

Eric Cheslock Oral History
Date of Interview: August 2, 2007
Location: Hortonville, Wisconsin
Length of Interview: 33:22
Interviewers: MS – Unknown
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: The date is August 2nd, 2007, and I am interviewing Eric.

Eric Cheslock: Cheslock.

MS: Cheslock, of Hortonville, Wisconsin. We are going to talk about his experience sturgeon spearing and all the sled saw that he has. So, I would like to start out just by asking you, you know, your name, when you were born, where you were raised, kind of job you were in, the family, things like that.

EC: My name is Eric Cheslock. I was born in 1956. I grew up in the town of Menasha. Did a lot of fishing on Little Lake Butte Des Morts, some on Lake Winnebago. I've been working at (SCA Tissue). I've been there for twenty-eight years. I have six or five brothers or six boys in our family all together. Most of us hunt and fish.

MS: Spearing too?

EC: A couple of them spear with me once in a while.

MS: But you are pretty much the longest in spearing thing.

EC: Yes.

MS: Well, how did you pick it up? How did you get into it?

EC: I picked it up from a friend of mine that I met back in 1985. He was doing it and he got me into it, and I just went on from there. I really enjoyed it.

MS: Was it the full day season then when you –

EC: Yes. It was actually – the season was like sixteen days long and we actually took a vacation to go out there and sit.

MS: Now our work is under the sturgeon –

EC: No.

MS: Because nowadays, it can only be a day or two and the season –

EC: Right.

MS: – could be over. Is the sturgeon behind us here the one that you have caught?

EC: Yes. That was the last one. That's fit to four inches. I got that I believe in [19]84. No. I'm sorry, [19]94.

MS: How much of that one now weigh?

EC: That one, surprisingly, weighed about 51 pounds, I believe. I thought it would weigh more from the size of it, but –

MS: What was the limit there? What was the weight limit then like forty something?

EC: Well, the size limit back then was forty-five inches.

MS: Forty-five inches. Yes. That is nice. How many of you caught over the years?

EC: That was my second one. The first one I caught – I'm trying to think what year that was. That was only a couple years before. So, maybe [19]92. I should look back in the records. But actually, the year that only 700 was speared was the one that I got my first sturgeon. So, I'm pretty proud of that because only 700 were taken in the whole lake.

MS: Is there a story behind it? How did the day started? Was it something you get in the morning or was it right to end?

EC: Well, actually –

MS: How did you come into the whole – how do they happen?

EC: Actually, there's a little story behind it. I had my Springer Spaniel with me. It was just me and her. She was really antsy. She kept wanting to go on the shack and run around. So, I was kind of bombed up that I brought her because I couldn't sit and watch the hole. I always had to, you know, let her out and then three minutes later she wants to come back in. Then she always wants to go back out and she want to come back, and I have to go out and check for her. It just so happened that at that particular time, we were both sitting in the shack looking down the hall and this thing came up. I was in 18 feet of water and I could see about nine feet down. I had my corkscrew down – seven feet. This thing, once it came up from the bottom and checked out that folks and as soon as I saw it, you know, instantly, throwing spear.

MS: Was that the first time was your first one?

EC: That was the first one.

MS: [laughter] What was going through your mind when the first thing you first saw your first sturgeon come up there?

EC: It just happens so fast. It's just instantaneously. You grab the spear and it's almost like it's all over for it started. So, it's really weird, the throwing the spear part. But then grabbing the line and pulling one off, that's all a different story. Because then you feel this tight on the end of the row. You don't know what you really have until you get to see it.

MS: Did you even get a good view of it when you came up in the hole?

EC: No. I could just see the nose come up and I knew it was a sturgeon. I could just see it. Because the water was really murky, and it wasn't really clear like some years. I just threw the spear and was lucky enough to get it.

MS: Do you have it like down just little bit Fraser, or did you have a pretty close to Fraser kind of speared in there? You know, some people can only put something like a cup of feed into the water or some people like to get all down low.

EC: Right. On that one, I actually followed that spear down and probably right before I was able to spear connected, I probably let go of the spear. Because it was pretty, you know, seven feet down, I think my screws were about six feet long.

MS: They were trying to run on you anything or was it pretty easy to get out?

EC: Well, that one, that one was forty-nine inches long and it was kind of a skinny fish. That one, being the first one, I didn't know what to expect. So, I took it really easy. But as it was – that I had a good hit on it, that wasn't going to get off. But it's really a rush when you're pulling on that rope and there's something tugging back.

MS: [laughter] Since it was kind of skinny, small fish, it was not – it did not put a big fight?

EC: Not huge, no.

MS: Yes.

EC: But it's one of the most exciting things, you know. Regardless of that, I could imagine something like a 180-pounds on the end of a line –

MS: Like that one you have got? [laughter] Did you mount that one or did you eat that one or –

EC: The first one we ate. Then the second one, I thought to myself that I'm lucky enough to get the second one. I should have this mounted in case I don't get another one. So far, I haven't gotten another one. So –

MS: How do you how did you compare it? Did you have a recipe or how did you about it to do –

EC: My favorite way is to put it on the grill – just on a Weber grill. A little bit of salt and pepper when it's done and dip it in butter. Then I also smoke some of it.

MS: Do you have it cleaned professionally or do you know how to clean?

EC: No. I clean.

MS: Okay. Great. Careful to cut away all the yellow –

EC: Right.

MS: Right. Okay. How did you come across your shanty? Did you buy that or did you build your own shanty or –

EC: The shanty I had, no. I have a friend of mine had a shanty and I asked him where he got it and a guy he knew built it. So, I called this guy and asked him to build me one. It's the style that I was looking for. I can handle it all by myself. It's on wheels. I can go around and roll it for fifty-five miles an hour with it. It's just a good, sturdy shanty and something that – like I said, I can handle it all by myself. So, if I need to move right away or get it off the ice, I can just go and do it. I don't have to try and gather the people up to help me.

MS: It is like a flat roof on or a gable or is it a hip one or –

EC: This one has a little gable roof on it. Nothing fancy.

MS: Keep a low at all or is it tall enough where you do not have to stick anything up that – some of them have, like, that little keep a low on the top.

EC: Okay. No, mine – yes, mine doesn't have that. It's just that the way it's designed, you know, the spear hangs from the ceiling and, you know, sits in a water a little bit.

MS: Then we see it kind of taking out the whole –

EC: Right.

MS: Yes. Okay. Okay. Tell me about the story about the sled saw that you got.

EC: Oh, the sled saw, my brother's father-in-law was a big sturgeon spear from the Hilbert area. He's passed away now but he let Todd use the saw, that's my brother. We would use that to cut our holes. Well, then my brother got out of it, got out of spearing for a while and then I was using the saw. Well, then my brother's father-in-law found out that Todd wasn't spearing, so, he was going to sell the saw to his nephews. I told my brother that, you know, I'll buy it from him. Well, as it turned out, he didn't really care for his nephews very much. So, he ended up selling it to me for \$200, which I couldn't even buy the parts to build it for \$200. That's how I ended up with it.

MS: It's how deep can you cut through with that one?

EC: Probably, a good thirty inches.

MS: Yes. Nice. Yes, pizza, hand chiseled.

EC: Yes.

MS: Have you ever done that or that was before your time?

EC: I never attempt that. No. That was before my time.

MS: Yes. So, in all those years you have been spearing, is there any kind of funny stories, crazy stories that you have come across? Any stories that you have that you will never forget, or your most memorable experience? Something in that order.

EC: Well, there's not too many stories. I prefer to sit by myself in my shack. I like the solitude. There are a couple reasons why I go out there and one is to hopefully get the sturgeon. But just go out it – a long time, just like I said, the solitude, just being out there. It's kind of hard to explain.

MS: Organizing your thoughts.

EC: Just sitting there looking in the hole.

MS: Yes. Some people like it for that, and other people really like it for the camaraderie with others. Something to go out in groups or whatever.

EC: Right.

MS: Or afterwards they go to the cabin.

EC: There are a couple times I go visit some friends or they come and visit me. But I prefer the quietness of everything.

MS: Do you get there right early in the morning at 8:00 a.m. or whatever, when it starts and go all the way till noon every time and –

EC: Yes. Now with this, the season change. I try to get up there as early as possible and sit out there. It's not – doesn't take much to sit out there anymore for all that time versus all day long like it used to be, you know. Got to be long days sometimes, but it's kind of nice now with just the half day season.

MS: Yes. Most people seem to like it. Seems like it might go a lot faster –

EC: Yes.

MS: – then instead of like a full eight-hour day and when everyone is sitting out there.

EC: But you know when I was younger, I didn't mind that, you know? But now, not that I'm real older or anything but it is a little bit nicer than have it shortened up.

MS: Yes. What about your spear? Is that something you got through a friend, or you made yourself?

EC: Well, I've got a couple of spears. The first one I bought from my brother's brother-in-law. He knows some guys that made it. The spear has flying barbs on it which means as the spirit goes from the water, the barbs' filled up. But as the spear enters the fish and you pull back on it, the barbs spread out. The whole idea behind that is so the fish doesn't get off. Once you spear a fish, it probably won't come off. By that, the style of the spear that I have now, I prefer this. I guess maybe because it looks neater. I mean, a spear is a spear, really. It's spear I use now I ended up winning at one of the [inaudible] points fishery. I bought a couple tickets. I spent \$10 and tickets are bucket piece. It was a raffle. I ended up winning and then I got a spear, a gaff, and what they call a tight pull or a push pull. That's to help push the cake of ice underneath. When you cut the hole again, there's a block of ice. You got to push it underneath the ice to get it out of the way. So, I thought that was a pretty good deal.

MS: Tell me about this cokes or decoy that you just make. Can you tell me from beginning to end how you constructed it, what you used, the materials you used, the process and –

EC: Well –

MS: – the end result.

EC: Well, it just got a block of cedar wood and just kind of drew out this chapeaus fish and start this carving it out. It's not too fancy, that's for sure. I ended up painting different colors on it. I ended up painting it white and I put different colored dots on it. It kind of looks like a wonder bread bag.

MS: Oh, yes. So, what colors did you use?

EC: It was green, red, and blue. In the back, the whole full fish is white. But I kind of – that's my wonder decoy.

MS: Got a name for the wonder decoy.

EC: Wonder decoy. Sometimes, I wonder why I'm sitting there.

[laughter]

MS: You wonder about a lot of things?

EC: Right. I wonder when a fish will come through.

MS: What did you use for the fence? You know that kind of –

EC: Just metal, some thin, galvanized metal. Kind of some slits and then –

MS: Did you weigh in with lead?

EC: Lead. Yes. Drilled hole, melt some lead in there.

MS: That is the first one that you made.

EC: That's the first attempt, that one. That decoy I had in the hole at each time I got.

MS: Oh, really?

EC: It's hard to change with something that has worked.

MS: It's your favorite decoy. Is that the only one? You only have one [inaudible] in the hole of the time?

EC: Usually, I mix. Sometimes, I'll hang a coffee cup beneath that. I know that's a popular thing to put it in water. I don't like a lot of things hanging in the water. I don't like a lot of it. It looks too cluttered to me. I don't really like that too much.

MS: Yes. When you go out, do you have a particular spot you like to go or does it all depend on the clarity of the water?

EC: It pretty much depends on the clarity and the ice conditions. I prefer to spear off the West shore, mainly, because it's closer – the drive for me. But I've – the first one I speared was off the lower cliff by high cliff. Then second one I got was on the West side of the lake. So, there's really no preference.

MS: Do you go to Poygan or in any other ones?

EC: I've gone on Poygan. That's a whole different experience, it seems like.

MS: But you can pause it if you wish. So, you were saying Poygan is a whole different experience from Lake Winnebago. Why is that?

EC: Well. It's a shallower lake. You can usually see bottom, water is clear. It seems more rushed out there, especially with the way the season used to be where it was just a weekend. Now with this lottery system, I think that's a good thing. It gets people that want to go out there an opportunity and also it gets people I want to spear like Winnebago – more time to do what they like to do.

MS: It was more rushed because there was a certain set limit.

EC: Well, at the time, it was, like, a two-day season. So, once that weekend was over, the season of Poygan was over.

MS: Oh. So, the Poygan season was different than the Lake Winnebago season.

EC: Right. Now, last year, I think, was the first year they went to a lottery. They determine how many fish could be taken out of that system. Then they had some kind of percentage of tags

that they give out. Then they can regulate how many fish are taken out of that system, which is good. Because I mean, there's years on its first dated. I speared like, you know, I don't know, 1,500 fish. I mean, they just nailed them out there.

MS: So, what was I going to say? So, you're not guaranteed to tag then on Poygan?

EC: No.

MS: You might wait another year.

EC: Right. Right. Then it all depends on how many people apply for tags out there.

MS: So, it seems as though since it is a little shallower and clear, it almost seems like could be a more desirable place to fish. But you still rather fishing in Lake Winnebago?

EC: Yes. I don't know. I just prefer the little deeper water.

MS: More crowded than Poygan?

EC: Yes, it can be. If the fish are concentrated and people find them, you know, yes, those shacks all over and that in the areas where they have the fish tend to be.

MS: Do you tend to plop your shanty down one spot and that is where you are going to stay by [inaudible]? Or do you move with what you hear?

EC: Yes. I've moved. It depends. You know, like when you set up your shack you might have good water and a couple days later might get cloudy on you or dirty or whatever. Then you might want to move to find clear water because your chances of getting a fish is better if you can see them, actually, you know.

MS: It makes sense now.

EC: [laughter]

MS: Yes. Do you have any sons or daughters who are also into spearing?

EC: Well, my oldest right now is twelve and he'll be coming out. I took him out when he was real little with me. But now, you know, he'll be going out still. I think he has to be fourteen before he can buy a tag. Then my eight-year old, he'll come out too.

MS: They are going to throw on shanty or you guys have two-in-one or three-in-one?

EC: Well, I don't know. We'll see how things go.

MS: Yes. But they both have this interest in it?

EC: Oh, yes.

MS: They like to go?

EC: Yes.

MS: Yes. That's good.

EC: Yes. You know, it's fun for me to show somebody else how to do it and hopefully keep things going, you know. It's a different experience.

MS: I think you said before, your father did not –

EC: No. My dad didn't do too much of that kind of stuff hunting or fishing.

MS: Was he raised around here, too?

EC: Yes. He grew up in Manesha.

MS: What did he do for a living?

EC: He was an insurance salesman.

MS: Insurance salesman. Okay.

EC: So, he's gone most of the day naturally like anybody that works. But you never took time off to do stuff like that so, and six boys to feed. So, I got to keep working.

MS: So, that was in town or out the country?

EC: That was in town.

MS: In town.

EC: I say town in Manesha but we were actually – I actually grew up on the east side of the Lake Butte Des Morts which was basically, like the city. A little bit more of bigger yards, but –

MS: Yes. Kind of north of Manesha, a little bit on Lake Butte Des Morts.

EC: Right.

MS: Where the whole town was anyway.

EC: Well, right, it's just north of the Polish connection is. I don't know if you –

MS: I don't know what that is.

EC: The bridge.

MS: Oh.

EC: The Campbell. I remember his first name is Campbell Ridge.

MS: Okay.

EC: It's 4:41 p.m. right now.

MS: Yes. I think on the Polish connection. What is the story behind that?

EC: Because all the Polish people lived in Manesha and –

[laughter]

EC: – that was the Polish connection going from one side of the lake to the next.

MS: Yes. John Jenkinson mentioned that he is an old timer. He has been spearing for almost all of his life.

EC: Yes.

MS: He is in his late seventies. He talks about the polls from the national –

EC: Yes.

MS: They have their own specific – they were big spears too, I guess. They had their own styles of shanties and spears. Like really, really long spears, you know, maybe 8, 9 feet spears.

EC: Yes.

MS: So, they had this little cute [inaudible] of a hole on the top, so, they can even, like, go through the hole because their spears are so long to get to spear it. So, I realize that about Manesha. It was like a Polish town, or anything like that on the bars in Manesha. [laughter]

EC: They're used to be.

MS: Yes.

EC: Not too many anymore, you know, or downtown, main street Manesha. I don't know how many bars they used to have. They used to be, like, thirty bars. But it, you know how that goes way back though, because when the canal, you know, the downtown Manesha is right out of the canal. They had a lot of – ships come in, you know, carry logs or whatever. That was a long, long time ago and back then there was just a lot of bars.

MS: Yes. Should we go take a look at the sled saw, maybe some of your materials and see what that is like?

EC: Sure.

MS: Let us do that. Okay. So, we are looking at the sled saw. Can you tell me a little more about how it works?

EC: Well.

MS: Or what it is composed of?

EC: Well, I have a six-horse engine on here. My chain, I think it must be like a 36-inch bar on it. When I start it up, what I do is – the engines on a carriage that I can lock. Then first, engage the belt and then I can lock it and engaging the belt will move the chain. Then the bars on, like, a pivot where I bring it down while the blade is spinning, I bring it down into the ice. Then I can lock it in place and then it either push or pull to cut the hole. The blade sets it an angle because you want to undercut the hole. So, as you're sitting in your ice shack and looking in the hole, you have a better – it's like a wide-angle camera.

MS: Yes, better visibility too.

EC: You can just see more.

MS: So, when it starts cutting through the ice, it is on the pivot so you can swing it down. Does it lock vertically then?

EC: Yes. I have on this one, I can lock it in different positions. But it's mainly, you just lock it vertical because you'll be able to cut through. That's the thickest cut you can have.

MS: How long does it take to cut your hole then?

EC: Well, it depends, you know, on the size of the hole. It usually takes me about fifteen minutes. My hole is about – I think it's 3x6 feet.

MS: Sounds kind of standard, I think. Yes.

EC: Yes.

MS: So, yes. It just seems like it is a motor on, some sort of old metal frame with a chainsaw sticking out of it.

EC: Right. Right. It's basically what it is.

MS: This looks really old. You do not have any idea how old it is?

EC: No.

MS: Or who built it?

EC: Well, my brother's father-in-law built this. The story goes, it's one of the first sled saws because he speared out of Hilbert. At the time when he started, he could get five tags for a quarter. The father-in-law or my brother's father-in-law used to spear. They're the only a couple guys spearing on the east shore. He used from Hilbert. Anyway, the story goes that he built this saw, and it was one of the first ones, a first sled saw that was built. The design is pretty primitive, but it works. The sled saws nowadays, they look a little bit differently. The engine's lower to the ground and the center of gravity is a little bit better. But this one works just as well.

MS: Any issues since the center of gravity? You said it was different. Does this one gets a little tippy?

EC: When I'm taking in the back of my truck, I have to strap it down, otherwise, I'm afraid it could tip.

MS: You have to top it on every that engines out.

EC: It hasn't tipped yet, but like I said, I strap it down. I'm afraid it might –

MS: You get any comments on it from other spears because of its design and age?

EC: Yes. People look at it and they say, "Well, that's an old one." So, I said, "It sure is."

MS: Then you said they built it when I was like five days for a quarter.

EC: Right.

MS: So, if we are not sure of the date, we could probably figure that out from the that kind of –

EC: Yes. I have no clue exactly. I know that the engine is a built in 1960, but that really doesn't mean much. That engine could have been put on there anytime but –

MS: Yes, sure beats chiseling, does it?

EC: Yes.

MS: Well, I noticed that you have your decoy over here. What did you use for the eyes? It just got red eyes.

EC: Oh. Those were just hole – like screw hole buttons or whatever. Like decorative –

MS: Thumbtacks or –

EC: No. They're like wooden –

MS: Oh. They are wooden? Oh. Okay.

EC: Yes. These were like when you could drive up, you know a crew.

MS: You cap it.

EC: Yes. Just like a little screw cap or whatever.

MS: Okay. Yes. Like I said, it might be modeled after a gar with that long nose.

EC: Yes.

MS: I have heard that sturgeon, kind of are found with gar.

EC: Right.

MS: Yes. Okay. Anything else you would like to add?

EC: Well, I just want to want to show you this.

MS: Sure, it is.

EC: Especially like after the hole is cut, you know, you clean off the ice chips. This was what used to be a vegetable strainer looks like. You put a big handle on it and we use that to scoop them chips of ice out of the hole.

MS: Was that built by the same guy, your brother's father-in-law?

EC: Right. But that was built by my brother's father-in-law.

MS: Yes. This looks like a giant – what do you call those things? Colander?

EC: Yes.

MS: Colander.

EC: Right. So, just probably something that he thought might work and it has for quite a long time.

MS: Yes. You got some old equipment, but it still works. There is your spear sitting right here too.

EC: Right.

MS: Your gaff hooks. Is this the stuff you want or is this the –

EC: Yes. This gaff hook here I won at that raffle and then off the spear and also –

MS: So, this one, it's metal all the way up to that point there and then got a wooden –

EC: Right.

MS: Okay. It is a five-time –

EC: Yes. I also have another one like that I bought from a friend. So, I actually have three spears that I have. I usually take two with me, one for a spare.

MS: This is not the one with the floating barbs or the flying barbs?

EC: No, the flying barbs? No.

MS: Okay. Yes.

EC: I got the spear head here with the flying barbs. I'll show you what this is. See these barbs move. What happens is when the spear's going through the water, these barbs fold up. As it enters the fish, you pull back on it, the barbs open up. It pretty much impales the fish on to the spear.

MS: Easy to go in, hard to come out.

EC: Right.

MS: So, those are square times rather than the rounded times.

EC: Yes. I'm not sure when this was made. I've seen some that the barbs are screwed on. So, if you spear fish yet, you can actually push to spear all the way through and unscrew the barbs. Then your spearhead will just pull right off.

MS: Yes. It is much easier on –

SC: Yes. This once a little bit difficult.

MS: You have to worry about the barbs breaking off or anything like that or does that happen?

EC: It could happen, I guess. It hasn't happened to me.

MS: Okay.

EC: I would imagine it could. I've heard of people spearing larger fish bends the [inaudible] on

a spear.

MS: Yes. I think I have seen photographs of that. Okay. Well, I thank you very much. This will probably all go to the Oshkosh Museum and everything like that.

[end of transcript]