

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish  
Dave and Bill Goeser Oral History  
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Male Speaker: All right. It's August 9th, 2007. I'm here with Dave and Bill Goeser, and they will tell me about sturgeon spearing.

Dave Goeser: Go ahead. State your name.

Bill Goeser: Spearing is quite a few.

DG: What's your name? State your name.

BG: Bill Goeser.

DG: How old?

BG: Eighty-five.

MS: Eighty-five years old? Where were you born and raised?

BG: Stockbridge.

MS: Stockbridge.

DG: Yes.

MS: How did you get into sturgeon spearing?

DG: Well, my grandpa had one arm, and he used to hold it over the top of the spear.

MS: He only had one arm?

BG: Yes.

MS: How did he spear with one arm?

BG: He hung it over and stabbed like that. Yes, he speared quite a few of them like that.

MS: He got you into spearing?

BG: I went out at the lake with him, yes.

MS: On the lake or at night, did you say?

BG: At the lake.

MS: At the lake.

DG: Can you tell him, dad, how old were you when they took you out on the ice first time? Do

you remember?

BG: Maybe seven or eight.

MS: Seven or eight years old. Back then, they didn't have an age limit, right?

BG: There were very few fishermen.

MS: How many would you say were on the lake that you could see when you were young like that?

BG: Sturgeon?

MS: How many fishermen?

BG: Maybe seventeen, eighteen.

MS: All of the guys on the east shore, pretty much.

BG: Yes.

DG: Were they friends of yours or neighbors or Indians or –

BG: There were a lot of Indians. They're covered with a blanket, and they use to hold a spear.

MS: So, the Indians would cover up with a blanket and hold the spear?

BG: Yes.

MS: How did they cut their holes?

BG: They chopped and –

MS: They had chisels.

BG: Yes.

MS: They made big, rectangular holes, just like everyone else does today?

BG: Slanted down there.

DG: Slanted hole – okay. Can you tell him how you guys got out on the lake? How did you travel?

BG: With a horse.

MS: Just by horse?

BG: Horse and cutter.

MS: Horse and what?

DG: A cutter? What is that? Like a buggy?

BG: No wheels on it, just little runners on it.

MS: It's like skis on it.

BG: Yes.

MS: Then there was a shanty sitting on the skis, and the horse pulled it out there?

BG: Well, they kept the horse out there quite a while.

DG: The horse would stay out on the lake?

BG: Yes, they'd feed them hay out there,

MS: Put a blanket on them, maybe, or something.

BG: Blanket on them, yes.

MS: Yes.

DG: Did the horse pull shanties out there for you?

BG: Yes, they did. They only cut one hole. My brother, he was going to fish, and he looked down in there and grabbed so many you could see way off the side.

DG: In the water?

BG: In the water, yes. [inaudible] sturgeon. My dad says, "Ray, you get off on the ground."

MS: That was you?

BG: No, that was my –

DG: [inaudible] brother.

BG: –my uncle.

DG: His Uncle Ray. Isn't there a story that a horse went through one time that you were telling?

BG: A team.

DG: A team of horses?

BG: They were cutting ice. [inaudible] and the horses break through. They could see him swim underneath for a long ways [inaudible] –

MS: So, the whole team fell through.

DG: He remembers that story really well because that was a very tragic event. Now, back in those days, your horses were your lifeblood. They provided your income with farming and everything. He has talked about that story ever since I've been alive, for 40-plus years, when those horses went through that time. I guess you said it was in the newspaper when the horses died.

BG: It was in the paper, that's for sure.

DG: Yes, it was a really big deal.

MS: So, you use the horses to help cut the holes, or they just –

BG: We saw them.

MS: You guys saw them, but how did the horses fall through? Did they just break through? Were they involved in cutting the hole themselves?

BG: No, they broke through.

DG: No. Were the horses out there sturgeon spearing, or was it at a time when they were getting ice for freezing?

BG: That was the time when they were getting the ice.

DG: They were getting –

MS: Okay.

BG: Yes.

MS: They could actually see them under – through the ice, they could see the horses swimming? That's terrible.

DG: A lot of times or early in the year when there's no snow, and you can see right through the ice. But did you guys always take the horses out when you went out sturgeon spearing in the

early days?

BG: We didn't. When the fish plays a lot.

DG: Okay.

MS: Yes, because, I guess, you couldn't spear for sturgeon before the [19]30s or something like that. It was illegal, wasn't it?

BG: I didn't just know – the warden [inaudible] by me one time, and I had two of them inside the shanty. He says, Bill, you better quit. That's enough.

DG: They wouldn't do that today. [laughter]

MS: Now, when you first started spearing, what was the limit? Did you buy a tag?

BG: Five. Sometimes they were a nickel a piece.

MS: Yes. Now, it's like one tag for what, 20 bucks?

DG: Yes.

MS: Yes.

DG: Dad was born in [19]22, 1922. When did you start buying tags for spearing? Do you remember?

BG: I got them old tags hanging out in the shed there.

DG: I know you do. But were you fifteen years old, roughly, or twenty when you were buying tags or –

BG: I was maybe twenty years old – fifteen.

MS: When you started spearing right by yourself and buying tags. I'm curious more about the Indians on the lake. So, they would sit on like a bucket or something. They had a blanket around them, and they'd sit there with their spears.

BG: Yes.

MS: Did they do what most people do today with the spear, has that rope, and it lets it run? Or did they spear and hold on to it and pull through?

BG: They let the sturgeon pull it.

DG: So, they had ropes on their spear?

BG: Yes.

MS: They had ropes in their spear too. Okay. Because I had heard a story of a guy who – from Royalton, whose grandfather told him this story, that they would come up in the spring when the fish were running, and they would spear them. Their spears weren't very good, and they couldn't hold on them. So, they'd have the rope, and they'd have this bobber, this wooden bobber. They'd spear them, and they'd let them run. Then they'd get in their canoes and follow that bobber. Then once they got tired out, they'd pull them in.

BG: Yes.

MS: When you were a kid, was most of the people on the lake, Indians?

BG: Yes.

MS: Most of them were?

BG: I know every one of them from south [inaudible]. I don't know just – I don't know who it was.

DG: What were their names? Do you remember the Indians?

BG: Quinny.

DG: Last name, Quinny?

MS: That's where the name Quinny came from?

BG: Yes.

MS: Stockbridge got its name because that was an Indian village, or no?

BG: I think so.

MS: You think so?

BG: I'm not sure.

MS: Okay. So, do you think most of the Europeans, the Germans, and people that were around at the time, did they learn most of the sturgeon spearing by watching the Indians do it or talking to the Indians?

BG: The Indians when they come home, they wanted stuff to eat.

MS: Did they teach you guys how to spear?

BG: Yes, my dad learned me.

MS: Did he learn it from them, do you think? Or you're not sure.

BG: Maybe he did.

MS: Yes. Interesting. So, you used horses to get out there. Did you ever have any stories of people falling in, or anybody you know who fell in the ice or anything like that?

BG: All I know, Oscar Schoehn's brother, he drowned.

MS: Oscar who?

DG: Oscar Schoehn?

MS: Oscar Schoehn.

DG: Yes. S-C-H-O-E-H-N is that last name.

MS: How did he fall in? Does anybody know?

BG: I think cutting ice.

DG: Cutting?

BG: I'm not sure.

MS: It seems to be a common way. Because all the chips and everything, you can't really see exactly what's going on. Yes.

DG: Any other stories about people who fell in the hole? I know you told me a couple.

BG: I can't think of anybody.

DG: How about decoys? Tell him about some of the different decoys people use.

BG: I've got some here.

DG: I know you do.

MS: Yes, what kind of stuff did you use for decoys early on?

BG: [inaudible] fish, they shaved the bark off and put lead on them.

MS: As long as you were using decoys, you always have been willing them into fish. You just



didn't throw anything in the hole. I've heard people put potatoes or whatever in there. Do you guys ever do that stuff?

BG: Yes.

DG: That was very common, the potatoes.

BG: That was common.

DG: Yes, corn, shell corn, we would drop down. Eggshells was common.

MS: Was most of that just to see the bottom or to draw them into the hole?

DG: To see the bottom.

BG: You can see the bottom.

DG: Yes. I remember a lot of the decoys. When I was a little kid, I would go to visit all the friends around the area. I'd walk, and I know a top, a spinning top, was always a common decoy, because it had so many colors. The toilet seats, people would put those down lot of times.

MS: Did they just hang them from a fishing line?

DG: Yes, normally a string, a heavier string. I know, recently, I've seen a lot of people put glow in the dark things down the last ten or twenty years. What else, dad? Can you remember people putting down for decoys?

BG: [inaudible] It's been a long time for me,

DG: Car parts, anything, anything shiny, stuff laying around the house.

MS: I heard even dead chickens or whatever, soak them in manure or something stinky, [laughter] whatever they could think they could try.

DG: Very superstitious stuff.

MS: Yes. Did you guys always just fish right off of the shore in Stockbridge then? Is that where you always went?

BG: Not very far out either. Just the last few years, they've been fishing way out.

MS: Yes. Well, they didn't have roads probably when you started out.

BG: No, they didn't.

MS: Did you ever have a situation where the ice buckled and you got caught out there for a

while, or no?

BG: No. I know my dad, one time, the lake opened up, and he was out there fishing. My God, he had to walk through down the [inaudible] where the tavern was down there.

MS: To get off the lake?

BG: To get off the lake. Then he ran and jumped to make it.

DG: I know in the old days it was a lot more common for people to go through with vehicles.

BG: I know.

DG: How many guys did you know that went through with vehicles?

BG: Quite a few.

MS: Why, in the olden days? Because –

BG: They drove on.

DG: Their communication wasn't as good. I mean, nowadays, if something opens up, you've got cell phones –

MS: They mark it.

DG: Right, it's marked. In the days, I know this one guy that worked for dad, Beaver LeFevre was his name. How many cars did he put through Lake Winnebago and got out and survived? Two or three of them, didn't he?

BG: Two for sure.

DG: But you'd be driving all over the lake, and you didn't know if there was a crack out there somewhere or an opening. Because you just didn't have communication, no CB radios, no cell phones. It wasn't on the radio itself, as far as announcing it. Now, during sturgeon spearing, if there's an open hole or something, they're going to announce it on the radio or whatever. But a lot of vehicles went through in the older days. I remember one year in particular, I don't know, we lived right on the lakeshore for several years. One year, we had our shanty out there, and the lake opened up. Our shanty was directly out from our home. The ice shifted where the shanty had moved like 1 mile in the other direction. We couldn't get out there for like a week to get to our shanty. Do you remember that? All of a sudden, that morning, it was gone. The ice had shifted and moved –

MS: That far?

DG: – downward. Yes. I know one year also, the day before the season, we had like a 50-mile

an hour wind. There was hardly any snow on the ice. Several shanties blew away and blew by. One of our shanties kind of got crushed and damaged really bad. I can remember that.

MS: What kind of construction went into making your shanties? How did you guys make them?

DG: Well, I know –

BG: Most of them tin.

DG: – tin, no insulation, the older ones. Dad had a shanty that we figured was fifty years old that we just got rid of a couple years ago. That thing was heavy. Wind blew through that thing. It was terribly cold.

MS: Was it tin?

DG: It was tin with a little bit of tar paper or roofing paper on the inside that was basically for insulation. Nowadays, we put a lot more effort into insulating them, making them light and easy to handle.

MS: You just use two by four framing now?

DG: Usually, we'll rip two by fours in half and use cedar is what we like to use, because it's so much lighter, and just as little lumber as possible to make it light, make it easy to handle.

MS: Do you still have a tin outside?

DG: Yes.

MS: So, you use the tin outside.

DG: Yes.

BG: Dave remembers that stuff better than I do.

MS: People only heard about this, but nobody has had any firsthand knowledge of it, is back when moving shanties was a big deal – it's a lot easier now when moving shanty than it used to be – somebody knew about someone who made a round shanty. They would put it up outside and roll it. Have you ever heard of that?

BG: That I never saw.

DG: I've never heard of that.

MS: Never heard of that?

DG: No.

MS: Okay. At least some people have said they've heard of it but never seen anybody do it. Maybe it's just a rumor. Yes. So, how many sturgeons do you think you caught over the years? Some people say they go thirty years and caught only a few. But some people say, "I can't even count it. It's over fifty or something."

BG: It's closer to a hundred for me.

MS: Closer to a hundred for you. Do you remember the largest one you ever speared and how big it was?

BG: The one in [19]92, wasn't it, or [19]90?

DG: I know it was in the [19]90s.

MS: How long ago was that?

BG: Thirty, yes?

DG: Yes, about thirty years ago, I would say.

MS: Do you remember the story? How it came in the hole? What happened? What's the story around it?

BG: Well, I didn't move that day. I was going to move one shanty, and the guys around me – I couldn't get out for something. I had to stay. For Christ's sakes, I didn't – I was really disgusted. There was thawing, and I just stayed in that shanty.

MS: Everybody else left, you said.

BG: Everybody else left. For Christ's sake, they're out in the west. This big one just gliding up the decoy, 99 pounds.

MS: You speared it. [laughter] That one put up a good fight?

BG: No, I broke his backbone.

MS: You broke his backbone. He's limp like –

BG: Short like that.

MS: Yes. I've heard someone who got real excited and actually speared him in the head and the skull.

DG: They'd get away a lot of times.

MS: Getting it out of their skull is real hard, getting the spear out of the skull. [laughter]

DG: Yes.

BG: I know better than to chop them out with a hatchet.

MS: Chopped them out with a hatchet.

DG: What do you mean?

BG: To get the spear out.

DG: To get the spear out of the sturgeon's head, you had to open up the head to get the –

[laughter]

MS: Yes, because I heard it's real tough. Yes. Where did you guys get your spears from? Did you make your own spears, your family or –

BG: My cousins.

DG: They'll be your cousin.

BG: Frank Goeser, Frank or Alex.

DG: Frank and Alex Goeser made spears.

BG: They found in one of –

DG: Was it a leaf spring from a car?

BG: A car.

DG: Yes, a leaf spring from the back of a car, that's the hard sheet metal that they used –

MS: For the actual head, or was that for the –

DG: The actual spear.

MS: Actual spear.

DG: I don't know how they did that, but that's what they're made them out of. They go to the junkyard and buy leaf springs. Because that's super heavy-duty metal.

MS: Yes. I'm not sure if I can picture what that looks like.

DG: It's about 3, 4 inches wide, a leaf spring. There's usually two of them strapped together on the rear suspension of a vehicle.

MS: How many tines did they have on those spears?

BG: The best one I ever had was one over six –

DG: Six tines?

BG: Six tines, more like that.

DG: Almost all of our spears were six-tine, but we sometimes had a second spear, just a reserve set in the hole, and that was usually a four-tiner. Remember the old harpoon spears, you talked about those. A lot of guys have those.

BG: Jade made one.

MS: What's a harpoon spear? Can you explain it?

BG: One tine?

DG: Only one tine.

BG: Spear like that. He got some like that.

MS: Was that a common thing at all back in the day?

DG: Didn't Joe Schapansky or Lambert Crystal have one like that too?

BG: Joe Schapansky, he put me in there one day to fish. For Christ's sake, I'm the only one to come. I really threw her down, and it hardly touched the fish.

DG: [laughter] With that harpoon?

BG: It was too light.

DG: Too light? Yes.

MS: Were they really, really, really long too, like 10, 12 feet long too? So, you could push it all the way down there if it was deep, or did you still have to throw it?

BG: You had to throw.

MS: You had to throw it through too.

DG: I know he complained about that for years, using that harpoon spear.

[laughter]

MS: Well, that's probably no surprise that you don't find too many of those anymore.

DG: Did the Indians have harpoons, or did they have regular spears. Do you know?

BG: Maybe two tines or something.

MS: Two tines. What did they make on? What did they make their spears out of? Do you remember?

BG: A metal of some kind.

MS: Wooden handles and metal head?

BG: Yes, it was mostly metal.

MS: Mostly metal. But only two tines you think?

BG: My dad came on the shanty where I was in. Then the neighbor came over. He just didn't come one. He speared him and just touched him a little bit. He says, "Didn't he come out flying?" My dad said he just moved.

MS: Real slow, huh?

BG: Yes.

MS: What about you, when did you have your memory of your first time going out?

DG: Well, I remember I was – I was born in 1960. Probably in [19]66 to [19]68, I started spearing with my parents, always going along. They would even take me out of school a lot of times. I would go sit in the shanty with dad and mom. Well, I remember being along, we speared a lot of sturgeon. It just seemed like the first few years; we would always get one. Almost every day I would go, we'd get a sturgeon. I can remember one in particular. I must have been eight or ten years old. I was with dad. We always had a fold down bed in our sturgeon shanties that was about 6 inches off the floor. So, we were laying down close to the water, so you could see it out further. I can remember one where dad was sitting by the spear, and it just happened to come in right by my nose. It was only down about 4 feet. I just remember getting really scared and kind of just shouting or running away from the hole. When I came back, dad had speared it. It was about a 60- or 70-pounder. That one, it's ingrained into my head what it looked like [laughter]. But –

MS: You were so young, [laughter] it scared you.

DG: Yes. But I used to go along a lot. I would fish outside of the shanty for walleyes a lot.

When I was legally able to fish, which I think was age 12, every year thereafter, I fished. I remember my first five or six years; dad would make me go. I liked it, but he would make me go for like a week straight. I would get kind of sick of it. I didn't get many the first 5, 6, 7 years. I think I only got one. Then, for some reason, when I was, like, twenty years old, I hit a hot streak where I got one almost every year for like ten years. I did really well. I know one day, I saw three sturgeons. That was like the best ever that I've ever done. But once in particular, I think it was 1980, the clearest year anybody can ever remember. I was twenty years old, home from college. I said to dad, on opening day, I'm going to get out there when it's dark out yet. I want to get out there and start spearing. He said, "No, you don't have to go that early." I said, "Yes, I'm going out early." So, I hopped in this fishing van that we had when it was dark out yet, at 5:30 a.m., and drove out there. I opened the hole up. This sounds like an untrue story, but I didn't even put the decoys down. It was pretty dark in the shanty yet. I think I had a flashlight sitting in the shanty. I always take the spear off the handle, and I stretch it out to see how far it will reach before the rope falls onto the floor. As I'm doing that, I'm reaching back to hang the spear up, and I scrape something. It was a sturgeon. It decoyed to the spear. It must have been laying right there. I just poked it, and I had him.

MS: [laughter]

DG: So, here it's dark out, just getting light out, and I've already got a sturgeon tagged and registered. I'm driving into shore, and dad's coming out, just out fishing. I said, "Hey, I got one already." He didn't believe me, and I showed it to him. I had one by 6:00 a.m. that day. He still talks about that. That's probably my best story.

MS: Do you like the change now that it went from a full day spearing to a half day?

BG: It's a lot easier, isn't it?

DG: I don't like it. I don't like it because of the amount of work it takes to get the shanty out there to prepare for the season, and the day is over just like that. I'd rather see a lottery system where one of us, three or four gets a tag, and you can fish the whole day versus the half day stuff, and the season seems to be over so fast.

MS: Yes. I get mixed reports. Some people like the half day. Some people don't. But what most people don't like is when the season's over in two days.

DG: Yes.

MS: It used to be –

BG: [inaudible]

DG: Yes. It's a lot of work getting this shanty prepared and even making a shanty or whatever. Then you can only spend a few hours out there or a couple of half days. I know now when we go, we usually have two shanties, and there's three or four or five of us, my brother, myself, dad, and his two kids. We just kind of just take turns spearing to kind of spread it out a little bit. I'll



spear for two hours, and I'll cook out outside and things like that, versus the old hardcore, sit all day long.

MS: So, you don't actually get that much time spearing then?

DG: No.

MS: So, it's been harder for you to get them over the years than recently?

DG: Yes, we haven't done it as well. I think the last few years – we get one every other year, approximately.

MS: I've heard people like on twenty years and never got one.

DG: We've had pretty good luck.

BG: Did you ever eat them?

MS: I've never eaten them. Speaking of eating them, what do you think of it?

BG: It's the best I've ever eaten. Sturgeon is really good.

MS: How did you guys prepare them?

BG: My mother and my wife, they used to skin them. We'd skin them and put them down and – no, that wasn't right.

MS: Well, how did you like them cooked best? What was the best way?

BG: Fried.

DG: We fry. Frying them was – 90 percent of how we eat sturgeon is fried sturgeon in a cast iron pan.

MS: In the cast iron. Do you bread it, or do you soak it in eggs and milk?

DG: No, we don't. Usually, a little bit of flour with the spices in the flour, put butter in a pan, good old-fashioned butter, and just fry it in a cast iron pan. That's the best one.

BG: That's the best eaten.

DG: This guy is very much hooked on – he loves sturgeon. He talks about it year-round as far as eating it.

MS: What's for dinner tonight?

DG: Yes.

MS: So, you guys always have some frozen steaks on hand. Over the year, how long –

DG: No, it doesn't last very long.

MS: How long does it last when you get –

DG: Maybe two weeks after the season.

BG: Yes, that's about it.

DG: Yes, we eat it. We like to eat it when it's fresh. It's always the best. Usually, when we get one, we try to all get together that night and have a big get together and a sturgeon fry.

MS: That's kind of a thing that draws the family together.

DG: Yes. It really is. Yes, family and friends and we try to do that a couple of times depending on how much sturgeon that we have.

MS: Do a lot of other families in the area do that too? Do you go to other families' houses?

DG: I think so, yes.

MS: Yes.

DG: I think that's pretty big. You don't want to invite too many people, so it lasts a while. Right, dad? But dad is also – he smokes his own fish. He's done that over the years. We'll smoke some sturgeon. Right, dad?

BG: They're good smoked.

MS: That's what I hear.

BG: Yes.

MS: You use apple chips or what kind of –

BG: Any.

MS: Anything?

DG: Apple. Maple is good. Oak is good. But another way he would – you shouldn't inch to him about creamed sturgeon.

BG: About what?

DG: Creamed sturgeon, that's our second favorite way to make sturgeon.

MS: Creamed?

DG: My wife's creamed –

MS: How does that work? What's that?

BG: Give it to him.

DG: I can explain that. We pan fried it first and browned it. Then you put it in a bowl, and you make a cream sauce, heavy cream and butter, heavy-duty cholesterol, and you bake it that way. Normally, when we have a large amount of sturgeon, we'll fry most of it, and we'll cream some of it.

MS: First person I've heard say that they creamed it so far. I don't understand. So, you cut it into a certain section, do a steak or whatever.

DG: Yes.

MS: Then you soak it in like some sort of milk cream and butter?

DG: No. We usually don't soak it in milk or anything. It's never a fishy tasting fish at all that we've had. We'll, basically, once you clean it up, cut it into steaks. We will just dry it off. Then you'll put it in flour and then brown it in a pan, cook it. Then you put it in a bowl to bake with the cream sauce mixed in with it.

MS: What's the cream sauce consist of? Do you know?

DG: Well, I know we always like to use just heavy cream from the farm. I know there was butter, fair amount of butter in there. Also, geez, I can't remember what the other ingredients. Some people use cream of mushroom soup, that type of thing, just to give it a good base. That's pretty popular around Stockbridge area, creamed sturgeon.

MS: Okay. It's not as popular out in west shore or anything. It's kind of something that's more local to here?

DG: I think it is, yes.

MS: Maybe that's why I haven't heard of it yet. Because you and Jim are the only guys I've talked to from this side of the lake.

DG: East shore, that was always pretty common. But we loved it – to eat it. This year, my brother smoked a chunk of it and brought it over to you. Remember how good that was?

BG: All good.

DG: It's very good. If you ever have a very large sturgeon that's not a real good eater, we'll smoke more of it. But the medium sized and smaller are usually better fried.

MS: So, the younger fish usually tastes better. It's just the bigger fish or the bragging fish –

DG: Yes. I don't know how old the bigger ones are, I don't know, 100 years old.

MS: Yes, I heard those things are old.

DG: Yes.

DG: But you never turned down any sturgeon, no matter what size it was, right?

BG: No, I never did.

[laughter]

MS: Jim was telling me about this over in Stockbridge that there used to be steamships that used to set lines for the caviar. They – I don't know how many thousands of them –

BG: Well, you could fish with set lines for a couple of years.

DG: You could for sturgeon?

BG: Yes.

DG: You could fish with set lines?

MS: I think it was still in the 1800s where they'd have these steamships that would set lines and catch all this sturgeon. All they were looking for was eggs for caviar. They would just pile up all the sturgeon and almost let them rot. Because apparently it wasn't a desirable fish at the time or whatever, but they desired it for the eggs only. Do you have any knowledge of any commercial fishing that went on in the lake in regard to sturgeon?

BG: No, I don't think so.

DG: No. We had caviar quite a bit, though. What do you think?

BG: Yes.

MS: Talk about that.

BG: I make it salty, put on the cracker. It's good.

MS: Have you made your own caviar in the past?

BG: No. I had a friend of mine used to make it over in [inaudible].

MS: Have you caught a lot of fish that had black eggs? Have you caught a lot in the past or not too many?

BG: I may be caught five or six.

MS: Each time you caught one like that, did you have it made into caviar?

BG: If it had caviar.

MS: Yes, yes.

DG: That was a real desired item, caviar. If I remember as a kid, I never liked it. But boy, if anybody got one with the black eggs, everybody wanted some.

MS: Everybody knew about it.

DG: Yes, everybody knew about it. That was big.

MS: Okay. So, you talking about sturgeon head soup, what's that all about?

BG: Well, they used to split it in halves, the head, and cut the meat out. She made sturgeon head soup.

MS: Was that using the brain or anything?

DG: Did you use the brain or –

BG: No, just the meat.

MS: Just the meat around the head.

BG: Fins.

MS: Fins?

BG: Yes.

MS: You make it into a soup?

BG: Yes, vegetable soup.

MS: Okay. So, it had like a tomato base or something like that or vegetable stock?

BG: I don't remember.

DG: I remember seeing the soup, but I never wanted to eat it. I know it had celery in it and potatoes, I think, didn't it?

BG: Yes.

DG: It had fins and sturgeon head meat in it.

BG: Well, they cut off the meat.

MS: The meat of the fins?

BG: Yes.

DG: They wouldn't put the exterior or the whole piece of the fin in there, just the meat from the fins. But in those days, they used everything possible that you could eat with a cow or anything.

MS: How did it taste different, like the fins in the head as compared to the body? Did it have a different taste to it?

BG: Well, it was more red meat on the fins.

MS: Was it tougher?

BG: No, no, not tough. It was good, though. I liked it really.

MS: Was that a common thing around here? Or is it just your family?

BG: [inaudible] throw anything away.

MS: Yes.

BG: They were [inaudible].

MS: So then maybe that kind of recipe might have been borrowed from the Indians in the area?

BG: It could have been.

MS: Okay. So, you own a bar in Stockbridge?

BG: Yes, the Gobbler's Knob.

MS: What was it called?

DG: Service?

BG: I was in combat. I got a letter from home. Geez, if I was home, I'd go right to the Gobbler's Knob.

MS: What was Gobbler's Knob?

BG: A tavern.

MS: So, you decided to name your tavern Gobbler's Knob?

BG: [inaudible], my brother-in-law.

MS: When did you open that?

DG: Was it after you got out of the Army.

BG: Yes, I was out of the Army.

MS: So, about [19]42 or so?

BG: Yes, something like that.

MS: So, you owned a tavern. What was the tavern like during the spearing season, the sturgeon spearing season?

BG: The meadows, everybody was in there drinking and –

MS: For you, was that the best time of the year, economically? Is that the time of year you made the most money?

BG: That was a good time.

MS: So, people would come in after a day of spearing and tell stories all night?

BG: I had them laying on the floor in the tavern and everything else.

[laughter]

MS: What do you remember about it?

DG: Well, I just remember it was the busiest time of the year. I mean, the place was jampacked from 4:00 p.m. until closing.

MS: From February 1st to March 1st?

DG: Yes, basically. As a little kid, I remember I had to help a lot as a busboy or serve food or whatever, clean up. I didn't get much sleep. I didn't have to go to school a lot, I know, because I had to help in the bar and the restaurant every night until midnight or so. My parents would let me skip school and then go spearing the next day. So, I remember that.

BG: You got some too.

MS: Did you guys ever serve sturgeon on the menu?

BG: No.

MS: No. That was something only private.

BG: Yes.

MS: You probably have other fish, rough fish, or anything like that on the menu then.

DG: Sure.

MS: Walleye or –

DG: Yes, always walleye and perch, right?

BG: Sandpipe.

DG: Another thing –one he was going to mention earlier is that they always ate the liver out of sturgeon, too.

MS: Yes.

DG: Fried.

MS: That was good.

DG: A real delicacy for – I think you mentioned the Indians always liked that too, didn't you?

BG: Yes, (Donnie Bunk?).

DG: Your friend.

MS: What was his name?

DG: Donnie Bunk was one of dad's best friends that always wanted to have the liver. I know that.

MS: That wasn't an Indian guy, was it?



DG: No.

MS: But the Indians liked eating the fried liver too.

DG: Is there anything else you ate out of from a sturgeon?

BG: Caviar.

DG: Caviar, liver, sturgeon head soup.

BG: That was about it.

MS: You remember the soup, but you remember being turned off by it.

DG: I didn't want to taste it. It just seemed kind of gross to me.

MS: Because of the word head or –

DG: The head in there, yeah.

[laughter]

MS: Where I come from, it was the local food that I would never eat was called moose traipen. It was a Luxembourgish blood sausage. It looked like you had to clean up after your dog in the backyard. It looked just like that.

DG: Oh, boy.

MS: All the old timers are like, "Oh, try it. It's good."

DG: When we get done with this, I've got a story for you about raw fish. A friend of mine was up in Canada, and he made a – (Bill Kyler?) who just came from a Canada trip. He's a real chef, and he usually pickles northern up there, just for something different. But he made some kind of raw fish mixture. It's an old German recipe. He's made it a couple times. But they've been back for a month, and several of the guys have gotten a tapeworm since they got back.

MS: Great.

DG: I just talked to Bill the other day. [laughter] He was going to see the doctor.

MS: Was your family of German ancestry?

BG: Yes.

MS: Did you speak German? Did you grow up speaking German?

BG: [inaudible].

[laughter]

MS: Which is what?

BG: A little bit that I can understand.

MS: That you can understand. Did you not start speaking English until you went to school? Or you were mostly raised speaking English and hearing German a lot?

BG: I talk German at home.

MS: You talked German at home?

BG: A little bit.

MS: I heard in this area of the state, it was strong –

DG: Strong.

MS: – and that the language continued for a long time.

DG: Dad's parents came over from Germany, right?

BG: My mother.

DG: Your mother, but your dad was here?

BG: Yes.

DG: Okay.

BG: My mother was eight years old, I think, when she came across.

MS: Came across.

BG: So many on the ship, they had to stand up.

DG: No place to sit.

BG: No place to sit.

DG: But it's a long trip.

MS: When was that? Was that like the [18]90s or early [19]90s or –

DG: Well, let's see. You were born in 1922, but you've got brothers and sisters that are twenty years older than you. So, that would be 1902. She probably came over in the late 1800s, I would guess.

MS: Wow. Anything else sturgeon related you want to talk about? Let's see. Did you have a certain spearing technique that you use? Did you like to run that spear down as close to the sturgeon as possible? Or did you just kind of throw it from –

BG: No, I throw it down always.

MS: You'd throw it down always, close as you can get and then –

BG: Because they looked so much bigger in the water.

MS: Than they actually are.

DG: Our theory was to have a heavy spear. Dad always taught us to guide it down as close as you can to the fish to guarantee you don't miss, if you have a heavy spear. But if you've got a lighter spear with more wood on it, then it can tail off on you. But if you've got that heavy spear, all you've got to do, basically, is drop it.

MS: Yes. That's what I've heard of mostly of old timers, they like to run it down as close as they can get to it.

DG: Yes.

MS: But some of the newer people that spear, they only have it in a couple feet deep before they try throwing it in there.

DG: It can be a problem if a sturgeon is off to the side, and you have to angle it. Because then the spear is going to drop on you if it's a heavy spear, but –

BG: So, you kind of have to shoot over a little bit?

DG: Yes, lead them a little bit, yes.

BG: I remember (Gene Mortal?) was in the shack one night.

MS: You remember Gene, what?

DG: Gene Mortal was an old friend of dad's from many years ago. What happened there, dad, with Gene?

BG: Know what?

DG: What happened with Gene Mortal when he was in the shack with you?

BG: I was laying down, and Gene was kind of leaning back. He says, "There's one, Bill. There's one." As I laid the spear down, I couldn't see him. He was too close to the ice. I said, "Well, spear it, Gene." He took the spear, and for Christ's sake, he take him one time over the back.

MS: You got them?

BG: Yes.

MS: It didn't get off, huh?

BG: No, it never got off.

MS: Some of those spears have got the flying barbs on them. When did those flying barbs start appearing? I had this picture in mind that they were kind of a newer invention, the flying barbs. But are they pretty old?

BG: Well, there were some of them I made myself. I never cared for a flying barb.

MS: Yes, I know some people don't.

DG: I'm guessing that was twenty, thirty, years ago when the flying barb started, but, you know, just never really seemed to take off much, I don't think around our area.

MS: Yes, (Nadlers?) still makes those flying barbs.

DG: Yes.

MS: He said his grandpa did that. I'm not sure if that was the [19]30s or [19]40s already when his grandpa started making some of the flying barbs. He wasn't sure if he was the first one to start doing that or not, but a long time ago. I always had this vision that was probably something new.

DG: Yes.

MS: You always used a six-tine, is that what you said, a six-tine?

BG: I had a four-tiner – a three-tiner and a four-tiner and a six-tiner.

MS: So, it seems, as the years go on, the spears are getting wider.

DG: Yes.

BG: Yes.

MS: Do you find that it doesn't affect the way it flies to the water if it's really wide? Does it affect it at all, from a four-tine or a three-tine?

BG: Geez, I don't know. When I saw one, all I had in my mind was I'm going to get you.

[laughter]

MS: Have you ever missed one? Did you ever throw one and miss?

BG: I did once.

MS: Tell me about that.

BG: It was a small one. It was down by the harbor. I speared five or six days. The guy told me to pull down. Because everybody's fishing down there and nobody's getting any. I don't know. I speared a lot [inaudible].

MS: So, you did miss one down there? How did that happen? You're changing the subject.  
[laughter] How'd you miss that one?

BG: I missed the one with (Alex's?) spear.

MS: Alex, is that your uncle? Your cousin?

BG: Cousin.

MS: Cousin. Was that like a three-tiner or something?

BG: That was a three-tiner right there.

MS: Was it nice and heavy? Or was it because it was too light? Or was it just a hard shot?

BG: One of those right over the bottom, I don't know. I couldn't get a good shot at him, that's for sure.

MS: Do you ever miss any?

DG: Yes.

MS: Yes.

DG: Yes, I missed a few. Well, I missed a lot more than dad has. I know that. I missed three in one day, once.

MS: The same day you saw three –

DG: We should tell him the story about our brother, Bob.

BG: Yes, tell him.

DG: Brother Bob was ten years older than I am, but he would – didn't really care to fish much. But dad would always want us to see us out there. If we were living in the house, he wanted us out there fishing. One Sunday, I happened to have to go out there with Bob. I was maybe, I don't know, nine years old; Bob was nineteen or twenty. He was out all Saturday night. He got home maybe at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. Dad took us out in the sturgeon shanty right at daybreak. I'm out there with Bob, and Bob needed his sleep. Bob says, "If you see one, wake me up." So, I'm watching the hole. At about 10:00 a.m., all of a sudden, here comes one right down the middle. I wanted to spear it, but Bob says, "Make sure you wake me up." So, I woke him up. By the time he gets up and gets the fuzz out of his eyes, the sturgeon's almost out. He threw, and he missed it. So, we stay, and we watch the hole for a couple of hours. He's got to sleep again. As soon as he falls asleep, here comes another one. [laughter] Same scenario, average-sized sturgeon, missed it again. So, we're all for two. It got to be late in the afternoon, 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. He's sleeping again. He says, "Get me up right away." He's right by the spear. He wouldn't let me do the spearing. Here comes the biggest one. I still can see this one right on bottom, this big round, just coming real slow. I wake him up, and he's looking. He can't see it. I'm pointing it out to him. I said, "Can I throw?" He won't let me throw. Finally, he sees it, and he throws it. It just touched it back by the tail. We had it on for five minutes, and it got off. So, we're all for three that day. My brother, Bob, made me swear that I would never, ever tell dad. Okay. [laughter] Now, it's like twenty-something years later, and the story's out. But the next day, Bob went out by himself and got a 60-pounder. But that story was kind of a funny story in our family, how I kept that secret. I never told a soul for twenty years, family secret. But anyway, he got one the next day. So, that was a good story. I also wanted you to tell the story about Frank (Goeser?), your cousin. Or is he your uncle, Frank?

BG: Cousin.

DG: Okay. Frank was an old legend that died maybe twenty years ago.

BG: No, he didn't die in –

DG: Or was it ten years ago? But remember how Frank could say he could smell sturgeon?

BG: Yes, he'd smell in the water.

DG: He'd cut the hole and smell – was Frank – have any Indian in him, or is he married to an Indian?

BG: I don't know. I don't remember.

DG: Okay. But he would always say he would cut the hole and tell you if there were sturgeons

in the area.

[laughter]

DG: Right? Wouldn't he say that?

BG: Yes. He'd smell on the water and –

MS: Did he ever reveal a secret? Or he just always said, "You don't want to fish here. There's not around."

DG: He never really revealed the secret. He just thought, I guess, it was an innate form of sense of smell that he had that nobody else had. I remember when I was a little kid, I'd go visit him. He would always say, "I can smell them. There's one going to be coming in here real soon." I'd lay there with him and watch the hole, and none ever came through when I was there.

[laughter]

MS: So, do you think you really could, or –

DG: I don't know. What do you think, dad?

BG: I don't know if Frank saw them or not.

DG: Yes. Frank could BS a little bit too, I know that.

MS: He is from Stockbridge too?

DG: Yes. He was a legend. Who else was an old sturgeon legend, dad, some of the old timers?

BG: (Shine Eastman?).

DG: Was he Indian?

BG: He was part Indian.

MS: Shine Eastman?

BG: The Dox Staters?

DG: The Dox Staters, yes. Tell him about the old warden that would always come check you guys, (Art Hill?).

BG: Art Hill. He'd check me [inaudible]. I say, "For Christ's sake, this is the first one I ever saw." It was.

MS: You were telling me your [inaudible].

DG: But I always hear a lot of stories about Art Hill. I had no idea who – I never met him, but he was the warden that was always watching these guys in the old days.

MS: This is just after he got back from the war or before?

BG: After I got back.

MS: After he got back.

DG: So, the [19]40s.

MS: [19]40s. Yes. [laughter] So, I didn't realize there were so many Indians in this area.

DG: Yes.

MS: Are there still?

BG: Indians?

MS: Yes.

BG: Very few.

MS: Very few.

BG: Yes. Cemeteries right up here, near the Catholic cemetery.

MS: A lot of them were converted Catholics?

DG: I don't know.

MS: Were they just buried in the Catholic cemetery, or not even in the Catholic cemetery?

DG: They're not in the Catholic cemetery but right next door. There are like two cemeteries. This one is – it's like an Indian preserve area for the cemetery. It's pretty neat down in Stockbridge.

MS: That's in Stockbridge.

DG: Just outside, like a half mile out of town.

MS: South, north?

DG: That would be north of Stockbridge, right?



BG: Yes.

DG: Just north of Stockbridge, quarter mile, turn left on St. Catherine's Bay Road, and it's an immediate left right there.

MS: So, how many Indian people can you remember by name? You remember Kenny or Quinny.

BG: Quinny.

MS: Shine Eastman? Who else can you remember?

BG: The Doxtater.

DG: That was D-O-X-T-A-T-E-R, I think was their last name, right, Doxtater?

BG: Yes.

MS: They were Indians?

DG: Yes.

MS: They did spearing too?

BG: They did spearing.

MS: Do they have shanties, or they have wrapping blankets too?

BG: I think mostly blankets.

MS: Mostly blankets. What did you think about that when they were out there with blankets, and you guys out there with your shanties?

BG: [inaudible] They would be kneeling down on the ice.

MS: So, they would be kneeling down on the ice?

DG: Would they lay down once in a while or –

MS: I know they stood underneath it for a while.

MS: Stood underneath?

BG: That blanket.

MS: Oh. [laughter] Yes. They made their own spears, or they get some from some local people?

BG: I think they got them mostly from local. Did you show him any of the spears?

DG: Well, we don't have any here, dad.

MS: Yes, it's all right. Well, I think that's good. I appreciate you taking the time.

DG: Okay.

[end of transcript]