

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

Dan Groeschel Oral History

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Interviewer: RB – Ronald Bruch

Transcriber: NCC

Ronald Bruch: We're going to just talk about his experiences with sturgeon on the Winnebago system and as a director and founder of Sturgeon for Tomorrow.

Dan Groeschel: Good morning, Ron and Kathy.

Kathleen Schmitt Kline: Good morning.

DG: It's a love of the sturgeon and a great family tradition that my father passed on to us, to myself and my brother, we started that way. It's been a great experience.

RB: Your grandfather also?

DG: No. My grandfather, he was from over in Charlesbourg, and I don't think he speared any sturgeon or fished them. He did raise trout in a spring that they had on their farm. Which was real common, and I guess he did a real good job on that. They had rookies, and I think some rainbows, but - a natural spring - but he didn't. My grandmother, on my mother's side, she used to come and spear along with us. I can remember when I was young, maybe six, seven years old, my dad would take me along. I'd go along fishing with him. He would tie a rope around my waist and tie me to the fish handy so I wouldn't fall in the hole, make sure that nothing would happen. And we'd go spearing all the time. It was a tradition that we were raised in. I was born and raised in Pipe. So, it was something as a family, everybody, most everybody in the area, went spearing when it came February.

RB: So, when you were six or seven, at what year would have that been?

DG: I was born in [19]41 so it would have been [19]48.

RB: [19]48.

DG: Luckily -

RB: You have been going on there for sixty years.

DG: Just about. Oh yes, been on the lake-sure, been spearing for fifty-seven. I speared my first sturgeon at the age of nine.

RB: Oh, yeah.

DG: There were two shanties out. My brother, which was four years older, he had one shanty, my dad was in the other one, and he was going to go over and visit him. He went out and started - we had an old fishing car. We called it the Blue Goose, an old Plymouth. He went out the door. He got it and started it up, and not a big sturgeon, came right out under the floor and I took the spear and I speared it, howled it out to the door. He jumped out of the vehicle and left it in gear, and it's going around. He came in to help me pull the fish out. I think it was a 40 some-inch sturgeon. That was my first one at nine years old [laughter].

RB: I'm not sure. I know when I was fourteen, I speared an eighty-four pounder, and I had my own shanty at fourteen. But I don't know the years in between that was going along.

RB: You must have been really excited at nine years old.

DG: Absolutely. I was really something excited. No, I wasn't afraid of that because I've seen fish like that.

RB: No. But I mean, just so excited.

DG: Oh, it's very exciting.

RB: Yes.

DG: Came real easy, bought my decoy heights and right out on the floor, so it wasn't hard.

RB: So, just a grainy shot.

DG: It was a grainy shot. It was the easy one. So, that worked out quite well.

RB: Your dad must have been excited and proud of you too for sure.

DG: Yes, very much so.

RB: That's how it is with your own kids when they shoot a deer, get their first fish, or whatever it is.

DG: It's a great experience.

RB: You are happier than if you got it yourself.

DG: It is more fun if you see your family members or whatever. I've got five daughters. They spear. They beat me with size of the fish [laughter]. My oldest one, Nancy, she's got a ninety-six pounder. Sherry, a couple years ago, she speared a ninety-eight pounder. Our grandson was along. I gave him a new little decoy, and I said, "Here, you put that in. Try that." He was bugging her all the time. He was bugging Sherry. "Grandpa gave me this." He said it'd be a good decoy. They put that decoy in and it was only about five or ten minutes later and the sturgeon came and ended up. She called me over, and I went over there. I said, "Heck, that looks like about a hundred-pound fish." She said, "It isn't that big." I got a ruler out, and it was just about 6 foot. It was 72-inches long, 71.

RB: Yes. That's good and close to a hundred pounds.

DG: So, it was no black eggs, it was spawned out. So, she was really happy. The good part about that was I picked the spot, both of the spots. So, they beat me.

RB: You spot in the decoy, and I bet your grandson won't fish with anything else besides the decoy.

DG: He tried different ones. They get a little antsy with that. He's eleven now, so I think that was two years ago. So, he'd have been nine, eight or nine, nine, I think he was. But he wants to go spearing, and goes along, enjoys that.

RB: That's neat.

Kathy: That's great.

DG: There were years that I can remember, old back in the [19]60s and [19]70s, when we fished off a Quinney. One thing is back then, we had a lot more ice, colder winters and of course, deep snow. I don't think that the female sturgeon left the lake as early as what they're now. I think with the shad base that's in there, they were primarily feeding on red worms. I think they stayed in the lake a whole lot longer with the cold winters, because we'd fish, well the whole month of February through the first of March. If you didn't get out right away, or if you missed some time or whatever, it always seemed like it got better later on in the season.

RB: You're right

DG: Fish would be more active, and they'd swim. As it got warmer, I think they were starting to move and feed, and probably starting to head for the river. Little different than what they leave now.

RB: Right?

DG: On it, yes. I've been spearing for quite a few years. It's amazing how you don't hardly see any shanties on a lake. As soon as it gets to Friday and Saturday, or Saturday and Sunday, before the season opens the following week, and then on Thursday, is they come out of mothballs, out of storage, all over the place, right?

RB: I'm sure you've probably seen a lot of changes over the years, I'm sure.

DG: Lots of changes.

RB: One of the biggest ones got to be this equipment?

DG: Equipment? One thing, we used to cut the holes by hand with a hand saw. So, we would chisel a square hole first.

RB: When did you stop doing that?

DG: I can tell you that exactly, [laughter] in the fall of 1959, we bought our first chainsaw.

RB: Oh, yeah.

DG: We used it for the 1960 season. I don't remember hardly anybody having an ice saw along this east side. I used to cut a lot of holes for people. But I remember that real well. I graduated in '59 from high school. I remember that only too well, and for the 1960.

RB: Oh, yes.

DG: We had our first saw, and in first couple years there, I can remember we had a 36-inch bar, which was 38.5 inches, it would cut it. There were some years that if you went where there was no snow, you couldn't hardly get through with the 36-inch saw.

RB: In this early sixties?

DG: Yes. Not every year. So, we'd sometimes have to go where the snowbanks were, or there was snow and ice would be maybe 3, 4 inches less in thickness.

RB: Did they make longer barriers then?

DG: They might have, I don't know. We didn't even look. Usually, we'd have 30-inch bars and thirty sixes. Then my brother and I, we used to plough our roads at Pipe and, of course, we rented fish shanties and we took care of a lot of customers. I usually cut all the holes. My brother would plough or would sow. Like on Thursday, before the season would open, we'd have a number of people that, "Oh, I want to be two miles out and a quarter mile to the south," and somebody wanted to be a mile out north. So, we would just take care of setting their shanties. I cut 215 sturgeon holes in one day.

RB: [laughter]

DG: My father was along with me. We pushed the shanty. We sunk the blocks, cut the holes, just the two of us.

RB: That's the brother you were in business with?

DG: That was my brother, yes. But he would pull the shanties and set them, and then I went around and cut the holes. My dad was along with me, and we would just push the shanties over the holes. We didn't bank them.

RB: Yes, wow.

DG: That's the most I caught. No wonder my back hurts once in a while.

RB: Wow, I guess so.

DG: Over the years, we've cut lots of holes and still do. Well, I've got my five daughters. Some of them, sometimes they're not all fishing. My brother's boys and their family, they go. So, we've had some great times over all the years.

RB: So, I talked about this before. But just for the interview, how do you know where to set up your shanty?

DG: Well, years ago, we fished some of what we thought were the worm beds. I mean, we fished them for probably thirty years in a row, almost the same we'd start. Those worm beds didn't change, and they really haven't changed today much.

RB: Right.

DG: They're still in the similar spots. They might move a little bit, but they're kind of in the same in the same places. Different groups, different people, some of them would fish a mile out, 2 miles out, 3 miles out, and south side of the road. We usually fished on the north side of the road from about 2, 2.25 miles out to about 3.5 to 4.

RB: So, different groups kind of had their own like areas too that they would go into.

DG: Their own areas.

RB: People respected those areas then more?

DG: Not necessarily respected but some years back, it wasn't the pressure like it is today. It was more of a casual fishing. Today, it's pre-fishing, cameras. Back then, it didn't matter when you got out and what time of the day, you just went when you could go and it worked out quite well. Although we'd move and sometimes, we fished like before we had any ploughs and equipment. We had a John Deere B tractor. We had a ski made for the two front wheels in front and we had two sets of chains on the back, and then we put sandbags. Some years, I can remember, like five miles out from Quinney, and then we usually went north. My grandma used to go. We had what we call the cutter, which was the sleigh and we pulled that behind and we went. We had either two or three shanties out there.

RB: So, you used the tractor to get out there?

DG: We used the tractor. We left that sit right on the lake. There's plenty of ice. Usually, there was a road ploughed. I think (Eckers?) ploughed down at Quinney, and at Quinney Fishing Club. I don't know if they had a club at that time. Yes, I think they did. You'd have a main road out, but then we'd go out and go off of that main road. I mean, we'd have sometimes a foot and a half snow or better. We just barely would get through but we had good spirit. Nobody else out there, just two, three shanties all ourselves.

RB: Get out there by yourself.

DG: I can remember Clarence Langenfeld, we are friends, but he was from Milwaukee. I think that one time he speared three out of our shanty. One day, I think he had five. I can remember him spearing five in one day. I think his brother did too, Claude did.

RB: (Fern Gephardt?) mentioned some fellow – I can't remember the guy's name, though – that said he had speared twelve in a day up there off of the park.

KSK: Oh, that's right.

DG: Twelve in a day?

RB: Yes. He was the fellow that he liked this alcohol. I can't remember the guy's name?

KSK: I can't remember either.

DG: Well, if they were coming that fast, he probably needed a little alcohol. [laughter]

RB: No kidding. [laughter] Just to calm his nerves.

KSK: Then the next day nothing.

RB: The next day nothing, yes. But he said that the fish just moved that day.

DG: Yes.

RB: You've seen that over the years too, right?

DG: I've seen –

RB: The fish –

DG: The most I've –

RB: – some days they just move.

DG: Right. Well, if they're feeding or done feeding, that's when we'd always say, "Well, then they float and swim around." The most I've seen was six in one day. The most I speared in one day was three. I'm still looking for my first hundred pounder. I've seen two when I was fourteen, that same year, I got that eighty-four pounder. I'm sure it was a hundred-pound fish or just there about, so not much over. It was coming in, and I moved for the spear. I went back in, it got afraid. One swish of the tail, and they're gone. I ran over by my dad, I was crying. I ran over there. [laughter] The next weekend looked like the same fish, came back from the west. The other one was going north, coming from the south. This one was going west, coming from the west, going east, same depth, right by the decoy. I didn't move a muscle. Looked like about the same fish, it was a brown one. It got to the same spot, and swung around, tail gone, never got a chance to throw the spear. "What the heck is wrong here?" Well, finally I got my head out, and I couldn't see nothing shining in the hole. I got my head out over the hole, and I looked and looked, and here, there was a nail hole that was a corrugated metal shanty through the rough metal and one end of tar paper, that's all. We didn't use insulation like we do today. If you line that up, then that was there, but I'd never seen it shine in. I blocked that hole, I never had a

problem after that.

RB: That one little beam of light there.

DG: One little beam of light, of course the hundred pounders didn't come back. But I did get that eighty-four pounder the same year. That was actually the last day of the season. They had twenty, I think after five. It was a late.

RB: Oh, yes. It's late.

DG: Can't fish that long now.

RB: Yes, right.

DG: Then I did lose one down at Quinney. Let me see that was when my brother was working. He's four years younger. He was nineteen or fifteen. I would have been fifteen, actually the following year, I think it was. I had a fifty pounder. I didn't have driver's license yet. I came out under the floor, speared that one, got on the floor, and it was off. It hit one tag then. I went over by my dad and told him I had a fish. We had a blue pickup truck, and we're fishing off of Quinney then, about 5 miles in the lake. Bare ice, no snow. So, I drove across the lake, came to Pipe, and we are at the meat market then. My mother was working in the meat market. Drove up, showed her the fish. Of course, at that time it wasn't such a big deal driving without a driver's license. Went over to the bar, bought a keg, went back out on the lake, cross lake, almost slid into my dad's, shanty when I came.

RB: Oh, you're too excited.

DG: I was going a little too fast, coming back. Probably was fishing a half an hour and I see a streak about 18 inches or something, about eighteen inches long, and maybe inch and a half wide. Lots of years, you'd have clear water, and probably the bottom three feet, it would be cloudy or you couldn't see. But the top would be real clear. I watched that, and it was coming from the south. It was just moving, barely moving. Finally, when it got over by this, "What the heck, cut them lose." So, I had a five-time spear that my brother built that year. It was a solid handled spear. So, I speared hard.

RB: Oh, yes. The head didn't come off?

DG: The head didn't come off. Now, we fish everything with lose heads. and had to learn the hard way. Story isn't over yet. Anyway, I speared down, and boy did I have a fish, fought, went up on ice, rolled, was hitting the spear, handle on ice. Finally, I pulled the fish back in the hole, and not into the hole, but it was down deep. I had a fairly long (gaffle?). It was a big sturgeon. It was well over 100. It was a five-time spear. It might have been, I'm going to say, 14 inches wide. I had the fish speared right in the middle. There was fish on each side of that spear. I had them with all the tines. That's and I'm reaching the fishes.

RB: I don't want to make you feel bad, but that's over a hundred. [laughter]

DG: I know, I can still picture that. That was my hundred pounder. What am I supposed to get? And I'd taken a [inaudible] off the wall, and the fish is probably down about four feet in the water. I was just going down and rolled off the spear. If I probably wouldn't have pulled them back that much, that fifty pounder that I had earlier that day, when I had the fish on the floor, the spear was off. So, then I took that spear along home that night, and we shoved it into fish. What I would do, it was sharpened with sharp tines four ways on the points. That would split the flesh and the meat and the barbs couldn't hold. So, we rounded them tines up on the bottom. They were round tines, but we rounded them up and never had any problem. After that, we started fishing with loose spears. But learned a lesson the hard way and only just seen a little streak. It must have been the buttons on the back or whatever. I would think that fish died but maybe not, but it was speared really good. So, things do happen,

RB: Yes. Well, that 200-pounder is out there with your name on it.

DG: Yes. That's good. I'll keep looking for him.

RB: We're getting new scales just so we can weigh your fish next year. [laughter]

DG: That sounds like a good deal. I'm ready for that. We had a number of different things that happened. One time, we were setting shanties and we're ploughing. It was dark already. My brother and I, and we're driving down and we could see in the plough in the front, we had a ton and a half truck at that time. It would have been back in about 1961 or two or three. We've seen kind of wet, and the water coming up. So, we stopped, and we weren't done working yet that night. Here we are going right down a new crack that had cracked.

RB: Oh, my god.

DG: We were on each side of it with the wheels.

KSK: Ploughing it out.

DG: It was only a few inches open and the ice wasn't really so thick either at that that time. That was one incident, one other incident, nothing happened though, but I got one story that's even better than that. My brother and I, we moved a lot of shanties. I was moving on a little bit north of the [inaudible] Road. At that time, we were ploughing Pipe, most of the time, we just took care of Pipe. I went on the north side of the Pipe of the [inaudible] Road and it was like maybe 6:30 a.m. and we were out there. We always had a routine. I cut the hole, we'd sink the block and then usually, we cut the hole about a foot from the shanty, so I see where the runners and how big the hole is from the back of the shanty. I'll walk around. I put the saw back in the truck. I grabbed the crowbar, and we usually had that shanty unhooked with the clevis. I started to push the shanty back over the hole. My brother happened to be walking behind the shanty on that foot of ice, and I knocked him in the hole. I heard it splash, and I heard him, and I went around. When I got around over by the hole, he was gone. He went down because he tried jumping across, and luckily, he didn't hit his head. He tried jumping across the hole, and it didn't work. He said he was down about 6 feet or so, and he could see the hole, and swam up. Then I

grabbed him, and he had a cigar, it was floating on the water. His cap was floating on the water.

RB: Oh, my god.

DG: I pulled him out and went in the fish shanty. We turned the stove on and pulled the batch of his wet clothes off. He was soaked really good. It was pretty sober and sobering in the shanty. Once we had everything squared away, and we got some of his wet clothes off, and think we had another dry jacket there. All of a sudden, my cheeks were starting to get real round, and I couldn't stop, and I busted out laughing. It was okay, because nothing happened.

RB: He was okay by then. [laughter]

DG: I can't quite say the words he told me. [laughter] But we always had a good laugh. In about a year or two later, we were out in Milwaukee at the Athletic Club. Invited some friends of ours that we fished up in Canada with. Some guys came over and when they heard that we were Groeschels, they asked, "Well, which one of you two guys were in the lake?"

RB: [laughter]

DG: I don't know the story went around. But luckily, nothing happened. He could have drowned or whatever. Well, maybe I could have got him out. I think it could have, but it's hard to say.

RB: Wow.

DG: So, then he went in. It's not even 7:00 a.m. yet, and he went home to change his clothes and get dry clothes. Of course, that night when we came in the bar, well, he said, "What do you guys do? Haul off a sturgeon? No, I'm kidding. " You can't do anything without getting blamed for something. Then I decided, after I had the hole cut, I thought, "Oh, I'm not going to fish there." So, I hooked on a shanty, moved it back away to south and south of the [inaudible] Road and cut in there. One of the fellows, (Harold Millenbach?), came out. He was a farmer up the road. He came out and he said, "Well, where should I go fishing?" Well, I said, I don't know. I said I cut a hole and I didn't fish and they were getting fish around there. Maybe you ought to go and sit on that hole. His shanty was 6-foot wide, just like ours were. So, when he pulled on that hole, and he speared two sturgeon out of there. One was an albino. Now I don't remember if it had exact pink eyes or not. That part, I don't remember, but it was a white, light gray sturgeon. I think that was 60-some pounds, and he got an 80-some pounder out of that same hole in two days. So, at least I picked a good spot, but I should have fished there. Because I didn't do anything on the other hole that I set up on.

KSK: Why didn't you want to fish it?

DG: I just changed my mind.

RB: Yeah. Just a hunch.

DG: Just a hunch, it wasn't anything to do with my brother being in the hole. Maybe that attracted the sturgeon. I don't know.

Kathy: Yes. They are like, look at this decoy.

DG: It's a possibility. I think the most hold I had under my shanty in one day was seven.

RB: Oh, my goodness.

DG: Well, I was looking for clearer water. We were coming up, and we were cutting and looking and then ended up fishing. But I did that, I think twice.

RB: Yes.

DG: Already, I had moved already, at 3:00 the last day for trying. I know one year back, when there were thirty-seven or thirty-eight fish speared, I had been up in Michigan spearing on Mullett Lake. I came back and the water in Winnebago was just terrible. It was dirty. My nephews, they had the shanties.

RB: Was that in the [19]60s, Dan, you think?

DG: Pardon?

RB: 1968, I think -

DG: That could have been.

RB: It's [19]69 or something like that.

DG: I don't remember exactly. I think it was thirty-nine there. It would have been [19]83.

RB: Oh [19]83. Oh, yes. We had big year in [19]82.

DG: In [19]83. Anyway, We came back from fishing up on Mullett, spearing. I said, "Well, you can't see everything's dirty." Well, I said, "If we don't go fishing, I'm going to have to work that day." That was on a Saturday or Sunday, Saturday. So, we took the snowmobiles and we pulled three shanties back out. About three and a half miles in the lake, off Pipe, nobody else was fishing, and set up, and I speared one. All I seen was something chocolate going on the side of the hole. Didn't come through the hole and it could have been a carp, I don't know. But it was a, I think, a 50-some pound sturgeon.

RB: Oh, yes.

DG: In the middle shanty, I didn't see anything. Then my nephew speared one in the north shanty and then we had snowmobiles. So, I went in. I was living in Pipe. We were living in Pipe, and I went and got my oldest daughter. She had a tag. I didn't have a tag left. Then I

brought her back out. When we're coming back out, I looked over towards the [inaudible] Road, and over by the Christmas trees where I could see a snowmobile sitting there. Well, we got to the shanty, didn't take too long, here comes two snowmobiles, two game wardens on it. And I think they figured that something was wrong. They said they were over the whole lake and there was no sturgeon. They couldn't find a sturgeon. They come nearby our three shanties, and there's two sturgeons. They were tagged. They were in the sleigh. Everything was fine. I never forgot that.

RB: They were looking for something to do.

DG: They were looking for something to do. I said, "Well, as long as you're here, you might as well, can you register the fish right away," and yes, they did.

RB: They did.

DG: So, they did.

RB: Oh, yes. Well, back then –

DG: I don't think there was registration stage.

RB: Well, there was.

DG: Well, yes, there would have been registry.

RB: We didn't run them but I think they gave the wardens registration tags,

DG: Yes.

RB: Then I think at that time (Cal Harbor?), they registered them. The fish crew did there.

DG: Yes. You're probably right about that.

DG: Yes. I know, that was going on. Well, there's been lots of fun. It's such a family tradition. It's been passed on. We pass it on ours, and it's just a great fun. It's different in deer hunting. One thing, when you got a sturgeon, you really have something that's good to eat. I think it's better than lobster.

RB: Oh, yes. How do you guys normally fix it?

DG: Well, we fry a lot of it, or we smoke it.

RB: Just pan fry it or deep fry it?

DG: Pan fry it. No, we usually pan fry it.

RB: So, you just, like take a thin piece or whatever and pan fry it? Just bread it and pan fry it?

DG: Usually, we don't bread it. We usually just roll it in flour.

RB: Oh, yes, almost like a steak.

DG: Well, yes. You can have it half, three quarters of an inch thick. Or even if you got a lot of fish, you could be making an inch. Three quarters is usually about where we –

RB: So, you almost cook it like tuna. Do you cook it all the way through?

DG: We cook it through pretty well through. Fair amount of oil, so it's almost like deep fry but it isn't quite that hot. It usually gets golden brown. The second pan usually browns up even nicer than the first pan once it's in the oil.

RB: Yes.

DG: Because it shows through it. It doesn't matter if it's a big fish or a small fish. Usually, when you cut or butcher the fish, you can tell if a fish has got white meat and no marbling in it. It could be a little bit tougher and maybe not as good a flavor.

RB: Oh, really? So, the marbling makes it better.

DG: Oh, yes. Absolutely, if you get a nice marbling and a yellow on that, that's usually a very, very good fish. Lot of people cut all the red meat off the back by the skin.

RB: Yes. Do you pull the notochord out? The cord out of the back.

DG: I don't. I actually like to chew on the cartilage and with that, but that's me.

RB: I mean, some people say that puts a taste in the fish but I don't believe how it would.

DG: I should take that back though. Lots of times on all the past years now, I did, usually cut that all away. Usually, when I was cleaning.

RB: You skin the whole thing, right?

DG: Well, yes. I usually cut it in 4 or 5-inch chunks across the fish, maybe 3 or 4. We got some big steak knives from being in the meat market. Then we'll skin them. You just go through the middle, upside down. Then you can peel it like you do pork. Then you got your chunk, and then you can steak that up. That's how I usually –

RB: I see, okay. When you freeze it, do you freeze it water then?

DG: Freeze it in water usually.

RB: That's just the meat? There's no skin or anything,

DG: No, that's all off. All trimmed up, and everything's gone on that and we'll cut out everything. There'll be nothing in from the inside. You got not the blood part but that's all cut away and clean.

RB: Yes.

DG: Lately, I've been actually cutting all the bone and everything off for it. But there isn't really no bone. It's just cartilage.

RB: Just cartilage, yes. Remove everything, just cartilage

DG: Yes, that's all.

RB: Do you ever make soup or did your family ever make soup out of these parts of it?

DG: We used to make some sturgeon head soup, but we usually had enough sturgeon. We didn't have to bother with that.

RB: Yes, right. There are people who do that, I guess.

DG: I know there is.

RB: They make some sturgeon head soup. I had a guy call me up and say they found a PIT tag in a sturgeon head soup.

DG: Oh, okay.

KSK: Really?

RB: Yes. "What do your blankety blank eggs look like? I found one in my soup." [laughter]

KSK: [laughter]

DG: Gloria goes spearing. She goes along. We had fun last year. We fished on the upper lakes. My daughter, oldest daughter, Nancy, went and my son in law and myself. We had three tags. Then we pre-fished on Friday afternoon. My daughter and Gloria seen eight sturgeon. Nancy thought that four or five of them were around a hundred-pound class. Then I see one and then I got a small one on Saturday, on opening day, made a little bit of a mistake. Nancy got a bigger one. Then my son-in-law got his first sturgeon on Sunday in the snowstorm, so he was happy. He was trying for some years. So, he had his first fish. He was up there alone, and I didn't go back. I was down at Jim and Linda's watching the snow fly. Then my brother's nephew, he speared 155 pounder off Pipe, out of our crew. So, that was a nice fish. That was a dandy sturgeon.

RB: Talk a little bit about Sturgeon for Tomorrow, because you're one of the founding members or one of the founding directors. We're going to have a chapter in the book on Sturgeon for Tomorrow.

DG: Okay,

RB: Kathy's been going through all the old records and files and everything from when you guys brought Professor Ballard here. All the political stuff that was going on between Sturgeon for Tomorrow founders and DNR and the personalities involved. It's really an interesting history.

DG: It is. Well, of course, as you know, in 1977, Bill Casper came up with the idea about forming Sturgeon for Tomorrow so we could propagate sturgeon for the future, so we would never lose what we had here. We got together, and there were five of us, Bill Casper, myself, and Bob Blanck and Lloyd Lemke and Vic Schneider. We were the first directors on that and it's been a great experience. I think that over the years, we set some new standards for working with the DNR. Although those first years, we sat down in meetings with the DNR representatives, and kind of we were told, well, are we crazy or are we nuts or it can't be done. "What do you guys think you want to do?" Well, all we want to do is be able to propagate sturgeon. Bill Casper located Professor Ballard from Dartmouth College and that was a great plus. He had gone to Russia, and he was experienced in propagating sturgeon and we got a lot of insight from that.

RB: Kathy actually found in the records where he actually helped you put together the proposal to do it.

DG: He came here and he was in the motel room. I think he stayed up all night to write the proposal, put together how to propagate the sturgeon. One of the things where we are mixing the clay with the eggs. The first batch that was tried, I think we had bad eggs. They weren't handled properly. Of course, we had to get permission from the DNR. Had it not been for Sturgeon for Tomorrow and bringing Professor Ballard in and all the other information and then the money that we raised and got going, the Wisconsin DNR wouldn't have been the first to propagate sturgeon.

RB: The first eggs that you took were raised up at Reverend Lang's place?

DG: Right.

RB: In New London?

DG: Right.

RB: So, did you guys know Reverend Lang? Or how did you make that connection?

DG: Bill Casper found him again. I don't know if he knew him ahead. I don't think so. Maybe, unless he bought some trout or something. He was also a lot of help. Very nice man, Professor Ballard. His wife came too. There's a couple of pictures around I had from when we were up at

Blanck's Supper Club for a dinner.

RB: His wife's father was a senator from Vermont.

DG: Oh, that I didn't know.

RB: Yes. Right?

KSK: Yes.

DG: He was no young spring chicken when he came here.

RB: He was actually retired by then.

KSK: He was retired.

DG: Yes. He was retired and he sure enjoyed the sturgeon and was very knowledgeable on it. In working and getting that going, I mean, it's been a great fun time.

RB: When they took those first eggs, were you guys there when they took the eggs? I know Dan Folz, I think was involved in taking the eggs.

DG: I think Professor Ballard was there. I think the first batch that we tried that didn't produce, they didn't hatch it. They weren't handled properly on that. I was not there. I went up later, once we had the second batch on that.

RB: Do you remember when did Fred Binkowski get involved? Did you guys ask that he get involved?

DG: No, I don't exactly know how Fred came into the picture.

RB: We've got to interview Fred, so he'll tell us.

KSK: Yes.

DG: I'm not sure where those ties –

RB: Because he got involved too early on.

DG: Yes. Well, he might have been behind the scenes. I didn't even know it too. It's a possibility also and I didn't know him personally at the time.

RB: I think even Serge Doroshov. Kathy was saying that the Professor Ballard's proposal, they ran that by Serge Doroshov as well.

DG: That part I didn't know about either. Well, that would have been internally with the DNR.

We wouldn't have maybe known where that all was passed around.

RB: Another major player back then was (Jim Addis?).

DG: (Jim Addis?) was there.

KSK: Can you tell me a little bit about what those early meetings with the with the DNR were like? Because I've just been reading memos. I've been going through old DNR memos and I've been reading, you know, what they've been writing. (Jim Addis?) seemed to be really like, "I don't know what these guys are doing."

DG: Exactly, correct.

KSK: I think they are in it for money. I mean, that all sorts of things were fine.

DG: It was really almost a flat-out no. Where are you guys coming from? I guess, don't come in our realm where that's our expertise. But it wasn't being done. Nobody was doing it here, at least, anyway.

RB: But then once you initiated it, they really embraced it.

DG: Good thing, we were persistent as we were. Once we got it going and got the whole program going, I think that we broke a lot of barriers. Other clubs have been working with the DNR, and it's just been a great asset. But it was a tough struggle. I mean, it was almost everybody was "No, you guys, you can't do that. You can't have any egg. Where do you want to go with all of them? What do you want to do? We can't stock in over our population." Well, we just want to know for sure if something happens –

RB: That you know how to do it.

DG: – that we know how to do it. Well, it's gotten a whole lot further than that. But everybody, Dan Folz, (Jim Addis?), was it Czeskleba?

RB: Don Czeskleba, he was the hatchery guy.

DG: Yes. He was on some of it. We even had the news media there. It seemed like that didn't even help. But we sat down and stayed persistent and really helped through all the years and get the program going. Of course, look where we are today, right?

RB: Then the Sturge N Guard program too. You guys must have gotten off really early on in that, right?

DG: Yes. Because we were talking about how many fish were going out on the river, at least. I didn't have any firsthand information on that. I don't think Bill Casper did either. You'd hear stories and people talking about it was second or third hand or fourth hand and how many fish were possibly going out. Not saying that there aren't some fish going on in Winnebago too. I

mean I fished set lines for catfish. We've seen them jump by us, never caught them, never had a sturgeon on, but we think somebody took some off.

KSK: Off of your set lines?

DG: Off of our set lines, but we never did catch one. I was surprised that they had fished them about three years, four years, or whatever my brother and I did. [inaudible] and then, of course, we would fish. One thing I was thinking about the poignant situation, and maybe you could shed a little light on that. But all those early years back, it was primarily. boy, if somebody got a 50 or 60-pound fish up there, that was really something. They were all a lot smaller little fish that were in this. That's why in February, when that season would have been that, I think, that the fish did not leave Winnebago so early when we were. They weren't up in there because that food base wasn't in there. We had all the food here that they needed.

RB: There's definitely been a change. There are really two possible scenarios. One is that there have always been big fish leaving here. But maybe, the quantity leaving has changed. But the ones that did leave perhaps went right straight through.

DG: They may not have stayed in [inaudible] or in the upper lakes.

RB: They may not have stayed in the lake until the shad came in. I suspect that's probably part of it, what you mentioned earlier, that they may have been more fish that stayed in the lake and went out later. That might also be part of it. So, it might be a little bit of both.

DG: I think that's got a lot to do. I think the fishery today, with the shad, I think actually, the fish got more vulnerable because they're out chasing shads and swimming where years ago, they didn't move, you didn't get them.

RB: Right.

DG: I've seen a number of times when we were fishing out on Winnebago, of course, we're always in the mud, usually. Not always now. But sometimes, you'd see the sturgeon. They'd be going and they'd be blowing the mud out. All that would be sticking out would be the tail out of mud. They plough right through and they're sucking up the worms. I mean, sometimes, you couldn't even see the fish and you'd see the mud blow and the mud blow. You wouldn't know where they'd go too low on the sides of your hole, or whatever. That was pretty common.

RB: When you guys started Sturgeons for Tomorrow, did you ever think you'd be where you are now?

DG: Absolutely not. Absolutely not and it's come such a long way. Actually, even people that that fished around the lake said, "Well, where are you guys coming from?" They thought maybe, we were going to spoil what we had. Well, we didn't spoil a thing.

RB: No.

DG: It's just gotten to be a great plus. We got 3, 4,000 members.

RB: Yes.

DG: All the dinners and the fundraisers, all the projects that we've worked on and supported, the different program. Some people complain once in a while about, well, some of the money went for sturgeon that were propagated for other states or whatever. That's not a problem because we can use sturgeon all over. I think even lakes around here. Thirty-one years has gone by pretty fast. We got some of our original people. They're still here. The only one that's gone is Bobby Blanck. Actually, he gave us our first \$1,000 that we could fund to have our first dinner. Because we didn't have the money and he kicked in \$1,000. We had our first dinner down at (Colton?). I think we ended up with like 198 people or 215. Of course, we outgrew that place. We had to eat in shifts there. We moved to [inaudible] where we had a larger facility.

RB: You've been there ever since?

DG: We've been there ever since and it's been great. We enjoyed a representation that you bring to the table and come to the dinners, and all the work that you've done. Plus, all the other biologists, Dan Folz, (Jim Kenbinger?), yourself, and there's been a number of other ones that's been great. Fred raising the fish in the projects we've been working down at the Water Institute.

RB: One thing I see from my perspective is the biological contribution. Just being persistent, like I said earlier, and getting the propagation thing off the ground to get it going. That's been a big benefit to sturgeon programs all over the country. I mean seriously, because there were only three efforts going on at that time. On the Atlantic, in the Midwest here on Lake Sturgeon and with white sturgeon on the west coast, all happening at the same time. But they all found each other after they started, and that helped synergize this whole thing and really take it to the next level. So, you guys are instrumental in that. But just locally here, the social aspect of Sturgeon for Tomorrow of having this vehicle that the public can identify with as the club or the organization that they belong to that keeps sturgeon spears and keeps the tradition going. I don't think we'd have the tradition that we have right now. There'd be tradition, but it wouldn't be as nurtured, I don't think if it wasn't for the organization. Truly, I don't think it would be

DG: By far not.

RB: No.

DG: There's been obstacles that had to be crossed. NOAA work together, get things worked out, get permission.

RB: I'm sure, even just between directors too. I'm sure there's been some challenges from time to time over the years, and with any organization.

DG: As soon as you put two people together, you got a couple different views. Now you put twenty, thirty, forty, fifty on that. But that's been quite good. I mean, you get some diversion. Some might say, "Well, I don't think -"

RB: You are talking about marriage right now? [laughter]

DG: No, I'm not. I'm talking Sturgeon for Tomorrow directors. I'm not going to touch the marriage part. The heck with that. You get people with different thoughts and different opinions and I guess that's constructive. All you can do was go by how the majority wants to go.

RB: If everybody thought the same, it would be pretty boring, really.

DG: Absolutely.

RB: You got to have some things [inaudible].

DG: Absolutely. They might say tough things about me, and maybe about you and whatever. But we just keep forging forward. Usually, those that are talking the most or complaining the most don't usually do much but complain.

RB: Where do you see Sturgeon for Tomorrow going now? If you would look out – well, you've been in business for thirty-one years now?

KSK: Forty-five years.

DG: You mean Sturgeon for Tomorrow? Sturgeon for Tomorrow is thirty-one years.

RB: So, in another thirty years, where would you envision? Where do you see it going?

DG: I guess I didn't look out that far in the future. I was working on, I guess, more of the tasks at hand. With that, I sure would like to see the fishery stay as strong as it is. Of course, you know me, I'm always asking for more in the quota.

RB: Probably it would be this year. It's on tape. [laughter]

DG: Providing that the system can support it.

RB: Right.

DG: As the fish get bigger and heavier, I'm sure they eat more. Maybe you have to take more fish from it. I think all the spawning sites are great if we don't have shad ones, or we get a different food base or something.

RB: The dynamic situation.

DG: The dynamics are there. I'm very agreeable on having sturgeon in other waters where it used to have sturgeon, whether they come from here. If you take a few quarts of eggs, we're not short of fish.

RB: Right.

DG: If they're hatched and they go on river systems or lake systems, I'd even like to see more lakes with the sturgeon. Maybe a little higher control from law enforcement. But it's just that you never know down the road what's going to take place.

RB: Right. You definitely have to think long term with this fish.

DG: Yes. I mean, you don't see your fruits of the effort. Twenty-five, thirty, forty years isn't a very long time for this program.

RB: Not at all.

DG: You need a much longer time. It's going to be more generations.

RB: I wish I had another thirty years left in my career.

DG: Yes. Well, you might have in your career. I don't think I'll have in my life, but –

RB: Yes. I might have in my life if I'm lucky.

DG: Well, I didn't mean you were going to just stay in the same position which you are, but –

RB: Right. I'm not going anywhere.

DG: The Sturgeon for Tomorrow effort has been just great.

RB: Yes.

DG: We wouldn't be sitting here today had it not been Sturgeon for Tomorrow organization. Unless something would have taken place. You got different clubs, Walleyes for Tomorrow, you know, formed after –

RB: I was just going to say, imitation is the best form of flattery. After you guys formed, the other clubs had formed.

DG: Right.

RB: Like you said, Walleyes for Tomorrow, Shadows on the Wolf, these other organizations that operate the same way.

DG: Working together. I think more years ago, and a number of people, they probably were in opposition with the department. Only thinking they're taking away, but I always said, "Hey, the DNR isn't spearing the sturgeon. We're the ones that are spearing the sturgeon. Don't blame them if we're taking the fish, or we're spearing the fish, or whatever." It's our fishery, and it's being watched over by the department. It's a great asset. It's one of the few places in the world.

RB: There's been an evolution of attitudes, I think, on all sides. I know in DNR, there has been, because when I first started with the agency, and I was in the late [19]70s, where we're the experts.

DG: Absolutely. We were told that when we had our first meetings.

RB: But that's changed now, thank goodness. It still is out there and some parts of it, but we certainly don't operate that way anymore in our program.

DG: Well, there's so much to be learned in so many different fields. You think you might know most of it, but that changes overnight in the way information is with the internet and the computers and everything today. I mean, information is passed around so much more worldwide than what it was.

KSK: Yeah,

DG: I mean, it's just a whole different situation.

RB: Kathy's been digging into how the first spearing season came to be, from the legislative standpoint, and finding some really interesting information. The first season in 1932, I'll just introduce this, and you can pass on some more.

KSK: Oh, sure.

RB: Was part of an economic relief package for the depression. There was some wrangling going back and forth as to whether we should just be spearing and/or hook in line or whatever. But I don't know when you were growing up, was there ever any talk about any of that, about discovering any other kind of –

DG: No. I hadn't heard that until that was mentioned just recently. But I do know that down in the Stockbridge area and along – I heard it more down that way, that it was part of survival. It was, go out and get some sturgeon. There were customers that would pay for it. It bought vehicles. It put other food on the table. It paid taxes. It was part of survival. That would have been through those Depression years and things were very tight. Probably the generations today don't realize that ever took place and just how tight and tough things were.

RB: Exactly, just trying to survive.

DG: Right.

RB: My dad's family, they lived on venison and fish.

DG: I grew up in a meat market. So, we had sturgeon. My dad, he'd eat fish. He'd do his work and go out almost every day.

RB: Was it right here in Pipe?

DG: Yes. Right in Pipe, that's where I grew up.

RB: Was it the one at [inaudible] now or whatever?

DG: No, right next to it. It's the Pipe meat market.

RB: Pipe meat market.

DG: Sometimes he'd fish all season. He spears sturgeon on the last day or something. But not always, there were times we had a bathtub in there, what we used to scall the hogs. The sturgeon would be put in there, and there would be snow put in there, so they would keep on that. There was somebody hungry for some sturgeon, well, that goes and part of survival too, I guess.

KSK: Right.

DG: I think primarily though it was pretty well for just that, it was a tradition, and it was a good food substance and I think people got it for their own use. I mean, they speared for the pleasure of spearing and for the food. In the end, I think that was the primary. Of course, you know how it always leads from some other things that can go on. If somebody's got to sell something or whatever, they did that to survive.

RB: Wasn't there a place out at where Jim and Linda's is at now, or right there, wasn't there a fellow that - I don't know if he sold fish, but he had kind of like a speakeasy or something -

DG: (Leo Dries?), yes, I know I remember that real well.

RB: I don't know if you told me, but somebody else was telling me about that. The spear is used to stop in there for a quick shot before they went home or whatever.

DG: Sure. Yes. He was down there, which is right where Jim and Linda's is. I used to mow lawn for him many years ago.

RB: Really?

DG: Yes. Real lawnmower, gas driven, though it was.

RB: Really? It had a little tavern or something there.

DG: That part, I don't know. Did they need license back then?

RB: I don't know. [laughter]

DG: I don't know if there were any town or county ordinances to have a tavern license, that might have come a little later. I think there was even a little more going than just a tavern,

maybe. [laughter] I'm not sure about that part. Then after he was in there, later on, Clarence Brown was in there for many years.

RB: Yes. Is there a tavern in there too?

DG: Yes. Same tavern.

RB: Same tavern, yes.

DG: He would sell minnows. He had a shanty out there, and he would sell minnows around the lake. Those lasted the best because they were in the lake water. He kept them right in there and kept the heat of the shanty. That worked that he was there for many, many, many years. He used to plough. He ploughed the road.

RB: When did they really start doing the road ploughing? You were involved in early aspects of that.

DG: Well, we had our first truck in, I think, about [19]59. Then we got a new four-wheel drive in 1965. Then through that time, my brother and I, we were taking care of – probably for twenty years almost.

RB: It really started probably in the late [19]50s or early [19]60s when the club started ploughing roads.

DG: No. There was no club until just the past two years.

RB: Really?

DG: Yes. There never was a club at Pipe.

RB: Is that right?

DG: Pipe was one of the last ones that that just started. My nephew and a few of the other guys and myself, we started that two years ago.

RB: Okay. But like Brothertown and Quinney.

DG: Brothertown –

RB: They formed it earlier?

DG: Brothertown was not so long. That's maybe about fifteen years. Quinney was there a long time. Stockbridge tavern that was Parsons down there for a lot of years.

RB: They formed to serve as ice fishermen, basically, but were they primarily spears or ice fisherman both or –

DG: Well, years ago, we had a lot of ice fishing. Sauger fishing was excellent.

RB: Right.

DG: I mean, there was a lot of ice fishing going on. That was as soon as it froze up. Now, going back some years when I got spearing time, then the fishing closed.

RB: Yes. You couldn't fish after that.

DG: So, there was a lot of traffic on the lake. Different than today, we just haven't had that sauger bite. They don't have that saugers. Walleyes are tougher to catch through the ice. I mean, you get some, especially if there's clear water and plenty of feed and all that. But Pipe didn't have, [inaudible] did not have a fishing club either and still doesn't. Then up until two years ago, like I said with Pipe. Brothertown, I don't know, that's twenty years already, fifteen that they started. Then Quinney, that's been a long time, though. Quinney had a crew down there. Then there was (Ray Ecker?). I don't know if he was a part time game warden, I would say, from Twilight beach. They used to plough, his son ploughed. They always had ploughs.

RB: [inaudible]?

DG: No, (Earl Ecker?) He ploughed. He is in the excavating business on the side. He's kind of retired now a little bit.

RB: I mean, when you first started spearing, most of the activity wasn't inside the lake, was it?

DG: A lot of it was, yes.

RB: Was it so active in the south then too?

DG: No.

RB: No. Not like today?

DG: That just happened probably since –

RB: Since the shad came.

DG: Yes, since the shad came.

RB: I got here when the shad got here. –

DG: That's about when that started taking place. How many years is it?

RB: Twenty-one years now.

DG: Is it twenty-one already?

RB: Yes.

DG: Time goes fast when you're having fun.

RB: Absolutely. [laughter]

DG: It's sure been good times working together.

RB: Yes, it has.

DG: Some people might not agree with that, but whatever. You take that with a grain of salt.

RB: It's where we are and where we've come from and where we're going.

DG: Absolutely correct. Sturgeon for Tomorrow, I hope that goes on forever. Of course, that's a long time, but whatever. The generations to come.

RB: All you can do is what you can do.

DG: It's a great fishery that we have. It sure is nice to see the fish getting the size that they are.

RB: I got some really interesting stuff to show you on that.

DG: They're living longer.

RB: I can set up another date to come over. It may be even with other directors –

DG: I was thinking about that. You mentioned that about that. We could have a meeting here. I don't know with all the tournaments, if we could get much attendance. But I mean, we could grab –

RB: I'm thinking later in the summer.

DG: Yes. You could grab a time and whether it's a weekend or weeknight, or whichever would work out.

RB: I'm just finishing up the future forecasting model that goes out five hundred years and forecasts population.

DG: Was that why you're asking where Sturgeons for Tomorrow is going to be in the next thirty or forty or fifty years?

RB: Yes. Because what happens is it shows how the population cycles in abundance over a long period of time, at different levels of harvest. It'll show you at what level of harvest it crashes.

I'm just working the bugs out of it right now. It really doesn't have any bugs, but we're building it. I've got to meet with my professor to make sure that I didn't screw anything up in it. But I think I've got it pretty well settled and it's really fascinating.

KSK: That it almost in the [19]50s?

DG: In the [19]50s, we were within a whisker of crashing this population by 1959.

DG: Well, I was looking at some of the catches, though. I mean, the spearing fish in fifty-five.

RB: There were a lot of fish [inaudible] in the [19]50s. There's really low population.

DG: I remember, I think that's when was that (Leroy Schrader?) that speared that big fish. Was that in [19]55 or thereabouts?

RB: (L. Roy Schrader?), that was in [19]53.

DG: No. (L. Roy Schrader?), that's Stockbridge. (Leo Stroble?)

RB: I'll have to look in the records. There wasn't a high abundance of fish back then, but there was some really nice big fish. But the abundance wasn't real high.

DG: I forgot how big it is, if that was 150-some pounder. Because I remember going across the road, and it was over in a tavern and Pipe. I think it was somewhere around in 1955 or could have been even little earlier than that. I don't think was, but the –

RB: The hard data shows how the population has grown over the last fifty years, to the point where right now, it has really steadily grown. Then I can build on the hard data and then launch it into the future. It shows how the population, we've got it up to this level now, but that it's more than likely going to cycle, up and down basically, on generations of sturgeon where you get a good buildup of adult stock. Then you get through recruitment from that. Then that cycles. It's almost like your class is a walleye going through, but it's on like a fifty-year cycle.

DG: Right.

RB: I mean, none of us will be around here to know if it's true by the time you get into the next cycle. But we'll have some indications of it in the next ten, twenty years. But the main point is that even though it's cycles, it's stable. We can maintain what we have out here pretty well, by having this 5 percent exploitation rate that keeps it at a high level of abundance, and keeps a fishery going.

DG: Well, we got a good amount of food. We got good spawning sites. As long as nothing gets contaminated on the river, or that the river system doesn't change, or whatever, too much.

RB: Right.

DG: I would say that we should be in a pretty good shape.

RB: Yes. We're probably going to have to look at building – or either revitalizing or building some new spawning sites. Revitalizing some of the old because they won't be known after a while. So, we'll have to look at that.

DG: See what takes place and get a few people to realize that "Hey, fresh rock is better than old rock."

RB: Right.

DG: Well, I would say that we sure don't want to lose what we have. We sure shouldn't if we watch out what's going on.

RB: We're set. We got a pretty good program in place to keep it going.

DG: Yes. I mean, it sure there's a lot of people that would ask, "How come we can't fish better hours during the day?" Well, then we're not cutting down the take. I don't mind a half-day fishing.

RB: A lot of people like that.

DG: I think that works out quite well.

RB: You get to move and not feel like you're sitting all day long.

DG: So, I think we'll have a good time.

RB: Do you have any other questions, Kathy?

KSK: No, I think I actually covered enough.

[end of transcript]