like you said, when your dad passed on, you just saw the parts laying there and thought, “Well, I might as well just finish some of the ones he started.”

JN: You never want to – you got to do it when you feel like you want to do it. If you're not interested in doing it, don't do it at that time. You don't want to start one and try and finish it. How long it would take, I don't know.

Interviewer: All at one time?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: You do it in different pieces.

JN: Different people say, “How long does it take to make one?” I say, “I don't have a clue. Otherwise, I maybe wouldn't do it.”

Interviewer: So since it's a hobby, you come down here – “I got time Thursday night” – you come down here, spend a couple of hours. Whatever you get done, you get done.

JN: I got a TV right over there. I watch TV, and then when a commercial comes on, I quick run over here, and I might do a little filing, and then I go back and watch TV again.

F: He runs on the treadmill a little bit and whatever.

JN: This is not my tine here. This is one of grandpa's. Here, I'll show you. This tine here, with the point, put on and finished – I did check that one. I worked on it from start to finish. That'll take you about three and a half hours.

Interviewer: That one tine. That's a flying barb one, too.

JN: This one's got to be loosened up just a little bit. They should be [inaudible]. My dad told me that when he would make a flying barb, he had a chunk of butter or grease there, and he would push that in there, and he'd pull it back. If the barbs were opened up, it was good.

Interviewer: That's how he tested it? He stuck in a chunk of butter.

JN: That's what I heard.

Interviewer: Tell me the story about the spear that you heard about that your grandpa made that had tines all the way up it, and how you came across it.

JN: Okay. My dad, when he would go in his dad's blacksmith shop – anyways, his dad made a spear, and he told me that it had barbs all the way up the tines. I just kind of visualized this a little bit, but not actually knowing what it was. I always had that in my mind. I asked a gentleman last year – this is probably seventy years after that spear was made – that he had two of grandpa's spears there, and he had sold one, which was the four-tine outside flying barbs was sold. But he had the other one. I went over and checked it. As soon as I seen it, I knew that was the spear that my dad had told me that his grandpa has made with the barbs all the way up the tine. His dad said that nobody would buy it; it always hung in the shop until this gentleman came along and said that's the spear he wanted. Now, what are the odds of finding that spear after how many years and being able to buy it?

Interviewer: Yes, that's pretty amazing. It is something where you get it; you don't throw it away. That spear seems to stay around the area now because people only really spear in this area.

JN: Even the condition of it.

Interviewer: It's a very small spear. That's only, what, six inches wide? And it's four tines. Now, explain the rationale for this, the different lengths in tine that your grandpa did.

JN: Well, my grandpa believed the features of a spear – the outside tines would be longer than the inside tines because he believed that when you spear the fish, all the tines weren't going into the fish at the same time.

Interviewer: Because the fish was rounded, he tried to model the roundness of the fish?

JN: I'm assuming so. But then you'd almost think they would be almost all going into the same thing.

Interviewer: Maybe that's why he did it.

JN: You never have all the tines of your spear in a fish anyways. It's one, two, three.

Interviewer: So that's a feature you don't carry on anymore, the different length tines. All yours are the same.

JN: I make them all. They're all the same length.

Interviewer: Can you estimate how many spears you've made in your lifetime?

JN: Oh, I wouldn't have a clue.

Interviewer: Is it something like ten? Did you make fifty? Or a thousand?

F: Well, this is a hobby for him.

JN: I'm assuming over the years I would have made more than a hundred.

Interviewer: So quite a bit. That's just what I was trying to get a grasp on.

JN: The only thing I do – my initials are on the spear, and they're not on these. Here, I can show you one here. See? This spear here is for my daughter. That's says J-S-N, which is Jamie Sue Nadler. What I sell, I just have J-N on – Jim Nadler. So if anybody wants to know if it's a Nadler spear, there it is, proof.

Interviewer: Got you. I like how you got a little wood piece that you put the tines in, but your wood pieces are record keepers. Explain that.

JN: It's a record piece, plus it's a guard for the points on the spear. If you're moving around or taking your shanty out on the lake, or just taking your spear home, some people believe that they don't want their – which is a good idea – don't want their shanty broken into and their equipment stolen, so they bring their equipment back home at night. That way, if you got a guard on, and it gets knocked around, your points aren't dulled. I case-harden a point so that if you don't bump them a little bit, they won't be dull right away. Anyway, over the years, we kept records on our boards. The board is – say on a five-inch spear, which is ten inches wide, that board is twelve inches wide then. It's probably two inches wide. That way, you can put the years on what you fish, and you can mark what fish you get. I have a spear here. It was first used in 1987 and 1988 – no fish. Then, it's 2-11-89. It says, "Dad, eighty-three pounds, seventy inches." That was the first fish gotten with this spear, which was also the biggest fish for the east shore in the Stockbridge area that year, which I got a trophy for.

Interviewer: You used this one all the way up to 2001. You use a different spear now?

JN: Yes. I had to go to a bigger one. These big spears –

Interviewer: That is a big – that's a six-tine spear with flying barbs all the way across.

JN: These spears are made – I don't know what to do, so I mess around. I don't make these big spears for sale because it's too much work in them.

Interviewer: Yes, it's experiment.

MEN: There's a lot – Linda and Scott are on there.

JN: Here's the first seven-tine spear I made.

Interviewer: Seven-tine.

JN: It's fifteen inches wide.

Interviewer: Geez.

JN: It has four flying barb tines and three stationary barbs. We've gotten a lot of fish with it. My daughter-in-law and her husband use that. I already have used it when I just happened to be in that shanty for some reason. Anyway, I'll tell you a story with that. Linda gets kind of excited when she sees a fish, and she throws it a little soon. She [inaudible] the forty-pounder right on the head. Anyway, the middle tine, which is a stationary barb, went through the fish's skull, right between the eyes, and still got it.

Interviewer: Was it dead instantly?

JN: Oh, yes. It just hangs there like a dishrag. Now, this was the tine. See, that's a pretty strong barb on there. Or, this one here. When that went – just to let you know how strong a fish's skull is, that flattened that barb right down tight to this tine.

Interviewer: It flattened the barb down?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: You cut those in with bandsaws, right?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: You don't use the hacksaw anymore?

JN: It makes a nicer – here's how it starts out. That's the crude version. That's all got to be filed down.

Interviewer: Where do you get the material from? You just go to the –?

JN: Just flat stock.

Interviewer: You get it from the local hardware store and go and get it?

JN: Well, yes. Somebody that sells steel.

Interviewer: It seems like since all your spears have records on them of their lifetime and the fish you've speared, what's the largest fish you've ever speared?

JN: That was that one with that six-tine spear. Eighty-three pounds.

Interviewer: In 1989, was your biggest fish. You've caught probably dozens in your –?

JN: Oh, yes. I got quite a few.

MEN: Here's my biggest one – Mary Ellen.

JN: Yes, you want to hear mum's story on her fishing.

Interviewer: If you want to tell it, go ahead.

MEN: What it says here, it was in 1999. Linda had gotten a fish in her shanty. Jim was in the other shanty. We had walkie-talkies. She called, "Dad, come quick. I need help." So he runs out of his shanty, over to where Linda was fishing. She had gotten a nice fish. So Scott, her husband, was going to come out and pick her up because she called in – they had two little girls, which he was watching at home. So they said, "Mom, you better go out and fish in Linda's shanty." It so happened that it's usually the shanty that Jim fishes in, but he was nice enough to give Linda that shanty that morning. He went to the other one, which is only, what, fifty feet apart? We're not very far apart.

JN: No, we put the shanties about two hundred feet apart always.

MEN: Anyway, Scott and Linda went back to shore to register her fish. So I was in her shanty, where she had gotten that one. I have an inner ear problem, so I tie a rope around myself. Jim has it all rigged up for me, and I tie it to the back of the shanty. So then I was sitting there a little bit, then I stood up. I was just looking as far as my rope would let me go because otherwise, I don't trust myself in there. All of a sudden, I see something dark. You always said, "Look, if the water's not real clear, there can be something coming that looks like a fence post or something." So I'm looking in the shack. From the northwest corner, I could see something coming. I took my spear off. I turned it a little, so it would fit over the sturgeon. I threw it down, and I reached up on the side quick. I called for Jim. "Help. I need help. I speared something." So he comes running over.

JN: No.

MEN: I shut the walkie-talkie off too soon, I guess. He had said to me –

JN: I answered her, but she had shut it off.

MEN: He said, "I'll park the Blazer right close by the shanty. So that if you need help, you blow the horn, too." So we had it all covered. So then, this happened.

JN: By that time, I already opened up the shanty door, and she was coming out her shanty door to get to blow the horn. Anyways, being tied to the inside of the shanty, she's out there, reaching. She couldn't reach the vehicle to blow the horn because she's tied tight.

MEN: Yes, I was tied to the shanty.

JN: Funnier than heck. If it wouldn't have been froze tight, she'd have pulled the shanty off the hole.

MEN: But I did get – how big was it? It was a nice, big –

JN: Sixty-seven pounds.

MEN: Sixty-seven pounds, sixty-four inches. That was my fish story.

Interviewer: Have you ever caught a female with black eggs?

JN: No.

Interviewer: What do you think of –? Have you ever made caviar? Or do you try it? Have you tasted it? Do you like it?

MEN: We've tasted it, but it's not our –

JN: I had an eighty-one pounder that was a year off. That time, (Ron Brooke?) was down there. There was something going on over at Oshkosh. There were people coming from Russia to study the sturgeon, so they took those eggs and the insides of that fish over there for study or what. I don't know.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you clean the fish yourself?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you do all that yourself?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you just cut off the head and the tail and go right up the gut? How do you go ahead and do that?

JN: Well, you take the insides out first. Then you skin the fish. That's the way we do it. And then you got the hide off and the tail, and then you cut the head off, and then we take it up into the kitchen there, and then cut it all into steaks.

Interviewer: What size steaks do you usually cut them into?

JN: Oh, they're about this thick. It's all boned and everything. It's off the backbone.

Interviewer: Do you do finger size?

JN: Yeah, we usually split the fish in half to take the spine out and the ribs, and then a half-inch or a little wider to steaks.

Interviewer: Any recipes? How do you like to eat it?

MEN: I just take an egg and milk, mix it up a little, and then dip it in that, and then in cracker crumbs and fry it in oil.

Interviewer: Fry it in oil? Ever smoke it or anything like that?

MEN: We haven't. Scott smoked some once.

JN: We had it done. Yes.

Interviewer: I heard that if you soak it in eggs and milk, it takes that –

MEN: We don't really soak it. I just use it as a wash, so the crackers will stick onto it.

JN: That's the way my mom always did fish – pike or perch or whatever.

Interviewer: Eggs and milk? She'd dip it in there and put it in cracker crumbs and fry it up?

JN: Yes.

MEN: They do say some people – like you said, if it's extras fishy or something, soaking it in milk overnight or something should help it. I don't know. We've been fortunate that we've never had any that were that fishy. We've always had good-tasting ones.

Interviewer: You had told me earlier that it was illegal actually to fish sturgeon before?

JN: As far as I know, my dad said his grandpa told him – it is on record somewhere. I don't know when. It would have been in the 1800s. There were steamships on the lake, and they laid set lines from one end of the lake to the other just to catch sturgeon for the caviar. That pretty well depleted the population of sturgeon.

Interviewer: Do you know any more about that, about the old commercial fishing besides that?

JN: Boy, not really other than the fish they did catch, they brought into shore, and they threw on piles to let them rot, or they fed them to the pigs. Now, I already heard the rumor somewhere they even used it for fuel. Fish being so oily, it would burn.

Interviewer: Since it was a bottom feeder and all that, all they were interested in was the eggs, and that was it.

JN: Correct. At one time, the fish sturgeon was useless, the meat. Nobody would eat it.

Interviewer: Yes, because not too many people have old commercial fishing stories. So the steamships would set lines from one side of the lake to the other and just get them for their eggs. What one guy had thought that he heard that one guy would do – I don't know if it was just one guy. He would take all the eggs down to Chicago and sell them to hotels and things like that for the upper-class kind of thing. Do you know what those steamship companies did with the eggs once they got them? Besides make them into caviar?

JN: I wouldn't have a clue.

Interviewer: Do you happen to know – was there an actual company name? Was there an actual company name that did this?

JN: Probably was.

Interviewer: You're just not sure.

JN: If that's on record somewhere, that would be nice to know.

Interviewer: Okay. What about the economic impact of sturgeon fishing to this area? How does it affect the local economy?

JN: Today, that's big business. For some people, it's just sport. They get a fish; they'll give it away to somebody. They're not interested. I think mostly locals use whatever they catch. The longer the season is, it's better for the economy. If it's just a short season, it's just those two days on the weekend, and then it's over with. All the bars along the lake – that's big business for them – even just sightseers coming to see what fish come into the registration station, and then they go in the bar and tell stories, have some beer, or whatever.

Interviewer: One guy was telling me that the bars – you hear the same story. The bars make a killing during this; it's like their Christmas season or something for department stores. One guy was saying a lot of people – this was on the west shore – there are a lot of people working in the mills that are related, working in the mills. A lot of them are all taking vacation, took their vacation during sturgeon spearing, so there was almost a lack of productivity on that aspect during the sturgeon spearing. Do you ever take vacation during the seasons?

JN: Oh, yeah. When the seasons were longer and I was still working, I would always take two weeks. If the season was three weeks long – when I was a kid, and I started fishing, then the season was the full month of February, February 1st to March 1st.

Interviewer: So how did the season –? Give me some things about the season that has changed over the years since you've been spearing for better or for worse?

MEN: Well, tag-wise, when you started out –

JN: Well, yes. The old-timers said they used to be able to get five tags for a nickel apiece. I think when I started, it was five tags for a dollar apiece. Then it went to three tags a dollar apiece, then to two. Then it went to one. Then the price kept going up – five dollars, ten dollars, whatever. Now it's twenty dollars, which I still [inaudible] too much. If it's a big sport, why not charge a little more for it.

MEN: Years ago, when you didn't have to spear your own fish, they always said that more of the ladies in Stockbridge got a sturgeon while standing at the kitchen sink than they did out on the lake because the husband would spear the fish, and then she could take it or whatever. But now you can't do that.



JN: At one time, you could buy tags during the season, so they'd run into a sports shop or a courthouse, wherever they sold the tags, get another tag. There were kids coming – a ten-year-old kid with an eighty-pound fish. You know that kid didn't spear it, so then they raised up the age limit; you had to be fourteen in order to spear.

Interviewer: How long ago was that about?

JN: That's a ways back already. Twenty years, probably.

MEN: Was it after we're married? We're married forty-six years, so was that after that?

Interviewer: What about other changes? Changes maybe that you like? Changes that have been better for the sport?

JN: Well, they shortened the season. It used to be all day. You could even fish at night. Whoever figured that out – put down lights, and you could fish. It had to be clear water. So then they shortened the season, and you couldn't fish with lights. Now, it's what? 6:30 to 12:30. Well, most of the time, in that first hour, it's too dark to actually see anything. But it protects the fish, and it's easier fishing. It ain't so hard on you. You sit there for eight once without going out of the shack.

Interviewer: I couldn't do it. I can't sit that still that long anyways.

JN: You're feeling pretty limp. But there's guys that do it.

Interviewer: What do you like most about going out sturgeon spearing?

JN: It's just something you like to do. If you got family going with you, that makes it more fun, too.

Interviewer: You see it as something that brings the family together?

JN: Sure.

Interviewer: I've heard some people like it for the solitude. They just want to be out there. They collect their thoughts. But then there's other people who love it for the camaraderie.

JN: I like when I'm sitting in the shanty – we usually fish alone. If I'm fishing alone, I don't even take a radio. I just like that peace and quiet and listen to the lake talk to you. When the ice cracks and stuff.

Interviewer: In your vehicle?

JN: Last year, we got stranded on the lake for probably forty-five minutes.

Interviewer: Tell that story.

JN: Well, Linda was sitting in a shack, and I was sitting there. No. Excuse me. We were fishing together because I had my fish already. All of a sudden, you could just hear the ice crinkle and crackle and rumble. It gets louder and louder. All of a sudden, she just starts pushing. What happens is the ice – a crack was open, and it comes back together due to the sun coming out. The ice warms up, and it expands. It comes so tight together, and it still wants to expand. It can't because it's together. All of a sudden, [inaudible] jump one side over and one side under, and you can feel it in your shack, moving. That water will ripple. Sometimes, it comes up and down.

Interviewer: Your decoy somehow moved.

JN: Yes. I said to Linda – we were fishing between two cracks. I said, “Better hope it's the crack that's west of us and not east.” We didn't even look out. Kept fishing until 12:30. “Okay, let's go.” Come out the door and look [inaudible] down by the east of us, there along the crack, all the vehicles lined up; nobody can get off. So they had to wait until there was a bridge put out across and get back into shore. Well, I had a phone along. I called in and said, “Mom, we're going to be a little late.” [laughter]

Interviewer: How responsive are the bridge teams?

MEN: Oh, good. They're good.

JN: They're right there.

MEN: They have a club here that you buy a pin or something. When you go out in the beginning of the sturgeon season [inaudible] –

JN: Road pass, they call it. Or you can join a club, which is a very good thing. These club members, they'll tell you – there's guys that will come out and won't even give a five-dollar donation. These guys are just waiting to help you.

Interviewer: What club is over on this side of the lake on the east shore here?

JN: Well, this is Stockbridge Fishing Club, I believe, right down here at the harbor. Up the road is Quinney Fishing Club. Down the road here is –

MEN: Is that the Brickyard?

JN: Brickyard Fishing Club, it's called.

MEN: Calumet County Park.

JN: At Quinney, those guys plow to the middle of the lake, and then I believe it's probably Otter Street – they'll plow from the west shore and meet in the middle of the lake, so they got a superhighway going right across, if you want to –

Interviewer: What's straight across from Quinney? What club is that?

MEN: Oshkosh [inaudible]. Maybe Otter Street.

JN: It's probably Otter Street.

MEN: That is, when the lake is safe. Some years, the ice is –

Interviewer: Have you been involved in any of the clubs around here?

JN: No, I haven't joined any. I just pay my dues when it – because I don't – that's the only fishing I do now is just for sturgeon. It's so many years – I like to go ice fishing for pike and stuff, but there's so many years the ice is bad and got away from it because I was all set up. I had a vehicle with holds in it and a heater, and just sit inside and enjoy yourself.

Interviewer: Is it basically those clubs, those three clubs that you talked about – Quinney, Stockbridge, and Brickyard?

JN: Brothertown's another one, farther out.

Interviewer: Do they pretty much have their own area that they patrol and get bridges ready in case people need them?

JN: That's right. That's right.

Interviewer: So somebody radios, calls the number – everyone knows the number – and then they call it, and within a little bit they're there?

MEN: Well, they're pretty much along the shoreline and early in the mornings like that and checking it out.

JN: Any place where there's a landing or access to the lake, there'll be a club. I'm sure there is. And then, them guys are there before you can get on the lake to check the crack if there is a crack. If they need a bridge, or if there is a bridge on, they're ready to make sure it hasn't shifted or something.

Interviewer: How did it get done in the olden days before there were these clubs? What did people do when there were cracks, like your father, your grandfather? Any stories you have about that?

JN: They carried their own planks.

MEN: You would hear about horses and teams. They'd go down into the lake.

Interviewer: Fall through, you mean?

MEN: Yes.

JN: I don't know so much about fishermen, but you would hear, years ago, they'd have to haul flour across the lake to be ground, wheat for flour for baking and stuff.

Interviewer: Winter wheat or something?

MEN: Maybe it would go too long in the spring of the year. The ice would maybe weaken, and they'd fall in, and the horses drowned. [inaudible] shoot them.

Interviewer: So there were a lot of times when the lake would freeze over, there was a lot of economic activity crossing back and forth on the east shore?

JN: Oh, yes.

MEN: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Because all the farms, or a lot of the farms, are on the east shore. They'd go to the mills on the west shore?

JN: What'd you have for transportation? You'd have to go all the way around the lake with a team of horses. It's quite a ways. But then, for a while, they had – was that a steamship that your mother talked about?

MEN: Oh, yes. Down from the Stockbridge Harbor here – I think it was called the *Thistle* if I'm not mistaken. My Grandma Wieseckel had to have her gallbladder taken out. And she got on the boat on this side, and they took her across to Oshkosh to the hospital to have that surgery. I know we have pictures of it. My mom is a twin, and [she] and her twin were six years old with my grandma standing on the shore, and they were boarding on the *Thistle*.

Interviewer: That was the name of the ship, the *Thistle*?

MEN: Yes.

JN: It was a paddle-wheel, I think, the picture showed. Or was it a steam engine?

MEN: No, I don't think that was – that was steam. It wasn't a paddle wheel.

Interviewer: Did the *Thistle* run set lines, too, all the way across the lake.

MEN: No, not that – who knows?

JN: I'll tell you, rumor has it – and I know it's a fact – all the old-timers – there was a lot of set lines in that lake that guys caught sturgeon, or whatever they caught – set lines to catch fish. Nobody knew where they were because they'd put them out there. Hey, my dad has [inaudible] for one. He did it. They had one line that had a thousand hooks on. He had another line that had twelve hundred on.

Interviewer: Your dad had two set lines out?

JN: Those lines would be in the water whenever there wasn't ice on the lake. They'd go by landmarks, and they'd have a rope with a big drag hook. By the landmarks, they'd know just about where they were when they put that drag hook to catch the line and take off what was on there. One year, they left them out too long and got some ice. Then the lake broke up, and the ice caught the lines, and they lost them. I don't know if he made any more up after that.

Interviewer: Not the first person that probably happened to. So there was a rope at the shore? Did they come and just start pulling it through?

JN: No, you just go out with your boat. They had to put them out beyond the rocks. Otherwise, they'd set in the rocks and get snagged, and you couldn't get them up. So they'd just look at the shoreline. "Well, that farm, by that silo, and that farm over there by that barn." That'll get you pretty close if you know how to read landmarks. A lot of guys used landmarks for fishing to go from year to year. There's a guy up town here; he's got a book of all the landmarks from his grandpa. His grandpa kept a – wherever he fished and got a fish, he wrote in that book those landmarks, drew that picture of that barn, that woods.

Interviewer: Is he the only guy that has that? He uses that for his own –?

JN: No, he don't use it. He just got it for –

MEN: A keepsake. For a keepsake.

JN: – I think he already did some.

Interviewer: Yes, that is a good keepsake.

JN: Boy, I wish I had that book just to copy that. That is the neatest thing. I've seen a – that would be something to put in [inaudible] –

Interviewer: Yes. There are other people that have written down from way back when the freezing dates and the thaw dates of the lake and everything.

MEN: Mom's diaries – they would be in there.

Interviewer: What else do we got?

JN: You should have left me [inaudible] sooner. I could have got a little more information, I believe. I would have went over to my aunt, which would have been my dad's sister. There's four of the girls living yet, but three of them – they're up in age.

MEN: They're in their nineties. [inaudible]

JN: The younger one, she remembers going out in the shop and [watching] grandpa work.

Interviewer: What was I going to say?

JN: I'll tell you another thing. In Stockbridge, there were a lot of guys that put set lines out, too. I know they did. Speaking of my dad, as long as they can't arrest him anyway – in the summer, they had seines a hundred feet long, eight feet high. They would go to the South, where there was a sand beach. They would walk out. Just walking on their tippy-toes, so they could catch air. Then they'd drag that seine into the shoreline.

Interviewer: What's a seine?

JN: Big net. A hundred feet long. Whatever fish they would drag in, take them home. I sometimes wonder – they want to provide for the family, but they must have been catching more fish than they needed. Unless they just went when they needed fish. But he said you could never catch a carp. They were so smart that once the carp knew that they were trapped, they'd all jump over that net.

Interviewer: But everything else would get caught? Sturgeon and other things?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: When your grandpa started spearing or making spears, it wasn't for sturgeon because sturgeon was illegal then, right? So it was just for things like carp and –

JN: It was legal to spear rough fish, but whatever they seen come in that hole got speared.

Interviewer: Since it was illegal to – did they have –? Because when people regular ice fish, they just – the ice auger and have a little round hole. But you couldn't pull a sturgeon through that most of the time.

JN: No, they have –

Interviewer: So, did they use the –? Did they have big square holes back then, too, then?

JN: They had a sturgeon hole cut.

MEN: Did they have shanties then? Or did they have the cloth –?

JN: They had shacks. They put down things that they tried during fishing – the lures. They'd take potatoes out there and the manure pile. They'd bury dead chickens in there and pull them out when they really stinky. Drop them down in the lake, figure that would draw a sturgeon. Cow innards. When they butchered a pig –

Interviewer: That was their coaxers, huh?

JN: They would weigh down a post, hoping a sturgeon would come and rub on that. My dad said none of that worked.

Interviewer: What does seem to work?

JN: I don't know.

MEN: Patience.

Interviewer: Do you think decoys, the coaxers – do you think they really do a whole lot?

JN: I really don't. My dad claims his dad never used one. I'll fish sometimes without one because I think that fish is just swimming through. Most of the time, it is. Once in a while, one will come and hit the decoy. Now, maybe that fish came because of that decoy. I don't know. Or one is better than the other, color or something – it don't make a difference.

Interviewer: Did you ever have one get off on you? You spear it, and it got off on you?

JN: Sturgeon?

Interviewer: Yes.

JN: Oh, yeah. I just held one tight once. That sucker. He went up underneath the ice, and he just fought like hell, and he rolled off.

Interviewer: Rolled off?

JN: The claim that grandpa had in his interview here – they never get off a Nadler spear, but you will hold them tight enough, and he fights enough, he's going to tear off.

Interviewer: So you didn't want to let him run for whatever reason just to see what would happen? [laughter]

JN: But it depends upon where you hit the fish, too.

Interviewer: If you just get them by the one tine.

JN: That's right. That's what it was. Just meat in one tine.

Interviewer: I've heard plenty of people that have only gotten it with that outside tine and pulled them on in with that one tine.

JN: If you don't force a fish, you'll get him.

Interviewer: Let him tire himself out. How long does it usually take? I mean, people say let them run, maybe tire them out. Is that something like a half-hour before you pull him? Or is that something that's five minutes?

JN: Five minutes maybe.

Interviewer: And they're already tired?

JN: It's really not a fight. They just swim around there.

Interviewer: Do you have any stories about the old Indian stories? You said something about Shawano?

JN: I don't remember –

Interviewer: Your grandfather passing down anything like that?

JN: I know they said they had one working for him, but they never said that he fished. He wouldn't take money. He had to work for food. Otherwise, he would drink it up.

Interviewer: Sounds like my great-grandpa, [who] worked in the mills in Niagara. They wouldn't even give him his paycheck; they'd give it to his wife.

MEN: What about that up in Shawano? You said they could walk across – that story.

Interviewer: What's that story about Shawano, about how many sturgeon there used to be.

JN: Okay. My dad had a friend that lived up at Shawano. Him and his brother said that the sturgeons were so thick in the spring of the year when they come to the Shawano dam that they'd roll some across on the other side of the river. Well, anyway, those fish couldn't get back. Then they claim they could walk across the sturgeon on their backs, that they were that thick. Anyways, getting back to rolling the fish over the river – I can remember hearing maybe ten years or so ago that the Indian spirit of sturgeon on the other side of the river, which was 195 pounds, I believe. Now, I'm just wondering if that was one of them sturgeon that those guys rolled over the dam.

Interviewer: Are there many sturgeon north of that dam in Shawano then? That dam is old, I assume.

JN: I don't know. There almost has to be some up there.



Interviewer: Yeah, because that goes right through the reservation, right? The Wolf River does. I'm not sure if they spear on that river up there or not. They just throw them over the dam for fun?

JN: Yeah, sure. Young guys. That's what you do.

Interviewer: Keep yourself occupied.

JN: Now the spring, when they show it on TV that sturgeon up there by the dam, they were pretty thick, but you couldn't have walked across them.

Interviewer: Do they spawn right at that dam? Is that a spawning point?

JN: Yes.

Interviewer: Well, we only got an hour tape. It's fifty-eight minutes in. So I thank you both for the time, and we'll stop here.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/9/2022