

Dick Ristow: Today we are interviewing Robert Jake Abraham who lives between Oshkosh and Fond du Lac across the road from Wendt's On the Lake. Is that all right if I call you Bob?

Robert Jake Abraham: Yes.

MS: Or do you prefer Jake?

RJA: Well, Bob is all right.

MS: Okay. Bob, tell me about when and where you were born, and some history about your family.

RJA: I was born right here on the simple spot I am now on Lake Winnebago. Did a lot of fishing and hunting. Later years guided on the Big Island. Started guiding in 1943 on the Big Island. Before that, I guided on the small islands. I guess I started when I was 15 years old started, I started guiding for suck hunting.

MS: Where is your family from originally?

RJA: My dad was born right here, just a mile north of my place. So, you know where I live now.

MS: You never got too far from the tree then.

RJA: Pardon?

MS: The apple did not fall too far from the tree, huh?

RJA: No. [laughter]

MS: How large was your family?

RJA: I had three sisters and one brother, five of us.

MS: Were you all involved in the history of the Lake, of sorts?

RJA: Well, kind of. But my sisters, of course, weren't, I mean not as much. But they didn't really fish a lot. Well, they really didn't hunt or anything. My brother and I fished all the time. Set line all the time is all they ever did.

MS: What your parents do for a living?

RJA: Farming.

MS: Farmers. Locally?

RJA: Pardon?

MS: They are all local farmers?

RJA: Yes.

MS: Dairy farmers?

RJA: Yes. I dairy farmed for – I don't know how many years. It was – I don't know how old I was when I first sold my cow. Let me see. I don't know. I don't really know. I can't remember. It's [19]70s. 1970 something that I sold my cow, and then I cash cropped for a while. When I went on my own to the island, I just got caught up with the fish. [laughter]

MS: How old are you now?

RJA: I'm eighty-five.

MS: Eighty-five. Wow. You said your father was a farmer too?

RJA: Yes.

MS: Tell me some things that happened years ago on the lake with your sturgeon history.

RJA: Well, I first started fishing, I and a friend of mine who lived up here near me, Clarence Tank. He passed away twenty years ago already, I guess. Well, when he and I started sturgeon fishing, heard about it, and we went across the driveway across the lake by Stockbridge. We went ten years. We couldn't get a fish. We couldn't believe they were spearing on this. We'd seen them, people had had them, but for some [laughter] unknown reason, we couldn't get any. I finally quit for a few years since I got so disgusted. So, then they were getting a lot of them on Poygan. I had a young guy working for me and he got all excited when our neighbor started bringing fish. They even showed us from what they got on Poygan. So, we hauled a shanty up there and fished five days. I was about ready to burn my shanty again. [laughter] Finally, on the fifth day we speared two of them. I guess that's when I got started. I don't know. It was pretty, I think pretty lucky after that for some unknown reason. That's when it got started.

MS: Who taught you this?

RJA: Just nobody. [laughter]

MS: Just learned by the seat of your pants.

RJA: Yes. I just seen and heard, and – I don't know. I don't know how I found all of it. I guess I just – my dad didn't do it.

MS: Your dad did not spear?

RJA: No, there was no spearing. I mean, we didn't know about spearing even now that I thought about it.

MS: How did you get out on the lake in ten days.

RJA: We had old cars. I drive \$25 car, and we drove all over. We never had a bridge. We jumped any crack on the lake and – [laughter]

MS: Kind of dangerous, is it not?

RJA: Well, when you're young nothing is too dangerous, I guess. [laughter]

MS: What kind of spears and decoys did you use back then?

RJA: Well, we used mostly crab, or corn in a white cup or something like that, or just hung anything in the hole. Maybe we did the wrong thing in the hole that's why we didn't get anything. I don't know.

MS: Took you ten years before you got the right formula.

RJA: Yes.

MS: What problems have you had, or challenges spearing?

RJA: I know I lost a big one day. [laughter] I mean, I don't – challenge, I don't know to say. I don't know.

MS: Mostly the weather?

RJA: Oh, the weather? Well, of course, when really, really bad, we didn't go out. I don't know. I just can't think of anything right now.

MS: How has the sport changed since you begun.

RJA: How what?

MS: How was the sport changed since you started spearing.

RJA: Oh, I can't believe it. I mean, because when we first went out, there was nobody fishing on this side. We leave here and head for the east shore, you wouldn't see one shanty until we got – drove, five, six miles before you saw a shanty. Nobody fished on the west side at all, or the south end. You'd never see a shanty at all here. Now, of course, years ago we never went out early. We had a dairy farm, and had cows to milk. You wouldn't get out there till 9.00 a.m., 10:00 a.m. You'd be early if you got out there by 9:00 a.m. or 10:00 a.m. So, even most of my farmers that were spearing years ago, were staying on this shore the same way. You don't see anybody until 9:00 a.m., 10:00 a.m.

MS: There is a winter pastime, sort of, huh?

RJA: Yes. Well, farmers after they get your milking and chores done on your farm, you couldn't get out there at 7:00 a.m. We'd never thought of going out at 7:00. Now, [laughter] I go out there at 5:00 a.m. in the morning, and I can't believe when I see that. I just can't believe they go out that early. But, of course now, the starting to see – the day, time, hours, so they close at 1:00 p.m. – was it 12:30 p.m.? 12:30 p.m. So, I'm like, you suddenly get out to have a daylight. Of course, a lot of people there now, there's not many farmers left. So, that's all city people or working people that take off and fish for a sturgeon.

MS: How did you cut your hole in these?

RJA: I don't know what you call it. Hand saw, the big one. We used to make ice so I had a couple saws like that. My dad s I don't know, he did it for years when I was small even. He cut ice for all the taverns around here, in Van Dyne. There was a tavern here and on the road, (Goyke's?). Made all the ice for them. Had all the equipment too at that time.

MS: Did they use that in their drinks then?

RJA: Sure. Oh, sure. Personally, I use the saw to cut the ice. Of course, we'd have to go on for a while.

MS: [laughter] That made for a flavorful ice bath.

RJA: You'd take a shovel and shovel that off and slash it off with a little water. [laughter]

MS: What is your favorite story regarding spearing?

RJA: Favorite story regarding spearing. I don't know. I can't – there's so many, I don't know where to start. [laughter]

MS: Anything in your past that was rather shady that you know of.

RJA: Shady?

MS: Yes, like maybe something that they didn't call it illegal.

RJA: I don't know. When spearing, I never did anything illegal. I don't know. I mean, of course, getting a big sturgeon is pretty exciting. First 82 pound, I guess, I got, I was pretty excited.

MS: Do you always spear with other guys?

RJA: Well, it was very new to me, and when I first started – no, there was only two of us. But then after a few years there was a group from Fond du Lac. Say we were four or five of those

guys. We went together all across the lake. But they all seemed to get one here and there, but just far too thin. I don't know, we were unlucky one for some reason. We've been doing it but never got any. I don't know.

MS: What kind of a spear did you use?

RJA: Well, first, we didn't know the fine, big one. That was a mistake. I'd fall off and lost the big one on top of that. I speared them, and I knew I hit them good, and I left the – the fish got away. I wanted to get my decoy. I didn't want to lose my decoys so I pulled my decoys out first. By the time I got a hold of spear again, fish was off the spear. Man, that was it. I see the flying birds. My brother worked in a welding shop, and he made spears. He did them for a long time and sold them. A lot of them, I'm really, really happy with them. He made a good spear. So, that was what I got now, and I use quite – speared a lot of them fish with them.

MS: Who was the most unusual character you met in your sturgeon spearing history?

RJA: I don't know what to say. Unusual, I don't know. I know there was a guy in Green Lake, who fished out here. He was – fished on here. He showed up for a long time. He came over here and had the map of the lake, and all this and that. He seemed to know a lot about sturgeon fishing. [inaudible] after that and cuts through. He started talking about sturgeon fishing. I never heard some stories that he told. He'd go on the east shore. That's where he fished all the time. He never went by it, but he went out there in the lake, two miles out and put his shanty there. He stayed there all year. He speared a lot out there, certainly. Because one year, he got twenty-two out of one hole.

MS: Wow.

RJA: Every day he went, he'd take somebody. Are you going to buy a license anytime? He was like, "During the season and that." That was a lot of years ago.

MS: How many could you spear then?

RJA: Well, I guess it was three, I think, or five. I'm not sure of the number at that time. But you could buy a license anytime. If you got a fish today, you only – say you had one tag, you can go buy another, or you get your friend a tag. He claimed [laughter] almost every day they went, they got a fish or two.

MS: Big ones?

RJA: Well, he had a big one. Not only – then he cut them all out here. He had everyone's reef. He had it on the map. He was a captain on the great lakes he went. But he lives out of Green Lake. He didn't live back up here. I cut him a hole. I had a couple of holes just straight in the back on the floor of the shanty. He was like, "Oh, this really particular guy. You never cut a lot of them for a guy." I had cut a lot of them. But anyway, he's out there. This is late in the afternoon, and we speared a 40-pound sturgeon that afternoon. Next morning, he comes out and he says he's ready. We got a 13 pounder. I can't believe this. [laughter] This guys is a stranger,

he comes over. So, then I got to believe that he got twenty-two out of one hole, I guess.

MS: Are there some kinds of tricks to the trade of sturgeon spearing?

RJA: Well, him and his wife fished together. They were there at 7:00 a.m., and they never left there until 5:00 p.m. They never lift their eyes out of the hole. That was one thing.

MS: No wandering around like they do nowadays and visit their buddies and other shanties.

RJA: Well, a lot of guys are outside fooling around, or put a tip up out. That's the worst thing you can do. [laughter]

MS: Put a tip up out?

RJA: Well, you're going to look at it, what do you do? You're out there and the fish comes through the hole. That's what they did. That's how they were more successful than other people. There's a lot of somebody who had their eyes on that hole, and that's the key of it.

MS: Do you have any favorite ways of preparing sturgeon for eating?

RJA: Well, years ago, we just love them fried. I mean we ate them, I think, all fried and smoked. Of course, the smaller ones I always thought are better fried. But then after the shad generally, well, I don't know sure change the flavor of the fish. It tasted so fishy and strong. I don't know. It just seemed I didn't like them that way. But then it seemed smoking them didn't seem to make much difference. I mean, I've seen them, didn't change – didn't have the fishy taste. I don't know if it was the salt or whatever. But no, I just ate some here a couple of days ago that a friend of mine got. He gave me and – I don't know. He had sturgeon too, but it sure didn't – [laughter] it had a better taste than they did have.

MS: Was that smoked or fried?

RJA: Fried.

MS: Do you have a special recipe that you own?

RJA: No, I've smoked almost all. I do a pretty good job at it, I don't know. Never smoked until about five years ago until (Greinke?) quit smoking. He was a great good friend of mine. Well, I just take it over him all the time. But after he couldn't do it, I started doing it myself and –

MS: Who taught you how to smoke?

RJA: Just by word-of-mouth from different people. I mean, I don't know. Some I saw it. Well, I knew how to – my dad years ago smoked catfish and that, but we never smoked a lot. But my dad had been smoking since 1943. I didn't learn a lot from him [laughter] that way really.

MS: I noticed on this – the people that I interviewed on this sounded like they all, kind of, have

a community and they stick together a lot. Do you have a lot of friends that you have acquired over the years from sturgeon spearing?

RJA: Well, yes, some of them. I mean, I sure have acquired, gotten, accumulated more friends from hunting than I do with anything else. Because I had so many different people as it is. In fact, after sixty years, even if just a couple of days, when I take people out, and they'd bring their family. I meet people every – new people every day, almost, new people.

MS: You have a history of being an island duck hunting guide out here. Who is the most famous person that you've guided for?

RJA: Lots of them. [laughter] I would say the most famous; (Henry Allen?), (Eddie Matthews?), (Warren Knowles?), I hunted with him a lot. (Dr. Long?), he was a Chinese dentist in Milwaukee?). He had two dogs and it was unreal. Trained and they knew exactly what to do. [laughter] If you had a dog, I'd tell you. Well, (Dave Uehlein?) famous people and Augie Pabst from Pabst Brewery. I knew all of them real well, I still do.

MS: How many years did you guide?

RJA: Well, I guided since 1943 on big island, Long Point. So, out on this call, I don't know how do people call it different? I guided before that, I don't know. I mean, in smaller island, that's what I would call a fraction. I think I started when I was fifteen. I think a lot of different people, I don't know, I can't remember some of them.

MS: Did you ever run a setline on the lake for a sturgeon?

RJA: Oh, yes.

MS: I understand years ago you handed him one hundred hooks.

RJA: Well, years ago it was three hundred.

MS: Three hundred hooks.

RJA: Now, when we first put out setlines for catfish, but if you wanted a sturgeon, we always set out three – we all set out set out three hundred apiece. That's how we made extra money. Farming, there was no money in farming. [laughter] So, it's catching catfish and salmons, smoking them, sell them to Greinke and – I don't know.

MS: Greinke had quite a business in the fish market.

RJA: That's all they did, he and his dad. It is all – they bought fish and sold them. A lot of fish, they weren't allowed to sell them on this lake. But 90 percent of them came out of this lake.

MS: It tasted just as good?

RJA: Yes. [laughter] My dad and – I can just remember as I was probably only 9 years old, maybe about 1930, the duck season, it was short. Then, of course, they had fished you know setlines all the time. So, after the – duck season was only a thirty-day season at the time. I might eat ducks for a while. So, after sturgeon fishing, or after – excuse me. After duck hunting, the lake was all wide open. So, what are you going to do? Set some setlines off. So, you could seine all the minnows around the shore you wanted. Just go out and pull a net and seine and you'd have a pillow [inaudible] shiners. So, you seine a bunch of minnows and set the setlines out. The first time, my brother set six hundred hooks off, him and my neighbor, he came in the Thanksgiving Day and he had eighteen sturgeons on the boat.

MS: Big ones?

RJA: Yes. They were either weighing from 30 to 70 pounds.

MS: Wow.

RJA: So, then they really got into it. Then they set – kept setting it. I don't know how many more times. Then before Christmas, they set nine hundred out, nine hundred out. My brother, and my dad, and some guy from Oshkosh. Then the lake froze over. The lake was still wide open before they set the line out. Then, of course, the lake froze and they couldn't get out there and – Second January, the Lake froze over. I had about two or three inches of ice, I guess, and not very much in a way. So, they put a boat on a sleigh and marked down. They could take a mark on the shore and pick up the line, just like that. The line was – didn't have a mark on it from sticking out of water or anything. So, they just cut some lose and put a stick about 20 feet long with a drag on it. It didn't go very far, they had the line. Found the line right away. Then they get a hold of it, and then they go beyond the lakes, and get a hundred hooks or so and pull it up again. Cut it off and then pull out hundred hooks out of one hole. They pulled out thirty-two sturgeons on that line.

MS: Through the ice?

RJA: Through the ice.

MS: Unheard of. Unheard of. Wow.

RJA: [laughter] They brought them all home. They were out there all day. My mother and sister, they were – they thought they'd drowned out there. They didn't come home, it was after dark. Went out in the morning, and there had been no communication or nothing that time. Finally came and – they had broken through, I guess, with the boat a couple of times. But they wouldn't let go of them sturgeon. [laughter]

MS: It was like gold?

RJA: Yes. We had another farm across the field here. So, I took them all over there. I can remember, I wasn't – I don't think I was over 9 or 10 years old. I took them and I dragged them all in line about 80 ponds to 30 or 20. I don't have any pictures of them, I wish I did.

MS: That would be a story to tell, huh?

RJA: Oh, yes.

MS: It's always nice to have pictures of something like that.

RJA: That time, I don't know, we didn't have a camera, I guess. [laughter]

MS: People didn't think about that back then.

RJA: No. You can go do it all the time or whatever. [laughter] That fall, they call it 130 – I think, Day 134 or something like that, that fall.

MS: Wow.

RJA: But they didn't buy every year like that. I mean, there's some years, I don't know whether it was actually for some unknown reason.

MS: You say they didn't have shad then.

RJA: No, there was no shad. We never heard of a shad.

MS: When in your opinion did they start seeing shad on the lake?

RJA: Well, I don't know. I guess they have a record of it and I – I don't know. I'm guessing about eighteen, twenty years ago. I guess I haven't – I don't know exactly. I mean, before that we never had seen a shad or heard of one. I don't know.

MS: Do you ever put things on the bottom of the lake for spearing so you –

RJA: Oh, yes.

MS: – so you can see the bottom better or –

RJA: A lot of tin barrel, paper plates. Years ago, we used all of them, or corn. A corn, and just shelled corn on the bottom. That was good, you could see well then.

MS: Do you have any – do you carve any of your own decoys or any of that stuff?

RJA: Not really. I made a quite a number of them I sold. I sold them, and I only got a couple of good ones now that I use. I don't have any old ones. I don't have any of those.

MS: Are you passing on any of your old traits to your grandkids? Or –

RJA: I don't – we don't have any children, so – [laughter] my nephew, he started spearing, but

he only speared one little one so far. He hasn't been out much either. Maybe it'll –

MS: Maybe it will take him ten years too.

RJA: [laughter] Yes. Well, he got one once but – but he hasn't been doing that good.

MS: Regarding sturgeon, what do you think is the most lasting memory that you have of the sport?

RJA: What I still remember? Yes, what will I say? I don't know. I don't really know what to say on that. I just can't think or believe that people know that they're spearing. Where do you all come from. It's just I felt like it was years ago. Just nobody was very interested in it. If you said you were going sturgeon spearing, they thought you're a little wacky. [laughter] I don't know. I can't believe the way its – what's happened. The people out there.

MS: All the fancy shacks.

RJA: Yes, fancy is right. We know that I do fancy that for a couple years did with my dad – we didn't last very long as – I burned a couple of them up [laughter]. We couldn't get them home no more. [laughter] I'm not very old, but I don't know. I don't know what to say on that. I think the – like I said, I just can't believe that people are out there. That all started the – I think it's the [inaudible] license they had. They gave everybody a surgeon tag. All of a sudden, people got this [inaudible] license, you got a tag from who knows where, never heard of sturgeon fishing. I know what happened here. They rented a few shanties. I rented out a couple of shanties. All of a sudden, they go told them calls, they could have rented one hundred shanties. People had to this tag, "Oh, we are going to try it. We got this tag." That's part of the whole thing.

MS: Not everybody –

RJA: Not everybody has heard about it, and did it, and tried it. It got out of hand.

MS: Do you ever go out with – in the bad years when there's a lot of snow?

RJA: Well, yes. I forgot how – once it got really bad, I guess we couldn't get out. But I don't know how we did get out. I remember there was a lot of snow, but I don't know how we did get out there. Well, I don't remember, it skipped my head. Once they had a snowfall and we needed to go to the tavern. That was in '62 or '63. So, we had bad roads since 1960. But before that, of course, we put chains on our old cars, and we went as good as we could, because we always can get off.

MS: But people like (Wendt's?) really helped the sport prosper too, by the fact that they're ploughing roads and renting shanties. It's been great for the sport.

RJA: Yes. But now, it got out of hand. Now they're going to have to ration the hunters and join in. If somebody had told me that fifty years ago, I wouldn't have believed it.

MS: Right.

RJA: You always went out here fishing. That is what you are saying? Well, we started out here, Clarence Tank and I. Set out in the middle of the lake. Of course, I guess, we weren't out on the lake too far. We also had to be in the middle of the lake. Sit there for two or three days and wouldn't see nothing and go across the lake and hear they were getting a few over by Stockbridge. That's where you had to go. That's where the sturgeon went. But they were here in the summertime, and we got them on hook and line.

MS: Just did not think they were here –

RJA: No.

MS: – during the winter?

RJA: So, I don't know. But we got new setlines in the fall here. Of course, in the summer, we used to set on the lake with snails. We've been on the setline. We think we wanted a sturgeon. We didn't really try too much then because, well, it was more risky than seeing that on a summertime. But we set six hundred hooks out in the middle just for a sturgeon. If you'd catfish, salmon, here and there sturgeon and I would eat once a while.

MS: Great. Great. Any warden stories back then that make interesting listening?

RJA: Never got arrested. I got close to on a few times, I guess. [laughter]

MS: Close only counts in horseshoe, huh?

RJA: Yes. [laughter] Almost got hit by a boat here four or five years ago out on the lake. Came so close, I thought I was dead. Passed out just for a second. They didn't even – he was closing in – they were going 50, 60 miles an hour at night. I couldn't believe it. [inaudible] Well, I thought he was going to turn in just like daddy. I don't know before I could do anything he was – just got soaking wet and –

MS: More traffic on the lake now than ever, huh?

RJA: Oh, yes. Now, the boats on the lake are unreal.

MS: For how many years do you think you're going to continue doing this foolishness?

RJA: [laughter] I feel right now, I'm not doing anymore. I don't think – I don't know.

MS: [inaudible]

RJA: Yes, you can't. I can't sit down after a while. If I go on a shack now, I'm actually around for an hour or two, and I just get tired. I don't what I did or why I'm tired. I guess that's the way it goes when you get older. Just keep getting slower. I don't know. Well, Mike there, he got me

out a couple of times this year. Otherwise I wouldn't have went. His brother Doug, I go fishing with him a lot. He sees that I get out there too. But I have one shack out.

MS: Thank you for letting me talk to you. I appreciate it. I'm sure a lot of other people would enjoy your stories.

[end of transcript]