

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

Ed Gorchals Oral History

Date of Interview: Unknown

Location: Larsen, Wisconsin

Length of Interview: 00:23:24

Interviewer: DK – Dick Koerner

Transcriber: NCC

Dick Koerner: My name is Dick Koerner. I'm here to do a sturgeon interview with Ed Gorchals from Larsen, Wisconsin. Ed, I'm going to ask you a series of questions. To start with, I'd like to know, where and when were you born?

Ed Gorchals: I was born in Kaukauna, Wisconsin, October 1st, 1928.

DK: Where do you live now, Ed?

EG: I live on Richter Lane, about two blocks from the lake. I've got a channel at the back of my house that goes to the lake. That's Larsen, Wisconsin post office.

DK: How did you get interested in sturgeon spearing?

EG: Well, being on the water all my life and friends of mine, the Jorgensens especially, and the Holmans, well, his dad taught us just about everything we know. So, we took up the sport.

DK: Besides spearing, did you ever do hook and line in the river?

EG: Back in the [19]40s or [19]50s, there was a season on sturgeon with hook and line. Boy, I can't remember too much about that. But I know we did though. We fished that line.

DK: But the Michigan-Wisconsin border, Menominee River, ever tried that?

EG: No. Out here it was – but we fished while it was big. The violators in the spring of the year [inaudible] were like a cobweb down there. Then in the fall of the year, then we'd move. We fished [inaudible] and a base channel with 500 hooks or more or 1,000 hooks.

DK: Who taught you about sturgeon spearing, your dad or –

EG: Well, my dad never got involved. Well, he passed away. He was a fisher but not a sturgeon – they didn't have any seasons when he was alive yet. But it was mostly John Jorgensen's dad that brought us all up. He was like a father to me. John's mother too, they kept us in line.

DK: How has the sport changed since you started spearing, Ed? I guess we all know that but –

EG: All these modern four-wheel drives, saws, and the spears are a lot different than they were back in those days. Well, there's mobility. That's the thing today. They've got helicopters out there now.

DK: We made seventeen different rule changes in the last few years, all to protect the sturgeon. There's more and more people getting involved in the sport of sturgeon spearing. I mean, you and I both know when sturgeon season came around forty, fifty years ago, there'd only be half a dozen shacks around. Now, there's thousands. So consequently, we are at a six-hour season per day. So, it's a half day season. Most people like that.

EG: I do, too. I think that was a smart move. Like you say, there were thousands and thousands of shanties on Poygan. That one year they just slaughtered the fish. You take a 36-inch fish that weighs 9 pounds, 8 pounds, some of them. What are you going to get out of that?

DK: Ed, how many years have you been spearing?

EG: I would say close to sixty years.

DK: That's a lot of years.

EG: Yes.

DK: I like to say, how many sturgeons have you speared? But I imagine you couldn't count.

EG: I can't tell you that because I never kept track. But I never got one over 100 pounds and never got a spawner.

DK: Really?

EG: No. A friend of mine, his son is only twenty-five years old, I think, has speared three spawners so far. [laughter]

DK: Have you ever missed a sturgeon that you speared?

EG: Well, I hate to tell anybody this, but I missed two; one was on Winnebago, and one was on Poygan. I wasn't paying attention on Poygan. But one was in 14-feet of water kind of outside this bowl. I missed him. But it wasn't a grandma shot.

DK: Three of the interviewees that I had agreed – I missed two in my lifetime. I know a guy who's missed seven in a season.

EG: Oh, boy. One thing, Pat speared fish that I didn't even see on the outside bar. You'll get one down at the bottom. I think he had pipes down. But I couldn't see that fish, and he speared it.

DK: Speaking of pipes down there, years ago we had –

EG: Pulp.

DK: – paper pulp, navy beans, eggshells, potatoes –

EG: Potatoes, yes.

DK: – and we were even dumb enough to throw metal cans down there.

EG: Well, I never did that. We had the pulp paper. That always worked well.

DK: I guess we all changed for the better.

EG: Well, definitely.

DK: PVC pipe seems to be the thing to do.

EG: The only thing is you got that extra lining hanging down.

DK: Not me.

EG: No, you've got that [inaudible]. Well, that's the next thing I've got to tell my son.

DK: Ed, well, you already answered this one. I was wondering if you ever got 100-pounder or – that's a goal that's –

EG: No, never.

DK: – in everybody's mind. You mentioned a shanty with the wheels on a tip down.

EG: Yes.

DK: You can go to Poygan, and you can definitely tell Winnebago shanties from the East Shore shanties.

EG: I always said to these fishermen in Poygan, they should – these Winnebago fishermen should really teach them a lot of things [laughter] about sturgeon fishing and how to mark your holes and cross cracks. Poygan spear them in a bathtub, you might say. These people go out there and spear anything that goes through, I guess.

DK: Well, Eddie, now that we only can spear six hours a day, a lot of people are going to spear most of those six hours. But do you have a favorite time of day that you like to spear? Even if it was an all-day season years ago. I know people who swear by 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

EG: 11:30 a.m. Well, Pat does here. Freddy Seal would come in a shanty, Wally Seal's son. This is about quarter to 11:00 a.m. Wally says, "Well, 11:00 a.m, I'm going to spear one." Well, he's fifteen minutes late. 11:15 a.m. he speared one. [laughter] Then at 3:30, I used to – well, I used to open up a can of beer at quarter after 3:00 p.m. and roll my coaxers up. This is when you can fish all day. By God, a couple times, 3:30 p.m. wouldn't come through. Well, that's fifty years, forty, fifty [laughter] years ago.

DK: Do you set up on the same spot every year? Do you have markers, GPS –

EG: Basically, the north end of the bar and I got off – when I was fishing. Now we're fishing with one shanty. But Pat would go a little north of me, and then I'd get – just off of the bar, I could see the boulders at the bottom. I just get off of the bar, so you don't hit a stone or whatever

there. [laughter] But –

DK: In the mud but close to the rock.

EG: I don't know if you ever fished outside the bar. But you line up to the south, to two points. Then you look at the shore and the two smokestacks. There was no GPS and all this other stuff. But that's the way it had been. John Jorgensen and I could drive out there, go like this, go this way, drill a hole, and they'd be on the stones.

DK: Ed, what's one of your most memorable experiences while spearing? Did you ever have an unusual situation where two fish come in at once or –

EG: No. I'd say –

DK: – upside down?

EG: John and I were fishing on the north end one year, and we had two fish. I would say we had two fish by 11:00 a.m. in the morning. I think, well, his brother-in-law came out, and he speared three fish out of one hole in one day. They were all nice fish.

DK: There's guys that sit for 20 years and never see a fish.

EG: I haven't speared one in Winnebago for 20 years, maybe more than that.

DK: How about bad weather or ice conditions that you run into? Ever get stranded or couldn't get across a crack or –

EG: The best thing to do is use common sense. If you're safe where you are and you've got heat in the shanty, stay there. But we'd mark the cracks with – we always carried branches and marked the cracks. Now they have roads. But still years ago, I always carried a compass and believed the compass. Pat would walk ahead of my car with a compass. He'd get away from the car, and he'd just go like this. I'd follow him with the – but if you don't know where you are, stay there where you're safe.

DK: How about superstitions? Any certain colored culture you believe in? Some oil rubbed down into the paint?

EG: Well, we used yellow and red every year for as long as I can remember. Well, I use both. I use the shad decoy and the yellow decoy. I've had luck with both of them. I mean, Pat, with fish, he's got – I mean, I sat with him, and we've had good luck with the shad. Now, there's other people who bought them from me. Well, you can see the shads sticking out of their mouth.

DK: The reason you made a shad decoy is because you saw the shad [talking simultaneously].

EG: Sturgeon on my page is there, and there's shad in there. Well, they go to stake in Winnebago. The warmer the water down in [inaudible]. Years ago, nobody fished down there.

Now, they found the sturgeon down in the shallow water and the shad. Well, look at what they did that one year down there. They just slaughtered them down there.

DK: What kinds of illegal activities have become good stories to you? You don't need to mention names. Can you relate to anybody saying so-and-so got fifty in a season years ago or –

EG: Well, years ago in Winnie County, Tustin, there was a gentleman across the lake and the river that [inaudible]. If you wanted sturgeon, you went to Winnie County, and you need to buy them \$1 a pound. The caviar was – we sold it for \$1.75 a pound. Well, then they were prepared and sold in pint jars for anywhere from \$20 to \$100 a jar. But we sold quite a bit of it back in those days. Now, they throw it away. People throw it away. Well, I had a picture of that around wherever. But I love it. You guys ate some of it down at that meeting. Pat says he loved it.

DK: Yes. You do a good job of preparing it. You can't –

EG: Well, I'd furnish it at Super Bowl parties [inaudible] up there every year. The guys would go nuts over it.

DK: You know, the law says you can't sell it, but you can give it away. A lot of people don't know what to do with the eggs. For sure, you don't want to put them in a metal pail.

EG: No.

DK: For sure, I've heard you shouldn't put it in a black garbage bag. But –

EG: Well, I use plastic.

DK: Plastic or pail.

EG: Plastic pail and plastic. I got five different size screens. Well, I've got a septic system here. It takes a lot of water and a lot of time. I'm going to do it right. I would say labor involved in fixing a batch is about eight hours, total of it. You find it. You have to separate the egg from the membrane. You run it through these screens. You've got to use your hands. I tried it down at the basement here and the sink outside, and it's messy. Eggs stick to stuff. In my freezer in the basement, I think there's still some stuck to it. But it takes a lot of cold water running. You just keep going like this through the sieves and through the screens. Then this one goes into this one, and you run it through again. Then run them through some ice-cold water. Then you leave them to drain. I lay them out, then I salt them. Then about every two, three hours, I kind of mix it like that. Then I put it in the refrigerator overnight. Then the next day, I mix it again. Then I put it in jars.

DK: Years ago, the set lines out here, we used to be able to have a hundred hooks. Then we lowered that to 25 for a reason. Because I know different guys were taking a lot of fish, and that concerned me. I ran a set line for just a couple of years, but I didn't really know what I was doing. But they tell me one line crossed another, crossed another. Guys had to cut the line and retie it in order to get more lines.

EG: Well, before the season opened, that's the way it was done [inaudible]. But we dyed our lines. Everybody knew the color of everybody else's line. Well, the wardens asked how we could tell the difference. Well, I told them. I said, "We dyed our lines."

DK: That's interesting.

EG: Yes. Well, we knew – can I mention names?

DK: No, no, you don't need to.

EG: But we knew this guy, that guy, and this guy, and how they fish, what kind of line, what kind of weights you put on. Some guys used half a brick or a quarter of a brick. We used decoy weights. For so many hooks, you put a decoy weight on. But this was fifty years ago or more. Well, that one night, I got arrested. They took my boat, motor, and my license for a year and put me in jail for three days. They took my boat and motor. So, I paid for it. But we were out there many nights risking our lives for – we needed the money.

DK: How about any other sturgeon stories for spearing on the river? Sturgeon year-round, just watching sturgeon guard is – a lot of people do that, but they don't spear. But they help guard the sturgeon.

EG: Well, I don't think there's any violators out there today. The ones that really would break the law just don't know the laws. They don't do it intentionally. But there was an incident in Fremont here about a month or two ago. Some people that came from Indochina or wherever these people come from. Well, they had a sturgeon in the boat. I know the law enforcement up there. They did give the warden a bad time. My son happened to be on duty that day, and he called for backup. But this one gentleman ran away, and they had to chase him down. They did have some firearms, I guess, with them. These wardens today have to carry a gun. The police officer, what are they going to do? You've got to carry a gun. When they had that limit of 45 inches, I went to a few meetings and said, "Lower it to 36." People will spear the 36 inch and leave the bigger – then they tag it. Then they're done. They let the bigger fish go. Let them grow up or whatever. 36 inches is big. We let them go. But these people go out there and just spear them. Let them spear the little ones and then get off the lake.

DK: Do you have a favorite recipe for sturgeon? How do you prepare the meat?

EG: Well, I fried up 58 pieces of fish about a month or two ago. I had two fryers here. The kids were here. My wife counted. Pat was frying, and I was frying on this one. My daughter, son-in-law, my wife and I, Pat and his wife ate the whole works. We've pickled some already, but I don't know – the way I take care of them, I clean them. I cut them up and fry them and put them in a breading. That's the way, I think.

DK: I cut mine in small chunks, so they're bite size.

EG: Well, so they're done all the way through when you cook them. My son-in-law recently

fished. [inaudible] my wife said they only fish three times a day. But I just enjoy doing it. I catch or spear them. I don't spear them. But Pat spears them. I catch them. I clean them and fry them and eat them. But –

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

EG: Well, I like to get a fish, for one thing, but just meeting the people out there and talking about it. After the hunt, you might say, going to the tent or wherever, to the watering hole, and just talking or listening to all the stories. Today, it's a great sport, I think. I hope they don't dent the population on them. Ron's doing a heck of a job, I think. I'm glad that they kind of went to this lottery system, so there's not a million people out there that –

DK: Yes, five hundred instead of three thousand.

EG: Yes. But –

DK: Well, Eddie, unless you've got another story.

EG: I'd like to just congratulate the Jorgensen family for getting us from the day that we started and building shanties and putting the shanties on wheels and the ice saws and the spears and the relation. They taught a lot of people, and they're still teaching.

DK: Well, Eddie, I want to thank you again for your time and for this interview. I'm looking forward to seeing it in the hard copy book.

EG: I'm knocking on eighty years old. [laughter] Make sure I get a copy of it.

DK: Yes, [laughter] for sure. Thanks again, Ed. This concludes my interview with Ed Gorchals. My name is Dick Koerner. This interview is now over.

EG: Well, thank you.

[end of transcript]