

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish  
Irene and Greg Halfmann Oral History

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Interviewer: BC – Bill Casper

Transcriber: NCC

Bill Casper: Today is March 24th, 2006. We'll be talking to Irene, the big fisherman, Halfmann and her husband, Greg. So, I know you've got a story to tell about this big fish you caught, Irene. If you want to do that, just talk. Don't worry about the recorder being on. So, tell your little stories about whatever.

Irene Halfmann: Well, he just moved. I said, "You move me, or else I won't fish anymore." We had to quit by noon. So, we went out of Calumetville, about 2 miles.

Greg Halfmann: That was because we were going to Florida the next day.

IH: Yes, right.

GH: That's why we had to quit that day.

IH: So, anyway, we moved the shanty at night. The next morning, I went out and took my breakfast along. I sat there for a half hour. Here one came to the end, a small one, didn't come through the hole, and then I ate my breakfast. Then by about 11:00 a.m., all of a sudden, here one came right straight through the hole. I said, "Good Lord, not so big." [laughter] Because I'm alone. Came through and all the way through and I got it right in the back, behind the head,

BC: How big was that fish?

IH: Ninety-two pounds.

BC: Ninety-two pounds.

GH: Tell him when you got it out, and you wanted help loading it.

IH: I got it out on the ice. I just had it on the ice and the spear just came right out. He said, "Lay it flat." Like he always had some (pipe?), I don't. So, then I wanted to get it in. I had [inaudible]. How am I going to get it in the truck? So, I took an old rug and put it around it and hitched the gill on the fin and pushed it in. [laughter]

GH: Yeah. You forgot to tell them though that you went out and tried to wave somebody to help you. [laughter] Everybody waved back and kept right on going. [laughter] Then you had to do the next best thing.

BC: You took the gill and put it on the truck and then you took a rug and shoved it in. [laughter]

IH: I went by (Eleanor Coleman?). I always went by her when I went home. She says, "You haven't got it." I say, "Yeah, it's a good one." That was the last time I fished.

BC: Is that right? I remember hearing that. Of course, I'll tell you those stories would get around, especially if someone your size would get a big fish. This was always a big –

GH: We started going out to Texas after that in the winter. That's why our sturgeon-spearing stopped then.

BC: I see.

GH: Yeah. Do you remember Dick Harris?

BC: Yes.

GH: We were big friends with him.

BC: Yes. I remember Dick.

GH: Way back in those days.

BC: I was going to ask you if you had any special recipe of how you fixed sturgeon?

IH: No.

BC: People are always asking about it. They were wondering also in doing this.

GH: Well, the big one, we always cut them in steaks, about this thick or so. Then she'd fry them, right?

IH: Yeah. But I like the way Mike fries it in butter, and he slices them. That's delicious.

GH: We always made it in steaks. Then the big ones, the front part, I cook on smoke. We figured it would work better than to cut it in steaks.

BC: This year we're not going to eat any sturgeon.

GH: We didn't get any. Mike got one. So, we had a sturgeon feed out there one night.

BC: That's good. Mike is your son?

GH: Son-in-law.

BC: Son-in-law.

GH: Debbie's.

BC: Debbie's?

GH: Yeah. You remember Debbie we talked about, who went when they were eight years old. How old was Debbie when you used to take her along?

IH: Before she went to school. The others were in school.

GH: Four years old?

IH: Yeah.

GH: About four or five years old.

BC: I remember kids would go along with their folks, and they would take a piece of wash-line rope-like and tie it around the kid and tie it on the wall. So, they could just get up [laughter] to the hole.

IH: She was good. I'd have a rug there, and she had her books, coloring books. It was bright enough. She could lay there. Then she'd lay on her stomach by the hole. Then she'd see them come her way. When I miss one, she says "You missed it."

GH: It brushed off on her. She goes sturgeon-spearing.

BC: That's good.

IH: Well, not this year. Or she went, but she didn't get any. She always got one before Mike did. [laughter]

GH: Well, she's caught quite a few sturgeons already too.

BC: You remember going on the lake when the ice wasn't the safest crossing the bridges and stuff?

GH: Yeah. Well, we never gambled. We always got across the track with a bridge. Of course, at least 80 to 90 percent of our fishing was in the bay, three-quarter to one mile out. That's between Pipe and Calumetville. That's where we did eighty to ninety percent of our sturgeon-spearing.

BC: The bay right off of Camp Shaginappi, in that place?

GH: Right. So, their lake was always pretty good there. Towards the end, sometimes if it got a little watery, then you'd come home with a shanty and go through water as high as the wheels. That happened once in a while. But the ice was still pretty good underneath. It wasn't all that deep there anymore.

BC: If you start getting run off down that stream off Pipe, that used to come down there quite heavy and then onto the lake. It would be on top of the ice.

GH: Yeah.

BC: I know. Then that was always a little area to watch.

GH: So, very seldom that we went out. I remember one time when we set out there, there was a couple others around us. That went on for a week. We were still set in there, and the others moved out. After about a week or ten days, some group gets, "How come she's sitting all there by herself like that?" They figured she must be getting sturgeon. So, then the next day when I come out in the lake, [laughter] "Where's my shanty?" There were so many fish shanties around our shanty. [laughter] I couldn't hardly find my own. [laughter] So, that's it. Pull up. [inaudible] I used to get out there maybe around 4:00., pull up my shanty. That's about one time when I went out maybe a little mile and a quarter out and saw a new hole. Lo and behold, the next day, we got one there. That happened to be on a Saturday. Then I got that one. I didn't have too much chance to go. She scared the most sturgeon. We spent a lot of money. It's hard to think of those days. The season was what, thirty days?

BC: Yes, all of February.

IH: That's what I said.

BC: We fished all of February all the time.

GH: When you stop to think all those hours that she put in that hole.

BC: The tags cost a nickel a piece.

GH: What?

BC: The tags were 5 cents.

GH: Five cents. I forget how many years. Quite a few years, they were five for a quarter. Then you could buy one tag. If you get one, go buy another one.

BC: My Pa would say, "Just go and buy two tags." He said, "There's no sense in wasting a whole quarter." [laughter] That's just the way things were.

GH: In those days.

BC: In those days, it was tough.

GH: I bet you.

BC: I mean, nickel beers. [laughter] If you got your two fish, we'd stop by, I think (Karl Sash?), while Howard (Leonard Shike?) was in that tavern, wasn't he? Was he in before Karl Sash? No. I can't remember that now.

GH: Yes.

BC: Howard and (Min?)

GH: Yeah. They were before Sash.

IH: Yeah.

GH: Sure.

BC: They were in that tavern at Pipe, which is Capone's now. I remember that if you would bring your sturgeon in there, in the tavern, then you'd get a bottle of wine from Min. Min Shike will give you a bottle of wine. Of course, that would attract some attention. I saw a guy walk in there one night [laughter]. I was pretty young then. He brought a sturgeon in, and he put it up on the bar [laughter]. Min would come out of that kitchen and boy, you wouldn't believe [laughter] the (horror?). She put some newspaper on the floor by the door. Then he had to put it over there. [laughter]

IH: Well, this one was paid a quarter for that tag.

BC: This was in [19]52.

IH: We went with [inaudible], and then he brought me back. I didn't have a car. I drove off with him, dropped me off at the shanty, and then first one, I missed on a Saturday. Sunday, I didn't go. Then on Monday, I went with him, and I got one. He brought me into shore and got another tag, and I went out.

BC: 1952, I was over in Guam. [laughter] Korean War was on. [laughter] Those are the four years I didn't fish.

GH: You should have a picture of when Greg came over your shanty, and you had that sturgeon. Here he picks it up and holds it up, cars going by. [laughter]

BC: It was always a real kind of a treat.

IH: Found a lot of friends out there on the lake.

BC: It's true.

GH: Most of them are gone now. It's amazing.

BC: I should ask you; you probably know as good as anyone. Your brother, Eddie Halfmann, built that snow-plow on that wrecker truck. I think (Irvin Travy?) built it for him, but you don't remember about what year that was? Wasn't it during the World War II year? I remember it out there.

GH: Oh, that would almost have been in the [19]40s.

BC: We got married in [19]40. So, it was after that.

GH: [inaudible] built that, one of those scoops on each side. One each wheel, not a blade.

BC: Not a blade. No.

GH: When he went out there in the conservation, saw that, they got that idea, and they made the same type of a plow for their trucks [laughter] to go out.

BC: That truck, I remember that that thing would push fairly easy because it didn't plow all that snow. It would throw snow both ways with those two scoops out there.

GH: Just those two.

BC: Then the middle, it shaved down about so high, and there was like a blade on that. Somewhere in Pipe, I go to find a picture of that record.

GH: I just wonder where that would be.

BC: He and I would go out. I would go and help him at the end of the season, if there was water on the lake, and we'd go and take the shanties off.

GH: I wonder if (Joanne?) would've a picture of that.

BC: Possibly. She's getting pictures ready for me.

IH: I was going to say.

BC: Joanne is.

GH: If anybody, she would have a picture of that.

BC: Yeah. Because you see there wasn't any four-wheel drive until the war ended. Then all those Jeeps came from the war. That's when they started with that, all the Jeeps and those Dodge four-wheel drive trucks.

GH: So, he had [inaudible] and had a lot of weight in the back of that thing.

BC: Sure. Yeah. [inaudible].

GH: Of course, if he'd pull something out, lift it up, well then he had the weight of that for traction. Those were the days.

BC: That's for sure. How many were in your family?

GH: We had seven kids.

BC: Seven Halfmann kids. I only knew the three. I knew Louis. No, in your family, your brothers and sisters.

GH: Oh, my family.

BC: Your brothers and sisters, yeah.

GH: Yeah, we had three boys and five girls.

BC: Eight of you?

GH: Eddie, Louis and I were the boys.

BC: All of you worked at the Halfmann Garage in Pipe?

GH: Yeah.

BC: For a long time when I knew you.

GH: That's where I started.

BC: The fishing sort of changed over the years, didn't it? We used to cut a hole by hand.

GH: Yeah. I remember (Val Coleman?) and I, we used to saw our holes together –

IH: (Lenn Turner?)

GH: – helped each other. Lenn couldn't help. He sawed his hole, but Lenn couldn't. He wasn't that able anymore to saw a hole. He had a couple of his railroad buddies.

IH: [inaudible] used to go with him. We've got our saw up here.

BC: I know.

IH: (Mary Lou?) painted that for our fiftieth wedding anniversary.

BC: There's a few of them hanging around on walls now, and they're not being used anymore.

GH: I see one down by Jim and Linda's there, where you can walk from the bar-room into where you hang your coats going into the dining room, that went across the wall there, one of those saws. [inaudible]

IH: Columbia Park.

GH: Columbia Park Beach. I lived up there. So, then we just had to pull it down there and onto the lake, but if you had to take black top, that wear down those runners. So, then we pull her out



there. Then in January, usually, every year, just like the clock, you had that January (toil?).  
[laughter] So, then sometimes it got so bad that it didn't freeze nice. So, we'd go on and pull our shanty up the shore. We might as well, because if you would leave it out there and go out there, well you almost [inaudible] I know it was all dirty from all that slime on top of the lake washing in there.

BC: The holes would freeze over sometimes.

GH: So, then we pull it in. Then after so many days, bingo, then it got cold. See? Clear ice.  
[laughter] Then the wind was kind of pretty good clip. You'd have to go accordingly. Because the shanty will always come around and swing around to the front of your vehicle. So, we had to maneuver that. [laughter] Experiences, those were the days.

BC: Sometimes the lake would get so smooth and windy, I remember (Bob?) broke his shanty loose to take it home. He walked over to get the truck. It wasn't parked far away. Turned around and the shanty was on the way home. It went from [inaudible] up in here at Pipe, and it went down to Winnebago Park. It hit the shore before he got it. Good wind blowing.

GH: Lucky the wind was blowing that direction instead of going across the lake.

BC: Well, it could have gone to Appleton.

GH: Yeah, right.

[laughter]

BC: It blew it so far.

GH: I made myself a couple of special sticks about this long, about this big, and I sharpened them. I drive one in the front. I had those loops to the runners and one on the opposite side in the back.

BC: (Pin?) about foot long or so.

GH: A good foot. Because it would always melt around the shanty too and because if that snow would melt away and if you wouldn't have that anchor, same thing would happen. You wouldn't find your shanty the next morning.

BC: That's right.

GH: Of course, that spear he made for her, time is this long. Of course, she didn't throw her spear as hard as I threw them, If I threw that spear, that comes down to the bottom of a fish that would come out. [laughter] It wouldn't get out of that. But that was a dandy spear. So, [inaudible] says, "Well, you can use it, but remember that's mother's spear."

[laughter]

IH: She always wants me to go with her, but not that safe on the ice anymore. Our good old legs are not quite as good as they were years ago. [laughter]

BC: So, I'm going to get some pictures from you.

[end of transcript]