

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish
Dan Gerhardt Oral History
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Interviewer: DK – Dick Koerner
Transcriber: NCC

Dick Koerner: My name is Dick Koerner, and I'm here to do an interview with a longtime friend of mine, Dan Gerhardt. We're going to do a sturgeon history interview with some stories from Dan's past on Lake Winnebago. So, at this point, Dan, I'm going to ask, where and when were you born?

Dan Gerhardt: I was born in Neenah in 1940. I lived there until about [19]95, [19]96, and then I moved to Pine River, Wisconsin. Fished in Lake Winnebago most of my life.

DK: How did you get interested in sturgeon spearing?

DG: When I was a little boy, my dad took me out, and he speared years ago. I'm talking back to the late [19]40s and early [19]50s. He died in probably [19]70. But he took me out as a small boy, and I just couldn't believe what was going on out on the lake and being by those old guys, (Frank Besson Stein?) and (Freddie Whitburn?) and (Wallenberg?)

DK: Woody Rabideau?

DG: Woody Rabideau, yeah, all these guys. I used to go out and sit in their shanties with them and dad sat in his own shanty. I'd go around and visit with these guys. I was just fascinated by the smell of the inside of the shanty. Of course, at that time, there were wood stoves. If somebody did get a fish, you could smell the fish slime on the floor. I was just mesmerized by it.

DK: Dan, do you ever do any hook and line sturgeon?

DG: Yes, I do. In fact, I ran a hunt and hook setline on Lake Winnebago. Of course, once in a while, you'd get tangled up with a sturgeon in there. They actually were a pain in the neck because all they did was make a mess. One morning, I went out, and I had seven sturgeons on. The line was so wound up. I just had one horrible time trying to get those things off the line. Matter of fact, this is 2007, I'm going up to Yellow Lake, fishing, in September with three other guys for a week.

DK: Well, that's good. I've done that myself, and it is fun. You say your dad basically taught you how to spear?

DG: Yeah. We had the old water pipe spears, 1-inch water pipe, with one rope running up the shaft of the water pipe and the other rope on the end of the water pipe, so you could get the spear handle back up. I can remember when my first fish came, in it was in probably 1956 or [19]57. I picked up – when it came in off the right-hand corner, out in the front, I picked up the spear. I was shaking so bad I could hear the head rattle in the spear but those were pretty primitive spears. I was always told that you throw the spear. So, I reared back, and I let her go. It didn't help that I had my brother-in-law in the shanty, Kenny Fischer. He was, "There he is. Get him. Get him." I was so pumped up because it was the first fish I ever saw in a hole. When I let her go, I drilled it right into the ice, and of course, that fish got away.

DK: [laughter]

DG: So, but I can still picture that fish to this day, and I'm sixty-seven years old.

DK: Dan, how has the sport changed since you started spearing? Do you like the new rules?

DG: Well, back years ago it was pretty free out there. It was not uncommon to run a fish off now and then because the fines were small, and nobody seemed to care. But now, with the fines so high that it's not worth it. It just is not worth running off the fish. But actually, when I think back at how I used to work pre-[inaudible], I'd drive over to [inaudible] (Feral Springs?) across the lake and cut a hole in the ice at midnight because I "found a hotspot." So, I'd cut a hole at midnight so that I could fish the next morning. We'd cut these holes by hand with a chisel. Now, if they want to preserve the sturgeon, just make a rule that you cannot use any mechanical device except for a chisel. Then you'll have – 50 percent of these people won't spear.

DK: [laughter]

DG: So, no, it was a lot of work back then. You just didn't have the equipment that you do now. You can move in a matter of an hour. You could probably move from one side of the lake in an hour. But it has changed.

DK: You've been spearing for fifty years. You got a lot of memories in –

DG: Yes, I do.

DK: – those fifty years. Did you keep track of how many fish you speared approximately?

DG: Lots.

[laughter]

Lots. I have never been able to get a big fish. The top three fish that I got were 72 pounds all of them, and I've never speared a fish over 72 pounds.

DK: Have you ever missed any?

DG: Yeah. Well, I just told you that I missed the one, my first one. Yeah. In fact, I missed one three years ago. I don't know what happened. But it came in, and I went underneath the decoy. I lost sight of it. When I put the spear down, a bunch of bubbles came up off the spearhead. Yeah. I missed that one. But I haven't missed too many.

DK: Did you ever have any on and lost it [inaudible]?

DG: No. Any fish that I hit off, I always got.

DK: Well, the goal is 100-pound fish for everybody. It's an unwritten law. You're pushing three-quarters of that.

DG: Yeah, 100-plus is what a guy's looking for.

DK: I haven't got one either yet but close. I know this answer, I think, but I like to ask this question. If you could only spear for two hours a day, what two hours would you choose? I know when we had all-day seasons.

DG: Yeah.

DK: I think I know what you're going to say.

DG: I'm going to say 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

DK: I knew that because you always liked that early.

DG: I liked it at 8:00 – I speared more fish between 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. than I did any other time, I think.

DK: I speared more fish between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. than I have at any other time. That's my favorite time. But I like to ask that.

DG: But I'll tell you what, one time, I threw my back out. I went to the – last day of the season, I went over to the north end of the lake. I borrowed a shanty. I just wanted to get in a couple more hours. When I was on the way out there, I was coming down Oak Street, and there was a kid, a long-haired kid, which I normally don't pick up. But I pulled over. He was hitchhiking. I picked him up. He said his grandma was dying in the hospital. So, I ran right straight to Theda Clark. On the way, I got picked up for speeding. The cop eventually let me off, to make a long story short. So, I dropped this kid off, and then I headed out to the lake. Well, I crawled into the shanty. I wasn't in there forty-five minutes, and one came right underneath the floor. His front fins were sticking out, and I stuck it. It was 42 pounds. I got over to Waverly to register it, and Dan Folz was over there, the fish manager. He says, "Oh, yeah, right, Gerhardt, you were out there for two hours, and you speared a fish." I said, "Well, believe it or not, but I did." But several guys said that I could spear fish if I opened a manhole downtown Neenah.

[laughter]

DK: I see you've got a magazine there with a picture of you and I on the cover there. We were checking for red worms.

DG: Yeah.

DK: Do you believe in that real wholeheartedly that you've got to have a spot on the lake where there's red worms?

DG: I think it helps. But now with the gizzard shad, all the dead gizzard shad all over the lake, I think that's taken something away from them. Also, the red worms have kind of dwindled over the years. We don't have near the lake flies that we used to, but I understand it's on the upswing

now. Maybe it's a cycle type thing.

DK: Some people believe in checking. That's what you and I were doing that time. We did check for red worms. But when they were plentiful, it seemed like they were all over the lake anyway.

DG: I think that fish run in schools. Sturgeons run in schools. Once you get onto them, that if you keep – just by word of mouth, keep track of who's spearing what and where and when, and I think you can probably kind of hang with a school.

DK: Okay. Can you name another one of your most memorable experiences whilst being out there?

DG: Yeah. I was sitting out an outer bar, and I had a fish come in that was suspended. That's the only fish that I ever had suspended. It came in about 4 feet under the ice, and it was moving at a snail space. It just barely moved, and it was so black. Usually, when a fish is down a little bit, it's a greenish yellow. Anyway, this fish was really high, and it was just crawling along. I leaned back in the shanty because I didn't want to spook it. When it got into the center of the hole, I just very slowly, about as slow as that fish was moving, I was moving through the spear. I leaned back and I speared it. That one was 57 pounds. I've never ever had another fish come in suspended like that.

DK: Yeah. You and I both know that this lake is – can change in a few minutes, winter or summer. You ever had any bad experiences with the weather conditions on the ice? I can tell you one I can remember.

DG: Don, old timer Peterson, and I, in a blizzard, decided we were going to go – our shanties were across the lake in front of (Faro Springs?). We decided we were going to go across the lake. We were onto the fish, and we wanted to get to the shanties. So, we jumped on the snowmobiles, and we started across the lake. Well, I took four oranges with me. I had them in the pocket of my snowmobile suit. We went across the lake, and everybody – at the end of the day, we never did find our shanties. We finally found our shanty with somebody in it, and we stopped and tried to figure out where we were. We were close. We were very close to our shanties, but we had just moved them the next (day?). So, we weren't really familiar with what shanties were around us. So, anyway, while we were in that shanty, a guy missed one. T/then I was really hot to find a new shanty, but we never did. Danny Wollersheim picked us up. We left the snowmobiles at (Feral Springs?) because the blizzard increased. But Danny Wollersheim gave us a ride around the lake to come back home. He said when he came walk across the lake, he found three out of the four oranges.

DK: [laughter]

DG: Yeah. It was a kind of like a small trail of oranges.

DK: Here's one that I think I know the answer to because I know you a little bit. Do you have any particular color code that you like to use?

DG: Oh, yeah. I know Johnny Jorgenson, he's always yellow, yellow, yellow. Me, it's mint green and red.

DK: [laughter]

DG: Yeah. Although I've had probably a smorgasbord down there. But right now my main decoy is mint green.

DK: Yeah. Well, any other stories you'd like to mention?

DG: Well, some of the funny stuff that goes on out in the lake, I can remember one time, I was with my brother, and we had stopped at Paynes Point Tavern. The ice was slick as a whistle. It had rained, and there was no snow on the ice. We went out to visit (Dick Pano?). Dick Pano had a big red shanty with an eight ball on it. So, we drove up. My brother was driving. Like I said, we had had a few beers under the belt. My brother, Dave, drove up to Dick's shanty. Only when he got to the shanty, he couldn't stop. He blasted Dick's shanty right off the hole.

DK: [laughter]

DG: Dick had a kerosene stove in there, and the pipes fell apart. When he opened the door and he looked out, all you could see was the whites of his eyes. Everything [laughter] else was soot. So, and then of course, one day my brother, Dave, and I were going out [inaudible] fishing, and we went by Dick [inaudible] shanty, and my brother didn't have a muffler on his Volkswagen. When we went by Dick's shanty, we kind of rode the banking and let the clutch out. It went bidi-bang-bang. Dick came piling out of his shanty and fell on the ice. Well, also, we went into Dick's shanty one day, and I say, "Hey, Dick, your shanty was sitting crooked down the wall." So, the radio was playing away. So, he said, "Well, let's go out and straighten it." So, we went outside and kind of butted the shanty a little bit, but when we got inside, it was pretty silent in there. Come to find out, Dick's radio [laughter] was on the bottom of the lake.

DK: Yeah. [laughter] I remember that. Well, Dan, when you do get a fish, a lot of different ways of preparing it. What's your choice? Favorite?

DG: Well, now that I live over in Pine River, I do a lot of cooking over the wood. I do like just basting them with butter and lemon and do them over the wood fire. Either that or I put them under the broiler. But I'll tell you what, one of the best sturgeons I've ever eaten was over at Dick and Elsie (Shavers?) at Winner County. Elsie pan-fried that fish in butter in a frying pan. Then she put it in a Nesco, and my goodness that was the best fish I think I've ever had. Then of course, I smoked for years. Smoked sturgeon is very good. One time, was sixty-five, I was going to Canada, and I wanted to take a half sturgeon up there. So, I started my smokehouse up, and I smoked a half a sturgeon and – from the rear end up to the head and just to slab on the one side. So, I left it in the smoker to cool. My kids and the neighbor kids got in there, and they started eating this smoked fish. Of course, smoked fish is very rich. All of a sudden, I had a whole neighborhood full of sick kids [laughter] because they ate too much.

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

DG: Camaraderie, just getting together with the guys, but I do like the solitude of sitting by myself. I don't like to sit with anybody else. But when I do, like I used to – now, I've got my own sturgeon shanty. I bought old timer Don and old timer Peterson's shanty and rebuilt it. So, now I've got a decent shanty. I've had a number of shanties over the year. But I just really like going out and sitting by myself. But then I also like talking sturgeon and listening to different guys and experiences.

DK: Well, Dan, unless you've got another short story –

DG: No, not really. But I've sturgeon speared since I was a little kid. I still have the desire, and I just love the sport. I'm a little sorry that there's too many people out there. It's too mechanical as far as too easy to set up a shanty. But that's progress, and you can't do anything about it.

DK: Yeah. Well, Dan, you've got the same thoughts and interests as I do. Over the years, we've done a lot of things together, fishing and hunting and spearing and so forth. So, I appreciate your time doing this interview. I want to thank you for your time coming over all the way from Pine River to do this. At this point, this is the end of the interview. Thanks again.

DG: Okay. Well, thanks for asking me.

[end of transcript]