

William Casper Oral History
Date of Interview: April 11, 2007
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Length of Interview: 38:35
Interviewers: PM – Paul Muche
Transcriber: NCC

Paul Muche: Today's date is April 11th, 2007. A little bit of a snowstorm today. We got about 2 inches on the ground, not collecting on the road yet, but there is about 3 to 5 inches predicted for tonight. Today, we are with William Casper, Bill Casper.

William Casper: Bill.

PM: We are at his home. The address here is – what is it, N8826?

WC: Bluegill Drive.

PM: Bluegill Drive in the town of Taycheedah at his home. Usually, Bill is doing the interviewing. But today, he is switching places here, and he is the interviewee. I get to ask him a couple questions instead of him asking the questions.

WC: Right.

PM: Just to get started, Bill, did you originally come from this area?

WC: Right. I live right where we are right now, on a farm, which is up on a highway right here, east shore of Lake Winnebago. Was born right in that house up here in 1931, January 29th, and spent my whole life here except for Korean War time, four years of that stuff. That's basically –

PM: As far as sturgeon spearing, how did you get started in that?

WC: Well, I was living on the lake shore. My uncles were Langenfelds and big hunters, big fishermen, and would take me along hunting and fishing a lot. In the wintertime, of course, when sturgeon fishing started, I would go with them. I started when I was – I wanted to go when I was 7, but my mother said, "No, you can't. There's a rule. You can't go on the lake until you're eight."

PM: [laughter]

WC: Which was, I found out, was just ma talking.

PM: Back then, there probably were not very many people that even went.

WC: That's right. It was amazing. My uncle, Ambrose Langenfeld, would come out from Milwaukee. He's my mother's brother. In 1939 was the first year I went out. He took me along fishing. We drove out on the lake, pulled this big old shanty out with a DeSoto car. We cut the hole. We'd chisel two holes. Then sawed the block by hand. He'd sink that block. I was too small to really do much with him. But I was there and learned what was going on.

PM: Back then compared to now, you probably did not move too many times.

WC: No, we didn't. No. The only time we'd have to eat fish, mainly on weekends because he worked in Milwaukee. So, he would come out here. Then he and I would go. I'd just wait for

Friday night, and he'd show up. He'd sleep at our home up here. Early Saturday morning, my mom would make breakfast, and we'd be gone. We'd head out, and we'd go fishing.

PM: Your mom and dad, they were farmers then?

WC: Right. There were seven of us kids in that family. I was the youngest of the boys. I have a sister, Mary Lou.

PM: [inaudible]

WC: Yes.

PM: She lives on the homestead?

WC: The one younger than I am.

PM: Very good. So, you got out pretty young. What age did you spear your first one? Do you remember that?

WC: Oh, at 14.

PM: Fourteen? That is pretty young.

WC: Yes.

PM: Back then, was it 14 years old like it is now?

WC: No, no. I don't –

PM: There probably was not an (age re?).

WC: No. I don't think they cared.

PM: [laughter] I know. Yeah.

WC: No. There was no age restriction at all. You needed a fishing license. All you really had to do was go and buy tags. Tags were a nickel apiece. You could buy five. When I first started fishing and when I was 14, my uncle, Ambrose, gave me his shanty, gave me his equipment, his spear, everything, decoys, everything. He was a pretty good mechanic. He made himself a new spear, built a new shanty, and the whole works. I started fishing with that. In fact, I always had the name Ambrose on the front, on top of my shanty. One year, I speared a fish. A guy came over. It was in the first year, I think. He's yelling, "Ambrose. Boy, Ambrose." He always called me Ambrose. [laughter] He never did learn my name.

PM: You said back then they made their own spears.

WC: Yes.

PM: Were those flying barbs yet or not?

WC: No. No.

PM: It was just prong.

WC: Most of them were made from pitchfork tines. A lot of them would take pitchforks, silage fork, which was wider. They heated up enough not to ruin the temper in it. But they heated up enough to bend everything straight and cut them off and make the –

PM: Tines.

WC: Yes. Ambrose would silver solder little tines on them. That's the way my spear is now that I have still. That's the only spear I ever use now.

PM: Really? So, you do not use anything with flying barbs?

WC: No. [laughter] No, I have nothing with flying barbs. I should. The big bad one is going to come someday.

PM: [laughter]

WC: But I've never had trouble. I never had trouble. Of course, I learned from the first day in the shanty. I sat down like every other kid. My toes were sticking over the hole.

PM: He yelled at you right away.

WC: He said, "Number one, never have your toes sticking out over that hole. Because the first thing, when a fish comes," he says, "you're going to pull your feet back, and they'll be gone."

PM: That is interesting. That is one of the first things my father taught me.

WC: To this day, you remember if anybody's in the shanty with you. I just tell them, "Well, just keep your feet back." [laughter]

PM: That is funny that you mention that because that is one of the only things – I mean, my dad, he was always on that. "Keep your feet out of the hole."

WC: Every day, when we'd go fishing when I was real young, at the end of the day, I'd kind of look forward to it. He would take paper plates. He'd put a couple of nails in them and drop in the hole. They'd go swimming down. Then I'd spear at them. If I didn't hit them, well, he'd spear them and pick them up, see. That's how I learned how to just say, "Just leave it alone, leave it."

PM: Good practice.

WC: Not throw the spear. He said, "You just give it a good shove." To this day, you hear him saying it. [laughter]

PM: Very good.

WC: That's a lot of years. Just think, I'm 76. How many years is that? My God. I was 8. It's been a lot of years when you think about it.

PM: Yes, it is.

WC: I really went out every year. I mean, some years, it was so bad. We wouldn't fish long. We'd move off. There was so much water on the lake. It's a lot of years of fishing.

PM: Way back then, the majority of the people that speared, would you say, were farmers or –

WC: Yeah. Many, many farmers, yeah. We'd go down at Pipe. That's where we'd go out on the lake, at Calumet Harbor. We could buy our tags at the tavern. (Howard Manderscheid?) ran the tavern, and Min was his wife. When you get a fish, it was customary to take it in there. You carry the fish right in the tavern. She always had something lying on the floor, papers, or something, throw your fish there. She'd give you a bottle of wine if you brought it in, which cost about fifty, sixty cents, I guess. That was to encourage you to bring the fish in. A lot of the fishermen would – the place would be packed.

PM: Just like it is nowadays.

WC: Just like it is now.

PM: It brings the people in.

WC: It brings the people in.

PM: So, through the years, you became accustomed. You liked the sport of sturgeon spearing?

WC: Yes. Unfortunately, the first time I went out –

PM: [laughter]

WC: The first weekend I went out with my uncle, we got a 104-pounder. I mean, this sort of sets the pace for you for the rest of your life. I probably would have been better off had we seen nothing for a couple of years.

PM: [laughter]

WC: I don't think I would have liked the sport. [laughter] But that's how it was.

PM: Just starting to get into Sturgeon for Tomorrow, you are one of the founding fathers.

WC: Yes. Well, when I started that in 1970, I never told anybody this, but my first time I was going to do this was during sturgeon fishing in 1976. I even talked to Paul Langenfeld who was the son to my uncle, Ambrose, who took me up.

PM: Your cousin?

WC: Yeah, he's my cousin. We were sitting in a tavern at where Jim and Linda's is now. I told him what I had planned on. I said, "I think I'm going to have some meetings and see if I can get the fishermen organized." It was a year. A whole year went by. In February fishing of [19]77 is when I actually started. But I honestly thought of it a year before. Until this, I never mentioned it to anybody. I mean, that's when I started. What I did, I came off the lake. I just decided I'm going to have a meeting. I came off the lake. I pulled my shanty home because I wanted to catch the fishermen that were still on the lake. I had printed up a bulletin. I went to EconoPrint in Fond du Lac and printed up a bulletin that merely tells fishermen that we're going to have a meeting at the Taycheedah Town Hall. That was the start of it. This is the bulletin. I'll be giving that to our writer, Lisa. In fact, this whole book, I'll give to her.

PM: So, that was in 1977 that the –

WC: Yes. That was when I –

PM: – the first chapter.

WC: Yes.

PM: That was when you first put it together.

WC: That's right.

PM: The first dinner?

WC: No.

PM: When was the first dinner?

WC: That was the first thought of it. What I did, when this bulletin went out, I had this meeting shortly after season ended, early March. I was in kind of a hurry. I thought, "Now, we could convince the DNR. We can get some eggs ready in spring." But things don't go that fast. At the first meeting that we had at Taycheedah Town Hall, 150 people showed up.

PM: Really?

WC: Yes. Dan Folz was there. I sort of ran the meeting. What we did was I introduced all the

fishermen to the DNR. Dan Folz showed up with Gordy Priegel from Madison. Believe it or not, 150 fishermen were in favor of starting a program. Two DNR people were absolutely dead against it.

PM: That being Dan and someone else or –

WC: Dan and Priegel from Madison. Priegel was supposedly the foremost individual –

PM: Fishery biologist?

WC: Yes. He was an individual who knew – just cut that for a second if you would. I want to be sure I'm talking about the right guy. It could have been Wirth. Actually, I was wrong about it being Gordy Priegel. It was Tom Wirth, W-I-R-T-H, from Madison who came up and was with Dan Folz at that meeting.

PM: Dan, that time, he was centered out of Fond du Lac?

WC: No. Dan was out of Oshkosh. Yeah. Dan was out of Oshkosh and worked in the capacity almost that Ron Brooks has today, similar situation.

PM: But they were against it saying that it would not work?

WC: They were against it. Well, they were against it, I think mainly because we sort of got the impression that we were stepping on their tender ground here. It was DNR –

PM: They control –

WC: – control. They didn't want a bunch of fishermen to come along and say, "Hey, here's –"

PM: So, that is in 1976 or [19]77 that first meeting was held. Back then, do you know that had to be one of the first – you did not have Turkeys for Tomorrow.

WC: No.

PM: You did not have Walleyes for Tomorrow.

WC: No.

PM: You did not have Whitetails for Tomorrow.

WC: No.

PM: Did you have anything, or where did the idea come from?

WC: Well, Ducks Unlimited was out. That was it. Yeah. They were there. Even there's an article in the paper that I have right here that I was asking, when I was sort of talking to a

reporter the first time, that I didn't have a name for this organization. It was in the paper that I didn't have a name, but I didn't want it like Ducks Unlimited. I didn't want unlimited. I just wanted something different. Lo and behold, my uncle – different uncle, brother to this Ambrose I've been talking about. He was a priest in farm life. He called me. His name was Father Henry Langenfeld. He called me. He said, "Why –" he was reading. He read this article. He happened to read this very article right here. [laughter] Anyway, he said, "Why don't you call it Sturgeon for Tomorrow?" He said, "That's what you're trying to do." [laughter] Boy, I'll tell you it's –

PM: So, he is the one that came up with that?

WC: He's the one that – yeah.

PM: Excellent.

WC: Yeah. It was just when that article was in the paper, that's when he called me.

PM: That first chapter that was started, that was –

WC: Yeah. We used to have our fundraising dinners at Kloten. It's just up the highway here, north out of Quinney area. You head east, between Quinney and Stockbridge and the Kloten Oasis. The first year, we had four hundred-some people. We couldn't get them all in the place. The first group that got there sat down to eat. They all had to get up –

PM: To let more people –

WC: – and stand around the outside of the hall and let the rest of the people sit down. Then we had door prizes. We had a raffle or whatever. The dinner cost \$7.50. The ticket costs that. I think we paid about \$4 a plate. So, we made a few dollars. So, that was our first fundraiser. But it didn't work. I mean, you couldn't ask people to get up and stand in the corner somewhere. That was like two hundred people had to get up and two hundred sat down.

PM: That would be a good problem to have today. [laughter]

WC: [laughter] Yeah. After a few years – we did that a couple of years. Then we moved to Kiel, to the Millhome. That's where we are to this day. Well, we've been up to 560 people at one time. Now, it's down again to four hundred-some, which is fine. It's easy enough to manage.

PM: But there are also three other chapters.

WC: There's three other chapters now. Yeah. The farmland chapter that you're in and the Southwest, it's called, and then the Oshkosh chapter, then the northern half, which is Wayne Hoelzel's game up there. Yeah.

PM: Do you know who was on the board of directors at first?

WC: Well, when it first started, that absolute first night when we had this meeting, after it was over with, I remember people brought some Schneiders that had a cheese factory out near Chilton area or something. They brought cheese, crackers, and beer. They brought all kinds of stuff thinking, "Hey, this is a big deal. We've got to –" so, anyway, we all were standing around talking and this and that. Danny Groeschel or Bob Blanck came to me, from Blanck's Supper Club. He says, "Hey, I'm going to help you with this. I'll be on your board with this." Dan Groeschel said he would help, and Lloyd Lemke and Vic Schneider. We were the ones that started – actually the directors in it. So, it sort of took off from there. When we had our first fundraising dinner, I invited Dan Folz. He would come and talk. At that time, the DNR was looked at a little differently than now. I mean, now when they walk in, everybody kind of gathers around. They've got questions for Ron and this and that.

PM: They were your enemies back then.

WC: Yeah, absolutely. It was like bringing the enemy into this group. I mean, it was unreal. It all changed. All over the years, it just changed. Right now, we have Todd Schaller who comes. People get up. We volunteer to go on the street patrol, all that work. So, anyway.

PM: Very good. So, that was the first chapter here.

WC: Yes.

PM: The second chapter, that was Southwest?

WC: Yes.

PM: Then Oshkosh?

WC: Fritz went. Bob Blanck had talked to him and said, "Fritz, we've got so many people. You've got to start a chapter, take a little pressure off us." Because we had a waiting list of a couple hundred people that wanted to come. We just couldn't handle any more people.

PM: At that time, all the spears from all over the lake probably came –

[talking simultaneously]

WC: They wanted to come. When your chapter started over there on the Southwest corner, and they went to what is the Chapparral now, which is probably going to be taken down.

PM: Days are numbered.

WC: Days are numbered.

PM: [laughter]

WC: They had a couple years that we went there. Then they moved to the Holiday Inn Farm.

PM: That is really (odd to this day?).

WC: Let's get the pressure off again because we were both so loaded. Then Oshkosh started their chapter. Then Wayne Hoelzel, he's president of the northern chapter now. Wayne was a member of the Oshkosh Chapter. After being on the Oshkosh Chapter for quite some time, he then went back home where he lived in Appleton and started his own.

PM: Started his chapter.

WC: Yes. His first dinners had a thousand people in them.

PM: Really?

WC: Always had a thousand people, that big.

PM: Wow. That is incredible. I never knew there were that many people. This was the first year I got up there. I went to the dinner this year and that is the first time I was ever up there.

WC: Well, they're down now with numbers of people. But in those first years, a thousand people would show up.

PM: It is interesting to point out though that as we are talking here today, like we said, it is 2007, but the Upriver Lakes are attempting to put a chapter together. I believe that will go over big.

WC: Yeah.

PM: Because as we speak, this last season was the first time it is going to a lottery system. There is going to be fishing on the Upriver Lakes every year.

WC: It'll be there every year from now on with a limited number of fishermen, right?

PM: Through the years, we found that there have been a lot of changes. We used to be at full days. Now, we are down to half days. We have got harvest caps. We have got a shorter season. It used to go to March 1st. Now, it is a sixteen-day season starting from the second Saturday in February. Are you comfortable with all the changes or –

WC: Right. I am. Biggest and best, though, change of all. Even in the articles that I have, the newspaper articles, with things that happened over the years, the Department of Natural Resources had the idea that if we would raise the low end on the size limit – it used to be 40 inches, went to 45. They even talked at times – this comes from Worth in Madison – that they were going to raise it up to almost 50 inches. In order to curb this, you just spear a bigger fish. They wanted to hold and help this population of fish. But they didn't understand that this is not catch and release. These spears are made to kill a fish. That's the way they're built. You don't want to spear a fish and have them tear loose. So, I started a thing – I can't remember the year.

But it's been in effect for some time now. We should get the exact date. It's got to be seven, eight years ago at least that I wanted a 36-inch limit. Because I ran a survey at one of our dinners, I had little cards printed up. I put it at every one of our tables.

PM: This was how many years ago?

WC: I'd say eight years ago. I put this at the table. You would just check it off. You didn't need to write anything, name, nothing. I didn't want to know who was doing this. Just saying, "Did you spear a fish this past season that you had to throw back because it wasn't big enough?" At five hundred and some people, we passed out about 350. Because a lot of husbands and wives come to our dinner. I would only have one of the family fill this thing out, circulate it through the whole hall. When it came back, the results were so great. Some people speared three fish in a year and threw them back. Ron Brooks was there. When he saw these numbers, he calculated out. He said, "Bill, if these numbers are even close to being right, they're spearing two thousand fish a year in that lake and throwing them back." Just from that very little survey that I did. I still have all those survey cards.

PM: That is funny you mention that because since 1995, I just did it once. I usually get about, I'd say, fifty signatures every time somebody spears a fish. I have got a big board that says, "Doctor McGillicuddy board."

WC: Oh, sure. Yeah.

PM: I have them sign their name and the length and the weight. Everything is off the record, of course. I always said to them, "If you speared a small one, you put a star there." I know through the years – well, before when it was 45 inches, I have had at least five to ten on the board.

WC: Yeah. We always had little kids, I mean, younger boys come that were spearing. The question was, "Have you ever speared – or in the last season, did you spear a sturgeon that was undersized that had to be thrown back?" A little young boy must have filled it out because he said, "I never speared one. But my brother speared two. Then he got a big one," he said. That's what he wrote on his card. So, you can see, he would have been satisfied with that little fish. This way, the guy killed two fish and speared a bigger one that he took home. So, it was actually three dead fish from this one kid.

PM: That is a great point.

WC: To me, it was one of the best things that's ever happened. In fact, since we've done this, if Brooks is anywhere near right, if there's two thousand a year times eight is sixteen thousand fish are probably in that lake right now.

PM: Especially now with Upriver Lakes and –

WC: You can see the increase in the fish in the lake right now. I do believe that that had more to do with the sturgeon crop of Winnebago than almost anything. But the awareness of fishermen is very good. I mean, fishermen are a little more aware. Of course, there's always

people that'll spear and run and whatever they do with them. I don't know that.

PM: As far as the Upriver Lakes lottery, do you like how that is laid out or –

WC: I think so. It's going to take a few years to see. We've only had one year. To say that it's going to be the ultimate, we don't know that. If they start knocking off too many black-egged fish, then I'm not going to like it. Because I'm not in favor of – it's sort of a staging area to go up to the spawning grounds. If there's too many black-egged fish taken, then I'll probably in a few years want to see. We got to cut this down a little bit. [laughter] I can't say, one year, this was all right. I don't say it should ever be cut out. Just take what they're doing in Michigan, up at Cheboygan, Michigan, Black Lake. By the way, they've got a chapter of Sturgeon for Tomorrow up there. But they have a season on that lake where they allow five fish. They've got a lottery when five fish are taken. The first year they had the lottery, the first year they had it, the season was over in an hour. It was all done. They got five fish. They're done. You've probably fished up there. I don't know. But I've never had gone.

[talking simultaneously]

WC: I go up to their banquet every year, but I haven't –

PM: No, I have not had the opportunity.

WC: We don't want anything like that.

PM: One of the real changes through the years is, years ago, you used to be able to fish out of your sturgeon hole. Now, you cannot.

WC: Yeah.

PM: Did you [inaudible]?

WC: If you're talking years ago, years, years ago, when the first of February showed up, you couldn't fish in a shanty anymore when I was young. We really fought hard for it because there were cloudy years. It was great to take a kid out in a shanty. He could sit there with a line in the corner and jig and catch a walleye or two. It might have been very cloudy. You didn't see anything but at least catch a few fish. You could –

PM: Now, to clarify this, this was just in a sturgeon shanty.

WC: In the shanty, yes.

PM: This is while you are sturgeon fishing.

WC: Right. I do believe at that time, and I could be wrong, but I do believe at that time, you were not allowed to fish sturgeon at all or walleyes at all. They'd shut it right down –

PM: Really?

WC: – during sturgeon fishing. Then we fought – I shouldn't say we, but I mean I was involved in it – that we really wanted to be able to fish, mainly to take kids along and let them fish out in the shanty and this and that. So, we got a (Thule?). Well, lo and behold, how many years later, the big [laughter] thing happened on the lake where it was so cloudy, you couldn't see anything. They started bringing fish in. Then they realized, they're catching them, hook and line. It's the end of it again. It's too bad because it is kind of fun to sit in there –

PM: Yes, it is.

WC: – for a kid to fish or any grown-up to fish.

PM: Or at least they only have to sit half a day now. [laughter]

WC: Yes. Half a day now and go home.

PM: As far as the future of sturgeon spearing and the future of the sturgeon in general, what would be your biggest concern?

WC: Well, I don't see any problems anymore.

PM: It is set up pretty good right now.

WC: I think it's really good. I think it's a fun season now. You could fish until 12:00 p.m., 12:30 p.m. A lot of people are asking, "Why can't we start a half hour later and fish a half hour longer.?" But starting a half hour later, to me wouldn't work. Because people will be in the shanty and that's it. So, if they add a half hour to it, that wouldn't bother me. But I like it the way it is. I just like it the way it is now.

PM: It is pretty nice. There is a lot of thought that has gone into all the rule changes.

WC: Sure. I mean, you get out of there. You could do your thing.

PM: Very good. How many different ways have you eaten sturgeon?

WC: Oh, the best way. A lot of people like smoked sturgeon. It's got to be done absolutely right. I don't mind it smoked. But to me, we pan fry it to brown it. You brown the fish on both sides and then put it in an oven and sort of bake it.

PM: Bake it like that.

WC: Yes, that's the way I like it.

PM: You soak that in milk?

WC: Yeah, milk and egg.

PM: Beforehand?

WC: Milk and egg and – well, in milk, especially if the fish has been in the freezer for a long time. It seems, I think, you can put it in the milk overnight. That seems to take a little of the aftertaste out of it, whatever taste you get out of sturgeon.

PM: So, you prefer the pan fried over – well, unless it is done?

WC: Yes.

PM: Unless the smoking is done.

WC: Yeah. That's a good way to fix it. I don't know. I haven't gotten one in two years. So, I don't remember how it tastes like. [laughter]

PM: Well, I have to bring some over.

WC: [laughter] Yeah.

PM: Through the years, have you always sat with somebody? Or do you sit by yourself?

WC: I'd go by myself. But now, my neighbor across here has been fishing with me. He and I are both getting at an age where we each need a little help, so cutting holes. You drive out there, and you might get stuck and whatever. So, the two of us go together. We even have an agreement that if we get a fish that's 75 pounds or bigger, we'll put two tags on it. We'll go home. [laughter]

PM: That is right. You told me that.

WC: Yeah.

PM: Very good. Anything else that –

WC: No.

PM: – you like to add?

WC: Well, not really.

PM: I think we are at the best of times right now.

WC: I think so. Yes. I have a lot of information that I'm going to be giving that doesn't even need to be on here, but that I'm going to give to them, to the people to read. They can do their own writing from that. It'll fill a book.

PM: Bill, you were the president for Sturgeon for Tomorrow for quite some time. Just in the last couple of years, you stepped down.

WC: Yes. I just backed down, yeah.

PM: How many years were you there?

WC: Well, I was in there for twenty-seven years.

PM: Twenty-seven years. I appreciate all the work you have done.

WC: [laughter]

PM: It is for myself. I'm 35 years old right now. To see the fish out there now –

WC: Yeah. I don't think I was 35 when I started. I was 40. But I'm so glad that it worked out that we were able to learn – the learning of the raising of them, that was a story in itself. That'll be in this book that'll go to the DNR. They can put it in this book if they see fit.

PM: You have been up on the river tagging?

WC: Yes.

PM: You have been up there?

WC: Yes. I get up there with (Shay?) often. We were very involved, Sturgeon for Tomorrow, with the sturgeon patrol and that whole story.

PM: That is all pretty good. All right. Very good. Well, this is Paul Muche doing the interview. I do not know if I said that in the beginning or not. But that wraps it up for Bill Casper. I appreciate the opportunity, Bill. It is great.

WC: Yeah. Go ahead. There'll be more than now.

PM: We are out.

[end of transcript]