

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

Willard Jenkins Oral History

Date of Interview: May 11, 2006

Location: Malone, Wisconsin

Length of Interview: 00:49:28

Interviewer: CR – Christopher Rice

Transcriber: NCC

Willard Jenkins: Start over. One time, a guy went out with a horse, and all at once, the horse stopped. "Come on. We aren't at where we want to go yet." He'd tap on the horse. The horse wouldn't go. So, he walked ahead of the horse and all at once, boom, he went right down through. There was a crack there and it's covered over, and that horse knew that. Now, how the hell did it know that? I don't know. He said there was nothing on top of that snow. But it was just a quarter of ice, a little ice, and then snow on it. He probably breached ice and, bang, down he went. It's one of them.

Bill Casper: Would you drive your truck out there if you'd have had it?

WJ: I remember well, [inaudible], which is the one that lived in [inaudible]?

BC: [inaudible]

WJ: [inaudible]

BC: Claudie.

WJ: Claudie. Claudie was telling that story one time. Oh, God. That's way back when Bernard was on the farm. I used to pull his shanty out for him and take care of him.

BC: Bernard (Berger?) was on the farm?

WJ: Yes. He was telling all at once, somebody told him they were getting a lot of fish at Stockwood. So, him and Claudie hooked two shanties together and they were going up the lake. He run into a snowstorm, flurries and stuff. They knew they were getting close to Stockwood. So, Claudie says, "I got out, opened the door of the car." He said, "I get out to look. When both feet hit the ice, bang, down I went." He stepped right next to one little surgeon hole. [laughter] "Down I went," he said, "I hung on the door and I got back out."

BC: Is that right? There was an old sturgeon hole and maybe didn't mark them in those."

WJ: No, we didn't. Back then.

BC: Back then, they didn't mark them so like we do now. No.

WJ: I remember one time, a guy wanted to move up to Ecker's Road. He asked me, and I said, "I haven't got time to do it." It was Fritz Berger, Bernard's brother. I said, "I really haven't had the time to do it." So, he went up there and he talked to Billy (Berler?). Billy Berler used to have the Turkey farm.

BC: Beyer.

WJ: Beyer. Bill was living up there and plowing the road. So, Bill come down and got in the shanty. I didn't know where it was. I went by there about an hour or two later, and here he sat on them gallon milk jugs, the plastic ones. That's what he wanted to hold [laughter]. I said

something to Bill. I saw him afterwards, a year or so later, I said, "God, damn it, that was a good marker you put by that hole." "Why?" "Because I drove right in," I said. [laughter] So, yes, it was –

BC: Who told me about, you went and set up some shanties off a pipe, and the guy kept fishing there. Then you went in and you finally said, "Hey, it's about time you move." He only moved a short distance. What is that? Was that you? He only wanted to move a little ways.

WJ: Oh yes, that was us.

BC: Start right from the beginning with that.

WJ: That was Jerry (Alec?) and his two buddies. I don't know their names. They were from the West Shore and they were getting fish right out here in the bay. So, they come over and one guy went out the day before. So, they wanted me to set them up. I said, "Well, go find your spots." I said, "I've got to cut a hole and I'll come over and look for you." Well, the shanties are about like from here to the road apart in there and they're right in the middle of them. I said, "Fellows, you want a fish here?" "Yes. We've got to fish here. That's where we're getting the fish." "Okay." So, I cut the three shanties and I went to shore. I didn't even get in there and here comes one guy to get me. "We've got to move that one shanty," he says. "The fish are just out there and I can't quite throw the spear that far." That likely slurry too, you know?

BC: Yes. Yes.

WJ: So, I went out there and I went in. I said, "You want to move?" "Yes." "Oops," he said. "There goes another one." By God, you could see the fish going just like they had a road. So, we talked it over and we figured about fifteen, twenty feet. Well, let's try it. So, I cut them another hole. We didn't have it tanked yet and he had a fish.

BC: Really?

WJ: They got three fish that day, just like that.

BC: Right out of that. They were in that spot?

WJ: On the runaway.

BC: Yes. Isn't that so?

WJ: You know the [inaudible] boy, Bob. He was fishing not too far away. Bob was hooking onto his shanties. I said, "How come you're back off and on? "Shit, there is nothing here." Well, I said, "These guys over here got two." I said, "Gregory Hoffman and his wife got a ninety pounder on the other side. He said he was back in that shanty and he stayed there the rest of the season [laughter]. He was quite a guy that Bob [laughter]. You went to [inaudible] Big Harry though, didn't you?

BC: Harry?

WJ: (Steffers?)?

BC: Yes. He told me a story one time that you probably know it better than I do because you were probably there when he told it the first time. About how he speared his fish.

WJ: Yes. It was swimming away.

BC: It was swimming on the road.

WJ: Yes, on the road.

BC: There was so much water on the road and the lake that he said the sturgeon was swimming towards – or somebody knocked on the door and said the sturgeon's swimming away or whatever.

WJ: [laughter]

BC: Yes. Harry Steffer's story.

WJ: Yes. He took the ball-peen hammer. He said, "I got him right between the eyes. That's the way I took him in the measure room. The way I weigh him in," he says,

Charmaine Jenkins: With the hammer in his head?

WJ: Yes.

BC: When the ball went in, it's through its skull.

[laughter]

WJ: Come from Harry, anything.

BC: Then the guy says, "Well, I can't weigh him with this hammer stuck in his head." Harry said, "Well, it's a – what is it? A ten or five-pound ball-peen hammer. Just take off five pounds," he says.

[laughter]

Typical Harry.

WJ: I went with him. We went up to sturgeon watch together, me and him. He got in that shack up there and he had that [inaudible] he's rolling on the floor [laughter]. Told him one story after the other, see?

BC: I know. I wish he was – he died, didn't he?

WJ: Yes, him and his wife.

BC: I wish somebody was around. I mean, [laughter], he had some –

WJ: He could always pick up – he knew where he wanted to go. He came right in the shack and there on the bend. So, he'd tell that captain there, he said, "Well, we've got to go there because my legs aren't very good and I can't really walk around too good." Oh, that was right up there. He pulled in there and stopped, leaned back in the seat. He might get out to take a leak, and that's about all he did in there, twelve hours.

[laughter]

But eat, Jesus, he could eat.

BC: Oh, yes. Yes, and wine, he liked. I went in his shanty one time, and I think he fished with – who was it? I don't know.

WJ: His brother?

BC: No, they had the junkyard that they had in [inaudible]. Don't you remember? On Morris Street? Who was that?

CJ: Oh, way down on Morris Street, yes.

WJ: Oh, I know who you're talking about. The girl.

BC: Well, yes, the girl. Yes.

WJ: Oh, what the hell were their names again?

CJ: The blonde?

WJ: No, no. They had a junkyard.

CJ: (Serah?), you mean?

BC: No, not Serah, but this –

WJ: No, no, no. The other one. The other one.

BC: Manis.

WJ: Manis.

BC: What Manis was it then?

WJ: Jake.

BC: Jake Manis. Harry Steffers and Jake Manis, they were very good friends. They would fish together. One day, I got a sturgeon. That's when I first speared, I anchored [inaudible] thing. I was outside and then Harry heard this outside. Jake and Harry were fishing together. So, then Jake said, "Well, you can't fish anymore. Maybe I'll sit in your shanty." So, Jake fished in my shanty and Harry stayed in his shanty, of course. Of course, the wine was always flowing between them too. They would drink wine out in that lake.

CJ: [laughter] I know. We got a bottle in the basement yet that he brought us.

BC: I know. I know.

WJ: Yes. She came out to get him one time or looking for Harry. She came in the tavern down there, put a big coat on, high-heeled shoes. This is at 9:00 a. m. Harry was in the tavern. No, he said, "He went out a half an hour ago." So, she drove out on the lake. I don't know if she ever found him or not, but he didn't ask just how she went –

CJ: You mean that lady with the blonde hair that always had that thing in the back, and she would come out fishing by herself. Is that the lady you mean?

WJ: No. No, that wasn't her.

BC: This was Jake Manis's wife.

WJ: [laughter]

CJ: Well, I thought that's what she loved in Manis. It's on that boulevard.

BC: That's right. That's where they lived.

WJ: Then one year, I was fishing up at Stockbridge Fairy Springs. I knew them guys up there. They were getting a few fish. Of course, when you fish with that gang, when they decided to move, there were eight or ten shanties, you moved. They said, "Pick up, we're moving. If you don't pick up, we'll hook right on and pull you away." So, anyway, the deal was the first fish that anybody got was for the party after the season. So, he was taking that fish in in the plow truck. He had to deal with that tavern up there, just as you drove off, Nimitz.

BC: Nimitz Tavern. Yes.

WJ: Yes. If the light comes on, on the front, my advertising light, the [inaudible]. So, he stopped and he got the field glasses out, and looked and sure, here they were coming out the roads. So, he threw the sturgeon out in the snowbank on the ice and he backed up and he plowed it in.

BC: Oh, he had the snowplow?

WJ: Yes. He never did find it [laughter].

CJ: Somebody else had –

WJ: Found forty-pound fish.

[laughter]

But at least we didn't get a ticket for not having a tag on it.

[laughter]

BC: He plowed it in [laughter]. I've been looking for some pictures of Eddie Hoffman's snowplow. It was like the biggest plow I ever remember. I think Joanne, his daughter, might –

WJ: She might have them.

BC: Joanne, yes.

CJ: Well, if she doesn't, Betty (Jodick?) would.

WJ: She's got pictures, you wouldn't believe.

BC: I've been there already. I've talked to Betty.

CJ: Oh, okay.

BC: She has got everything.

CJ: Isn't that something? She gave the whole bunch to the Villa Loretto. Now, she did stuff up there. They opened a new place. I was over there a couple years ago.

WJ: I can still see Eddie out there putting chains on for guys in the morning. The old timers.

BC: Yes. Hoffman's Garage in Pipe. Then Greg Hoffman and Louis worked for him.

WJ: Yes. I don't remember when Greg worked there, but Louis was there.

BC: Yes. Greg worked there.

WJ: That's before he got to be the mailman, I suppose.

BC: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. Yes. They were young boys. I mean, they were older than I am. Greg

is ten years older than I am. I'm seventy-five, so –

WJ: Yes, I've been up there more than once when these old guys would come in. "You aren't going fishing today?" "Yes, we are if you put the jeans on." [laughter] He went through a lot of snow out there.

BC: Who?

WJ: Eddie would.

BC: Oh, with that wrecker, he always kept some stones on the back and the wrecker back there. Then that little plow, it only plowed the track for the wheels. Then it had a v in the middle that was up about this high. So, we didn't need to push that hard. But you could see him coming down the road and the snow flying in both directions. I think Ervin Schroeder built that for him –

WJ: He did.

BC: – in Johnsborg, in the blacksmith shop.

WJ: That Ervin, he was quite a guy even up to the end.

BC: Oh. Ervin Schroeder. Yes, he could build. You walk in there and tell him what you'd like, whether it was an ice chisel or whatever it was, he could make it for you.

WJ: I had a Cub Cadet lawn mower. There was a screw he set up. It drove off the end of the motor to the hydraulic pump in the back seat. It was all cast aluminum. I broke one or two on there. It was thirty-five bucks a piece. So, Davey Schneider says, "Why don't you stop and have Irvin look at that one?" So, I had it behind on the trailer. So, I pulled in there. He come out and he looked, "Yes, give me a couple of days," he says. He called me up one night, 8:30 p.m., and he says, "Can you bring that lawnmower up tomorrow?" "Yes," I said. "Anytime." He says, "I think I got it figured out." He caught that piece and he put it in there, tightened the bolts. He says, "All you've got to do is keep the bolts tight." It run ever since. How he had a memory to know that, I don't know.

BC: Yes. He was a good mechanic.

WJ: He was a mechanic, yes. I wonder if they ever did pull up all his line shafts and stuff.

BC: Yes. I don't know. They were going to do that for that old blacksmith shop?

WJ: Yes.

BC: That building's still standing there, isn't it?

WJ: Yes. But no, he was going to do it up in the – I don't know. Was he going to get the

building?

BC: I don't know.

WJ: I don't think so.

BC: I have no idea.

WJ: But I know the antique guy, Schneider.

CJ: Schneider?

WJ: Yes. I heard he took all the line shafts and everything out of there.

BC: Out of that blacksmith shop? Yes. Well, when I was young and you'd go in there and then, oh, that whole line shaft thing was running up in the ceiling.

WJ: Yes.

BC: It was just rumbling in there all the time. Belts flying. Oh God. It's a wonder somebody didn't get their arms chopped off.

WJ: The last time that I was in there, he gave me a little horseshoe about that big. He said, "Did I ever give you one of my horseshoes?" I said, "No." Said, "Never once." He scrounged around. "I haven't got too many left," he says. Got the cleats on the bottom. [inaudible] for the nails.

BC: He made them himself.

WJ: He made them himself.

BC: Yes. He made the shoes. Yes.

WJ: He could pound them out of there and then knock them flat. He must have shoed horses one time.

BC: I'm sure. All the blacksmiths did. All the blacksmiths shop did.

CJ: That was a long time ago.

WJ: Oh, yes, that was [inaudible].

BC: He had a fish and a snowmobile suit?

WJ: Yes, I speared one right out the bay here. I was working at (Thompson's?) at the time and there was a bigger fish. His wife was out in the shanty with me. Bear was coming later. I said,

"There's your fish. Tag it." "I don't want it." I said, "I don't want it." So, I said, "I've got to go to work." So, when Bear came out, he put it down the snowmobile suit and walked in the house by [inaudible].

[laughter]

WJ: Tell him about your dad.

CJ: What happened, that was 104 pounds.

WJ: The fish, it'll get to you.

BC: Yes. It's the fish that does it. This is you and –

CJ: Donna and me.

BC: You and Donna. Okay.

CJ: Dad came driving and – it's all the same pictures.

BC: It's all right. I just want to – so, I'm going to need one of these here.

CJ: But this one, I don't really know what that – that picture's been around a long time.

BC: Sure. Well, there's something written on the bottom there.

CJ: Yes. Dad, Charmaine, and Donna.

BC: Oh, okay. This would've been –

CJ: Sturgeon caught in Lake Winnebago. It doesn't say the date, but that's it.

BC: Write his name on the back. It's red but doesn't matter.

CJ: We were in the house and mom, and all of a sudden, we hear the horn blowing. He had – what was that truck?

WJ: A little model A.

CJ: Model A truck.

WJ: The coke with a little box on the back. All the farmers had them.

BC: Yes. Like all of them were.

CJ: Yes. Okay. Anyhow, Keith comes barreling in the yard. He is blowing the horn. We ran

to the door and we look and he drives up and he backs up and he gets out and he goes like this. He looks in and he jumps back in the truck and he takes off. Here, he came around the corner so fast, the fish flew right out. Carl, Sas, and, I don't know, all those guys that would've been in the bar saw it. So, they were all standing there on the corner waiting for him and their latest fish in the road.

[laughter]

So, that, I thought, was a pretty good story.

[laughter]

He comes back and he had his fish.

[laughter]

But the look on his face when he jumps out and he goes like that. Then he looked in the box and no fish. Oh my God [laughter].

BC: Yes. Those boxes were only like eight inches high.

WJ: Yes. They weren't much.

BC: They weren't very big.

CJ: He must have been so excited when he went around the corner. He just spun the wheels. They said they saw it fly out and they all ran out there waiting [laughter].

BC: It would be nice to find a picture of a model A truck, you know? Because there's nothing on the lake any more than that.

CJ: Maybe you could find that in a computer.

BC: Yes, I might. Because everyone had – they'd take the rumble seat out and they and they'd –

WJ: Put boards in there.

BC: They'd put boards in there and they built a box.

CJ: Now, probably this had been a couple years – a year ago. He could have found one. I forgot where he got it, how he did it, [inaudible] it. [laughter].

WJ: When I first come in and work for the state, that was back in [19]47 down here. All the way from the corner down past the tavern that was parked on both sides with old fish cars, you name them. The guys would leave them there all over there.

BC: Yes, from pipe?

WJ: Yes.

BC: Yes. They'd come down there with their good car –

WJ: Yes. Then take that beater out there.

BC: – then take the beater on the lake. Yes.

CJ: Now, they drive these good things forty [inaudible].

BC: Yes. Now, you've got to have a \$50,000 four-wheel drive.

CJ: Yes, to go out on the lake.

BC: Yes.

CJ: [laughter] Well, I remember that one time before we were married and you had to go out on the lake and bring somebody's shanties in. I went out with you and there was so much water out there. My dad said, "You don't go out there." "Well, I'll go with him." So, we went out there and what did you have? You had to go take spears out for somebody's shanty. There was so much water. What was that?

WJ: I don't remember anymore.

CJ: It was on a Sunday, we went out there anyhow.

WJ: [laughter]

CJ: Couldn't go out anymore. You went out and you said you'd go get those spears and we went out.

WJ: We were out there pike fishing one time on a weekend. There was a whole bunch of guys, [inaudible] Larry, and myself. We'd run out of beer about right after lunch. So, I said, "I'll take that old fish car and I'll run in and get a case of beer." It was good going. You could drive forty, fifty miles an hour. There was hardly any snow. Got in, got the case of beer. There should been a couple guys, maybe ten minutes when I went back. All at once, here was a crack about this wide.

BC: Three feet wide.

WJ: Well, there was nothing I could do, but step on it. I only blew one tire though. You see the way some of them guys drive out there? More of it happens.

BC: Oh, I know. Awful. I remember when I was at home and Ambrose (Levenfeld?) was on

the lake with the normal Levenfeld group, whoever. Elsie (Lodolf?) called my mom and she said, "Tell Billy to take the ice boat out." Because I had it parked down on where Gladstone Beach is at now. "Go tell the guys to get off the lake because the lake is opening up." So, I went down, put the sail up on the boat. I sailed across the crack that was about eighteen inches wide. I just had long runners and the runners in the front were about almost five feet long. I sailed right across it and I went out there and I yelled at Ambrose. I found him way up here.

WJ: You never knew where they'd be.

BC: Oh man. I found him anyway. I said, "You've got to get off the lake because it's opening up." So, we went back. It was like drizzling. It was rain, no snow. It was just glare ice. I remember a Plymouth car. Remember those? They were like a woody. It was called a Plymouth. Made of wood paneling.

WJ: Yes, yes, yes.

BC: Somewhere in the [19]40s or something. They made them out of wood. He could not drive towards shore because the wind would blow that thing around.

[laughter]

It would spin him right around because he could have gone straight into the wind or with the wind, but he couldn't go [laughter]. But anyway, we went home, we went in. We got down here on shore, out quite a ways. The same guy you talked about with Bill Beyer, they heard about it, that the lake was opening. When we got there, that lake was open like eighty feet. There we are with all those cars and everything out there on the other side of that big wide crack. Bill Beyer brought his aluminum boat down and some long ropes. They took all these people, all of us, pulled us across. We didn't even ride a boat. The guys on the east side pulled us and then the west side pulled the back again. Hauled all of us off the lake, left all the cars on the lake that night. The next morning, I went down with Ambrose, the wind turned around to the west to close that crack. Ambrose said, "Well, as long as the crack's closed, let's go fishing." [laughter] He went right back.

WJ: Right back to fishing.

BC: Went right back out on the lake, went fishing again. It was so unbelievable that – and they didn't have bridges like you got now. You've got good bridges to drag out there put across.

WJ: So, I was just going to talk about the time it opened up down here and they put two hay racks with the sides off. Just the hay racks, pushed them out there. Then the cars would drive under one, jump on the other one and off on shore.

BC: Regular hay rack? Just a rack, you mean?

WJ: Yes. Well, the running gear and a flat rack. I don't know how many sailed through that day. They were three, four hours at it.

BC: Oh no. Just to get them off the lake.

WJ: Yes. [inaudible] sturgeon fishing. We stopped in the bar to cut some shanties in. It was dark already. We come in, here was Butch –

BC: Gillick?

WJ: No, no. Same cloud. Butch. Butch. Oh shit, I can't say his last name. It doesn't make any difference. But he was in there. "God, Bill," he said, "I was looking for you." He said, "I don't know if I dropped the front end in or what I did." He says, "But I'm hanging out there on the lake." I said, "Can we find it?" "Yes. I left the lights on, the parking lights on. ' You get the hell off the roads.

BC: This was at night?

WJ: Yes, at night. Well, I got four or five guys in there. I said, "Well, let's go out there." So, we went out there and here, the ice had shoved up like this. It was about that much of a drop. Front end went over.

BC: Three feet of drop and then the front end?

WJ: Yes, there it was, and it closed up again. It was solid there. I took the shanty and I said, "Well, all we can do is everybody get a hold of the front end and we'll lift her and we can back off." By God, it worked. Rosenbaum. Butch Rosenbaum.

CJ: Oh, oh, yes.

WJ: He still talks about that.

CJ: Yes. He still talks about it. Every time we see him, we hear that.

BC: Butch Rosenbaum. My goodness. Yes.

WJ: But you know, it works the best now. I got two pieces of that guardrail that they put up along the road.

BC: Oh, yes.

WJ: You know, it goes, cut. They're twelve-foot long.

BC: You carried them along.

WJ: You do wonders with them.

BC: Yes. Yes.

WJ: There was a guy out here, he drove right into the crack [inaudible] with two wheels. A brand-new truck. He says he was [inaudible].

BC: Yes. The chunk breaks off, you're going to go down away.

WJ: So, I chiseled enough ice so I could get down underneath the wheel. Three guys stood out there and looked at the car right up and we just pushed it over. We did the same thing with the front wheel. When you're trying to yank them out, you aren't going to do it.

BC: No. It'll stay right in that crack.

CJ: Well, if that's tough, I'll come with a trailer [laughter].

WJ: What?

CJ: I'll come with the trailer. We wouldn't have had the accident if they're that tough [laughter]. They shouldn't have banned it.

[laughter]

WJ: It did work.

BC: [laughter]

WJ: Oh, I can't think of anything else out here. That's when I was working for Greg. I was on the tree road and here was Joel out there. Jiggling.

BC: Levenfeld?

WJ: He waved me down.

BC: Joel Levenfeld?

WJ: Yes. "Go sit on that hole right there," he says. Well, I said, "That's a used one." "No, Jerry just pulled off it. Show them there's a fish there." So, I pulled the shanty over and put it on there. He helped me bank it up a little bit. I went there, and you couldn't see worth of shit. Probably six to eight feet. All at once, a dark streak went through and I wheeled a spear. Pulled it up, and I had about a fifteen, twenty-pound carp. "Good job," he says. "At least we got something out of that hole."

[laughter]

"I'll take that home," he says. "Give it to [inaudible] when he comes home." Him and Louis had to go over to the island and everybody was getting fish over there.

[laughter]

WJ: Then one time, Louis was fishing out in the bay here.

BC: Louis being who?

WJ: (Louis Kohler?).

BC: Louis Kohler. Okay.

WJ: He says, "I need a helper." Well, Danny and Jim Brown lived upstairs. We were in the farmhouse. I said to Jim, "You want to go fishing?" "Yes." I bought him a tag and he went down there with Louis. Put him in a shanty with Louis. All at once, Louis said, "Good Lord, here comes a fish. Oh, that's pretty. Oh, that's pretty." "Why don't you spear it?" "Oh, that's pretty," he says. Finally, Louis grabbed a spear and he speared the fish, put it up on the floor, and he said, "Jimmy, now you tag it then." "I'm not tagging that thing. I didn't spear it." Louis says, "I don't get mad very often," but he said, "I was mad that day."

[laughter]

"I had my tag in it." He said that was his last tag. He said, "If I had, I would've tagged it, but I wanted a fish."

BC: Sure. He could only spear two, three at that time.

WJ: Yes.

CJ: I remember when you could get five.

BC: Yes.

CJ: Then you'd go get the tags as you needed them.

WJ: Yes. One or two at a time, you know?

BC: Yes, I know.

CJ: What were they to start with? A quarter? A nickel?

WJ: Yes.

BC: They were five cents a piece. That's when I started. Five cents a piece, and you could get five fish. I would say, "Don't even waste a quarter." He said, "Go get two tags." You can always go by Howard [inaudible] in the tavern, and you get another tag if you get a fish. So, you'd get two fish, you'd stop there at night on the way home, get a couple more tags, and maybe you never spent whole quarter. So, the times were not like they are now, you know?

CJ: Yes.

WJ: That one time when I first came up here, probably – I came up here in [19]47. [19]47 or [19]48. Don't make much difference. But probably (Berger?) was alive. They lived on a farm over here. Junior worked for the DNR down here. So, he said to me one day on a Friday, "Do you want to go sturgeon fishing?" "What the hell is that? I never heard about that," I said. He says, "Mom and dad have got to go to a wedding anniversary on Sunday. So, the shanties will be empty. You can fish in one. I'll fish in the other." "Okay." That was the best morning, God damned day I ever spent in my life. [laughter] So, I think I saw one wall I – So, the next day, we come off the lake from nothing. His dad and his mother's truck were parked by the Jigger's Meyers down there in the park. "Oh," he said, "I bet they got a fish." So, we had to stop. His mother speared two of them within fifteen minutes. I said to the day before, I didn't see shit. But that's fishing.

BC: That's the way it was. That's the way it worked. Well, I was with Ambrose one time – Ambrose Levenfeld. I fished with him from when I was eight years old, 1939. I would go with him all the time. Weekends, he'd come out from Milwaukee, I'd go with him fishing. Until I was fourteen, then he gave me his shanty and all his equipment. Then he made all new shanty and all new spears. I still got the spears right now. So, anyway, we went out there with his shanty one day, and the hitch broke. Driving off a pipe, hitch busted on it. He says, "Cut the hole right here." He says, "This is the spot, something's trying to tell me." We got two sturgeons in there.

[laughter]

We got two fish in there.

[laughter]

WJ: There was an old guy from Brother town that was fishing down there. I was cutting holes and I was working at the [inaudible] and he was into the tavern on the corner when I stopped him from fishing. He says, "I'm going to pull my shanty out this afternoon." He says, "Wherever it's parked, cut me a hole." Okay. So, the next morning, I went out there, and here he is, right on the tree road. Right between the Christmas trees, that's where the shanty was. Cut them a hole. Two days later, he had to come out and tell me, "Yes, I got them, seventy-five pounds." He says, "I got them when they're crossing the road." He says, "They're moving fast."

[laughter]

He was one of them old timers. Like, old Dick (Steady?). Remember him?

BC: I remember –

WJ: He had a round Chevy.

BC: Yes. Oh, yes. Yes. A couple of them on the lake. Jim Brown, Bobby (Gildenrack?) had one. They were round shanties.

CJ: How did they make them?

BC: They were like, you know, when you go up past these farmers that have the –

WJ: Old stained silos.

BC: Well, they have this thing that they blow feet up in. It's like a big funnel. It's tapered down on the bottom. Well, they take that and they'd stand it upside down and put a floor in. They'd actually cut a half round hole inside. Sam Emery had one. He didn't have a rope on his spear at all. He had a hole. He had a wooden handle and a hole in the roof with a flap over it. The pole stuck way through and one tie on the harpoon. One big tie. He'd just sit there with that and he'd put that down there and just give it a good shove.

WJ: Yes, he had.

BC: Yes. One hook, and it was quite big. I remember seeing it in his barn. I always told (Gene?), his kid, I said, "Gene, what are you ever going to do with that?" It was hanging alone in outer barns. Had a beam along there. Well, it was laying on two nails up on that beam. I said, "What are you ever going to do with that thing?" "Well, that's Pa's old spears." Well, then the barn burned down and the whole thing was gone. Even if I could have found the head of it, it would've been nice. But it was all gone [laughter].

WJ: Yes. (Kid Shane?) was another one from Stockbridge. He had one of them. The harpoons, he called it. He's got the guys with four or five times in his spear.

BC: [laughter]

WJ: He used to give them shit all the time about that.

[laughter]

BC: One time, yes, a lot of fish were speared that way. Yes.

WJ: Yes. I speared and went up to Stockbridge one time. That's when they were really scarce. Bad water, you know?

BC: Yes.

WJ: I took it in to register it. We were along –

CJ: I don't remember going.

WJ: Come home and the phone rang. "You don't want to get rid of that fish, do you?" "Jesus. I

don't know. Why?" I got buyers." I said, "I don't know. I'd have to talk to you." Besides his phone. So, anyway, I took the fish up there, took the tag, got \$40, went and bought a quarter of beef.

BC: You bet.

[laughter]

Too bad.

[laughter]

WJ: I never was that crazy for a sturgeon eating. I eat it, but I'm not that –

BC: Yes, I know. Depends on – how do you – we're always looking for some recipes. You got any special way you make it at all, in particular? Do you remember what you're –

CJ: John cleans it and that's perfect. Cut it in strips and dip it in egg and roll it in cracker [inaudible].

WJ: Yes. He does all the frying too.

BC: He does?

WJ: Yes.

CJ: He does the best. I mean, well, I guess that's how my mom did it, and he did –

WJ: He learned that from Elvira.

CJ: Oh, from Elvira. Well, because my mom did it that way. Once we tried it with milk. Some people swear by baking it in milk. We didn't like that at all. I mean, a lot of people like it, but we didn't. Because we always get together and – well, at John's house usually it is, all the guys in the group. Then everybody brings some of their fish and cooks it all up. So, we thought, we're going to try some with milk just for the heck of it. Well, nobody liked it. How do you make it? With milk?

BC: Well, no. No, not really. Well, Hazel Blanc always told me that sometimes sturgeon has a stronger taste to it. But she would put it in milk overnight and just leave it in the refrigerator. Then the next day, she would just dry it off and then do her normal –

CJ: Well, I'd do milk and egg, mix that together and pull it in that.

BC: That's only to keep the cracker crumb stick into it.

CJ: Yes. I don't know who it was just in the last couple years told me again that that's how they

make it. They make it in the oven.

BC: My ma would put it in a frying pan and same way, but brown it real good. Then she'd put it in the oven and just let it slow bake.

WJ: Well, can't overdo it too.

CJ: [inaudible] in getting that fat.

BC: Oh, yes. If you overdo it, it's tough.

CJ: Yes.

BC: I mean it's – yes.

WJ: I was talking to a guy yesterday that he heard of guys that got four walleyes down here on the lake so far. There's [inaudible], God damn far, I can hardly swim.

BC: There's a lot of food, I guess. There's a lot of food.

WJ: So, you can imagine, it's going to be one hell of a year for them to bite.

BC: Yes. Sturgeon, of course now, April, whatever, it's April 11th today.

CJ: May.

BC: I mean, May, excuse me. Yes. It's May 11th. Of course, the sturgeon spawned how many weeks ago. The little ones have hatched, even those that spawned in the river, they put drift nets out now. They put drift nets in the river and they're catching the little ones at night. Then they come up and they move. They're only an inch long, but they got all their parts now.

WJ: Really?

BC: You see when the sturgeon first hatches, the egg yolk is under its belly. It doesn't have eyes. It doesn't have a mouth. It doesn't have anything. It just lays there like a little larva. But by the time it digests that egg yolk, it gets gills, it gets all its fins, gale, everything – the mouth, everything. Then they start drifting. Then at night, they come out and they'll drift down the river to wherever they go. Then the sturgeon that hatch in the fish hatchery – and I got to believe that's wild rose or wherever – they are all swimming now. They're all developed totally already. They're in nice shape. So, by August or September, they'll be like three, four inches long.

CJ: We went to a fish hatchery in Tyler, Texas. That was pretty neat.

WJ: It was a bass hatchery.

CJ: Yes. They had this huge, huge aquarium, and we went there. We went back on a Thursday

because they would have a diver going in there and feeding them. They had all these different kinds of fish. They didn't have any sturgeon. We asked about those. But you know what they fed them? Koi. I said, "You've got to be kidding. You feed the fish koi?" We got our little pond. When we first started it, you'd pay \$8 or \$9 for a fish and they feed them [laughter].

BC: They grind them up.

CJ: They fed them. They said, "Everybody remarks about that." They say, "You feed the koi [inaudible] [laughter]."

WJ: Well, they used to feed carp when I was with them. We'd put them in big holding ponds and feed them shell corn.

BC: Over on the west side, you mean where the big cribs were at in the DNR state?

WJ: Yes, that big holding pond. I was down in Madison that time. You'd go out there, well, there'd probably be a couple hundred thousand pounds of fish. With milk cans full of shell corn. You had a little motor on the back of the boat and start it up. You go down, you just dump it out, and run. Them God damn fish are just like nothing for that.

BC: They just heat it up. Yes.

WJ: It sucked it right out.

BC: Sure. Yes.

CJ: Yes. Yes.

WJ: [inaudible] outfit he used to take cars out with. That old square thing, you remember?

BC: Yes. That was the hoist to raise them up.

WJ: Yes. Now, that other way is so simple with the airbags.

BC: Oh, yes. Yes. Now, they go down the airbag and pump it up. Float it up [laughter]. They could do. The nice part with that, you get one that goes in deep water. I mean, deep water. Not Lake Winnebago's twenty-two feet. They can go down and bring up almost anything with airbags.

WJ: Oh, yes.

BC: I mean, it's just a good way of doing it. I wish we had a picture of airbags system.

WJ: I've seen some pictures of them taking cars off, but we don't have them here.

BC: No, no. I know.

WJ: Did you know they were going to raise or they were raising sturgeon down at Cedarburg somewhere down there?

BC: Well, they're raising sturgeon down at Milwaukee. Great Lake Center in Milwaukee.

WJ: Yes, I know that. But no, this was out – God damn, it was in the paper. Our daughter brought us and I threw it away.

CJ: How old would that truck be? It goes 1948 Ford (AB?).

BC: [laughter]

CJ: The older than that.

BC: The older than that. It's a model A Ford. Yes. (Gretchel?). Frank Gretchel.

WJ: Yes. He used to rent out a few shanties when the boys were plowing the snow on halves.

BC: Oh, he could half the fish.

WJ: So, a guy came in one time. He says he had about a seventy-five, eighty pounder. He went in and told Frank, "I got a big fish." "Well, bring it in," he says. "Do you want it in here?" "Yes, but you've got to have it." He started the band saw and sawed it from the tip of the nose right down to the back. Gretchel. [laughter] That's [inaudible] on us too.

[laughter]

BC: You got half.

WJ: You got half.

BC: Half a head and half everything.

WJ: Yes. I don't think there's many guys that got any more fish than the Gretchel boys. Now, they can't get them.

BC: I know. Danny's not getting them. His daughter got a nice big one last year, but he does –

WJ: Well, he doesn't want to listen. My theory is that the four by eight holes aren't the answer.

BC: Well, you don't need all that. Spending all your time up on the ice, cutting holes isn't the answer either. You've got to sit in the shanty and fish.

WJ: Well, when they fish, they fish hard.

BC: Oh, I know that. Yes.

WJ: But I've told him that. The old soul, (Stefanie?), he's dead now. When I used to cut his holes, he wanted to see ice all the way around in the shanty. Just as straight as you can cut it so you can still sink it, and he never failed to get a fish. He says, "When I see that fish, he's mine. I don't care about that one out there," he says. Which makes sense. But I told Danny that a couple of times. He just –

BC: Yes. Well, listen, my friend, I'm going to head home.

WJ: Okay.

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[end of transcript]