

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

Wayne Hoelzel Oral History

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Interviewer: DK – Dick Koerner

Transcriber: NCC

Dick Koerner: I'm going to ask you, Wayne, some simple questions. Anytime you feel like interjecting, you can do that. My name is Dick Koerner and I'm going to interview Wayne Hoelzel. Wayne, I want to ask you, when and where were you born?

Wayne Hoelzel: April 12, 1947, at Theda Clark in Neenah, Wisconsin.

DK: Where do you live now?

WH: Menasha.

DK: Menasha. Okay. How did you get interested in sturgeon spearing?

WH: I don't know. That's a hard question, I guess. But hanging around with my uncles and my cousins, they were doing it. So, that's how I got involved. I was invited out there a couple times and been doing it ever since. Except for the three years I was in the service.

DK: Did you get your dad interested or had your dad speared before you?

WH: My dad speared before me. He's ninety-one years old right now and he quit spearing a few years ago.

DK: Did you ever do any hook-and-line fishing on, say, the Menominee River or any of those rivers in the western part of Wisconsin?

WH: No. No, I never did that.

DK: Well, you've been around, I know, for a good many years. How has the sport changed since you started spearing? Do you like the new half-day seasons?

WH: Well, I think everybody's starting to enjoy the half-day seasons. Years ago, we used to go every day, fished all day long. Never left a hole for the whole season. Now, we got half days and sometimes, shorter seasons. So, it's kind of a relief [laughter] in a way.

DK: Yes. How many years have you been spearing, Wayne? Do you have any idea?

WH: Well, I was old enough to drive. So, I guess that would've been one of the first years when I was sixteen. Now, I'm sixty. So, today is October 12, 2007. So, I got my little note in my pickup truck because I applied for Upriver Lakes and I still don't get my sturgeon tag for Winnebago yet.

DK: Yes, I got mine the other day.

WH: I got my note in my truck. It's been there for two weeks. So, it'll probably be there until the last minute.

DK: Do you recall how many sturgeon you speared over those forty years?

WH: No. I never really kept track of them. But of all the fish I speared, I'm satisfied with the success that I've had. I've seen a lot of sturgeon, let a lot of sturgeon go. One year, if I can remember – oh, I think it was either like twenty-two sturgeons that came in my hole in one year.

DK: Wow. That's great. But you've got to be there.

WH: Yes.

DK: You've got to put time in.

WH: Yes.

DK: We all know, we've heard guys that've been out there twenty years and hadn't gotten a fish. Some guys seem to get one every year quite frequently. But you've got to put your time in.

WH: Well, it's just like anything else. Like I said, we fished every day, all day, and the whole season. I, for one, and I know my uncles and my cousins, we go into a shack, we don't come out of the shack no matter what. If you're eating lunch or if you do have to go to the bathroom, you use a pail. But our eyes never come off the hole because it only takes a second. They're there and they're gone.

DK: That's right [laughter]. Well, you don't remember how many you speared. Do you remember how many you missed or maybe you never missed?

WH: Well, I don't think there's anybody. I think one guy told me one day that he's never missed one. But as far as most people I know, either something has happened or someone's at least missed one. I think I missed two my whole life in this last season. In 2007, I missed two. The first one I didn't really care about. It was maybe thirty, forty pounds. It was no big deal. But the second one I missed, that's probably one of the biggest fish I ever seen in my life. It was on bottom. Way on the outside of the hole. We had that warm weather and wind and rain, and it was blowing through and the water was rippling. But when I saw it, I knew it was big. How I missed it, I don't know. But I did.

DK: Well, it's a goal of every sturgeon spearer to get a hundred pounder.

WH: Right.

DK: Have you ever gotten a hundred pounder?

WH: No. No, I haven't.

DK: That was close. I noticed you can tell East Shore shanties from the West Shore shanties. Most of them on the East Shore are on skids, bigger shanties. On the West Shore, most of them are tipped downs and lay downs like you got with the wheels on the side. But you got wheels on them.

WH: Correct.

DK: Do you utilize the lay down part of it? To me, it seems like it'd be awful uncomfortable to be next to that cold floor.

WH: Oh, yes. It's a little bit cold, but the fresh air probably keeps you awake. But as far as laying on the floor, if I would've been laying on the floor, most of the times, I would've probably never speared the fish that I saw underneath the shack or way outside out front or out on the side of the holes. Because a lot of the fish I've speared were always outside the hole. I never had a lot of them easy shots that everybody says where they come in where they're two feet, four and six feet right straight down the middle of the hole. I don't think I've ever speared a fish above six feet.

DK: Really? Some people can't fish all day. So, they fish part of the day. Some people have favorite – some people believe at 8:00 a.m. I personally like between 11:00 and 1:00. Do you have any favorite time that you for sure want to be there? Of course, you go all day, you're going to be there, but –

WH: Well, I would say probably most of the fish that I've ever speared, probably between 10:00 and 2:00 is probably the best hours. But I've speared some before and some after.

DK: Well, years ago, we didn't have GPS. We used radio towers and trees and points and smokestacks to line up spots. Do you believe in sitting on the same spot all the time or do you try to get there on your old spot at least sometime? Or do you just go check it for red worms and set up at random?

WH: Well, there's a lot of areas. We'd go back to the same area and we always used landmarks. I still use landmarks and go from one area to another area. We keep moving. There's sometimes, well, you just don't find them and then you just start moving and just start cutting and looking for something different. Hopefully, you get lucky.

DK: Give me one of your most memorable experiences while spearing something you'll never forget. Maybe two fish coming in at once or – well, you said twenty-two in one –

WH: Well, that was the whole season where we saw the twenty-two fish. I guess as far as remembering something like that, well, I can't remember how many years ago. But my son's thirty-seven now and he was in college. We were both laying in the shack and he was supposed to head back towards Platteville to get back to school, and he was running late the way it was. He was going to leave like around 2:00 and I said to him, "You better get going." He said, "Well, I hate to go because –" it was the last day that he could fish and there was only, I think, another week left in the season. But anyways, he hung around for an hour more. Finally, he said, "Well, I guess that's it. I guess I'm not going to get my fish this year." He's always been pretty lucky too since he started. He more and more said that. Then once he says, "Dad." When he said, "Dad", I was looking down the hole too and here comes a fish about sixty pounds, come right straight up from the bottom. Just came diving right up towards the (decoin?) and leveled

off and swam through the hole, and he got his fish [laughter].

DK: Good. Good for him. Well, Wayne, when you're out there, you never know about the weather. Bad weather, ice conditions, snow, rain blowing, ice shoves, cracks. You got any stories to tell on that?

WH: Well, yes, there's always some of that. I've been involved with sturgeon for now twenty-seven years, being an officer and director at present and all that stuff. Helped start the Paynes Point Fishing Club so people could get out there when we had bad weather. Did a lot of plowing and plowed for a lot of people during the sturgeon season. Did give up a lot of my sturgeon spearing time. But I always made sure I at least got my father out there so he could sit in the shack. Well, I tried and helped everybody else. So, I pulled a lot of people out of snowbanks and cracks and people that broke through the ice. In fact, there were a couple of them the last couple of years that drove on open water and we got them out. Then I can remember one time – I can't remember the year – that we went out spearing in a storm. Like I said, I guess sturgeon spearer's a little crazy. So, the guy that's doing the interview here with me, Dick Koerner, he is just as crazy as I am.

DK: [laughter]

WH: Because he was with us that day. But I remember I had a [19]62 Chev, and my uncle, Ed, he had a Chevrolet pickup truck. It was probably around a [19]65, [19]66. My cousin, Joe, he had a Ford pickup truck with a camper on the back. But anyways, it was the last day of season and there was some big fish. Dick can probably correct me. Maybe I think Felix Koerner might have speared a hundred pounder the day before that.

DK: A hundred and forty.

WH: A hundred and forty-pound fish the day before that. There was other fish that was speared in that area. It was about, not quite three-quarters away across the lake, a place what we called Walleye Alley. It was the last day and the weather wasn't good. It was snowing. We all met at the Rainbow Beach by the bridge and had some discussions. We weren't going to go, but we figured we had to go because it was the last day and some of the guys didn't have a fish yet. So, anyways, we got together. If I remember right, we left a couple vehicles there and then we doubled or tripled up, I guess, in a couple of vehicles and went out and we got out in the lake. It was probably about six miles maybe from where we were. Well, actually we left Rainbow Beach and headed probably towards the northeast corner. We were just a little ways past Lake Park Road there ways, probably about four miles off of their shore, I would think. Pretty close, three to four. Anyways, we went out there, and after we all got out there and got fishing and stuff and sitting in the shanty. All at once, the wind got worse. You could hear the tin rattling on the shacks and then it started to rain a little bit and then it was sleet, then it was hail. We had thunder. We had lightning. We'd be looking down the hole and it was lightning out and you could see the flashes and stuff. Then it started snowing more and the wind got stronger. Finally, I don't know if it was around 12:00 or so, well, everybody was in the shack fishing because we didn't have any radios or nothing then. But I guess everybody had the same thing on their mind that we should probably get off the lake. So, we were discussing it because I think most of the

shacks were all doubled up. So, we were going to go look for other shacks. Well, we looked out the door and we couldn't see the shack. So, we thought, well, we'll just sit here and maybe wait for a break. Well, then, if I remember, I think it was Dick Koerner who came to our shack and we had some discussion about going in, getting off the lake. Dick, if I remember right, went to a couple more shacks or tried to find them. I don't know how he found one shack to the next because you couldn't see it.

DK: Well, we had a chain gang.

WH: Yes.

DK: Far as you could see and stop.

WH: Yes, that's right. We made that chain gang. So, anyways, we all got together and had a discussion in one of the shacks. Some wanted to stay because we had enough gas, so we had heat. We'd stay in the shacks and just stay there and let the storm blow over. But then some of them were worried about family members getting concerned. Some figured, well, we could get in, somehow, we could make it. So, anyways, we made a decision to go to shore, which was probably in the long run the dumbest decision that we made. But anyways, we did. We left all the vehicles except one. We took my cousin's truck because he had the camper on it. Plus, if I remember right, after everybody got together, there was some beer and there was some wine in the back of the truck. Anyways, before we left, and everybody was getting round up, before we got in, Dick come by the shack. I looked at him and I said, "What the heck's wrong with your ear?" Because it was white. He had frostbite on his ear already. So, anyways, then after that, you know, we all got in the truck and we tried to get to the shore. We figured instead of going back to Rainbow Beach because of the two rivers and the cracks and stuff there. If we did get off course even though we had the compasses, that we could drive in the river or run into one of them cracks. Well, the ice was moving and shoving a lot that day. But as far as we know, there weren't any cracks going to the East Shore. We figured the closest place was Nimitz's. So, we headed towards there and we had a couple compasses. I was in the back of the truck. So, I didn't know what was going on in front of the truck as much. But the guys that were in the back, we were all just talking and telling some stories. There was some beer and wine in there. So, we started working on that a little bit, having a few drinks. Then we had to stop several times, almost run over some fish shanties because you couldn't see – I don't think you could see a foot past the hood of the truck. It was so bad. So, they'd stopped and they looked at the compasses and figured we were going right and all this other stuff and had little discussions. So, we kept going. Then all at once, we stopped again and everybody got out and we're talking and thinking, gee, we've got to be pretty close to Nimitz or some place here. Pretty soon, we've got to hit this place. I don't know. The storm, it didn't break, but there must have been just a little opening and somebody thought they seen trees. So, we started walking a little bit, and sure enough, we're on the shoreline. We walked over the other way a little bit. At that time, years ago, nobody had any four-wheel drives or plows or nothing like that or did anything like that. But Nimitz had a snow blower and he always blew his road out with a snow blower. Of course, you blow it so far, and there was a lot of snow those years, and that year especially. So, you got a nice high bank from the roads being blown out with the snow blowers. Behold, we were right next to the shore right alongside the road. In fact, we were on top of the snowbank. I don't know if Dick remembers

that or not. But then we stayed out of the truck and then he backed the truck up down where the snow wasn't so deep. Because if we would've broke through, there's probably – I don't know [laughter]. If I remember right, probably eight, ten feet of snow there piled up that we stopped on. So, then we backed the truck up.

DK: I remember arguing when we got to shore. I said we should go right and some of the guys said left.

WH: [laughter]

DK: So, we went to the right and we hit Nimitz's.

WH: Right. So, then anyways, well, we got there. So, that was a good thing. Then we went in by Nimitz's. I guess we made some phone calls to a couple of wives so they could call the other ones and tell them we were on shore. Then we had a few drinks there because what was in the truck, we had it all gone, if I remember right, by the time we hit shore.

[laughter]

So, we went in by Nimitz's and talked some more and had some drinks. It was pretty dark when we got home that night after everybody got dropped off. Then the next day, we all met again because we had to get the shacks off. Plus, there were a couple vehicles that were left out there. So, we had to get them.

DK: I can remember walking in front of the truck every now and then because I had a compass. It wouldn't read right inside the vehicle.

WH: Yes, I remember that. Yes.

DK: So, I walked in front of it and said, "Hey, we've got to go this way." That was a harrowing experience for all of us.

WH: It was something we probably never should have done. Because even though we went east, we knew there was no crack, but the way the ice was shoving with all the wind that day in a storm like that, it could've opened up. We would've never known it. We would've driven right into it.

DK: Yes.

WH: Or we would've got stuck or whatever. But we would've stayed in the fish shanties. We had enough gas to last the whole night. After it got dark, the storm broke anyways. We could have just driven wherever we wanted to go, as far as seeing. I mean, we would've probably had troubles, maybe got stuck or something because of all the snow and the drifts. But anyways, we made it safe.

DK: Yes. Wayne, do you have any superstitions when you go out there or certain colored pokes

or Anna's oil rubbed on your decoys? Anything in particular? I mean, I know John Hewitt, at that time, he mistakenly wore one blue sock and one green sock. He got a fish that day. So, every year after that, he kept wearing [laughter] two different colored socks.

WH: Yes. There's a lot of guys that are certain colors or whatever. Sometimes, white with an orange nose. For some reason, the red nose always kind of seemed good or yellow or green. I tried that Anna's oil because they always drilled a hole and put it in a cupcorn and some of my uncles did it. They've got fish, but it's never helped me that I know of [laughter].

DK: Is there any other favorite fish story you might want to relate?

WH: Oh, I could sit here all day and all night and we could tell fish stories. I guess the only other one I could probably make a little bit shorter that I remember too. Especially that area when we were fishing and where we did run into that snowstorm and came off, we said it was stupid. Because also in that area, we fished it before and around that area. There's a lot of springs in that area and it doesn't make any difference how cold it is. Some of them still stay open or they just got a little crust or whatever. But we were inside of that area a little bit one year spearing. I'd come off the old landing there by High Cliff and drove out to my shack. I think I drove there for a week and everything was fine. Again, this guy sitting next to me, Dick Koerner, him and John Hewitt, they came to see me one day because people were getting fish and stuff around there. They stopped and we talked a little bit. They were going to do something. I don't remember what it was. But they left, and they no more left when somebody knocked on the door again and it was Dick Koerner standing there again. He was all excited, all shook up. He said, "You are not going to believe this." I don't remember exactly what he said, we need help anyways or whatever. But when they left my shack, they were just off of probably my trail just a little bit. As they were going along, they hit a spring hole. The speed and everything must have been just right because they broke through. When they stopped, the front wheels on John's truck was sitting on the ice, I would say maybe about six inches. The back wheels were sitting on the ice and there was probably maybe about six inches there. If you would've opened the door and stepped down, you would've fell in. So, that's how big the hole was that they broke through. But for some reason, [laughter] the front tires and the back tires were on ice and there was nothing but water around them. So, I got my pickup truck and Don Peterson Snr., he had a Jeep. He had got his Jeep, and we went over there. He hooked onto the front bumper and I hooked onto the back bumper on the sides, and we just took them. Had them in four-wheel drive and just took the truck and did it real slow. We worked it. It came right straight sideways and pulled it [laughter] off the spring hole and everything was fine. But I mean, there again, there was a lot of luck involved there for some reason. It could have been really bad. I mean the truck could have gone down.

DK: You bet. That was scary.

WH: So, I guess that was a scary moment for them too. Because I know that they were both excited when they came to my shack. I knew something wasn't right.

DK: When you do get a fish, what's your favorite recipe for preparing [inaudible]?



WH: I've either have smoked them, have somebody smoke them. Either that or I will either pan fry them or deep fry them. But as far as pan frying, just take them, put them in a bag and shake them up in Wondra flour and some salt and pepper, and put them in the pan and just fry them. Make sure they're done. I think as far as trying to get a real good taste, the main thing is when you clean your fish is to get the fish clean and especially get all that fat off. So, you get a nice little white piece of meat. You'd think you're throwing a lot away. But if you want it to taste good, you've got to clean it decent.

DK: Okay. What do you enjoy most about sturgeon spearing?

WH: Like you had speared a fish [laughter].

DK: Speared a fish and –

WH: They get [inaudible] fish every –

DK: Camaraderie with the other guys, I guess.

WH: Yes. It was a lot of parties and years – like I said, years ago, we used to fish every day for three weeks, all day long. Of course, those earlier years, at one point, I was laid off for a lot of years, for a couple months during the winter. So, I had an excellent opportunity where I could fish every day. But like I said, like Dick says, getting together afterwards and – we all had our favorite stopping holes. Sometimes, we'd get together, go to different houses and have little party and tell stories and clean sturgeon. But it was the time you'd usually get home at night. So, usually, at the end of the season, my wife would shake my hand and say –

DK: [laughter]

WH: – "Yes, we're still married another year yet." She said, "I don't know how, but we are."

[laughter]

DK: Wayne, I do appreciate your time. Thank you very much for this interview. This concludes my interview with Wayne Hoelzel. This is the end of the interview. Thanks again, Wayne.

WH: All right. Thank you, Dick. I appreciate the opportunity.

[end of transcript]