

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

Bob Frank Oral History

Date of Interview: Unknown

Location: Neenah, Wisconsin

Length of Interview: 16:45

Interviewer: DK – Dick Koerner

Transcriber: NCC

Dick Koerner: Good morning. My name is Dick Koerner. I am here to do a sturgeon interview with Bob Frank, a neighbor of mine who lives on the lake. Bob, I am going to ask you a series of questions and answer anything that comes to your mind. It doesn't have to be exactly in the order I have it. Bob, when and where were you born?

Bob Frank: I was born in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin in 1932.

DK: Where do you live now?

BF: I live at 520 Sunrise Bay, Town of Neenah.

DK: How did you get interested in sturgeon spearing?

BF: Well, I did a lot of hunting and fishing in my days. When I got old enough to get a shanty and stuff, that was the way I wanted to go, and very enjoyable.

DK: Well, we know we are talking spearing here, but there is also hook and line season in some lakes and some rivers in Wisconsin. Have you ever gone outside and done any hook and line sturgeon spearing?

BF: No, I haven't.

DK: Or sturgeon fishing?

BF: No, I haven't tried it.

DK: Bob, who taught you, your dad maybe or a friend or brother, or are you self-taught?

BF: Well, kind of self-taught, but I used to go out and visit a few guys I knew out there. (Elmer Kuchenbecker?) and a few of them old guys and kind of got the fever.

DK: Bob, how has the sport changed since you started spearing?

BF: Oh, it's changed a lot. We used to be out there before dawn and stayed all dark. Now, it's the way it should be. That's a long day. You can't sit there.

DK: [laughter] Everybody seems to like that half day season.

BF: Oh, I'm all for it.

DK: We have made seventeen different rule changes in the last few years. They were all to protect the sturgeon. You know how long it takes for a female to reach maturity, about forty-five years.

BF: Definitely, yes.

DK: So, do you agree with that philosophy that we are on the right track?

BF: Yes, yes, I do.

DK: Bob, how many years have you been spearing? You have got any idea?

BF: Oh, [laughter] probably fifty-five.

DK: That is a long time.

BF: Yes.

DK: In that fifty-five years, Bob, how many sturgeon do you think you have speared? You kept track?

BF: No, I never kept a count. Maybe twenty-five.

DK: Hey, that is good. That is about what I got, twenty-five, twenty-seven.

BF: Yes.

DK: That is good. Have you missed any in that fifty-five years?

BF: [laughter] I don't want to talk about that.

DK: [laughter]

BF: One time, I had a sturgeon on for forty-five minutes, and I couldn't get him near the hole. But that's when we made our own spears out of old forks and stuff. I just couldn't get him near the hole.

DK: So, you did not miss him. You just could not –

BF: Then finally, it pulled off.

DK: Awesome.

BF: Yes.

DK: That happens now and then. If anybody has put a lot of time in out there, there is always a miss or a loss eventually.

BF: Oh, definitely. I'll never forget that fish. Yes.

DK: Well, it is the goal of all spearers. It seems that they want that magic number, hundred pounds. You never get hundred pounds.

DK: No. Eighty-seven.

DK: Hey, that is the same as mine.

BF: Eighty-seven is the biggest – yes.

DK: Mine would have been hundred. It had eggs, but it is gone now, I will tell you.

BF: Yes. Mine had eggs. Yes.

DK: Well, that is good. Bob, do you prefer the shanties with the wheels or the tip down? You sure can tell the difference between an East Shore Lake Winnebago shanty and they got them great big barns on runners. On this shore, it seems everybody has got shanties with wheels either a tip down or a –

BF: Pop-up.

DK: Yes.

BF: Yes. Yes, I had the pop-up. That was really very – especially if you're alone. Or one other guy, easy to hook on and go.

DK: Now, we can only spear until 12:30 p.m. So, most people are out there the whole morning, and there is not much visiting anymore going on. It is all serious business. When it was all-day spearing, did you have a favorite, you want to be there at this time?

BF: Yes. I think it was between 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. [laughter]

DK: Oh, really?

BF: Yes. But it didn't make that much difference. You just got to be there.

DK: I never wanted to miss between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

BF: Oh, yes.

DK: I was sure lucky during those hours. Bob, do you set up with a GPS now that you got GPSs (in that?) to mark a spot, or do you go by landmarks yet?

BF: Just by landmarks. I look out there every day. You got a kind of a hot spot you like to go. If it's hot or not, you (find out early?).

DK: You can always move.

BF: Yes, move. It's easier to move nowadays because –

DK: He did want a new hot spot.

BF: Yes. Hot spots change every year.

[laughter]

DK: How about the red worms? Do you ever look for them and try to set up a worm bed?

BF: Yes. You and I did a few times, Dick.

DK: After living here a few years, I found out there has got to be lake flies all over the lake, so I abandoned that. Well, what is your most memorable experience spearing?

BF: I think that was, oh man, a few years ago already. It was kind of a snowstorm in the morning. My brother, Red, he comes up and visits with me and sits with me. Then we were going to go, and we were looking out there. I said, "Boy, Red, we better hold off a while." That snow, it was blowing along this surface. It looked like about 15 feet high. It was so windy. So, we stayed here, had an extra cup of coffee, just kind of watching the weather out the window. Finally, after about an hour or so, I said, "Yes, it looks like we can go now. Things are starting to settle down." As we were going out there, we saw a guy standing by a shanty a ways off and (could make him out?). It was in the morning, probably 9:00 a.m. or something like that. I said, "That isn't right." He was kind of waving. So, I said, "We better go over there." So, here he was, some young guy. He said, "My buddy's in the hole." His buddy was a hairy creature. So, Red and I, we got in there. Oh, that poor guy was hanging out of the shanty down in the hole, heavy clothes soaking up, and he was blue. Within another two minutes, he'd have been gone. We got a hold of him, and we pulled and pulled. He was a big guy. He probably went three hundred pounds. We got him up on the floor. He couldn't talk. He dashed himself in the head with a spear. We said, "Wow." We got our hands full. We had a hard time getting him through the door of the shanty. Then we got him out there. His buddy, he had a kind of a Jeep or something with a tailgate. The guy said, "We got to get him to shore." Three of us on him, Red got his legs and him and I on the shoulder, trying to throw him up on the tailgate, missed once, hit the tailgate, backed up, finally got him in. Red had a cell phone. He called 911, I believe, that we're coming in the Fresh Air Camp at Neenah. They said, "Neenah [inaudible]. We had a guy that was injured, and he couldn't talk, and he's blue." When we got there, they were there and the ambulance was there and the fire trucks were there. We thought he was a goner, but he made it. I think he's still spearing to this day.

DK: Yes, he is.

BF: But he's a little more careful.

DK: That is a wonderful story. An extra cup of coffee saved his life.

BF: Saved his life. Saved his life. It did. I don't think he'd have lived another five minutes at the most.

DK: Wow, what an experience. How about bad weather or bad ice conditions? If you have been on the ice long enough, you run into cracks, springs, open water, blizzards, whiteouts. Any experiences you can remember there?

BF: Yes. I was in the shanty, and I heard some snowmobiles come up. It was blowing on. I couldn't see, but I always parked my vehicle heading towards the way I want to go when I go for home. I heard these snowmobilers pull up. Red was outside. They come over to ask him. He lives in Woodstock, Illinois now. They said, "Hey, can you tell me where Waverly is?" I heard them tell him, "Yes, right over that way. Right that way to Waverly." You couldn't see it. It was a kind of a whiteout. So, after a while when I said, "Red, then guys, where do they want to go?" He said, "Waverly." I said, "Where'd you send them?" He said, "Right down that way." I said, "Red, that's the Neenah River. Why would you send them there?" He said, "Well, why would they ask me? They know I don't live around here." [laughter] But they must have made it because we never heard anything.

DK: Wow.

BF: I said, "That is crazy."

DK: Do you carry a compass with you?

BF: Always.

DK: You bet you.

BF: I always have one in my truck.

DK: You bet. Any superstitions, Bob, that you have a certain colored (coaxer?), a certain hat you have to wear or anything?

BF: No, no, I don't. I know guys that do, but I don't. Yes.

DK: I know a guy who had a blue sock and a green sock on, and he got a sturgeon. He did not realize that at the time.

BF: Yes. [laughter]

DK: Of course, he had a pair just like that at home.

BF: Yes. [laughter]

DK: [inaudible] he wore a blue and a green sock, one of each color. So, he thought that was his lucky charm.

BF: Yes. Well, I knew a guy who always had an orange yellow plaid shirt on. Dick, you still

got that? [laughter]

DK: Yes. Well, it fit no more, but I still got it.

BF: Yes. [laughter]

DK: Do you ever use anise oil on any of your coaxes or –

BF: No.

DK: – corn cobs –

BF: No.

DK: – or decoys?

BF: No.

DK: PVC pipes or –

BF: Yes.

DK: I mean, we made a big improvement there –

BF: Yes, definitely.

DK: – by going up –

BF: Right. We used to slice potatoes and put them down in there.

DK: That was not so bad.

BF: That wasn't so bad, but this is good. Yes.

DK: Do you know of any illegal activities? You do not have to mention names. That makes a good story.

BF: Well, not really.

DK: Not really.

BF: I don't think there's much illegal stuff going on out there anymore. Years ago, it used to be a lot of it. I knew that, but not anymore.

DK: What is another favorite fish story you can tell out there? Anything come to mind?

BF: Well, I used to like to put a bobber in the hole and fish and watch the bobber. It seemed like every day, I'd come home with a couple of perch or a walleye or something, especially when the water is not real clear, and you lose interest after a while. Every day, a couple of fish come home. I enjoyed that. But now, that's a thing of the past, too.

DK: Any special event that you can remember a fish coming in the hole and it just glowed like a halo around it or a hard shot or under the ice?

BF: Yes, I've had them happen, too. But I've had so many encounters that it's hard to recall just which is.

DK: Any lucky shots under the floor, or somebody else seen it and you did not?

BF: No, not really. I remember one time I was talking to my son on the cell phone. I said, "Hang on a second." One comes from under the floor. There he was. Nice one, too. Yes, 80-some pounder because I remember that. I said, "Hang on, Red --" or Mark. I said, "I've got to set this phone down."

DK: That is good.

BF: Yes.

DK: Do you have a favorite recipe for sturgeon?

BF: I think pan-fried is the best.

DK: You like it pan-fried?

BF: Yes, I like them pan-fried or deep-fried. Yes, a little breading on them, some kind of seasoning and not a lot of heavy breading, then deep-fried or pan-fried.

DK: Do you soak in the pan? Do you have the oil about to cover half the thickness of the fish, or do you have it enough soaked?

BF: Yes, about half. Yes.

DK: That is the most that I do. How about caviar? Do you ever eat caviar?

BF: Oh, love it. I love it. I got that one. That's the only one I ever got with ripe caviar.

DK: Oh, you did?

BF: (Deed Bergstrom?) called me. He heard I got it. He said he knew a guy would process this for me. So, he did it in halves. That was the best stuff. I gave Deed a couple of jars. In the evening, I'd get some unsalted crackers and some cream cheese on there and some caviar and I mix a cocktail.



DK: [laughter]

BF: Then I'd sit back and say, "My friends could see me now." [laughter] Yes.

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

BF: Oh, the camaraderie, the guys.

DK: That is ninety-nine percent, the people say that.

BF: Yes.

DK: It is fun to be around these guys this time of year, especially if they got gas for their saw.

[laughter]

BF: Yes. That's the little things that come back. [laughter] You could try to start a saw for an hour and a half and finally figure out there's no gas in it. That's happened.

DK: Well, there was gas in there. It is just the way the thing was made that when it was tipped up, the gas was not –

BF: [laughter] We'll never forget it. We bring that up all the time, too. Yes.

DK: Well, anything else you can think of, Bob?

BF: Well, between Red and I, we won that opening weekend fishery for Payne's Point twice. Yes, won that twice, just lucky. Yes, just lucky. Well, we won it because you checked in at Payne's Point. This one guy down the beach ways, he got one, but he let the DNR gut it out for him there. His fish would have been bigger. But we took ours without gutting it out. We took it down later after we went to the fishery. He was about a pound less [laughter], but they had cleaned it out for him. He asked if they could do it. They said, "Oh, sure." He said, "Go ahead." But he's a nice guy, too. I know him. I see him often.

DK: Well, Bob, I thank you for your time and for the interview. It was a good interview. This constitute the interview for Bob Frank. My name is Dick Koerner. This is the end of the interview. Thanks, Bob.

BF: You're welcome.

[end of transcript]