

Richard Rife: Richard Rife. I'm interviewing Eugene Biettler and today is August 8th, 1900 or 2007. We're talking to Gene, like I said today. Gene, when were and where were you born?

Eugene Biettler: I was born in Winchester, Wisconsin in 19.

RR: You forgot.

EB: October 13th, 1940 at Winchester, Wisconsin, right here in the town of Winchester.

RR: Okay. Who were you living with?

EB: Yes.

RR: How large was your family?

EB: We had four. Four kids in the family.

RR: Okay. Your brother and sister?

EB: Two brothers and two sisters.

RR: What did your parents do for a living?

EB: My dad worked for Winnebago County and state roads, and my mother was a housekeeper.

RR: They were lifelong residents of Winchester?

EB: Yes.

RR: How did you first learn the activity [inaudible].

EB: Yes. Through Reinhart School. They would set up a three day or four almost like a four-day course. You went on Friday. You went in there from 6:00 until 10 on Friday night. Then you start at 7:00 and you wanted to approximately 10 the following Saturday and Sunday, also same time. And that was like every other your hands on.

RR: Okay. Now, when did you start your interest in student school?

EB: In about 1962.

RR: Okay. Let's go back here. What did your dad and mother do for a living? You said your dad was –

EB: He was a state employee for Winnebago County. Yes.

RR: Do you have any stories or pictures of us [inaudible] fishing?

EB: Oh, yes. Quite a few. One year we were out and I made about two or three inches of fresh, wet snow and as we were driving up to the to the shack. We've seen some awful different kinds of tracks that were coming into the shack and we went along and there was a hole in the center of the shack which looked like a normal an animal had gone in there. See. So, as we open the door, we've seen a flash of fur and we didn't figure what was it? And we didn't know. And it hid behind the stove. So, I took the handle of the broom and then while on the on the he sticks his nose out. Well, he stuck his nose out. I swung on nest and he went in the water. It was a mink. It swam around and swam around water. We have blocked the hole where it come in earlier. So, he went underneath the floor. And so, as we're sturgeon spearing, he's going back and forth under the floor. You could hear him going So, we hadn't – at that time, you could fish in the shack, so we had a minnow pail in there, and all at once he came out on the minnow pail with his front feet, looked around. I don't know, how am I going to get this guy, you know? So, the minnow pail had this nylon loophole, this nylon binder twine hanging on it. So, I cut a piece of that off in the middle and I put it around, where he had put his feet on this minnow pail and he come out again but this time he just evaded the loop, see. So open up the minnow pail and I smashed the middle and then I put it on and I – we're supposed to be sturgeon spearing. Well anyways, he does this the next time and I still didn't get him, so I pushed the minnow pail further into the water and this time, when he stuck out there and put his feet there, I had him by the neck. Well, this nylon rope don't turn – come tight too fast. And I got him hanging over the wall and he's just putting up a fight something terrible. So, I managed to take out his dipper and twist up the line and I give him a little drowning affair and bubbles and bubbles and bubbles and bubbles and finally, finally, he didn't do anything. So, we I picked him up and I had some milk fell. I had milk, not milk, but nerd paper, bladders that we used to use for throwing down. So, I blotted them all off and I hung them in the back of a shack over by the stove. Matter of fact, that was was a silver mink, a grey mink was what it was. Must have come out with somebody sturgeon shack and now it was running around on the ice. So. Now, maybe about half hour, 45 minutes I hear a little coughing. I look in here. This mink is alive in back of me hanging upside down. So, we had to give him another bath. But this time it was – he was good. So that was one of them.

RR: Who did you start fishing with? Your dad?

EB: No. I started with Freddy Selo.

RR: Okay. Freddy Selo. And there would be [inaudible].

EB: With Freddy and Roger and Jerry. They're no calls. So, they couldn't get out there until 10:00. So, I'll get there early in the morning and stay until nine, ten o'clock and then I have to stick with them. Yes. From there, I went with my brother-in-law, and we still are together.

RR: Okay. What factor do you use in advance? [inaudible] do you use in your fishing like you're shanties and your spears and whatever. [inaudible]

EB: We have one or two, [inaudible] about 3 shacks, pretty well all homemade [inaudible].

RR: Yes. And so, everything you have mostly is – .

EB: Oh. Decoys? Yes, pretty well decoys. We have one or two of the old decoy that was in one of the Sturgeon books and we had bought out of [inaudible] years and years ago.

RR: We've got leather clothing and knowledge environment here, but terms, we've got Kevlar. We'll go into what factors are most important to you fishing sturgeon? In other words is the weather more important?

EB: Ice conditions. Weather we can take.

RR: Weather, you can take.

EB: Yes. Snow, anything like that.

RR: Any experiences in ice conditions?

EB: A lot of times we have to take [inaudible] to get them off. We couldn't drive out anymore. Water on top of the ice keep locking your shanties up and finally you have to give up. That was when we went into March, you know?

RR: It was delayed?

EB: Yes, we sometimes we even had decoys out on front of the shanties, floating water and still trying the sturgeons.

RR: [inaudible] Couldn't get off the lake because –

EB: Yes. I remember sitting in the – we had left Winnebago [inaudible] getting off and we drove over to (Flagan?), and we were sitting in the bar over there watching the people come off and you could just see the vehicles, the water splashing in the lights going down, down and then coming back up. Which I don't think any other women, but it was very close to it.

RR: Year of [inaudible]?

EB: Yes. That was year of [inaudible]. That was one of them. Yes. It was water. I mean, you could just see the vehicles go down, the ice give as they were [inaudible].

RR: Any other problem that you can remember getting off the lake?

EB: When you want to play, when they look like the registration station, it looked like the Green Bay Packers stadium had just let out. They were trying to get to the registration station and they were about a mile and a half off from the resort there waiting to get the other sturgeon in to get tagged. Just – that was unbelievable.

RR: How has the sport changed since you began giving? Usually cut the holes out by hand.

EB: Yes. I wasn't too much into – we used to drill the corners and saw, but not that much. There was no less chainsaws and Freddy had a chainsaw, and he did most of the cutting in our area.

RR: [inaudible] used to cut the holes by hand?

EB: No. I never had to. We took our drill and drilled it all out, but not with the with the regular saw.

RR: Not with the handsaw?

EB: No, didn't have to do that.

RR: Really? [inaudible]

EB: Like I said, Freddy got a chainsaw. He did most of the sawing for everybody around. Yes.

RR: You think that what are – What have you done to improve your steering access to the lakes and stuff? You building anything different?

EB: Well, we – if cars didn't go, we had snowmobiles and we put skis on the shanties and the plastic runners over the tires and meet him like an airboat to get him across. Years ago, after Nina wreck over to the Nina, to the Nina Point there, he had always chopped down to get out there to get out. Nowadays they just drive all over. You always wonder why they don't fall in. Things have changed that much where people used to go to be safe and now they just travel. There's –

RR: Access to the lake is not unlimited anymore.

EB: No, I mean and to – you can almost like with a snowmobile, a four-wheeler, you don't have to go out to one or two main landlords in the area. You can go off your own property if you live out there.

RR: What's your favorite story about sturgeon fishing? Anything unusual?

[inaudible]

EB: One time we had to saw down to our ship. Fish had producing and so we decided to saw it in. And so, we had a chain saw with a 40-inch bar and we got up behind the shack and we showed him and I unlocked the door because he had his lock hanging on the other side of the door which you don't do. Yes. And he says, I think that's Miley coming with his snowmobile That's a too longer. You know? This is years ago. See. So, we got, we had to, we had the saw running on the back of the truck. I had snuck up and locked the door. So, we started sawing and we saw through all the way around. We left part and then we took the saw and we put out a good angle and we took two of his decoys off. [inaudible] I'll get you. He said, "That was my

good decoy". And I said, but you don't have to worry, you know where it is. I said you know where it is, it's not long so. And said there's one of them.

RR: In fishing, you have a group that you do and you. People like you know, you have your kids go.

EB: My boy, Brian. Yes.

RR: Okay. And he's interested in it?

EB: Oh yeah, and his wife Sarah. And now, with the short season, my wife has got involved in it. She didn't like that setting from six until usually – at that time it was as early as you can get there until – a lot of guys stay until 5:30. Paul Harvey, the report. A lot of them left at 3:30. Where the Tavern to see where the fish were biting so that they could be in that early the next morning or move.

RR: Have you got any – have you any stories about different fish that you have speared, anything big or different.

EB: Not really just that. When the shad come in strong, if you did get one that was really feeding on shad, there was a taste different taste than meat.

RR: What about physically like, is there any damage on any of them, or one-eyed ones or –

EB: Oh, I speared a one-eyed one. I speared a one-eyed one. I had the biologist come up here and check it out and he said that it was – It just didn't ever have an eye. Yes. And so, then I got blamed. I got (razzed?) at. I was that I was. I got that fish – it was – it was one of those years where it was off Haystack where he was really we were going out with Neville and I was one of the years and we pulled off the shacks and then we pitched it and then we got better. You pushed another one on and while I got it was, it was really dirty water. But they said it was going around and around in the circle. That's why I got it. OK. Yes. Only had one eye. He talked about his spear. And you know other spears. Some of these guys you have different things that they use.

RR: What do you think is the most unusual [inaudible]?

EB: Well, over there, he had a Christmas wreath down there and we would throw a coin and see if you can get it through the hole. Different objects, so it's just unbelievable. But sometimes they'll come to. Fresh and greens and fresh and orange airplanes and plastic, baseball bats just unbelievable that people will put down there.

RR: What's the most unusual character that you've run into doing spear fishing?

EB: Oh boy.

RR: Anybody that's off the wall? Different?

EB: I would say probably Dick Kerner. When he was supposed to be fishing, he always had somebody with him or visiting somebody or had to meet somebody or had to go to a meeting. Yes. And then he had his favorite spot on front of his house and then if somebody set up close to it and he wasn't there, he was wondering how what they got, where, who it was. Yes. Or tapping and moving the bridge while everybody else was [inaudible].

RR: What kind of tricks have you heard that other spearkers used to get fishing? Do you use anything unusual or?

EB: No, I think our biggest help at that time was the pulp paper that we put down. Yes.

RR: You can't do that anymore.

EB: No. Can't do that.

RR: Whenever you get done, you got to keep that now.

EB: But you know, at that time too, we didn't have the sturgeon you have now. Except for 20, 29 days and maybe, maybe, if you're lucky, see a sturgeon. If you had a minnow come by you were lucky.

RR: And [inaudible] is like that.

EB: And Winnebago. So, I mean, when you said I'm going to buy and you waited for sturgeon and you didn't see him that often a lot of times, it was, you know and. But it seems like now with the we'll be taking all the people away and shortening the season. You got to fish harder and your can't go visiting and cookouts and the family get togethers is used to.

RR: It changed the whole environment. What are the legal activities? Have you ever heard of [inaudible]?

EB: Well, there was one about the 32- or 33-inch fish, [inaudible] and the fellow is dead now but he did get one of the largest sturgeon off on the North Shore. Then it was taken off the spear and thrown back in because it was too small and lay at the bottom of the hole belly up in about 17 feet of water, 16 feet of water and as we kept looking at this fish for a day or two, we decided w that maybe we could get a fish fry out of that We took a bunch of snow fence slats and we're in the shack and we're nearly knees together and sticking them down in the water and we had a plan on the end of it, we will poke this thing and pull it up. Well, we got it about 3/4 way down the water in the slab [inaudible] in my face. We left it. We didn't take it there. The buoyancy of that, of them sticks in the state, and then they busted to come up, back up, hit the ceiling in the shack. That's it. That's enough of that.

RR: Okay. How do you like your sturgeons best? Cooked? Fried?

EB: I prefer it a cut up in like 1 inch squares and deep fried, so I don't know what seasoning on

and deep fried.

RR: Yes. You like it smoked?

EB: But you – it seems that you – even if you mount that sturgeon and get all the grease out of it, it will, eventually will start dripping on you and then the grease comes out.

RR: You de-grease the sturgeon after you –

EB: Yes, after you mount it. But yeah, but now the same thing, if you take those sturgeon, you put it in the smoke house and you give. It 220 degrees or 225 and bring it back down or you can raise it. That grease don't flow. They won't come out that sturgeon. When you break that piece of meat open when it's cold. It's still in there. The fat is there. But still when you clean and mount a sturgeon, and it's on the wall and it sets at 90 to 80 degrees for a year, all at once you see some drips coming right, But why does it drip there when I doesn't drip in the smokehouse?

RR: [inaudible]

EB: Yes.

RR: How many sturgeon have you done?

EB: I've done approximately – I should probably figure that out for you [inaudible]. I think it was approximately 60 sturgeon, 60, some small sturgeons.

RR: That you've done? It's a long process of doing them up?

EB: Oh, now we're talking sturgeon for tomorrow or sturgeon mounted big ones?

RR: Sturgeon mounting the big one.

EB: The big one. The biggest one I've done was 112 pounds and that was –

RR: [inaudible]

EB: No, I didn't do [inaudible] but I – the other one, my Board of directors Don Peterson [inaudible]. Yes, that was the biggest I've done was 112.

RR: That's time consuming?

EB: Oh, yes. A lot of cleaning. A lot of cleaning. Yes. Yes, I've taken the head of a sturgeon put it on the band so I can cut it open and there's so many pockets of yellow fat in there that you cannot get at. You try to get at them all, but there's always, there's been –

RR: [inaudible] Do you dehydrate those?

EB: No.

RR: You don't dehydrate them?

EB: No. They're put up manually. No, they're not freeze dried.

RR: [inaudible] Any other recipe that you have?

EB: No. [inaudible] because usually we do a bunch of them up. It's a we have a sturgeon party now at the seasons show. We have a sturgeon party on Saturday night and if we have a sturgeon that gets cut up with – we have – we get them from last year. We do that, we do them. We have to save some but to serve the people and to everybody get a nice taste of the one inch squares. It seems to be the best. Yes, it fries up not as fast as a perch but it does a nice job of getting them done, deep fried with a good breading on them.

RR: Okay. Recipe. What do you feel like your sturgeon has done for the area? Is it a good asset during the year?

EB: Oh definitely. Oh yeah, definitely. It gets a lot of the area people around together and to see – don't probably see every year, or every month. You see them on the ice. It brings a lot of business into the area.

RR: Yes, that's true. Okay, what is the most valuable thing that you think about sturgeons? You like it because it's a family tradition?

EB: Oh yeah, definitely. Now that the wife is going because it's only a half a day and she said she enjoys it, but she's already got her first sturgeon now and I'm [inaudible], and now it's all getting together, getting ready to go. Getting everything moved out there. Just to get together in January and February to start.

RR: You have the comradery [inaudible]. I think that that's about all I can ask you. Les tells good stories about sturgeon. Okay Gene. Thank you.

EB: Yes, it's really changed, you know, from the long days in the in the long season to the short days, you know, and some people say God, I'm going to get out of this because they don't pay to get everything out just for a two-day affair, but our seasons have been getting spread out.

RR: I still enjoy it, just like you do. Yes, right. Yes, it's just. Yes, right. One of the two things I do in a year to you that I really love.

EB: Yes. Yes. And like I said, you can, we can probably if you think back, there's hundreds of stories that that you can come up with. Yes. Things that just happened, you know. Sometimes aren't planned at all.

RR: Yeah. Okay, Gene. Thank you. Alright. Oh. Let's go back and get another little item here. Gene, mounts the sturgeon for our sturgeons dated every year, and he donates these



sturgeons. Last year, we got three and then we also did one [inaudible]. Yes. You want to tell us how you do that, Gene?

EB: Well, they come in from the DNR, and Rick usually brings them up here and I've been doing them now almost I think about 20 years and I did about 60 of them fish. [inaudible] 60 next up there before I get about ten mounted sturgeon, big sturgeon, but I'm [inaudible] know that but I do the small ones for Sturgeon for Tomorrow.

RR: It's for a raffle?

EB: Them are for a raffle. We did them from north chapter and once we did them for three chapters and approximately 60 of them that I've done so far for Sturgeon For Tomorrow.

RR: You do a really good job on it too.

EB: Thank you.

RR: We get a lot of comments. Is there a drying process that you use on those?

EB: That's just a in the air process. That's all it is. You take them to [inaudible] make a form for them and put it back together and sew them up and keep their little feelers hanging down and paint them up and loan them and get on the boards.

RR: A beautiful piece of art and good morning.

EB: Thank you. Yes.

RR: Okay. Any other comments?

EB: No, not right now.

RR: Okay, thanks Gene. Now those sturgeon that you've done for us, what is the worth on those?

EB: I figure it at 60 sturgeon, which there could be a few more little ones but at the value – at a banquet of drying up \$200 a piece they come up to \$12,000 a by those taxidermists that was donated to students to help protect our sturgeon.

RR: Yes, and you've donated to us since, I don't know. When I first came here.

EB: Yes. I don't either. It's been a –

RR: It's been a long time.

EB: Yes. For a while I started with north chapter and then we had north chapter and air chapter.

RR: And Gene donates to us. The existing amount of money and that, yeah. So, we're very well appreciate that.

EB: Thank you.

[end of transcript]