

Bill Buksyk Oral History  
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Interviewer: KK – Dick Koerner  
Transcriber: NCC

Dick Koerner: Together over the years. We're just going to chat a little bit about sturgeon and sturgeon stories and see how it works out for the sturgeon history program. So, Bill, I am going to start out asking when and where were you born?

Bill Buksyk: I was born in Neenah, August 26, 1930.

DK: Wow. I know where you live in Neenah. So, how did you get interested in sturgeon spearing? Or if you do any sturgeon fishing [inaudible]?

BB: I guess my first time out was with my older brothers, they were ardent sturgeon spearkers. I was just out of high school, and he says, "Well, why don't you come out? We need a strong arm." So, I went out on the ice with my brother, Dave. As we approached the area where they were cutting a hole, I could only see Elmer from the waist up. I thought, "What in the world is – kind of a sport is this?" Well, as it was years ago, they didn't have the saws and all the modern equipment that we have today. They chipped their ice out all by hand. That was a pretty cold year. So, there was some 30 inches of ice, and he was standing in the hole, throwing the ice out. I thought, wow, I thought he'd fell in. So, I drove up to the hole and started talking to him, and he said, "Well, come on muscles, we'll get you working here." So, I got in there and grabbed that chisel and two pokes, and I went through. Did I get a hallelujah for that? Because I went through too quick, they said, "You're supposed to get almost all the ice out. So, you got, maybe an inch on the bottom, and then you go through." I said, "Okay. I didn't know." So, I was – that was one learning experience that I never – I'll never do that again.

DK: Yeah. That is a good story. I remember doing the same thing – similar. Who would you say taught you how to spear? Your dad, or brother, or friend?

BB: Probably, my older brother (ElMarie?). Dave just, kind of, tagged along with him till we finally got our own shanty a few years later. But I fished with Elmer for the first few years till I got the hang of it. He showed me what to do, and how to throw the spear and whatnot. Then those days, they had the shanties with the (cupel?) on the top. You don't see any of those – rarely anymore because they had pretty long spear shafts at that time. Now, it's just a short, 6-foot, 7-foot spear that you hang in the water or whatever. But in those days that cupel was stuck up in the air 7 feet, 8 feet, and you could have quite a shaft on the spear.

DK: Bill, how has the sport changed since you started spearing? Think it changed much?

BB: Well, yeah. I guess there's a lot of things that have happened since I started to fish. I'm 76 now, and I started when I was 18. So, that makes fifty-eight years out on the lake. I guess when I started out, it was a case of some years we could see, some years we couldn't see. Some years the water was pretty murky, and then the visibility was poor. But we could spear two fish at the time. I never got two in one year. I've got one and missed one but in one season. The sport has changed in that we have much more modern equipment now to cut our holes, and so we can move around a little more. But basically, that and the excellent jobs that our DNR and (Ron Brook?), namely, that really done an excellent job in helping control the spearing of the fish because there were seasons when the water was clear, when they just – they got a lot of sturgeon. If that would have happened in successive seasons, it could have hurt our sturgeon population.

DK: Right. Bill, how many sturgeons have you speared in those fifty-eight years? I will go back then maybe –

BB: I think twenty-five. [laughter] This is, kind of, another story because my son, Brad, is so lucky. He's got that proverbial horseshoe where – and he's gotten twenty-six. He's 40 years old. So, I say he puts his time in but so do I. But he just seems to be lucky. He's speared a couple in one year. In those years, we maybe did some things we weren't supposed to do, we filled tags and stuff. You know how that goes, but whatever. He's a good spearer, but this year on his birthday, he missed two. So, –

DK: Wow.

BB: – that was, well, not a happy birthday for Brad.

DK: How many have you missed, or had on a spear and lost? Can you recall that?

BB: I had a big one. I know it was 100 pounder because I had speared a few fish before that. Then there was a gentleman, his name was Busk?). I can't remember his first name. But he stopped in to just visit and see all he could see, and a fish come through high. He says, "There is one." I said, "Yeah, I see it." I grabbed a spear and laid it down on the floor and gave it a sail. I hit the spear and – I hit the fish in the tail, one time, way in the back. I had him, got him back, worked him around in the hole. He was, "Don't lose him, don't lose him." I was trying not to, but I was young and excited. But anyhow, I got him in the hole and got him turned. He was crisscrossed across the hole. He stretched from one corner to the other. He was big, he was big. So, then he tried gaffing at him. I said, "Well, you better not miss him because he's going to get off." He was thrashing. I could feel the spear clanking against the ice. All of a sudden, sad but true, he got off.

DK: Yeah.

BB: So, I lost that fish.

DK: Well, everybody's goal, I know – all the spearers that I have talked to, they always seemed to have the goal to get is 100 pounder. That seems to be the goal for everybody. I have not achieved that yet, but close. But how about you, what is your biggest one?

BB: The biggest one was 86 pounds. Then Brad says, "Well, I'll have to beat that dad." So, the following year, he did. He got one 91 pounds up on Poygan. I kidded him, and I said, "Poygan fish don't count."

DK: [laughter] If you only could for two hours a day – I will forget that we got half day seasons now, but when we speared a lot of years, all day. You and I, I know, spent most of those days in the shanty. But if you only could spear for two hours a day, what's your favorite two hours stretch?

BB: I would say the most fish that – generally, the most fish that I've gotten were between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

DK: That is exactly what I say.

BB: Yeah.

DK: Exactly.

BB: I've never speared with people. Say, I came into the shack at 7:00 a.m., and all of a sudden, ten minutes later, there one was. I've never speared one that early.

DK: What is your most memorable experience spearing? You have one that – impossible shot that you made, or a prettiest fish? I mean, sometimes the weather dictates the picture of the hole, it lightens the hole up, and the sun shining, and clear ice. You can see some of those fish seem to have a glow about them. Then if you do not think of anything right now, we can come back to that and –

BB: Well, I guess my most memorable fish was a fish I got off of the Neenah Lake. Dave and I were working four-hour shifts. He worked the morning shifts or fished, and then, I had worked the morning. I came out at 11:00 a.m. At 12:00 p.m., my older brother came out. Of course, he had come from work. He had a couple of bottles of shorty O'Connell's with him. He was clanking around with the bottles. I said, "Elmer, quit making so damn much noise." So, all of a sudden, I had a sailor corks, sir. He was sailing that thing, and sailing it, and sailing, and sailing it. So, I said, "Elmer, would you please leave that thing alone. You're going to chase them all away." All of a sudden, he says, "Okay." He says, "I'll get us a beer." So, the corks are wandering out. It was a nice sailor cork. I lost it a year later, but it came back into the hole. This fish came in right after it. It was the prettiest fish, I guess, I'd ever seen. It was like you said, the sun was shining. I was facing the south, and this fish came in. It was just beautiful. It was 69 pounds. All of a sudden, I said to Elmer, "Don't move. Don't move." He looked, and he says, "Oh my god." He says, "Don't miss it." It was a good shot. It was only about 8-foot, 9 foot down. So, I grabbed the spear, and I threw it. He says, "Oh, you missed it." I said, "Oh, no, I didn't. Just look at that line going out." So, he's like, "God, you got him." So, I pulled him in. He had the gaff hook, and he missed it the first time. I said, "Elmer, don't fuck around." I said, "That thing could get off on us." I had hit him good, right in the middle of the back. So, all of a sudden, the second time he got him. [laughter] I had a little lip on the edge of my door for when you get out. Well, he tripped on that and fell, and the fish fell on top of him and – it was just kind of hilarious. So, he took the fish and went – he said, "I'm going to take it and showed it to my brother – our brother, (Nabi?)". I said, "Okay." I said, "I'll see you later." Well, he left, and he didn't come back. Well, finally, Dave had worked till 4:00 p.m., and he come out. (Daringer) had stopped in to see me and congratulated me. That year, we could have to fish, we two tags. So, Dave says, "Well, where did Elmer go with it?" I said, "I don't know but I'm getting a little worried." I said, "That was 1:30 p.m. and he's still not back." So, he says, "Well, I'll go see what's going on." So, he cut – and he didn't come back. So, all of a sudden, I left. I couldn't stand it anymore. So, I drove to where my brother, Norman's shack was, and there was this wet spot. The ice had, kind of, shifted and cracked, and all of a sudden, there, his tracks went right

through it. Out in the middle, I could see a hat. I thought, "Oh my God, that's Elmer's project." Because I couldn't see it, I was close to it. Nabi's shack was on the other side. So, I swung around it, pulled up to the shack. I never even shut my car off. I ran up to the shack, I said, "What's going on?" I said, "Where's my brother, Elmer, and what happened?" He says, "Just come in and settle down." I can't remember. Nabi had gone in and helped them with it. Elmer had hit this slush spot and the front of the car jumped up on top of it, and the truck – the fish was in the trunk of the car. The trunk flew open, and luckily the fish was trying to swim forward because it was in a couple feet of water. So, then old Schindler, Jack Schindler, he'd come out with his record. He says, "Well, somebody better spear that fish." He said, "That's going to get out of the trunk." So, then they speared it the second time.

DK: Wow, for good.

BB: Yeah. So, then I – we proceeded to go to (Burby Traders?) and have a few brews and whatnot, but that was – an end to the fish was I'd brought it into the tavern a little half a dozen times. Finally, I said, "Well, it's got to be 9:00 p.m. Guys, we better get home and get this fish cleaned." The last time I took it in and out, I didn't lock my trunk, dumb. So, we get home, and Nabi says, "Well, bring the fish in. Bill, let's get this thing going." I said, "There isn't any fish in that drunk." Well, it was gone. So, we went back to Traders, ready to tear the place apart. All of a sudden, I get a phone call, then this person says, "Bill, if you'll go home and go under – look underneath the steps in the basement, your fish is there." So, I don't know till this day who did it, but I got a good idea. So, that was quite a story.

DK: Yeah. For sure. You and I both know being on the lake, you never know when the weather is going to change the conditions. You got any horror stories on getting lost in a blinding snow or fog, or ice shifting, crossing cracks or –

BB: Well, I guess I had one incident. My wife was pretty close to baby time, and I wanted to go fishing. So, I said, well – I felt I didn't want to leave her at home. So, I thought the next best thing was to take her along. So, I did. I took her out on the ice. I talked to (Smolz? 00:14:24) son on the way out. He said, "Bill, the lake has been shifting." He said, "Better be careful, especially with your wife being pregnant." So, we went off at Lake Park, out front of [inaudible] where I was, kind of, weaned on this sport. [laughter] The ice shifted, and it just rumbled, and it roared. My wife was, "Oh my god, what was that?" Well, it's nothing. It's just – Ice shifted. I looked out the door and here it was piled up about 6 feet to where I was supposed to go off the ice. So, I said, "We better get out of here." So, we went in. She said, "Well, now what are we going to do? We can't – What's that up ahead?" That's where the ice shifted, and it's raised up in the air. Smolz was on the other side. He knew I was out there because we were fishing next to one another. So, he directed me off. He said, "You're going to have to go about halfway to Waverly and then come back in the water." The water was bottom. I mean, it was – the ice had shifted, and there was a sandbar there. It was right on the shore. I was afraid it was going to be baby time right on Lake Winnebago, but we did get off. I guess that was the time that I was scared but I didn't tell her. [laughter]

DK: Yeah, I hear you. Bill, you got any certain superstitions, or things that you always got to do a certain – setup a shanty in a certain way, face a certain direction, or wear a certain shirt? I

know a guy who had – speared a fish when – he realized when he got home, he had one blue sock and one green sock. From then on, that's the way he came out on the ice.

BB: [laughter] I guess whatever works. I always had my favorite – I like to face the north. I don't know. I guess that was – my older brother has always said, "Well, it keeps you from the sun, and the shadows and whatnot. But if you face the south, sometimes you get – lake will start to thaw and whatnot." So, for that reason – I guess it's just a habit – I always faced the north.

DK: Yeah, I do too.

BB: As far as couture, I got a favorite yellow and black couture that there was a sailor fish that I lost. I've got a backer couture. It's kind of marbled green and yellow. I've had two fish come in for that. So, I guess that's one of my favorite sculpture's couture.

DK: Good. Hey, kinds of illegal activities that you know of that are good stories that you have heard. You do not have to mention names, of course. If you cannot think of any, we will go on.

BB: Well, I was over visiting Elmer, and Elmer says, "Well." I said, "How'd you do?" He says, "Well, I've seen a small one." But I said, "I'll let him go, this and that." But he says – now, all of a sudden, I heard another car pull up, and here it was Dave. Elmer says, "Don't say nothing, but there's one in there." He had a big, kind of, a fiber barrel out. He used to bring his wood out. He had an old wood burning stove. It was an old – from a heater that he had in the basement. I think it was 200 pounds if it was a pound. I said, "Elmer, get rid of that thing and go to gas like the rest of us." But anyhow, Dave comes in, and he says, "How's it going?" Elmer says, "Well, not too bad." But he says, "I'm getting a little cold." He says, "Why don't you go out and get us a couple of sticks of wood?" That burner, you throw two sticks of wood in there, a foot long, and it'll drive you out of there. So, all of a sudden, Dave says, "You son of a – so and so." You were here, this fish was in that barrel. [laughter] So, Elmer says, "Well, it's an extra or something." We won't get into that, but – because we were waiting for Dave to use a tag and so – we always made sure that our fish get tagged. I mean, it was maybe illegal, but I guess I did it, everybody did it. I could fish all the time. Some people could only fish at the weekends. So, if we got a fish, we'd fill in their tags. Maybe it wasn't right, but we did it.

DK: Yeah. Bill, when you got your fish, of course you eat it, some people do not like it. But do you like to taste of the sturgeon? What is your favorite recipe?

BB: Well –

DK: How do you it prepared?

BB: I like to steak it, half, three quarters of an inch, whatever you desire. But I like it deep fried. My wife has a batter that she makes and what have you. I prefer it that way. I always said – talking about them 100 pounders, I always said if I ever got that big guy, I'd probably try smoking some of it. But I always felt that it was too good just staked and deep fried. But you got to be careful cleaning it. You got to cut all that yellow fat away. Now, I have a skinny knife that follow me down to work. It's a hook knife, I call it, and you can skin the fish. Years ago,

we used to scrub them with soda water and all that stuff. With a knife, it would only stay sharp for about two cuts. So, now, we strip the fish and take the skin off before we start cutting it up, and then we take all the skin off, and then – but there again, you got to make sure that you get all that yellow fat, because that's where the bad taste is. People that say they tasted terrible probably didn't clean it right?

DK: Yeah. What do you enjoy the most about sturgeon spearing?

BB: Well, I guess it's the hustle and the bustle, and the excitement of going out and sometimes battling elements, and snowstorms, and shoves, and cracks, and putting bridges out and stuff. I guess that's all part of it. I remember some time when Dick and I would be putting a tree line out, which it would start out with six guys, and it usually end up with Dick and I being the last ones [laughter] at 4:00 p.m. But the tree line got out. I guess that's part of it. I guess I looked forward to just being with the guys.

DK: That is right, camaraderie with the boys.

BB: Excellent.

DK: Well, Bill, that was a nice interview. Thank you for your interview, and your time. We will see on the river when we go guard those sturgeon this weekend.

BB: We got to take care of that fish. That was sure a pleasure, Dick.

DK: Okay. Thanks a lot, Bill.

BB: Okay.

[end of transcript]