

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

Bob and Darlene Homan Oral History

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Location: Neenah, WI

Length of Interview: 00:21:30

Interviewer: DK – Dick Koerner

Transcriber: NCC

Dick Koerner: We're going to do a sturgeon interview today. We have the top lady female record holder on sturgeon spearing on Lake Winnebago to interview today, so this will be real great. I want to let you know that my name is Dick Koerner. I'm going to interview Bob and Darlene. Bob and Darlene, I'm going to ask some general questions. This microphone will pick that up. Then later on, I'll be getting into your fish story. So, Darlene, where and when were you born?

Darlene Homan: I was born in Marshfield, Wisconsin, 10/20/31.

DK: How about you, Bob?

Bob Homan: I was born in Menasha, Wisconsin, 4/16/30.

DK: Darlene, how did you get interested in sturgeon spearing?

DH: Well, between my husband and the Payne's Point Hook & Spear Fishing Club where I was an officer of that and I was involved in Sturgeon for Tomorrow, it was just a natural thing. I like to fish and I like to be outdoors, and Bob fished. So, we had a shanty right out in front of the house and we would go out and fish.

DK: So, you live right where you speared then?

DH: Yes.

DK: You live on Lake Winnebago. I believe the address is 1425 Cowling Bay Road. Nice to have the sport right in your – in some people, it's backyards and some people, it's front yard.

DH: Here, it's the front yard.

DK: In mine, it's the backyard. My front door face is on.

[laughter]

DK: Bob, how did you get interested in sturgeon spearing?

BH: Through my closest friend, John Jurgensen.

DK: John is a good spearer, a good guy. Did anybody, in particular besides him, teach you anything, like your dad? Did your dad spear?

BH: No, my dad didn't spear. But just John and his father, (Eddie?).

DK: Oh, that's a good teacher.

DH: Didn't Eddie give you pointers and stuff though, too?

BH: No.

DH: No? Okay.

DK: Darlene, how has the sport changed since you started spearing, as you can recall?

DH: Well, the fish have to be bigger now. That's changed. The hours have changed because you can't fish all day like we used to. That has changed.

DK: Do you like that?

DH: No. [laughter]

DK: Most people do. I'm surprised to hear you say that.

DH: No. If I'm going to spear, I'd like to go out, well, 8:00 a.m. and come in here for lunch. Then we go back out again and spear until 3:00, 3:30. We can't do that anymore. Well, that's the way it is with me.

DK: How about you, Bob? Do you like that half day or do you like the all day?

BH: If I were still fishing, I would be all day.

DH: We had it nice. We would go out. Say, at 11 a.m., he would come in and eat, and I'd be out there because we both had our snowmobiles. Then when he'd come back out, then I'd come in and eat and then I'd go back out. So, we had it covered all the time.

DK: That's good. That's the main thing, is to have the hole covered by somebody. How many years, Darlene, have you been spearing? Just an estimate.

DH: Oh, fifteen.

DK: Fifteen or so. How about you, Bob? About the same or more?

DH: More.

BH: Gosh.

DK: It had to be over fifty.

BH: Fifty. I quit now.

DH: Yes. We don't fish anymore.

DK: Oh, you don't fish –

DH: No. We haven't fished for quite a few years. Why? It's hanging out there on the wall right now. [laughter]

DK: (You got it?). Darlene, how many sturgeon have you speared in your fifteen years?

DH: Of course, my big one. The year after that, I got, what was it, maybe a fifty-some pounder. Totally, I've speared three of them of that three fish.

DK: How about you, Bob? How many notches on the spear handle you got?

BH: I have no idea.

DK: That's just like Johnny said, he has no idea. I know it's a bunch. That's all right. You had some good years. Have you missed any, Bob, or lost any? (Had a lot?) lost?

BH: Never had that happen.

DH: You did, too. You and Warren. The year after I got my fish, you said that one was bigger than mine.

DK: [laughter]

DH: It almost pulled you in. Warren had to pull you back. You lost it, but you don't remember that. He doesn't remember that.

DK: Oh, that's all right.

DH: Yes.

DK: Everyone that I know that spears – and I've been spearing for about fifty-five years myself – and it's an unwritten law, but it seems as though everybody's goal is to get a hundred-pounder. I have not reached that yet, neither has John Jurgensen. But Darlene, I know you have. Please tell me what that is. I know what it is.

DH: [laughter]

DK: You tell me. What is your biggest sturgeon?

DH: 159 pounds.

DK: 159, that's –

DH: Yes. She's all fish. She had no eggs in her. She had spawned out the year before.

DK: Oh, my goodness.

DH: (Dan Fultz?) told me at that time that that was the biggest fish to come out of Lake Winnebago because she had no eggs.

DK: Wow. That is good.

DH: Yes.

DK: That is good.

DH: So, mine is all fish. The guys can argue it with me all they want to. [laughter]

DK: I would have had a hundred-pounder, but it spawned out the year before, and mine was eighty-seven.

DH: Yes. See. Dan Fultz said that that fish would have gone over two hundred pounds.

DK: Well, I was impressed when I saw it hanging on the wall there. Bob, how about you? Anything to brag about?

BH: No, no. I have no idea. Probably sixty-some pounds, I'm not sure.

DH: Well, he's married to me.

DK: [laughter]

DH: Yes. He can brag about that.

DK: Well, here's a question. It's immaterial, but I used to ask people this years ago. You have already indicated you prefer an all-day season, but we don't have that.

DH: Yes.

DK: But if you could only spear for two hours a day and it wasn't an all-day season, what two hours would you prefer?

DH: 10:00 to 12:00.

DK: Bob, what about you?

BH: Morning. Sometime in the morning.

DK: Sometime in the morning. I always liked 11:00 to 1:00.

DH: Yes.

DK: I got more fish around noon. I don't know. I'd like to ask that. I know Dan Garrett, he

likes that 8:00 to 9:00 a.m. He likes early. But somewhere along the line, is it coincidence, or is it just that they like (them feed?) during the middle? Maybe that's the cruising part of the day. Anyway, that was just a question I wanted. Bob, what is one of your most memorable experiences while spearing? Like two at a time came in or one upside down or anything like that?

BH: No. But I fished here in endpoint and I never had anything like that. The best thing that ever happened to me was shoveling the snow to let the sunlight into the hole, so we could see. My wife says, "Bob, you better get in here." I got in there, and she was hanging onto that big fish girth.

DK: [laughter]

BH: So, when she got it up in the hole, I just put the gaff hook in its mouth and backed out the door with it. I say, "Baby, you got a big ninety-pounder here." Little bit off in there.

DK: Little bit off. Your most memorable experience. I'm going to hear this now, the one that's hanging on the wall out there.

DH: The one that's hanging on the wall. Bob was outside shoveling snow. We went out a little bit later. It was a Sunday morning. We had about three, four inches of that white fluffy snow. He was out shoveling. The fish came in under the decoys. Oh, about six, eight feet of water, I would judge it was. I threw the spear and I only hit it with two times. The other three didn't catch it. I started yelling for him to get his bums in there [laughter] and help me. It just so happened that the day before, a friend of ours next door borrowed our sled behind the snowmobiles. So, he had to come in and get the sled from (Dick Fountain?) and go back out. Then we could bring the fish in and up to the tavern. When we got up there, Losey was running the tavern at that time. They weighed it. They weighed it at 159. Then they said 160 and then they went back to 159 and then it was 160. Losey yelled at me, "How much do you want it, Darlene?" I say, "Well, 159." That's how it came about, 159. Then all hell broke loose. I mean, he got on the radio at the Point Tavern. Well, you're one of these old fishermen that you don't leave that shanty for anything. Like the old-timer and all these guys, they left their shanties to come in to see my fish. When they radioed back to Losey, they said, "She got a fifty-nine-pounder." He says, "No. 159." But they didn't believe it. So many of the old-time fishermen that don't leave their shanties, like I said, for anything. When they came in, I just grinned. [laughter]

BH: Also, the guys were coming back from Poygan. Losey got on the –

DH: Radio and –

BH: – radio and notified them. He says, "You've got to stop in and see this."

DK: What year was that, Darlene?

BH: 1986.

DH: [19]86.

DK: 1986.

DK: It was down about six or eight feet?

DH: Yes.

DK: So, you had a nice shot.

DH: Yes.

DK: No mistaking it. Was the water visibility good at the time?

DH: It was a little bit cloudy.

DK: A little bit cloudy.

DH: I don't think I've ever sat out there and had good visibility.

DK: How deep of water were you spearing out then?

DH: Twelve, thirteen feet.

DK: I like that twelve foot.

DH: It's like two city blocks out in front of our house where we sit.

DK: That's good. I do the same thing right out in front of my place, behind my place, depending on where the front door is.

DH: If it's going to come through, it's going to come through.

DK: Well, that's another thing. Well, trolling is not the right word.

DH: [laughter] They've got to move.

DK: But a lot of people, I think, if they don't see a fish in half a day, they move. Now, with the half days spearing, sometimes they move twice in a half day. I always thought if you sat long enough on a spot, put your time in, your odds are just as good that way as it's putting all that effort in to move. So, you're kind of a sitter too, right?

DH: Yes. We put it out there and that's it.

DK: Well, how about bad weather or bad ice conditions? Do you have any stories where a crack

opened up around you or something?

DH: No. I was out there one noon when he was in eating and it cracked. Oh, my gosh, the water comes slushing up through the hole. That scared me. [laughter] But we didn't have an open crack, but the ice just cracked. I had never experienced that before. That scared me with the water slushing up into the hole.

DK: I think we've all been through that before, and it is scary. Any superstitions you have while fishing? Wearing a certain coat, certain colored coxer, using anise oil?

DH: No, no.

DK: Nothing –

DH: No.

DK: – in particular? Before, years ago, we used to put down paper pulp and eggshells and navy beans and so forth. What did you use for lightening up the bottom back then?

DH: We had some squares of paper pulp.

DK: [inaudible]

DH: We didn't put much down. We really didn't.

DK: I don't put much either. (Fred Whippen?), he wouldn't put anything down.

DH: Yes. You drop the coaxers. We didn't throw stuff in the lake. Well, if we did, it might wash up here [laughter] in our shore and we'd have to pick it up.

DK: Now, PVC pipes are what most people are using. That works good. That's helped me catching an outline of a fish going across. [Are] there any kinds of illegal stories, not that you were involved in, but that you heard that you know to be true, but you don't mention their names? Any story that so-and-so got or such and such got eight or nine fish in one day or one weekend?

DH: I've heard of a fisherman out on the lake, an illegal sturgeon, and he cut it up in pieces and put it in his pants legs and his pockets and stuff like that and came in with it.

DK: [laughter] I guess the reason –

DH: You probably know who I'm talking about.

[laughter]

DK: Are there any other good sturgeon stories you might have that you can remember?



DH: Another family, husband and wife, he had an illegal sturgeon and the DNR were coming to the house, so he threw it in bed with his wife. He threw the fish in bed with his wife.

DK: [laughter]

DH: You remember that.

DK: I didn't do that.

DH: No. But you know who I'm talking about. He just threw the fish in bed with his wife because the DNR was coming in. [laughter]

DK: Well, [are] there any other spearing stories of yours that you might want to mention today?

DH: The very first year I went out to sturgeon fish, I hyperventilated, I think. I saw a fish on the bottom and I could not pick up the spear and throw it. I shook. After that, it was okay. But the very first year, I hyperventilated. I don't know why I do that. [laughter] There it was. I could not pick up the spear and throw it.

DK: Did you get a fish your first year?

DH: No, no, no.

DK: Well, do you have a favorite recipe for a sturgeon then?

DH: We like fried sturgeon. With my big sturgeon, I boiled some of the meat down and then I added liquid smoke to it and cream cheese. I made a dip and took it up to the tavern for the fishermen that came in, so they could have a taste of my fish. That was good. That was good. Anyway, I thought so. It was all eaten, [laughter] (so I thought so, too?).

DK: What do you enjoy the most about sturgeon spearing, Bob? It's like deer hunting. Once you get one, you're hooked.

DH: You bet you.

DK: Not everybody likes it. Some people can't stand it, but some people think it's the greatest thing since sliced bread.

DH: It's like you said, once you see one, you're hooked. The peace and quiet. I mean, we sat together, husband and wife. We could talk. I mean, we would talk, but we had the radio on. It was just peaceful and quiet. I'm answering for him.

[laughter]

DK: Well, that's kind of a hard question to ask. I mean, everybody's out there to fill their tank

for sure, but the camaraderie with your fellow spearkers is probably as good a reason as any to be out there. Well, anything you can think of? Bob, you want to add to this story?

BH: My memory is shot. I can't remember.

DK: John is having that same problem. I'm probably on the way. [laughter]

BH: Yes. But I fished with him and I fished with (Eddie Gorgel?). In fact, it was his shanty where I got my first sturgeon on.

DK: Eddie Gorgel?

BH: Yes. That was on Poygan.

DK: He's on my list to interview also.

DH: He can tell you some stories.

BH: Oh, yes.

DK: I know that.

[laughter]

DH: He can tell you some stories.

BH: He smokes fish, too.

DH: Yes.

DK: He's a good fisherman all the way around. Well, I thank you for your interview and your time, Bob, and Darlene. Very interesting to know that that fish was all fish and no eggs in it.

DH: No eggs in it.

DK: That makes me even prouder of you.

DH: Me, too. I'm so glad that Dan Fultz said that to me. He was sure it would have gone over two hundred if she had eggs.

DK: (Elroy Schrader?) speared a 180-pounder in 1953. That record stood for fifty years. Now, it's broken by 188 pounds.

BH: Yes.

DH: But they both had eggs in them. Mine is all fish. [laughter]

DK: I mean that puts you right up near the top.

DH: Yes, yes.

DK: I saw that 158-pounder that was speared at Waverly this year. That was a nice fish. But I was in awe when I saw this. That's a beauty.

DH: That's a fish. That's a fish.

DK: Well, thanks again, Bob and Darlene. I really appreciate your time.

DH: No problem. No problem.

DK: This is the end of the interview.

[end of transcript]