

Dick Koerner: Larry Benedict, otherwise known as Redskin. We are going to ask some questions and listen to their sturgeon stories. So, Lynn, when and where were you born?

Lynn Benedict: I was born in Chicago in 1936.

DK: Wow. Okay. Larry, where were you born?

Larry Benedict: Oshkosh.

DK: Oshkosh.

LB: [19]32.

DK: 1932. You lived in a nice, wooded area here. This is really beautiful area. What is your mailing address?

LB: 5850 Woodland Road.

DK: How did you get interested in sturgeon spearing, Lynn?

LB: Because I was with Larry. He did it. From the day that we were married, I did what he did. I hunted, I fished, and I speared sturgeon [laughter].

DK: Larry, how about you? How did you –

LB: Well, my dad was originally the one where I got started with because he speared when the first Poygan seasons came. I went with him for years before I had my own shanty. But I started out with my dad.

DK: Do you ever do any hook and line fishing for sturgeon?

LB: Yes, I did. I tried it a couple times up at [inaudible]. We never did much, caught some undersized ones, but it was always so many people there. We just kind of gave it up. It just wasn't any fun.

DK: Yes. Well, Larry, who taught you to spear? Your dad or a friend or –

LB: My dad.

DK: Your dad. Lynn, I know you picked it up from Larry.

LB: Right.

DK: How has the sport changed, Larry, since you started spearing? Do you like the new rules? We have made a lot of rule changes, but it was all to protect the sturgeon.

LB: Oh, I have no problem with that. You've got to do those kinds of things. But it's got – I can see why. There's got to be such a tremendous amount of people participating now that there wouldn't – if they let it go like it used to be, there wouldn't be any sturgeon left.

DK: Yeah. You are right. Let us see. Now a lot of people kind of blast the DNR for the rules, but I think – personally, I think that they are on the right track. I know you are a real sportsman. You are always out there. You are always concerned. You are up to snuff on all the rule changes and understand the reasons why we need them. How many years have you been spearing, Larry?

LB: Oh, I must have started in like [19]48 probably, before I – even before I got out of high school. It's over 55 years plus.

DK: Yes. How about Lynn? I know you tagged along with Larry. Do you still go every year or do you –

LB: I still go. But as you get older, I just am not as comfortable in a sturgeon shanty anymore. I don't go as often.

DK: Lynn, I know you have speared a sturgeon. How many have you speared in your life?

LB: Oh, I don't know, 20, probably something like that.

DK: Really? That is great. Because not a lot of women were in the sport when I started, but now they are – now, it is really – I would not be surprised if – the younger crowd, if it is almost 50/50. But Larry, how many years? I know you have been – we figured it out. You must have been out there 50-some years.

LB: Never missed a year that I'm aware of. I only missed one too, that I had my heart surgery and – that was one of the years that I almost missed, was one of those years I – probably the most interesting story I have that's happened [laughter]. I guess maybe I can just tell you that right now.

DK: Sure.

LB: Well, I was – I really had back trouble. I was in the hospital for three or four days in traction. I'd asked the doctor, I said, "Is there any chance that I could go set in a sturgeon shack?" He says, "Why?" He wasn't very happy about me doing that, but I went. I had a buddy that had my shack out. They had just been having action, like you can't believe, up in Paynes Point. They missed four or five fish. I just – just driving me insane not to get out there. You know, [laughter] I went out there one morning and sat down with him. He had just missed one the day before. The spears are hanging there. I'd said to him, I said, "Well, what spear did you use?" He said, "Well, I missed him with that one." I picked it up. It's gravely out there. One of the tines was just bent right on the end. I said, "I've got the files. I'll sharpen that one." I have this spear laying in my lap. I'm sharpening the spear. Along comes a sturgeon right under the ice, rubbing. When he came in under, he was in the process of rolling. He was upside down. He

came into the hole. I suppose when the pressure of the ice went up, he popped right up in the hole [laughter] – right up in the hole, splashed water all over. In the process of turning over, I said, "Jeez, don't try to spear him now. You've got to let him get down." He started down at an angle. I said, "Well, you can hardly miss this one." Will you believe it? I watched the whole process. He took the spear. All excited, he speared. He went right down over the top of the fish. [laughter] He missed it. I said, "Oh, my God, you missed it." "Oh, no." I said, "No, you haven't." [laughter] It's long gone. It was just unreal. I'd never, ever seen one that high before, you know? They come right out of the water, right into the hole.

DK: Yes. I will tell you, I speared for about the same amount of years as you did. When I missed my first sturgeon, it was after I already had speared 20 sturgeons or so. I could not believe I missed it. It was an easy shot. It was just deep. I started asking other people about, "You ever miss one?" Some of these guys say, "No." Then I ask their buddies. They say, "He's full of [laughter] you know what." Yes, I have missed a couple. It happens, does it not, Larry?

LB: Oh, yeah. Well, John Jurgensen, he hadn't missed a fish just for the longest time. Then he says, "I think my eyesight is getting bad." He says, "I missed two of them this year." So, he got until he was missing them, like, not just recently, but I think everybody misses one once. It wouldn't be any fun if you never had. It's like never missing a deer. It takes the joy out of it if you know you're never going to miss it. [laughter]

DK: Seems that is a non-written law, but on the lake itself, everybody's goal is to get 100-pounder. Have you ever gotten a 100-pounder?

LB: My wife's got me beat two times.

LB: I've gotten 100.

LB: She's the one. The biggest I got was 80.

LB: 102.

DK: Oh, wonderful. Mine would have been 100, but the one that I had, 87 pounds, but it was spawned a year before.

LB: That was one of my story experiences that I spent a lot of time in the shanty alone because of Larry's job. He was around the Twin Cities all the time, checking concrete jobs. I didn't like to drive on the lake. So, I would meet him on shore. He would take me out to the shanty. I would sit alone. He would come back and check if he could. Then he'd come back probably at noon, take me back in. Then if he could, he could spend some time out there. He had just come out and checked on me. Nothing was going on. He left. He's always checking. So, he was making his tour to check everybody else. In the meantime, this 102-pounder swam in. I got it. But I couldn't bring it back up. It was just too big. So, I said, I just opened the door. He fortunately was driving by. I just waved to him to come and help me. He came in. I said, "I don't know, it's really big." He started pulling it up. He says, "Oh, yeah, it's really big." [laughter] So, that was the biggest one I've ever gotten. I got a couple of 80-pounders. But

being out there alone, there was always somebody nearby if you needed help. They knew that I fished alone. I think you came across the lake one day, too. I was out there alone. The wind was blowing. He had me set up about from here to the bird feeder side of a crack. You said, "I'd never sit here." [laughter] I said, "But Larry put me here." I have to stay till he comes and gets me. But I did get a lot of respect for the lake because I was very naive. I would just go. Then a snowstorm would come up. I would be frantic. One day, he came out with a snowmobile to find me. Someone on shore says, "Well, how are you going to find her? It's like one of these bloody whiteouts, you know?" But he came. I said – he and John Jurgensen took me across the lake one day because it was the last day of the season. We've got to go. A fellow on shore says, "You're not going out on that lake, are you?" I said, "Yeah. They're waiting for me. I'm going out." Well, it was so terrible out there. I was so afraid. I sat in the shanty with a jacket over my head, crying because it was thundering. It was lightning. It was a whiteout. I thought for sure the lake was going to open up [laughter]. We were going to be done for. But we left and went with the compass, came out at the Fresh Air Camp.

DK: I was out there that day too.

LB: But it shook me a little bit. It took me a long time before I'd go out if there was a snowflake in the air [laughter].

DK: That was scary.

LB: Yeah.

DK: Well, Lynn, any other stories that you want to tell me at this time?

LB: Yeah. I was fortunate in the fact that a lot of people sit for years and never see a sturgeon. But the very first time Larry took me, it was on Lake Butte des Morts. I didn't even know what a sturgeon was. It was snowing. He left to go plow the road to keep it open. He says, "Well, it's a big black fish. If you see a big black fish, that's a sturgeon." Well, I sat there a while. Yeah, here comes a big black fish along the bottom [laughter]. I guess that's a sturgeon. So, I just picked up the spear, not having a lesson on how to throw it. I did get it. But I ended up spearing it sideways, not across the back. It was like 67 pounds.

DK: Sixty-seven?

LB: So, it really gave you an introduction to the sport. I mean, once you see a sturgeon in the hole, you're hooked.

LB: Yeah. She was ready to quit fishing, believe it or not.

LB: You've got to see one. I mean, you can sit there. There's absolutely nothing. Deer hunting, you can see them at a distance. You can get ready. You're sitting and looking in this sturgeon hole. There's nothing. All of a sudden, boom, here comes this big fish. You're hooked.

LB: I couldn't keep her out of the shack after she speared that one.

LB: I really wanted to fish alone. I didn't want him sitting there saying, "Here comes one now. You do this. You do that." It's like, "No. I want to do this myself."

DK: You want to do it on your own. Yes. Anything else, Lynn?

LB: No. I think that was it. Like I said, I, you know –

DK: How about you, Larry? You have got another good story?

LB: Well, I tell you, there's millions and millions of them, but that one was an experience that you don't very often get. A lot of things happen. A lot of years before I finally – I missed a surgeon, too, but then I missed a couple the same year. But that happens out in Winnebago when you're out in that deep water. It's not always easy, yet it's a long way out there sometimes under the ice.

LB: Well, he had an experience where your shanty blew in an open hole in the lake. [laughter] I'm glad I wasn't there. But it was so windy. The shanty took off. It went in an open hole [laughter].

DK: I remember that.

LB: Yes. Right out in front of your house. That's what you get for being a nice guy, helping everybody else. I just left my sandy set in a snowbank. I thought, "It'll stay there." I'm going helping guys that were caught. I looked around. There goes my shack, just gone, right out in the hole. .

DK: All right. I used to do this, but I have not in recent years. But do you check around for red worms before you set up a shanty?

LB: I have. But I just found – I don't know if that's really an asset or not. It's supposed to be, but never done anything for me. It's like if there are worms there, that doesn't necessarily mean there's going to be sturgeon there. They might be over on some other worm bed someplace. Some guys swear by it. But I have one of the checkers and everything. But I just have never had it be an asset to me.

DK: Yes. I believed in it until I lived on the lake. I saw so many lake flies after living there that I figured they have got to be everywhere. So, just go to a spot that you believe in and give it a shot.

LB: Well, really getting back to the – I think the DNR has done a really good job on a lot of things they do. In the sturgeon thing, they're on top of. I love that noon closing. That's just beautiful. But the only thing that I don't – I think it's too early because it's dark at 7:00 a.m. yet. It's almost like they should have backed it from like – until 1:00 p.m. or something. You get the first hour out there. It's pitch black.

DK: Well, there is a reason for that. That was designed to save the sturgeon because –

LB: Yeah.

DK: That leads me to the next question. If you could only spear for two hours a day, what two hours would you choose? Now, forget about the half day. When it was an all-day season, what was your favorite hours to set?

LB: 10:00 a.m. to noon.

DK: You bet you.

LB: I'd say 9:00 a.m. to noon. I thought the two hours would be 10:00 a.m. to noon.

DK: If I had four hours, I would say 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., you know?

LB: I've speared very few fish in the afternoon. Everything's been pretty much morning.

DK: So, that was the reason for it. We will not get into this now, but there are a lot of reasons for the hours that we have now. We can talk about that after the interview. But you already talked about the bad weather and ice conditions. You are going to – all of us that have been out there have run into ice shoves or ice cracks that open. You have got anything comes to mind other than –

LB: Oh, yes. I have experience at Paynes Point that it's a crack that runs pretty much north and south there. We always had good luck at Paynes Point. We set up. I asked them, "If get near the crack, maybe the fish come near or whatever." I was sitting maybe 20 feet from the crack. It was one of those days when ice was crunching and cracking like it is when it's moving. All of a sudden, I heard this, like, thunder or rumble coming. All of a sudden, the shanty started to shake. [laughter] I lifted – the water went up. That line of the water came up 3 feet, just whooshed right up. Everything from my shanty was whooshed around. I thought, "Oh, my God." I opened the door and stepped outside. That crack maybe was – had been like 2 to 3 feet high. I looked out the door. It must have been 10 feet high. Come together by – it must have put such a pressure on that water that I was so close that it just whooshed the water right up inside my shanty. It scared the hell out of me. I got respect for the lake, but I was never – ever anything like that ever happened to me. That was an experience, I'll tell you. [laughter]

DK: I have had the same one where I ran out the shack. I thought it was the end of the – my spear was swinging and –

LB: My spears both fell off right into the water, knocked them right off.

DK: Everybody else, as far as I could see, was outside the shanty.

LB: It's like a sonic boom. I was out there alone too, when that happened. I thought, "Oh, my God." I opened the door. I jumped out. I thought, "I'm glad there's not open water here."

DK: Larry, do you have a favorite color for coaxers?

LB: Well, not really. I always had pretty good luck with black coaxers with white trim on them. But I tried the fluorescent stuff. I don't know. It's just – I guess it doesn't matter. You've just got to be there when it comes or coming, whether that's – size seems to have something to do with it. But I don't know. It's one thing I never ever could decide what the best way to go was, put in five coaxers or not put any. I've already speared a sturgeon with no coaxers down.

DK: So have I.

LB: I like that, that you do not have any problems with the lines to work around, but harder to see them.

DK: I think every one of us have, at one time or another, tried a great big sturgeon like coxer. That takes up too much room in the hole, though. Now it comes down to when you are eating your sturgeon. How do you prepare it, Lynn? How do you like it prepared?

LB: I usually just have it smoked. Neither one of us is really fond of just preparing it, frying it, or whatever. I have eaten it where other people have done it. It was fine. But I don't know. Smoke seemed to be the best for us.

DK: Do you smoke your own or –

LB: No, not usually.

LB: We did it one time. But as you get older, it gets easier to pay to have it done [laughter].

DK: Yes. Any other stories you can think of that you would like to –

LB: Not offhand.

DK: Not offhand? I guess, well, you said it yourself. My next question is, what do you enjoy the most about sturgeon spearing? It is just like you say, everything is silent. It is a silent world. Like deer hunting, like you say, you can hear them running, or you can hear gunshots. You can anticipate maybe you are going to see something. But there, there is nothing and nothing. Silence. All of a sudden, it appears. From there on in, it is a rush until it is over.

LB: It can be so quick. I mean, he's so into not missing anything that it would be like, "Watch the hole. I'm going to pour coffee now?" I mean, it's like you might miss something. "I'm going to do this. Be sure you're watching," you know, whatever.

DK: Larry, do you pretty much like to sit on a spot, a favorite spot, and set it out? Or do you like to, as some people call it, troll?

LB: I figured three or four days, I guess when you've got – we tried to fish in a group, and I – if

you've got three or four shanties, and you've been there for three or four days, I always think there is no fish here. It's time to move. Because you have that many shanties, somebody should see something.

DK: I know I sat on the same spot on the knoll for the entire season when we had 21 and 28-day seasons. I sat there just like a deer stump. I figured eventually one would come by. They did occasionally. Quite often, on the last day, I got a fish. But I am not one for moving much. But I will move after a certain period of time and there is nothing going on around you.

LB: Well, that's one of those things people talk about moving. That was one of the things that – one of the irritations of sturgeon spearkers. I don't know why if somebody gets a fish, people move. But they think they've got to come and set 40 feet from you in an area. John, he would always set it right. He says, "Let's spread out. Everybody spear-fish instead of everybody trying to spear the same one." [laughter] That's what he always said.

DK: I never heard him say that.

LB: I said, "He's right. Spread out. We'll all of have a shot. Why all try to get the same fish?"

LB: Yeah. Well, that's what you do on Poygan [laughter].

LB: Well, Poygan is just terrible. I mean, that's the only thing I don't like –

LB: That's the best thing they did with the lottery thing, is spread it out.

DK: That did solve pretty much our problem. That's good. People seem to like that.

LB: Anybody that complains about what the DNR's done with the surgeon season is either greedy or stupid, one or the other.

DK: That's good. I agree with you. It was all to protect the resource. We're lucky to have the finest sturgeon population in the world. I mean, a lot of people have them. But we've got enough that we can have a harvest season on them, which is great.

LB: It seems like it has changed too that – its theory always was we always had to be out in the middle of the lake. We had to be in 18 feet of water. We had to be in really, really deep. I'd always say, "Well, why can't we go closer to shore in case the weather turns bad, you know, or something of the sort?" It seems like as the years went on, I mean, guys are fishing closer to shore now. They're getting fish. Have they been there all this while or because of the shad or something, you know?

DK: Well, everybody's got their own theory. Years ago, though, when we had to chop a hole by hand with a hand chisel, that gave you a reason to stay. [laughter]

LB: Yes.



DK: Now, with the power saws and the four-wheel drive trucks, some guys move twice a day. That is not for me. But, hey, it is what they do. Well, it has been enjoyable talking to you both, Lynn and Larry. I thank you for your interview and your time. After this is over, if you want to jaw a little bit more about a fish or two or a story that you forgot, we can do that too. So, with that, this interview is over. Again, thanks, Lynn and Larry.

[end of transcript]