People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish
Reuben Hoelzel Oral History
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Interviewer: EH – Eugene Herubin
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Eugene Herubin: We'll talk about Ruben's early life and his introduction to sturgeon spearing. Name and then tell me when you were born.

Ruben Hoelzel: My name is Ruben Hoelzel. I was born 3/9/16.

EH: 1916.

RH: Sixteen, yes.

EH: Wow [laughter].

RH: Makes me ninety years old.

EH: Ninety years old. You look great. It's unbelievable. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RH: I had five brothers and two sisters.

EH: Well, where were you born?

RH: In Quinney?

EH: At home?

RH: At home.

EH: No hospital then.

RH: No hospitals.

EH: Oh, that's interesting. Now, in the family there, where did you come? Were you the oldest, the youngest, in between?

RH: I was the oldest.

EH: Wow, the oldest and did a lot of the chores. Did you live on a farm?

RH: I did.

EH: So, then a lot of chores and helping out fell on you.

RH: I did, yes. When I was about three years old, we moved north of Stockbridge, 2.5 miles northeast. That's where they lived the rest of their lives.

EH: Did your dad have a big farm, small farm?

RH: 80 acres.

EH: Oh, 80. Milk cows?

RH: Milk cows, pigs, chickens.

EH: Ducks?

RH: No ducks [laughter].

EH: Pigeons?

RH: A lot of pigeons.

EH: Now, how many cows would you be milking?

RH: Well, around sixteen.

EH: Sixteen. I suppose you had to help when you got older.

RH: Oh, yes, did a lot of milking.

EH: Did you have a big garden?

RH: I had a big garden.

EH: I suppose you had to pull a lot of weeds.

RH: [laughter] Yes. Life was different then to now. I would plant sugar beets and crawl up and down between the rows and weed them out. So, you had one beet here and one beet there. Those days, you had to do it all by hand.

EH: I think there was a plant in Green Bay, wasn't it, that made sugar out of those?

RH: Yes. We have to harvest them in the fall and haul them down to Sherwood near the beach down there on the railway track. Go down there with a truck. Then they'd have a hook on each side of your rack, and they'd raise it up and dump them in and away you'd go.

EH: Did you have to dig those out by hand?

RH: No. I had a kind of plow that would go under the beet underneath and raise them up. Then you'd have to go and pick them up and chop off the greens off of the ends all by hand. You had a big blade about 16 inches long like that you would go chop.

EH: Geez, and you got a big field. For that digger, did you pull up with a tractor, or did you use horses?

RH: Horses.

EH: Team or single?

RH: Two horses.

EH: Two horses [laughter]. Different times. Did you plant the tops? Did you feed those to the cattle then too or not?

RH: Yes.

EH: Did you have corn too?

RH: Corn, wheat, oats, barley.

EH: Oh, all that.

RH: A lot of hay.

EH: A lot of work, all hand work. Well, that made you strong. That's why you're still here at age ninety.

RH: [laughter] I guess so.

EH: Oh, yes. I just wonder today; how many kids would be able to go through what you went through when you were young?

RH: I broke a lot of fork handles.

EH: [laughter]

RH: You'd just load on them and try and pick it up, throw it on top way up higher than your head all the time.

EH: Pitching hay?

RH: Pitching hay and pitching corn. That was all done. You had to go with a corn binder and make a bundle and tie it and shoot it up. You'd have to pick it up, put it on a wagon, bring it back down to the barn where the silo was, and throw it in a machine that would grind it up. Shoot it up into the silo. That was hard work.

EH: Yes, that was probably all in the fall of the year too. How about school then? You worked at home. I suppose there was no time for school.

RH: Well, I went to school until sixth grade. I had to stay home and work.

EH: Stayed up to sixth grade. Well, I can relate to this. Because my dad only went to school to the second grade. But he's been gone for quite some time now. But I know back then it was a little bit different than today, sixth grade. But in the fall of the year, I suppose sometimes that you'd be off school just to help on the farm too.

RH: Oh, yes.

EH: Like for filling silo.

RH: A lot of that, yes. Spring of the year, go out in the field early in the morning, and work up a bunch of land before I went to school.

EH: Oh, then you'd go.

RH: I'd run across us through the fields to get to school by 9:00 a.m.

EH: [laughter] Wow. Kids think they got it tough today, huh?

RH: Right. In the wintertime, we'd go the same route. The snow would be over the fence posts, and you could walk over the snow. It was that high. We'd go right across us through the field. Well, it was hard. The snow would be piled up as high as the telephone poles.

EH: Yes. Those were winters. We don't get those anymore.

RH: That's right.

EH: I suppose that at home, everybody was pretty much busy just keeping the home going, right?

RH: Right.

EH: Mom cooking and –

RH: A lot of cooking.

EH: – canning.

RH: Canning.

EH: Well, you said you had hogs and chickens. So, you had your eggs, and you would butcher the hogs and butcher beef once in a while.

RH: That's right. In the wintertime, we did, yes.

EH: Now, did you have to help there?

RH: Make your own sausage. Beef we used to cut it up and can it and put it in jars. In the summertime, all you had to do was go down into a cellar and get the jar out and bring it up, throw it in the kettle, and warm it up. It was just beautiful, yes.

EH: Did you pick mushrooms too or not?

RH: No, I never picked them.

EH: You didn't do any mushroom picking, oh. Did your people deer hunt? Did you parents?

RH: I only went a couple of times. But dad and my brother, they always went. I stayed home and did the work [laughter].

EH: They got the chance to hunt. Well, how about fishing? Did your dad fish?

RH: Well, on the earlier days, he did, yes. When I was probably about, oh, ten years old, we'd go fishing with a team of horses and a sleigh. Go out and fish for walleyes. Take a washtub along and go out there and catch walleyes. You didn't have to have the –

EH: The license.

RH: – equipment like they have now.

EH: No license, no depth finders.

RH: We didn't have nothing. All we had was we used to make our fishing equipment with an old copper boiler, cut out the shape of a fish about 6 inches long, and staple it onto this copper and all and you use a jerk hook. That's all you use. It didn't have no bait or anything on it. You take that down there and jig that up and down, and the walleyes, they keep coming right out. We'd just throw them in that washtub.

EH: I suppose when it was full you –

RH: You go home.

EH: Then you go home with plenty of fish.

RH: Put them in a water tank in a barn. When we wanted some, we'd just go get them out.

EH: Oh, they were still alive then.

RH: Yes.

EH: When they freeze up, they come back to life, don't they?

RH: Yes.

EH: [laughter] So, they get up.

RH: A lot of big ones, yes.

EH: Well, how did you cut your hole in the ice?

RH: With an ice chisel. That's another story. We used to take from an old car or an old truck, those steel springs that they had. We'd cut it out. Whatever you wanted for a chisel, you cut that off. Then you'd take, and you weld it onto a steel rod. We'd take it to a blacksmith shop, and they would weld that together. Then they'd sharpen it up for us and make a real slant. We'd go from one end with about that long and about a couple of inches would be a slant on there.

EH: Yes, just cut it on one side.

RH: One side, yes.

EH: If you cut it both sides like a knife, it's no good.

RH: Oh, yes.

EH: You'd never chisel a hole.

RH: One side.

EH: Yes, [laughter] that's for sure.

RH: They were like a razor.

EH: How deep was the ice then?

RH: Well, a lot of times it would be 3-foot deep.

EH: Yes, that's a job. Did you cut several holes?

RH: Yes. We would cut a lot of holes sometimes. Sometimes we would use the same holes over when you go back out there. Then after a while, when I was older, then we went out. We had an old Model A Ford. We'd put great, big, balloon tires on it. The snow would be 2, 3 feet deep out there. You'd go right over the top of it. That's how high the snow would be. You'd drive out there and then fish.

EH: You would shovel off the snow and chisel out a hole.

RH: Then we started using different bait at that time when I got older. We used metals with a willow stick on willows offshore. So, put the willow line in the snow, tie the string onto the

willow, and cut a little piece of cardboard, probably 3 by 2, tie that onto the line about a foot from the top of the willow. That wind would move that willow and keep that line working all the time. The bait's moving down there. The bait would keep moving.

EH: I know the scheme because when I was a boy in Northern Wisconsin and fishing in Wisconsin and Minnesota, we did the same thing for northerns and also for perch. Very effective. There are not enough willows around now for people to do that. You've got to buy at a high price [laughter]. Priced equipment. Well, when did you first get introduced to spearing sturgeon? Did your dad go out spearing sturgeon?

RH: No. He never went with us from the start. He went two years after. Some of the neighbors, when we went out fishing, they got us started on the sturgeon spearing.

EH: Were you pretty young at the time?

RH: Yes, sixteen.

EH: Sixteen, wow. Wow. That's way back in the 1930s. What did you use to –

RH: We made our own shiners. It was 2 by 6s for runners. Then we had some scrap iron, and we put under the runners to slide to push the runners. We have them shining. Some of them finally were built, some right onto the runners. We had some without where we could take the shiny off and then lay it down. At that time, we never haul shiners out. We'd drag them right down the road and out on the lake.

EH: Did you pull them down with a vehicle, or did you use a team of horses?

RH: Well, at first off, we used the horses when we had a lot of snow in the earlier years. The roads were mostly shut. We had to go through the field. Our farm cut the fence on the next town. I'd go across, go down on the next road, and go down until we got to Highway 55 and then to Stockbridge and then out onto to the lake.

EH: Well, then come spring, you had to go out and repair your fence.

RH: Right.

EH: [laughter] Another problem with sturgeon spearers.

RH: Right.

EH: How about cutting the hole? How did you go about cutting a big hole?

RH: We used to cut them with that chisel knife. I was telling you about them, that chisel, they were sharp. We could go down at least 3 inches when you take that chisel and drive it down like that. After it got started, you could just chisel and keep it going right along, just one after the other, go right around and make a square hole. You would have about [inaudible] out of the

hole, about, oh, 6 feet wide and probably 2.5-foot narrow width.

EH: Would you take turns on the chisel then?

RH: Yes, we took turns.

EH: That's pretty hard work.

RH: It would take us an hour or two sometimes.

EH: Yes, not like today.

RH: We chiseled that out. We would have a scoop shovel to shovel the ice out when you chiseled it. Then do around the edge and the bottom and when it'd get thinner to the water, then poke it through so the water would come up.

EH: Yes, that fills the hole quick.

RH: Then you'd go around, break it off, and then you have to have a couple of them and push it down under the ice. Well, then sometimes, we would go to work and instead of chiseling it all down, we'd only go down maybe 4 or 5 inches in the middle part and chisel it all the way around. Then we'd cut it into a section like that. We'd drive the chisel down in there, and it would break. Sometimes we'd pull them out, have a hook like we had for our bailing hay, pull them up, and pull the ice off of that.

EH: Well, you had the team of horses there. I suppose they could pull that right out, huh?

RH: Pull it right out.

EH: Because a big block of ice is pretty heavy.

RH: Oh, yes. But then after a while, we went with that Ford truck. We had that.

EH: But you've got to be kind of careful too when you're chiseling out a hole. Because if you break through too soon, then it fills up with water. Then you get pretty wet trying to chisel out the rest.

RH: That's right.

EH: Oh, what a difference.

RH: Yes, it was a lot of difference.

EH: So, you were about sixteen then. What were the rules that were there? Did you have to get tags or anything back in that period of time?

RH: Well, we got tagged, but you got, I think it was five or seven for a quarter at that time.

EH: [laughter] Well, you had plenty of tags. Who knew one could get that many.

RH: Yes, very few.

EH: If you live with all your brothers and sisters, if they all got them, well, you [laughter] had an awful lot of tags.

RH: Yes. I was the oldest one. When I was fishing, mostly it was me and my next brother. Well, then my sister was after that, then my other brother was later. I was older. I was up in my twenties then.

EH: Oh, yes [laughter]. You were the old timer.

RH: Yes. Then the stuff got a little bit different. We're starting to modernize a little bit.

EH: Now, you say it was a neighbor you'd fish with at first when you were young?

RH: Yes.

EH: That person, was that the father of one of your friends, or was that just a chum of your own?

RH: Well, it was friends of ours.

EH: They knew more about and kind of taught you the spearing?

RH: Yes.

EH: Well, that's really interesting. Well, how about now for decoys? What did you guys use down there to attract the sturgeon?

RH: Well, we had 2 by 2s we'd cut out that were shaped like a sturgeon. We cut drill holes in the bottom and put lead in there. You'd have to get the lead in the right place so when you put the string on to put it down the hole to move it around, if you didn't do it right, then that fish would just go straight up and down.

EH: Up and down.

RH: It wouldn't swim around. You'd have to make fins on there. On that copper, we did.

EH: Then you had to balance it.

RH: I had to balance it to make it work right.

EH: Well, that's interesting.

RH: The same as spears. We made them out of hay forks. They are called hay forks, what we use for pitching hay and corn.

EH: That was the three tines?

RH: Three tines. They take those, and they have to put welder points on the sides of that.

EH: A barb?

RH: Barbs on there.

EH: Oh, the wet box would do that.

RH: Yes. Then the bottom part of the handle, we had to open 2.5 feet, something like that, with pipe.

EH: Oh, you put a pipe on it?

RH: I filled it with lead just to get some weight on it.

EH: Yes. Otherwise, it won't go down too easy.

RH: That's right. Then we'd drill a hole on the end of the pole that we put into the pipe, put our string through there. We'd have rubber bands about halfway down or a little further up on the pole and pull that tension up on that spear and have a really tight rubber band on it that would hold the line. So, when you threw the spear, it didn't pull out. You'd have to watch. That could be too loose.

EH: Did the spearhead come off the handle then too?

RH: Yes.

EH: So, it did come off.

RH: That's how it would come off, was break that band up. The plank there would come out of there. The rubber band held it up there. Then you spear. Well, then it would go up. But it happened already where it froze, and it didn't come out too.

EH: [laughter] Yes. I know the story. Now, did you guys have pretty good success when you were young? Did you see a lot of sturgeons in the hole?

RH: Oh, yes, I've seen a lot of them. There were a lot of small ones. There were big ones.

EH: So, I imagine every year, you would spear a few anyway, right?

RH: Oh, yes.

EH: Did you get any big ones?

RH: At that time, we didn't have no real big ones, 40-, 50-pounders.

EH: Well, that's a pretty good size.

RH: But in my later years, I got some big ones –

EH: What was the biggest one?

RH: – when I moved to Menasha.

EH: Oh, yes. Got away from Stockbridge. Did you go up here and fish off of Waverly Beach, sturgeon?

RH: After I got married.

EH: But what year was that you got married?

RH: [19]41.

EH: [19]41, wow. Did you go into service then?

RH: I only got as far as Milwaukee. They chased me back home [laughter].

EH: That was a good break [laughter].

RH: So, I never got deployed. But my two other brothers went.

EH: So, then when you come up to Menasha, you got some bigger fish, huh?

RH: Yes.

EH: What was probably the biggest one you speared?

RH: 96 pounds.

EH: That's a nice fish.

RH: That was right in front of Waverly Beach.

EH: There's a lot of big ones speared off of Waverly Beach.

RH: Yes.

EH: Did you did you get many in a year, four or five?

RH: Well, when I was younger, we got a lot of them. But later years, you could only get one.

EH: You could only get one with the regulations. Yes, you were young. When you were living back on the farm then, when you'd come home with a couple of sturgeons, well then what did you do with them?

RH: Well, we'd fry them up.

EH: You had some.

RH: Sometimes we'd smoke them.

EH: You'd have to clean them?

RH: Clean them up, yes.

EH: Did you smoke them right at home yourself?

RH: Yes, we had a smokehouse.

EH: Well, I suppose because you were making your own sausage, you'd obviously have a smokehouse.

RH: We smoked our own hams and all that.

EH: You were pretty self-sufficient.

RH: Right.

EH: That's interesting.

RH: In those days, I know how it lasted that long. But you smoked those hams. Then you'd put them into brine. You'd set them out there in that barrel. They'd be out there in July and still use them hams out of there.

EH: [laughter]

RH: Were just as good as the day they were put in there.

EH: Well, you did a good job of smoking them and salting. Nowadays you can't do that.

RH: No.

EH: Did your dad do all that, or did you have a hired man to come in to do it?

RH: No. All the neighbors got together always when butchering pigs and cows and all that. We'd all get together.

EH: How about with the sturgeon then? You do the same thing. You'd get a couple, you and your neighbors?

RH: No. We did mostly that ourselves.

EH: Did that yourself. How long would those smoked sturgeon last? You said you smoked some of those. Did they last a couple of months, smoked?

RH: Oh, yes. It was cold then over those days.

EH: [laughter] Yes, it's true. Those winters were long and hard.

RH: It could be 20 or 30 below zero.

EH: How did you heat your house, with wood or coal?

RH: Wood.

EH: Wood. Then you had a lot of splitting to do too, I suppose.

RH: I split a lot of wood. Cut a lot of wood in the wintertime.

EH: Two men.

RH: Two men saw, one on each end and the other –

EH: You and your dad or you and your brother?

RH: Well, first it was me and my dad. Then when I got old enough, my other brother, we would do it. Cut them down, trim the trees out. We'd have a big circle saw where we'd cut them up and put lengths in them and then split it up. We'd haul it home. Then I'd pick it up again and bring it in the house.

EH: What did you have? A maple?

RH: Yes, I had a lot of maple.

EH: Some oak.

RH: Oak, mostly maple.

EH: Boy, I bet when it gets to 20 below zero, you would take an awful lot of wood to heat the house day and night.

RH: Yes. At nighttime when we went to bed, we always put the biggest chunk we could get in there and set it in the heater.

EH: Fill her up.

RH: Fill it up.

EH: Well, did your mother then cook the sturgeon? Did you have a wood burning cook stove when you were young?

RH: Woodburning, yes.

EH: That was quite an art then too though, to be able to cook and not burn the food.

RH: That's right.

EH: Your mother was probably –

RH: She did a lot of cooking. She knew how to cook, especially bread.

EH: A lot of bread.

RH: Coffee cakes and all that kind of stuff, pies, and you made everything.

EH: Well, I suppose you had to pick your own berries too?

RH: Right.

EH: Did you have a strawberry patch or anything like that?

RH: Strawberries, raspberries.

EH: Yes, that was good. I suppose your sisters, they would do the berry picker, huh?

RH: No, we did lot of it.

EH: Oh, you guys had to do it too, besides taking care of the animals. Who picked the eggs from the hens? Did the girls do that, or they were washing clothes?

RH: They were younger. But we did it first off. Later on, then they had it.

EH: When you brought home some sturgeon, would that be a day of a big feast then when you

could eat the sturgeon?

RH: Yes.

EH: Did your mother have any special way of cooking those or just fry them up?

RH: No. We used to just fry them up. We'd have walleye pike for breakfast. She used to cook in the morning, pike and potatoes and all the works. By the time we went out in the barn in the morning and then milked the cows and did your chores and come back in, you were hungry.

EH: You bet. Then go to school besides.

RH: Yes.

EH: Wow. I suppose you had your own bacon too, from the hogs.

RH: My own bacon, yes.

EH: Then the eggs from the hens. You guys ate pretty good.

RH: We had (lard?) too.

EH: [laughter]

RH: Because we used to use the frying from the meat and all that and fry the pork sausages and fry down the meat to use in the summer. Put it in earthen jars, and you go down there and get the meat out and warm it up. Lot of the time, we'd save it and put it on the bread and put some syrup on top of that.

EH: Was that maple syrup?

RH: Well, we had maple syrup too, yes, and we had just regular white syrup. That you had to buy though.

EH: Did you make your own maple syrup?

RH: No, we never made our own.

EH: Oh, you didn't have sugar maples then.

RH: We tried a couple times, but it never –

EH: Never worked out too well.

RH: Not too well.

EH: Yes. I know that years ago, people ate rye bread with some lard on it, little salt, and pepper.

RH: Right. That tasted good.

EH: I'm sure [laughter]. Did you take that to your school lunch then?

RH: Sometimes, yes.

EH: How about some of the sturgeon? Did you have some fish sandwiches with walleye?

RH: No. I never took any to the school.

EH: Peanut butter and jam?

RH: We got a lot of that.

EH: [laughter] Oh, man. I suppose when you got older and had your family, then I suppose you started taking your family out sturgeon spearing with you, huh?

RH: Yes.

EH: You taught the boys how to do it.

RH: Well, that's when Wayne got into it, then pike fishing and sturgeon fishing.

EH: When they were young boys.

RH: Yes.

EH: How about the other ones besides them?

RH: Well, Michael was the youngest one. But he never got started fishing until later years. But Wayne, he got into it right away. He used to go down to River Lake and fish there.

EH: Oh, sure.

RH: Sneak out of school and go down there.

EH: [laughter] Oh, yes, back in those days.

RH: [laughter]

EH: How about in sturgeon spearing? Did you ever take your sweet wife out with you?

RH: Oh, yes.

EH: She'd go out there too?

RH: Yes.

EH: Did she ever spear a sturgeon?

RH: No.

EH: No [laughter]. Did she ever see one in the hole when she was out there with you?

RH: I don't think so. Did you?

Betty Hoelzel: Yes. That one came through, and I said, "What's that?"

EH: Yes. Well, one came through, and she said, "What's that [laughter]?"

BH: I just saw a dark shadow. I said, "What's that?" He said, "Oh, that's a fish." So, he got the spear. He was going to spear it, but he missed it.

EH: [laughter] He missed it. Oh, well, you don't get them all. Well, that way there, there's a few. That way there, she would have bragging rights over you. That would have been too good, right?

RH: [laughter] We got a lot of fish in the later years over here in the [19]50s and [19]60s and [19]70s, [19]80s. Well, I retired in [19]79, then I did more fishing. I got used to go out there.

EH: I imagine now, you don't get out. Or do you still want to get out there once in a while?

RH: Haven't been out for a couple years now. To walk around there, I can't handle it no more.

EH: But yet over the years, you spent quite a few hours out there on that big pod, a lot of hours when it was frozen.

RH: Right.

EH: When did you get your first power saw to cut your holes?

RH: I never did get one.

EH: You never did get one.

RH: So, Wayne got one. Oh, yes. After a while, after they started and got in with these other fishermen, Peterson and all those guys, and they started getting these saws and all built.

EH: Well, they weren't about to cut them the old way like you had to work hard on them, right?

RH: They cut some first.

EH: Well, that's good. You got to teach them right from the ground up. Your decoys, did you paint your decoys?

RH: Yes.

EH: Any special colors that you found were good?

RH: The lighter colors, the better.

EH: It didn't make much difference. I suppose back then there were a lot of fish down there.

RH: Yes.

EH: Were you surprised when you were young, your first time you went out, and saw the fish down in the hole?

RH: Oh, yes [laughter]. That was a lot different.

EH: How was that?

RH: Well, to see a big fish like that, I never saw one before like that, that big, yes.

EH: I suppose, yes, you've been catching walleye pike, and they were 2, 3 pounds. To get a 30-, 40-pound fish, wow.

RH: But we fished walleyes one time me and my brother were fishing. That's when we had that Model A up in here. Went out there at Stockbridge Highway and we went north of Stockbridge about a half a mile out. We were catching sand pike every day, about eight, ten every day. That snow was 3-foot deep. One day, I said to my brother, "Why don't we go out in the lake and try to go out about a mile?" Nice sunshine day. So, we went out there and shoveled some snow away and started chiseling and making holes. The first hole we made, I said, "Well, I'll put a line down in the hole." Went down about 4 feet and the tip up went up. Well, that kept right on. We couldn't even make all the holes. They put enough pop ups in. So, we just kept on pulling the pike out.

EH: Those were all sand pike?

RH: No. Those were walleyes out there, big ones.

EH: Big ones [laughter].

RH: Between 2 and 7 pounds.

EH: Wow, those are big ones.

RH: [laughter]

EH: As fast as you could pull them up.

RH: I never went home. We didn't go home. We went downtown Stockbridge by a guy that we knew, dumped them off, went back out, and waited for it to fill up again. All great, big walleyes.

EH: Can't squawk at that. That's fishing.

RH: So, I said to my brother, "Tomorrow, we've got to get up early and milk those cows."

EH: [laughter]

RH: Because those people saw us out here and they're going to be out here. So, sure enough, we got up early. We thought we got up early enough. We got out there, and there were fifteen cars out there around that spot where we were fishing. Everybody was pulling fish out of there.

EH: [laughter]

RH: But they fished there for over three weeks on that one spot. That was a regular city out there after that. It just spread right out. I don't know whether there must have been a hole there and that fish kept coming in there or what. But every day, they kept getting smaller. The bigger ones were all gone. But they were still catching smaller fish. I never saw anything like that in my life.

EH: Oh, that's unbelievable.

RH: Never saw that. I never saw it again.

EH: No.

RH: My mom just couldn't believe it.

EH: Then when you would spear sturgeon, you have a lot of tags when you spear a couple of sturgeon. Did the people kind of flock around you then too, for the sturgeon shacks or not?

RH: Oh, yes. They never went too close, but they'd move around. In summer, we'd be getting a few. Then they'd kind of move around there and move out again. But that was the job, to go out there on the lake too. I used to put little planks on the shore on the cracks. You'd drive over those planks and slide off in the crack. You'd have to get the car up back out of the hole, jack it up.

EH: Everybody thought you were having fun out there. It's a lot of work.

RH: Yes [laughter]. Right. Then after a while, they took plenty of nails and the planks together.

Then the ice would move. It'd be zigzagging around, and they'd slide off.

EH: Yes. Well then sometimes, you've got to build ridges. Do you have to cut those down?

RH: Yes. We'd have to chop the ice down. Yes, we'd pile up. Sometimes you'd come in, and you have to chop it all on. But I was out there one time with my dad in a Model T Ford, and it rained while we were out there. We got a lot of rain. Then when he tried to come back in, we couldn't get off no place. The ice shoved together like a peak like this. It went like a teepee peak like that. It shoved up like that from both sides. It was just like a wall. It was probably another 4-foot higher than the ceiling here.

EH: Wow. That's really nice.

RH: All the way along, it was like that. We drove back, and the water was that deep on the lake. We were going back and forth and then looking as we got off. Because we're never going to find a place to get off. All of a sudden, we found a place where they could jump upon to get off of there. That's the only time I ever saw ice pile like that too.

EH: That is scary.

RH: It was scary. I was scared because I was a kid.

EH: [laughter] You were a kid, yes.

RH: [laughter]

EH: Oh, man, that is unbelievable.

RH: Yes. We had warm days those days.

EH: So, there it is.

RH: Then we used to fish until the 15th of March back those days.

EH: That's right.

RH: A lot of times the ice got kind of scary out there toward the end of the season into March.

EH: Getting a little bit of honeycomb, was it?

RH: Yes, and foam.

EH: Right. Did you ever lose a shack?

RH: No. We never lost any.

EH: Well, that's good. Just thinking of those, some people kind of wonder what it's like today. But like you say now, trying to find a way to go over that big ridge, there were no plowed roads out there then, were there?

RH: No. You made your own roads.

EH: So, you, I imagine, have been stuck many a time out there at a shovel and get the vehicle going.

RH: Oh, yes, a lot of times.

EH: Now, when you went out with the horses, that'd be a little different then, wasn't it?

RH: Yes.

EH: Because the horse can go through deeper snow.

RH: Well, it would be rough for them too, when it was deep like that. We were out on the farm when we used to haul the milk. A lot of times, we'd get them big snowstorms. We have to shovel the horses out. So, the stove died. In that snow, they couldn't fix their feet up to get to go.

EH: No kidding. Wow. I never heard of that.

RH: It was that deep.

EH: That's something.

RH: Oh, yes, the neighbors, we used to get together. Three of us lived close together. We'd all go together and pick each one up. Go to the cheese factory and back.

EH: Well, all your milk went to the cheese factory?

RH: Yes.

EH: How far would that be from your home?

RH: It was about a mile.

EH: Mile. But if you had to keep shoveling the horse out, that'd be a [laughter] long while.

RH: Oh, yes. We didn't have to do it all the time.

EH: Oh, no.

[talking simultaneously]

RH: But there were places where they had to.

EH: Now, when you went fishing then, you probably had to take feed out there too. Because the horse could eat during the day. Or it didn't stay out that long?

RH: It wouldn't take so long. We always had some in the wagon, in the box, just hay, I mean.

EH: What kind of horses did you have?

RH: Oh, we had some black one and some brown and white one, railings.

EH: Were they Belgium horses or some of those big horses?

RH: Yes, big ones.

EH: Yes, draft horse.

RH: Yes.

EH: Did you name the horses?

RH: Yes, we always had names for them.

EH: Did they know their names?

RH: Oh, yes.

EH: You could call them by name, and they'd come?

RH: Oh, yes. They were pretty good. We had one horse that used to be a race horse we bought. In the spring of the year there, we'd have a buggy, wagon for hauling milk. We went with the horse. One morning, I went to haul the milk. I had it loaded up on a wagon there. I would go up the driveway down the road. I got about 100 feet down the road, back wheel fell off. Here I'm trying to hold the horse and hold all the milk cans on it. Then I'm signing out there hollering for help. Finally, somebody came and helped me unload those milk cans –

EH: Unload them all.

RH: – and get the wheel back on. I don't know what happened. Did somebody loosen it up or what on the way? It [inaudible]. Because when you go ahead with the buggy, then the nut turns the same way as the wheel. So, it could have happened that it might have got stuck, and it went backing up that it loosened it up.

EH: Sure.

RH: But that's highly impossible because I'd tread around there quite a few times. But it happened [laughter]. One time, I was coming home from the sea factory, from the neighbor's kind of downhill coming towards our farm. This horse was running trot along pretty good. A stone hit on a dashboard and scared him. Well, he took off, and I couldn't hold him. He kept on going instead of me turned into our driveway. I couldn't do that. Because if I did that, I'd have went rolling through a stone fence. You're going that fast. Because I made him go straight ahead and a couple hundred feet down, another farmer lived on that side. So, then he slowed down. I turned him into there and turned around and came back home. But if I would have turned in there, I'd have been gone.

EH: Gone to [inaudible].

RH: Oh, he was really gone.

EH: Did you ever ride them then with saddles?

RH: No. The only horse I rode a saddle was to a fox farm at Sherwood [laughter]. It was an old horse. Couldn't use them nowhere. The guy said, "You ride them down there." That was an awful ride down there because I'm not used to riding him. I put a thick blanket on there by the neck. Just sit on a horse and ride from Stockbridge to Sherwood on there to that mink farm. When I got down there, he couldn't walk when I got off.

EH: Then you had to walk back home?

RH: No, they came and got me.

EH: Oh, they did, luckily.

RH: But I was sore, oh.

EH: [laughter] Should have taken the buggy and led the horse [laughter].

RH: Yes, that'd have been better.

EH: Oh, that's quite a story, Reuben. Quite a story. Yes. We could talk here quite a while. But I think we've got a lot of good information and especially those early days about getting out onto the ice and spearing those sturgeons. Hey, I want to really thank you for allowing me to tape this program. We hope that it can be of value to the writing of the book on sturgeon.

RH: Yes. Some information there, I'm sure some of them you'll use.

EH: Oh, yes. Some of those stories of the early, early times, what you guys went through. Well, let's face it, when was that when you first started?

RH: Way back in the late [19]20s.

EH: Late [19]20s.

RH: I was born in sixteen.

EH: Yes, when you were sixteen years old or less, ten years old. Wow. Yes, the late 1920s. Well, you had a time because then you were born just after World War I, right in that period of time. These are some valuable tales of what it was like in the early days compared to what it's like today. But once again, Reuben –

RH: I can remember when we had pigs that were raised for butcher. One year, the price drop was way down to nothing. We had probably about ten or twelve pigs. They were weighed about 250 pounds. They were just as pretty as the picture. $2.50.

EH: Per hog?

RH: Per hog, we got.

EH: Well, you can't feed them for that.

RH: No.

EH: So, then you had to rely on catching more walleyes and spearing more sturgeon.

RH: [laughter] I guess so.

EH: Because you sure didn't have any money to buy anything if you were counting on –

RH: No. I was really cheap of them all. Even then, the butcher shop, you would go down there and if you bought meat down there, they'd throw a ring of bologna in or something like that. Now, you've got to pay $5 for a ring of bologna.

EH: Ring of bologna [laughter]. Well, how about during the Depression then?

RH: That was rough going.

EH: Were you on the farm then?

RH: Yes.

EH: Yes, sure. Because you were married in, you said, [19]41. So, wow. So, I imagine then the prices were low, and you had to really raise everything you would eat.

RH: Yes, that's right. We were lucky we didn't lose our farm. But a lot of people lost their farms at that time. Banks went broke.

EH: Did your whole family stay together then at the farm at that time or not?

RH: Yes. We were all there.

EH: No jobs out.

RH: No jobs [laughter]. I used to go and work for different farmers off and on when I got older, and our family got bigger. My other next brother did too until they went in service.

EH: Did they pay you in cash, or did they pay you in chickens?

RH: We got paid in cash.

EH: How much?

RH: I worked for one farmer, one winter, for $12 a month.

EH: $12 a month.

RH: Milking cows and feeding them and cleaning the barns and all that stuff.

EH: [laughter] $12 a month.

RH: Then we used to go thrashing with a trashing machine, and we'd get a dollar a day from 6:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m.

EH: But they did feed you, I trust.

RH: Oh, yes. They had good food.

EH: Well, they had to do something. Because they didn't give you good money [laughter].

RH: Yes. Because I'd say, "I want a keg of beer." Why not?

EH: Got to keep the troops happy [laughter]. They've got to keep them happy. Well, that's all. That's quite a long period of time and a lot of hard work. But as I said before, Reuben, that's why you're still here. You still look good. Because you had a lot of tough days but a lot of good days.

RH: The kids nowadays, they don't know what work is.

EH: Yes. You're right. I've got a neighbor that won't even shovel the driveway, a high school junior. I don't know if he'll ever pick up a shovel.

RH: That's right.

EH: [laughter] But that's the way it goes. Well, hey, Reuben, put her there. Thanks loads. I've

enjoyed talking to you. [inaudible] for yourself, how's that?

RH: It sounds quite all right.

[end of transcript]