

Bill Casper: We will be with Gwen Bowe. This is March 23rd, 2006. Anyway, my first interview, so bear with me. We will see what happens.

Gwen Bowe: [laughter]

BC: So, Gwen Bowe, today we are going to be talking about sturgeon fishing on Lake Winnebago. How long have you been fishing? How long have you been going out there?

GB: Actually, where I've been fishing, it's probably been since 1980 when I caught my fish. Before that, I used to just go along and sit. I never actually fished.

BC: I see. That first fish you got, was that big fish?

GB: It was the big one, yes.

BC: Yes. Tell me about it. What happened there? You went out by yourself, did you?

GB: My husband had been going out with these guys through the years. Some of them started where they didn't go out much anymore. I didn't like him going out on the lake by himself, so I said I'd go along. So, we bought (Lester Cook's?) shanty. So, that year I went out with him. He set me up and everything. He went off and set himself up over by Wally and Mike and them and sat there all day.

BC: That would be Mike Bowe?

GB: Mike Bowe and Wally Bowe.

BC: Wally Bowe, yes.

GB: Sat there most of the day. He didn't see anything, a few little bugs on the water. I thought, "How boring this is [laughter]." Then I'm not much of a fisherman, summer or winter really. So, sitting there, he said he'd be back around 3:30 p.m., 4:00 p.m. to pick me up at that time. About 3:30 p.m., I pulled up the decoy, left the hole open, and I go outside, look for him to come. He wasn't coming. Go back in and look in the water, out in, out in. Finally, one time I was standing there watching and all of a sudden, this head just started coming out from under the shack. I'd never really seen a sturgeon close up like that. But I thought, "This has to be a sturgeon [laughter]." So, I went out about. I kept watching it just come through real slow. It was going away from me. Quietly grabbed the spear and stuck it actually. I didn't even get to throw the spear because –

BC: It was up so high.

GB: – it was up so high. I would say it was only 3 feet under the ice. So, it really looked huge [laughter]. Then after I speared it, then it took off and dived towards the bottom. I said it reminded me of when you see a shark being speared in a movie or something like that. It just twisted and turned. Finally, I thought, "Well, I got to get it in." Got it up to the hole. It was so

big. I was balancing the spear on my knee because by that time he was heavy when he was out of the water. So, I got the gap hook. I had both hands full. The door was shut [laughter]. So, I don't even know which one I let go of. I let go of one, got the door open, threw the chair out, and got the fish out. Then I kept standing out there hollering, waiting for them to come [laughter]. That was it. They could hardly believe it when they saw it. They didn't think it was as big as it was, but it was. It was huge actually because it was really big around. We thought maybe it had eggs in it, but it didn't have any.

BC: It did not have eggs?

GB: No. It had maybe a couple of pounds, they said. They figured that it had spawned the year before. Because after we measured it, it was 126 pounds. It was 74 inches long. We even measured the girth. It was 32 inches around. So, it was huge. It was as big around as my son.

BC: It was a beautiful, big fish, yes.

GB: I might have missed it if I'd have had to throw the spear any distance. I don't know. But I thought I might, say, stab him [laughter] with the spear because that's what happened. But I got it in just right. So, I don't think I'd have lost it.

BC: Yes. Did you have flying barbs on your spear?

GB: Yes, it had the barbs on it. But, yes [laughter]. But like I said, that was actually my first year where I fished by myself. I had gone along a few times, but I had never really fished by myself. Except maybe if you went to visit somebody, I was in the shack. That was about it.

BC: Did you grow up around here also or not?

GB: Oshkosh.

BC: Oh, you are from Oshkosh?

GB: Yes. My brother was a fisherman. But he wasn't ice fisherman, he was summer. He was a good fisherman. He knew where all the hotspots were. People from Milwaukee would come down and look for him to find out where to go and stuff like that. But he used to skip school when he was a kid [laughter] to go fishing.

BC: [laughter] Yes.

GB: But no, I wasn't much of a fisherman. Actually, Kenny's not either, except for the sturgeon.

BC: Kenny, yes. Did he get a fish that same year or not?

GB: I'm trying to think if he did.

BC: Of course, if he did, it would not have mattered anyway with this big fish.

GB: I don't think he did that year.

BC: Because I am not sure if that was the biggest fish that year or not. Do you remember?

GB: I think it was.

BC: I believe it was too, yes. That was in 1980.

GB: Eighty, yes.

BC: Then you had a taxidermist?

GB: Yes. My husband said, "Well, you've got to do something with that one," as big as it was.

BC: Yes, as big as it was.

GB: So, after we got done running around to the bars – of course like you always do.

BC: Yes. Well, I heard all about that.

GB: [laughter] We woke up (Ron Hasley?). He looked at the fish. He said, yes, that he'd do it. He had never done one before, but he'd done other fish, smaller ones, and stuff. So, he said he'd do it. So, that's what we did.

BC: Then the fish, of course, is almost too big to hang in your house.

GB: We had it in the house for about a year. Because, well, we were on the farm, and we had big enough rooms. But we couldn't hang it. We set it on our dining room table for about a year [laughter].

BC: Is that right?

GB: Yes. Because we had a case made for it in there.

BC: Oh, wow. That is the case that was in over at –

GB: Blanck's.

BC: – at Blanck's Supper Club in Johnsburg.

GB: Yes. It had to have been there 10 years or more, I would think.

BC: Yes. Sure. That is the fish that I took in 1997. I took that same fish to New York.

GB: Is that how long ago it is already? Wow.

BC: It was 1997.

GB: [19]97.

BC: Yes. I got a call. I was right here working outside, and Kathy called me. My wife called me and said, "You got a call from New York?"

GB: [laughter]

BC: She said, "I did not get his name, but it sounded like Kennedy," she said. When I came to the phone, he said it was Robert Kennedy Jr. I thought it was someone else. I thought it was Robert Boyle just kidding me.

GB: [laughter]

BC: Robert Boyle is the guy from *Sports Illustrated*. He wrote a story about me in *Sports Illustrated*.

GB: Yes. I remember that.

BC: Then Kennedy said that Robert Boyle had told him – the guy from *Sports Illustrated*, the writer – that if he wanted a sturgeon for his little museum they were building at the Pace University, Robert Boyle had told him that I would be able to get a sturgeon for him. A mounted sturgeon, see? I said, "Well, let me try." I got his phone number. I said, "I will have to call you back if I can find something." I thought of that fish at Blanck's because it was such a nice, big fish. Kathy and I had gone out to dinner over at Blanck's. I asked Kevin about it, Kevin Blanck. He said, "That fish really does not belong to me. It belongs to Gwen Bowe." He said, "I think if you talk to her, you can get that fish." So, I did. That is when I contacted you.

GB: Well, yes. It was hard to give up actually.

BC: I know. I remember that.

GB: I said, "Because we haven't now seen it since [laughter]."

BC: I know.

GB: Just in pictures. But it's nice it went someplace that other people can see it and enjoy it and wonder about it [laughter].

BC: That is right. There are a lot of people to see it. It is at the Pace University hanging in a little museum that Kennedy built. He teaches there.

GB: Yes. That's what you had said.

BC: He teaches environmental – what does he teach? Environmental something. He has been working on the Hudson River out East. That has been his game for years. So, yes, the sturgeon is gone. It is in New York. Sturgeon for Tomorrow, our club, someone in New York was going to buy it. He wanted whatever you had in it or having in mind. I said, "Well, maybe Sturgeon for Tomorrow should give it from the fishermen of the state of Wisconsin or Lake Winnebago." That is what we did.

GB: Yes. Well, that was a good idea.

BC: Yes. So, we gave it to them as a gift from all of us and including you, by all means. So, now, Kennedy had a little plaque made with your name on it and whatever. It is on that picture. I think you gave me a picture of you with that fish hanging when you got it. We gave him a copy of that.

GB: That is what you call fashionable [laughter].

BC: Yes, I know. That was very fashionable.

GB: [laughter] Yes.

BC: Not to worry. I will tell you, they were quite –

GB: Well, I got a picture from him after a while.

BC: Yes. That is the one I gave you right there.

GB: Yes, right.

BC: Sure. That is the one he sent to me for you. In fact, he sent me two of them. I got one up there also. So, yes. So, now it has got a good home in New York.

GB: Yes. It'll be there long after I'm gone, I hope [laughter].

BC: New York. Now, when you prepare sturgeon, I do not know if you have any special recipes or anything that you –

GB: Well, when his dad and his uncles and them all went, they used to cut them up into an inch steak. Then they'd freeze them in water until they used them. Then they'd cut off all the fat and the red meat and whatever. But it still, at times, didn't taste really good. So, we talked with Wally and Annie, how they did it. She cuts it about a quarter-inch thick then dips it in egg and milk and then the flour and just fries it then. I've never found another way that tastes as good.

BC: Is that right? That is all you do with it.

GB: Right.

BC: Just season it and that is it.

GB: Right. It's really, really good. I know we've had people over for sturgeon. They just couldn't believe how good it tasted [laughter].

BC: Yes, I know. My mom would make it about the same way. She would brown it. She put it in egg and milk and whatever, maybe cracker crumbs or something. Then she would brown it in a pan. Then put it in the oven and just slowly let it bake just so it was nicely done.

GB: Well, with it only being a quarter-inch thick, by the time you brown it, it was done.

BC: It is done. That is right.

GB: Right. It was done. But I know I haven't had anybody that didn't like it [laughter].

BC: I know.

GB: In fact, they're usually asking for more when you've run out [laughter].

BC: I know. This year is a bad year for me. I did not get any at all. I do not even have anyone that got one that I could get a taste of.

GB: I know. After Lester died and Kenny bought his shanty, then we used to always take some to Jane. When she lived in Mount Calvary there, took some there. Then even when she was in the nursing home because she didn't have anybody to get any for her anymore either [laughter].

BC: That is right. I know it.

GB: But, yes. I said for someone like me to get a fish like that – because in a way, I felt bad for my husband just because he fished every year and every year and every year. I come along first time, and you end up with something like that. It's like a slap in the face, you might say [laughter].

BC: [laughter]

GB: But I guess it was beginner's luck. I don't know. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Like I said, I'd never seen one really in the water before. When this one came out right under my feet right there, I was looking [laughter]. I thought, "My God, that has to be the sturgeon because who's got a head that big?" It looked like it was huge, and it was. But I knew it then.

BC: Oh, it was huge [laughter].

GB: But it was amazing. But like I said, when it dived, you might say, to the bottom, I said it looked in the distance just like you see when they spear sharks. That's exactly what it reminded me of. The way they twist and turn.

BC: Yes. I had seen them. I was with my uncle when he got a big one. It would go down in the mud and out back up under the ice so fast. They would be moving.

GB: Well, this one, it didn't get a chance. Because I watched it for that little bit and I thought I better get it up [laughter]. It was not bad getting it up until I got it up out of the hole. Then you needed actually more hands. But I did it by myself. I don't think a lot of people believe that [laughter].

BC: Oh, yes, I believe you did that. I know how it goes. I know.

GB: Yes. I said I couldn't believe it. I had both hands full. I had the door to open and chair to get out of the way [laughter]. Everything went flying.

BC: Do you remember any time on the lake when the conditions were bad? I remember when you drive on ice across cracks or –

GB: Yes. I think it was 1988. It was really warm in February. It had been in the 50s. You'd stand on top of the ice and the snow. Just standing there talking, you could sink in 4 or 5 inches eventually. I think Kenny got an 88-pounder too that year. But when we were getting off the lake, we were waiting in line behind this whole bunch of trucks waiting to go over the bridge. I think it was at Calumetville. All of a sudden, just watching the ice, you could see the ice like a wave. I told him, I said, "Get out of here." We came down as far as Pipe. We got off at Pipe that year. But, yes, it was bad [laughter]. That's the only year I remember it really being bad. It's been where you're having that snow on the ice, and it's been really slippery.

BC: When the ice rolls and it looks like rubber, it rolls.

GB: Yes [laughter]. I didn't want to be there.

BC: It is not a place to stop. You better keep driving.

GB: There were just so many waiting. I bet there were about six, seven, eight cars ahead of us that were waiting to get over the bridge. Watching him, I thought, "Move on over and get out of here [laughter]. So, we did. But I was never so glad to get on dry land that year. I keep telling my husband I'm really a chicken at heart [laughter].

BC: Oh, not really. I will tell you that lake is to be watched.

GB: Oh, I know. That was one thing my brother always said too. He always fished at the Fox River, and he fished at Winnebago. He said, "Make sure you get off it when you think it's time. Don't wait."

BC: Now, also, I was wondering if you had any pictures? Now, maybe that picture that you had when I took that fish to New York?

GB: I've got an album at home with pictures in. Plus, we might have some loose ones. I think Kenny's got some pictures of other fish and other times on the lake.

BC: Kenny said something that he had pictures of cars that were broken through the ice or something.

GB: Yes. My daughter's got most of the pictures right now. I'm going to go through the ones she's got because she didn't find that one. But I remember we had one where I think – was it Bill Jensen who was trying to get a truck out? He had to build a thing over it to get it out.

BC: I would like that as well.

GB: So, I think we've got that picture someplace. I'll have to look it up, that's all.

BC: Yes. Because that would be something real interesting. It would go right in this book with the story of your fish and picture of your fish. That would be nice to have.

GB: Well, I'm sure we've got some of those.

BC: Yes.

GB: [laughter]

BC: I know you've got a picture of you about 1:00 a.m. or 2:00 a.m. of that day. I know you have it.

GB: [laughter] Oh, yes.

BC: After getting that fish. But if you could some way –

GB: Yes, I'll go through those. I've got the book at home. Then I know there were some loose pictures too. My daughter might have some of those. But I'll go through them.

[end of transcript]