

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish

Ron Epprecht Oral History

Date of Interview: April 26, 2006

Location: Oshkosh, Wisconsin

Length of Interview: 9:48

Interviewer: EH – Eugene Herubin

Transcriber: NCC

Eugene Herubin: On April 12th, 2006. We are interviewing Ron Epprecht. Ron is a sturgeon spearer/decoy carver. Lives out on –

Ron Epprecht: County Road FF.

EH: County Road FF, county southwest of Oshkosh. To start with Ron, tell me about your family, your dad, your mom, where they came from. Then how you got into the interest of your occupation and whatnot.

RE: My mother and father were born in Oshkosh. My father worked at Paine Lumber Company for probably 20 years. Then he worked for the school system for another probably 25 years until he retired. He passed away in 2003. My mother was a homemaker. She's still alive.

EH: What was your occupation?

RE: I'm a machinist at Mercury Marine in Fond du Lac.

EH: How did you get into this activity of decoy carving?

RE: I don't know. I just found it interesting one day and I always liked wooden duck decoys. One day I just thought I can do that and I just started doing it.

EH: How did you come onto this pattern? It seems like every decoy carver has his own shape. How did you come onto this pattern?

RE: I know that the sturgeon and garfish hang around together or school together. I thought, well, this is a good thing, similar shape of a garfish and that's why I started doing that pattern.

EH: Did you have other interests in woodworking before this?

RE: Yes. I always built something, shelves or whatever. I always found it interesting to be working with wood.

EH: Why is one white with red dots and another one orange with yellow dots?

RE: The fish are curious. I suppose some of them are more curious of the white ones than the yellow ones and vice versa.

EH: Have you ever considered any other shapes?

RE: Yes. I'm thinking about making shad decoys in the shape of a shad.

EH: You mean multiples like a school of shad or –

RE: No, just singles.

EH: Single?

RE: [affirmative]

EH: What do you think is one of the things that keeps you interested in this spearing and decoy carving?

RE: As far as the decoy carving goes, I have to have something to do. I can't go in the house and sit and watch television at night. It keeps me busy during the winter months and I enjoy doing it. As far as spearing, I just love to be outside and I love to go spearing. My two sons go with me and we have a good time.

EH: How long have you been spearing?

RE: Probably for 40 years.

EH: How old are you?

RE: 57.

EH: Oh, you started young. You start right on Winnebago?

RE: Yes.

EH: On your dad's shack or your uncle shack?

RE: No.

EH: How did you do it?

RE: We used to rent shanties from Winds.

EH: So, you're one of the spears that has speared south then?

RE: Yes, until probably 1985. Then we built our own shanty.

EH: Now, you say you're spearing with your sons now?

RE: Yes.

EH: How many sons do you have?

RE: Two.

EH: They are both interested in the activity too, or –

RE: Yes.

EH: They use your decoys?

RE: Yes.

EH: They swear by them?

RE: Yes [laughter].

EH: [laughter]

RE: Sometimes they swear at them.

EH: Tell me some interesting stories starting from the first one there, the oldest experience about your particular sturgeon that you have speared.

RE: I've only speared three sturgeons in my entire life. The first one was 25 pounds. It was 48 inches long. It was unbelievable. The thrill of it, it got me hooked. Then the second one was 50 pounds. That was the biggest one I ever got. I was really happy with that. The next one was 30 pounds. I speared that one day Dick Braasch and I were out together and I got that one.

EH: What is the biggest one your sons have speared?

RE: My youngest son, John, speared one that was 60 pounds, 2 years ago. That was his first one and only one. My oldest son, Ryan, speared one in 2006 that was 77 pounds. That was his third one and his biggest one.

EH: You got any interesting stories about yourself and other people when you were spearing, things that have happened to you?

RE: No, not really.

EH: You haven't fell on the lake or dropped the car in or anything like that?

RE: No [laughter]. John dropped his cell phone in one day. That was about the extent of it.

EH: Is it still down there?

RE: Yes [laughter].

EH: You ever hear about guys doing things that are shady or whatever in the course of spearing?

RE: Oh, yes.

EH: What kind of things? No names.

RE: Hook and line fishing –

EH: Hook and line fishing.

RE: – for sturgeon.

EH: Putting on a bait with a heavy line?

RE: Yes.

EH: Coming back tomorrow and checking it out.

RE: Yes. Pull it in and there's a fish on your spear.

EH: That seems to be the most common story that I've heard.

RE: [laughter]

EH: What are your favorite ways to prepare the sturgeon?

RE: We usually have it smoked. That's the way we enjoy it the best.

EH: You fry it at all?

RE: No.

EH: Well, who smokes your sturgeon for you?

RE: Dick Braasch. There aren't many people around that do that anymore.

EH: Did you keep the caviar?

RE: No, there was no caviar.

EH: Was the sturgeon male?

RE: It was a female, but it was a F1 female.

EH: What kind of activity has affected their causes in the community?

RE: I don't understand the question.

EH: What does the community and you get out of this? Is it the camaraderie or –

RE: Oh, yes. You spear with your children and I enjoy that. Sometimes we go with Dick

Braasch and that crew there and it's a lot of fun. It's a great time and they're all wonderful people.

EH: So, you're passing your sport onto your sons and maybe grandsons or –

RE: I certainly hope so. I hope that Sturgeon for Tomorrow and the Department of Natural Resources and the people all have their heads together so that we keep on preserving this so that it's there for our grandchildren and their grandchildren and children and children and down the road.

EH: I noticed that one decoy looks like the advertisement for Target [laughter].

RE: [laughter] It isn't.

EH: I thought maybe you were working for Target, a white mackerel with red dots.

RE: I am not working for Target.

EH: Well, any other things of interest that you noted in your years of experience of spearing?

RE: No, not really. What are you looking for?

EH: Anything.

RE: No, I don't.

EH: I understand that you and your kids are the roofers for Dick Braasch and his sturgeon building.

RE: Yes. They call us the roof Nazis [laughter].

EH: [laughter]

RE: You better not put that in there [laughter].

EH: Well, Dick will appreciate that.

RE: [laughter]

EH: How many roofs have you guys put on for Dick?

RE: Oh, I'd say probably 20, 25.

EH: That's all rubber?

RE: Yes.

EH: Well, you do everything then. You decoy carve, you're spearing, you build shanties too, I think.

RE: Yes. If they need help, we're always there for them.

EH: Very good. In conclusion, what do you have to say about your future in spearing?

RE: I hope I can go until the day I die. I hope my children always go with me.

EH: Very good. Thank you very much.

[end of transcript]