

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

John Jurgenson Oral History

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Interviewer: DK – Dick Koerner

Transcriber: NCC

Dick Koerner: Okay. Ready to go for sturgeon history interview. My name is Dick Koerner and I am here today interviewing John Jurgenson. John, I'm going to ask you a series of questions and eventually, we'll get to your sturgeon story. But to start off with, where and when were you born?

John Jurgenson: When was I born? 1930, 6/27/1930, in Neenah, Wisconsin.

DK: In Neenah. Okay. I know you live here on Cedar Street. I also know your dad, (Ottey?), was a big-name sturgeon spearer in town. Is this the house he lived in?

JJ: This one?

DK: Yes.

JJ: No. He lived out on Main Street in Neenah.

DK: Main Street. The next question is obvious, how did you get interested in sturgeon spearing or even sturgeon fishing because there is a hook and line season? I would imagine your dad got you into interested in fishing.

JJ: That's right. I was twelve years old, I think, when I started.

DK: Okay. How has the sport changed since you started spearing?

JJ: Well, the allowable limits, that's a big issue. Well, now you can only spear one fish than we used to. For years, we could take five if we could get them. There seems to be a lot more fishermen. I know the shanty towns don't seem that different, but there seems to me that there's a lot more sturgeon fishermen. You must have records of that someplace.

DK: Yes, someplace. How many years have you been spearing? Probably, I know it's over fifty.

JJ: Sixty years, anyway.

DK: Sixty years?

JJ: No, over sixty. Sixty-five years, probably. Oh, my goodness. Because I was about twelve years old and I'll be seventy-seven next month.

DK: Okay. That was my next question. How old are you? Okay, seventy-seven. Well, how many sturgeons do you estimate you speared in your lifetime?

JJ: That's impossible for me to do. I don't know.

DK: No guesses?

JJ: No, I can't guess what that would be.

DK: But I –

JJ: Well, I haven't speared a sturgeon for three years now or two or three years I think it is. But years ago, there were years when we got our five. Years when you didn't do so good.

DK: Over the years, you're pretty good with a spear. But everybody, I'm sure – I have a long record myself of not missing a fish, but I have missed two in my life. Have you ever missed any?

JJ: Yes. In late years, my reactions are wrong. They're the same thing as affecting my shotgun.

[laughter]

JJ: I mean, my timing is off. But I stir it. It depends on it. If the sturgeon is only down about 10 feet, you can then near reach them with the spear. I spear a little different than most people. I learned that from my dad. You put the spear down as close as you can get to them or until you got about 18 inches of spear handle up in the shanty. That's all.

DK: I see you've got cupolas in your shanties, and that's the reason for it.

JJ: Sure, you can't have a longer spear. Years ago, over in Menasha, a lot of the Menasha spears, they had high cupolas, and they had long spears. I mean, much longer than anybody you see today. Have you ever seen them over there?

DK: No.

JJ: Well, you must have seen them high pitched roof. Then they had a cupola on top of that. Some of them had a hole in the top of the cupola that the butt end of the spear went up into.

DK: Never seen that.

JJ: They could probably reach down 10 feet or more.

DK: Well, that's interesting. I knew you had the cupola, but I never knew there was extended cupolas. John, what's the biggest sturgeon you've speared, if you can recall?

JJ: Ninety-nine pounds.

DK: Ninety-nine?

JJ: Yes, one short of my son's biggest one. He got one over 100.

DK: It's really an unwritten law, well, not a law, but everybody's goal seems that spearer wants to get 100 pounder?

JJ: Yes. There'll be a lot more 100 pounder spears now, since the control they have now. There's some big fish running up that river.

DK: Well, that's good. Now, we've got the half-day seasons. It's quite popular with most when I asked this question. Because over the years, I've always kind of kept track of who speared a fish and at what time of day. For me, it was different than a couple people. But your confidence level is better if you – I mean, it's hard enough to sit and look at murky water. But if you've got to believe in any second now one's coming, that's what keeps you going. But if you could only spear two hours a day, which two hours would you choose?

JJ: 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

DK: Okay. Now, interesting, because I would say 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. A lot of people spear fish around noon. Now, I don't know if that's because there's more people. I don't know how that noon – for the night shift, a guy can maybe spear it around 1:00 a.m. and then have to go to work or it just seems a sturgeon move around noon. I know a guy who likes 8:00 a.m. in the morning. He's got all the faith in the world that he wants to be there by 8:00 a.m.

JJ: I think it's just a guess, really. I've speared them early in the morning. I've speared them late at night. As long as you could see, we could fish longer. But I'll add this. Most of the fishermen I know like the season the way it is now, because it's awful monotonous sitting there for another four hours or so, four or five hours.

DK: John, what's one of your most memorable experiences while spearing? With the experience that you've had, you've had to see, let's say, two or three come in at one time, or one come in upside down, or one did a funny thing with your coxer or –

JJ: I've never had any come in upside down. I know my dad did. He'd come in upside down and suck the coxer, a small coxer, in his mouth upside down. He speared them. I mean, he speared them right in the belly. But I never had that happen. I've had them come to one decoy that was down deep and turn and come right up for the second one, a smaller decoy. Just, really, just looking at them.

DK: Do you have a preference for color for your decoys?

JJ: No, I don't. I don't know if my dad had a preference, but I don't think – I've tried all different colors.

DK: If they're there, they're there. I guess, whatever color you got down there, if a fish comes in, that's the right color.

JJ: Yes.

DK: How about bad weather and ice conditions? Can you tell me any stories there? I've got some dandies myself, but with your experience, you –

JJ: I'll be honest about what I say on this. For me, even now, the next season, I'd like to see the worst goddamn weather that you can have in the world. Because then you don't get many fishermen out there if they don't have equipment. I'm talking about having to have not cars that you can drive out on that lake, or trucks even. But you've got to have the right kind of equipment to get out there. The ice is thinner. Sometimes it's rare that you have that thin ice. You usually have ice between fifteen, seventeen, and twenty. That's about normal. That's plenty to hold a car or truck. But years back, when you'd get 15, 20 inches of snow on the ice, then it's a problem. But, of course, now they can plow roads all over the lake. It's different. It's much different.

[laughter]

JJ: Cars are all over. They've got equipment to cross the cracks. It's different.

DK: I remember your dad with his jeep coming by. He had his own set of ramps that he'd get across the lake.

JJ: Yes. Well, he grew up with that one. They used to use them on doors. They used on railroad cars. They slid in a slide. You must remember you never seen them. But that's what they'd get a hold of them. They're double layers of wood. That's what they used to cross cracks. That's what he had when I started fishing.

DK: How long of a bridge did it make?

JJ: As long as a door, probably 8 feet. I think that's about what a – or as a door on a railroad car. Some of them are a little bigger than that.

DK: I don't know.

JJ: That's where they come from. They'd get worn out ones. He knew some railroad men.

DK: John, we talked about colored decoys. I know guys who used to rub them with anise oil. When you could put stuff down the hole, they'd put cut-up minnows down there. Anything you recall with things that you thought might help?

JJ: Well, I think if you put minnows down, it would probably help. That anise deal, I don't think much of that. There were guys at one time that put liver down there.

[laughter]

DK: Yeah, I did that, too.

JJ: [laughter] But putting minnows down, that could help. I don't put any minnows down, but it could help. I liked it when we could put some white on the bottom so we could see where the bottom was. Because now, and I'll even mention his name, the chief man at sturgeon fishing, he

says when we got 10 feet of visibility, we got good water. He doesn't know what good water is. When you can see – drop a penny down on the – or maybe not a penny, something shiny like a dime down on a piece of paper on the bottom, and 17, 18 feet, and you can see it plain as day. You remember them?

DK: Yes.

JJ: Then you could spear some fish right off the bottom. You had to know how to spear a little bit then too.

DK: Yes, I remember those crystal-clear years. But for every one of them, there were four or five dirty –

JJ: Well, I don't know. I think we averaged out pretty good on them up on this end of the lake. But, see, the thing that was done differently back then is they didn't start the drawdown on normal years. I'm talking about a year when it's normal. They didn't start the drawdown out of Lake Winnebago until after the season. They didn't do it because after the season, but that's when they did. I can't think of it anymore, January, February, March. They started their winter drawdown in March on a normal year when they didn't have a flood condition or that. Then they went to February. Then they went to January. Now, they're drawing it down all year. Well, you don't get a chance for the water to clear up. Because my dad, I asked him one time, "How come you never go down there to fish?" Because he liked to fish down there in the summer and that. He says, "Can't see." That was his answer. The water wouldn't be clear. But then you'd get up by the outer bar and you could look right down and see the bottom. There were a lot of fish other than sturgeon too. Cut that out.

DK: Any kind of story with illegal activities? You don't need to mention names that do. It's a good story to listen to.

JJ: Well, they used to. They used to when I started to fish. Of course, it was much better before I started when my dad was just fishing. But when I started to fish, we thought nothing of seeing three, four walleyes a day in the shanty. When I was first married, I told my wife, "You want to have fish for supper? I'll spear a couple of walleyes for us." We'd have fish for supper. But now, you'd be starved to death before you found one of them son-of-a-bitches in the lake.

[laughter]

JJ: Well, they're there. But, I mean, the water isn't clear enough. See, they'd come up off the bottom for you for your decoys. You had to be quick because they only looked at the decoy. I suppose they thought the decoy was going to start swimming for something. You must have seen that when you were fishing back then. And then how many shanties did you have down there by you? There were three or four of you.

DK: Yes. There were no more than six.

JJ: Right. Now, what's there, sixteen, twenty, thirty?

DK: Yes.

JJ: Not a good year.

DK: Any other story you can remember, a particular fish that fought like heck or got away on you or –

JJ: Never had one get away and never thought any of them fought that hard. They fight, some of them. My biggest fish, 99 pounds. I mean, that fish pulled pretty good. But you don't need a cow rope on them like a lot of guys have. All you need is a small rope. We don't like the big, fat ropes on there. The spears I make, they all got to re-drill the holes bigger generally.

[laughter]

They don't want a big rope.

DK: Yes, you make a lot of spears.

JJ: Yes, I make a lot. I don't know how many I've made, but I want to quit now. I must have 110 of them down there. But I need a couple for myself. Well, I only need one. I don't carry a spare spear in the shanty anymore either. That's just a waste of time. Another job to wrap up, to take out when you move with the car. We never used them years ago. We just had one spear in the shanty.

DK: Now, your spears are made of pitchforks?

JJ: I like to make them out of old ones. The new ones aren't very good. They're too big. The tines are big. I can show you the difference. I got some I made out of them because you can't get them. They tell me that they're using these old forks for putting up some kind of birdhouses along fence rows. What is that bird?

DK: Bluebird?

JJ: Bluebirds. They're using them forks. I have a hard time getting them now. Once in a while, I bump into one. I can take you down and show you the difference. I'll do that. I got three stuck away for myself of the old forks. You'll see the difference in that spear. Boy, they got small tines. I don't have any use for the flying barb ones.

DK: No. They won't get off. But it's still a big, heavy, clumsy –

JJ: I never heard of one getting off, even with one tine in them. Those things and – well, then you got to screw around to get them off. Then you got to get them back on. Who's to say if that – when you shove that in a fish, it's got to have years enough to spread back. Jeez, the tines are so big. It's junk. In my mind, it's junk. But they're going over. I remember when they first come out. I could make them, but I never made one. But it wouldn't be that difficult. But I got

equipment that I can work with that stuff, but I don't want to.

DK: John, I personally like setting up so that I'm facing north. A lot of people don't pay any attention to that, but do you have a preference?

JJ: I always like to face north. I like the door on the outside to the west or to the east side of the shanty. I don't know why. But that's the way my dad did it, that's the way I do it. Well, I don't know. It probably wouldn't make any difference. I know there's guys –

DK: Probably, but I always figured, the sun. if you have a clear day, and you've got the snow shoveled away from the shanty, and you're looking into that glare. I like to have the light behind me too. I think it illuminates the fish when it comes in better than you can see the fish more than that. That's my opinion.

JJ: I don't know. We always shoveled around our shanty a little around the holes, three sides where the hole is to let a little light in.

DK: We went through some tough times. I mean, you and I have been out there when there was no snow, lots of snow, water on top of the ice, so there was no banking, and the water was swirling down the hole. We have a tack of tar paper inside the hole to keep the water from rushing in from the sides just in order to see down a few feet.

JJ: Well, what you want to do on that, so you don't have to go through all that rigmarole. You want to cut a couple holes well, further than my little wood fence there, about half again that's far from your shanty. Fill holes and the water will run off. I always drain if I get dry weather. You can chop it or if you've got your ice saw, just run the blade down. That'll eat that out fast enough.

DK: Yes, I know.

JJ: But yes, otherwise, you get that weight of that water. It keeps going down. So, then you get more water. It starts to find a hole around your shanty where it isn't banked and eats through. But this way, you get the water going away, always. My dad taught me that two years ago. Chop a hole away from the shanty. Let that water off. It gets soft. Because they'd fished until the ice didn't hold them anymore years back. But then, of course, it changed. He never said anything about there not being a season. He just said, "Well, there was, I don't know, around 32 or so when they come out with tags." He never had any thought that there was a season.

DK: Well, John, any other particular story you want to tell?

JJ: No, I don't have a lot of stories.

DK: How about –

JJ: The only thing I'd say that I want to make a point on there is that everybody should be careful around the cracks. There's a lot of people out there that haven't done it for long. Maybe



it's their first time out, even. They take their vehicle out there. You never know.

DK: That's for sure. I always told my kid, "You drive across the spot now, but you just don't ever drive across a crack without getting out and looking it over and checking it out. If you cross there, don't plan on going back the same way. Even twenty minutes later, that could change."

JJ: Right. It's very hazardous.

DK: How about sturgeon recipes? How do you prepare yours? Any particular?

JJ: Well, since I don't have a wife, I don't eat sturgeon. We ate a lot of sturgeon. We liked to smoke sturgeon. My dad liked sturgeon, but we liked it smoked. But now I give mine to somebody that wants them. Anybody, if I get one. I haven't speared a lot lately. Like I say, it's two years, I think, since I got a sturgeon. But that happens.

DK: John, what do you enjoy the most about sturgeon spearing itself?

JJ: Well, that's a hard question to answer. Right now, you mean? Right now, we have quite a time out there. We got a big group of about, I think there's ten, twelve guys. When do we have to quit? 12:30 p.m., is it? After 12:30 p.m., then we have a cookout. Then we have a few beers with it. That's kind of –

DK: Camaraderie.

JJ: Right. Because I really don't care to have any more sturgeon to eat or anything like that. I don't make caviar. I don't know how to make it. I could get it made. I have friends that know how. Well, if I get a sturgeon with caviar in it, I take it to somebody and give it to them.

DK: Well, John, I thank you for your interview. I always enjoy talking to you. I'll go downstairs and look at your spears and your coaxes.

JJ: You're going to take this one along.

DK: I'll take that one along and give it to (Ron Brooks?). He'll like that. That'll be a reminder.

JJ: He can put it on his desk or someplace.

DK: Put it on his desk and that'll be a reminder that, "Oh, yes. I got to go see John Jurgenson." There's a lot of things that you've got stored up here that after I leave, you'll say, "I wish I would have said this."

JJ: Well, yes. I don't really remember. I got a lot of stuff down there. You might want to look at some of it down there if you want to make a comment on it or write something. One thing is ice creepers. I mean, I would put on a pair of them bought in ice creepers. Because most of them that I've seen, and there may be some that are different. They don't have a heel. They have that cross up halfway up. Well, you put your foot down on the ice like that when you don't have

anything on your heel and you're on your ass.

[laughter]

JJ: Because it slips off. I'll show you the type of ice creepers we use. I started one, but I don't think they got any of them. Well, Pete, I made a set for and I made some for other guys. But I'll show you a set.

DK: One thing I know about you from knowing you from the goose club is you make everything. I mean, you really are talented. You make your own skiff, make your own decoys, make your own spears, make your own creepers.

JJ: You put that in there. I make everything I use.

DK: Everything you use, you make.

JJ: Yes. I got the skiff hanging in there. It's a fiberglass skiff. Yes, fiberglass. But I made it. I mean, I made – I don't know, four or five of them. I made one for Jim (Guns?) and one for Pete and one for Pete's boy.

DK: You even make the paddles.

JJ: Yes, I got them down in the basement too, but there are not many left. They seem to use them pretty good.

DK: How about marsh skis, did you ever make a pair of them?

JJ: I made a pair of marsh skis in high school. I wasn't a marsh skier. I used them a few times. Then I think what happened, I was keeping my fish shanty on a lot I owned up by Lake Poygan. It wasn't on the lake, but back there off the road. There was a lot of snow in there. I put them under the shanty in order to push it down there in that snow and broke one of them. That's what happened to them. I never skied in the marsh much. That was getting over with. When I first started hunting, there was tons of mallard in that marsh up there. The one out on the lake. God, there was ducks in there. At dark, when I first started to hunt, if you'd stay, we'd sometimes cheat just a little bit, Christ, that mallard come in there by the thousands. But then we didn't hunt mallard much then. We mostly hunted canvasback and what's the little duck again? I can't think.

DK: Teal.

JJ: Teal, yes. Bluewing teal, not the green wings, the blue wings. But, God, I had a lot of fun up there.

DK: Well, no matter what the season, there's always a sport that you can enjoy yourself with.

JJ: But now, I don't even go fishing. I bought a fishing license last year and this year, but I haven't went. I'm too lazy to go. Well, I don't have a boat anymore, a motorboat. I gave that to

my one kid. After a while, he asked me if he could sell it. He said, "I don't use it." Well, I said, "Sell it. I don't care. I'm not going to use it. I could go up to point." Well, one of the boats up there, I built. We built boats too, wood strip boats. Then the one I got up there, we called it our *Duck Boat*. That's a flat-bottomed, really a flat-bottomed skull but pointed nose. Boy, that's a nice boat for fishing or hunting.

DK: In the marsh?

JJ: Yes. Well, right out in the cane beds. It's a 16-footer. It's not a real little one. But it's the size of that, but it comes in good. It's a very sturdy boat. We run an 18-horse motor on it. Well, you might as well say it's Pete's now. I mean, he bought the place from my mother. I built that boat too. I built skiff for him, but we only got one skiff left that I built, wood skiff. That's up there. But he's hunting all the time.

DK: What do you think, back to Sturgeon now, the lottery that we were going to try. I rather enjoyed that this year. I was in on the lottery and I got a tag.

JJ: We filed as a group, Pete, and Joe and I. We didn't get a permit, but we're going to file again this year. We're going to file until we –

DK: That really made a better season than the surface that we had there the last few years.

JJ: He's got to watch it. You can tell (Brook?) to don't expand it at least until there's so goddamn many sturgeon you got to get rid of them because it's better that way. Why go up there and kill all them fish? Them fish are running. See, they thought – well, you thought the same thing. They didn't run until spring but we knew that. They knew it in Winneconne very clearly.

[laughter]

JJ: Hell, they had them fish come up there. I said about late September. But now, they're telling me that they're going to because they start coming even ahead of that. Of course, food supply might have changed a little bit and we took a few sturgeons to eat up there. I always got to count because I can't think anymore. I got to do something. Let's see. I can't think of the months. God, that's stiff though. But anyway, it was about the tail end of the season then. See, the season used to be a month for duck hunting. It should be that today. Instead of shooting all the goddamn ducks, you shoot them for three. Well, they must shoot them for two and a half months, don't they?

DK: Well, sixty days.

JJ: Sixty days. Two months. But anyway, we knew them sturgeon were in there earlier than they thought and coming up through there and some nice ones. Then guys from Winnicott, don't you worry, they knew how to get them. You know how they fished them? They fished with three thousand hooks.

DK: Three thousand hooks.

JJ: On every line.

DK: And more than one line?

JJ: Well, there was more than one guy, more than two guys. I don't know how that figured out, but they wanted to caviar and they wanted to smoke sturgeon. Between you and I, do not put this on the paper, we used to fish.

DK: You're on record.

JJ: Is that running?

DK: Yes.

JJ: Shit, I'm not going to talk about that anymore.

[laughter]

JJ: [inaudible]?

DK: No, it's still running. Well, you didn't mention names.

JJ: No, I know, but well, they know. The DNR knows now that they fish within big lines. But I knew a lot of the guys. A lot of them come out of Winneconne. I imagine they took them out of Winnebago, the sturgeon. Where did they get all that caviar on the south end of the lake? That guy down there that makes caviar, good caviar, I guess. Well, they fished them all over the lake, sleepy hollow. There was a set line and a gill net in every shed down there. I'm not telling you where sleepy hollow is. You probably don't know.

DK: No, I don't know. How about sturgeon watch, sturgeon guard, have you ever been on the banks watching the sturgeon site in the spring?

JJ: Yes, I did a lot of times. But I haven't now for quite a while, maybe five, six years or more.

DK: Well, [inaudible] relieve me this year. He saw what I saw. Like I say, there were three to four hundred sturgeons spawning. It was amazing.

JJ: I'd never seen that many, but I'd seen quite a few. I'd seen them when they were spawning. Like I told you, they were pounding underneath this metal boat. Made a racket at night. That's when I was there with the warden watching the first sturgeon there. I watched quite a few different times. My brother and I went up a few times. I think I went up with (Donny Petersen?) and I went up a few times. Where did they start? Well, remember when they had that nice place that house on that land? I think it was a contractor from (Avalon?) that owned it.

DK: Yes. You mean (K&S Farm)?

JJ: Yes, K&S. You must have been in there.

DK: Yes.

JJ: Because that's where we went at first. Then they had a little problem. I don't know. There was one of the guys who got arrested or something. He didn't like to be in the radio for some kind of hunting. So, they closed it out. That's a story I heard.

DK: Then they moved across the river in a couple of different places. Now, they're back there on Main Creek Farm it's called now. They sold off a good share of that land to the DNR.

JJ: That land that this fellow from Avalon had?

DK: Yes.

JJ: They had tennis courts up there.

DK: Yes. he still got that part too.

JJ: What do they call the buildings? They had their kind of cone shape.

DK: Those box setups.

JJ: No. This was a nice building.

DK: They had an A-frame.

JJ: A-frame, yes, big A-frame. That's where we went in. Yes, that was a nice place to go. Some of those places we've been haven't amounted to much, but they're adequate. Well, that last one, are they still in there? That's a farmhouse and they had sleeping quarters down in the basement for us. The DNR, I think, bought that. It's right on –

DK: It's right on the [inaudible].

JJ: Yes. Is that where you're going now?

DK: Yes.

JJ: They had breakfast for you.

DK: Yes. Nice lunch. Make your own, but they serve you.

JJ: Yes, I liked it.

DK: Give a sturgeon patrol hat.

JJ: Then when my brother died, because him and I were going then. We went two or three times. I just got lazy, I guess.

DK: Well, John, again, thank you for the interview and your time.

JJ: You're welcome.

DK: We'll come on down, and I'll show you a little stuff.

[end of transcript]