People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish
John Jurgenson Oral History
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Male Speaker: The date is August 2nd, 2007. This interview is with John Jurgenson. We're going to be talking mostly about construction of sturgeon spears.

John Jurgenson: What do you want to know first? [laughter]

MS: Well, let's just start out a little bit with your name, your age, where you're from, family background, family history, things like that.

JJ: I'm John Jurgenson. I've been living in Neenah, Wisconsin all my life. Fish and hunt and worked a little bit. What I did for a living was I ran the water department for the City of Neenah, and very much enjoyed fishing and hunting. We had a place up on Lake Poygan. My son has a place up north, Boulder Junction. I kind of play around making things, build a house now and then for people, for friends at no fee. Like now, I've been making spears just about all my life, as soon as I was old enough to do it, and my father knew how. My father and I built boats years ago, too. We had a place where we built wood runabouts, duck skiffs. I even made a couple of Styrofoam ones – or not Styrofoam. Not Styrofoam

MS: Fiberglass?

JJ: Called fiberglass skiffs. I have one in the garage. I'll show you when we go upstairs to see the other stuff because you should see the cutter. That's really a part of the spearing, having an ice cutter. Because mine, you can cut fifteen feet a minute in two feet of ice. One man can shove the cake down and set up the shanty. We don't normally have two guys even bother with it like a lot of them. One man can lift them into his car alone pretty well, but they get a little heavy. It's nicer if you have two.

MS: [laughter] So, why don't you explain to me kind of from beginning to end, step me through the process, help me understand how you go about constructing your spears, and maybe some of the rationale for why you do what you do, how your spear might differ from somebody else's? Just from beginning to end, so that we can kind of picture how somebody would make a spear.

JJ: Well, that's easy for me to do. The way I do it, I generally start with making a spearhead. I like to make those out of old forks, old ones, not the new ones because there are different diameter to them and they make very good metal spears. You have to straighten them out, have to heat them, just heat them. You don't want to overheat them, but you heat them, so you get them nice and straight, and then you cut them off to the required length. You put a taper on the top bar, so that you can make them fit into your spear. Then the next thing I do, you weld on the barbs on the tines. This one I'm talking about now is a six-tiner. There, you have eight-tine because you have six of them on the inside and then one on each outer spear up a little higher.

MS: Eight barbs on six tines, is that what you're saying?

JJ: Yes. Then of course, you have to make the handle. Generally, what I do, the metal part of the handle is approximately half of the spear, maybe a little over. I make the metal part out of a piece of three-quarter inch pipe and steel pipe. Then I set it up such that I can pour lead in it before I put the wood handle. I pour lead in by having the top end of it on the bottom – wrong.

Goddamnit.

MS: It's all right.

JJ: I better start over. Yes.

MS: No worries. I put the fork, the spearhead into it, on the bottom, and I kind of shape that a little bit. Then I stand it up on the fork without the wood handle in, and I pour in the required amount of lead. Generally, it takes right around five pounds of melted lead that goes down and goes around the tang of the spearhead where it's in there. Of course, you've got to wrap some stuff around it, so it doesn't spill out on the bottom. Then you let it cool, cool it down. I kind of jumped ahead a little bit. There is a sleeve put on, on the top of that pipe that's a little bit larger. It just slides over the top of the pipe and you put it on there for about three inches and weld it around on one end where it's on there. Your wood handle fits into the other half of that piece, and you have that turned down. I have a lathe that I turn that down with, so it just fits. In fact, it fits quite tight. You have to drive it in there, so it doesn't get loose on you. Then you have to pin that, so you got a guarantee that it won't pull out. You drill a hole. I use a big nail and cut it off and flatten it out like this one here. Well, you can't see it, but there's one in there. Then you have to drill the wooden handle. You have to drill two holes in it. One is strictly just for putting it on a nail, so you can hang it up in your shanty and leave it hanging on that nail. The other one is on a slant, and you run your rope through it. You run a rope down. You have a loop knotted on the end that you can put over one of the tines. Then you got enough, so you can run it up to the other end of the spear and have a knot in it to hold it there. But then you want the rope to be long enough, so that you can pull your head out.

MS: So, the head doesn't stay on? It's just merely tied on temporarily with a rope?

JJ: Yes, to this loop here. Where the knot stops the rope from pulling tight on the spear, it's got to have some slack in it, so that the head can come out. So, you need about eight, ten inches of slack. It isn't particular on how much you have. Then to hold it in, on my spears, you put a loop on them with a rubber band around it to hold it. That holds it in. Then when the fish pulls, he pulls it out through that loop. You still got your pole where it goes through the top boring in the pole. There's a knot. Of course, that keeps your distance, so you can get out. Sometimes you pull the pole back with the fish right behind it and sometimes the fish will pull more rope out with the hole. He'll pull the rope out through the hole. He can pull out all of it. I usually keep about sixty, seventy-five feet of rope, not very big rope.

MS: So, when you spear him and he starts to run on you, you spear him. The spear stays in him. It comes out from the handle of the pole. Then he starts swimming away, and then the rope slack starts coming. Then you kind of hold onto the rope and kind of work him back –

JJ: Work him back. Yes.

MS: – after he's (tired?) himself out a little bit or something like that.

JJ: Sometimes, he's dragging the pole all the time. But sometimes, the rope will feed out

through the pole. If you get lucky and get it close enough where you can get a hold of the pole, you can pick the pole up and set it up in your shanty and just leave the rope run out in the top hole. Then you got more to play with. But usually, they're not that hard, unless you get a real big one. They're not that hard.

MS: So, let's go back to the spearhead. Do you prefer six-tine spears, or does it not matter to you?

JJ: It doesn't make much difference.

MS: But what makes more of a difference to you is how thick the tines are?

JJ: Right.

MS: Why?

JJ: So, it penetrates. So, it penetrates easy and doesn't make such a big rip in the fish. If you got bigger tines, they're harder to drive through a fish, too. They got fairly tough skin on a sturgeon.

MS: So, you like kind of narrower tines?

JJ: Yes. Small –

MS: Just so people know, the tine is kind of like the fork, essentially.

JJ: Yes. It's the fork –

MS: It's the fork.

JJ: – with these barbs welded on. That's what holds them from coming out.

MS: So, how long are the tines? When you get the pitchfork, it's probably like, what, twelve, eighteen-inch forks. But you cut them down to about what?

JJ: Well, that's about seven inches.

MS: Seven inches?

JJ: Yes. Give or take a little bit. It isn't that particular, but that's about what it's down to. I think I cut off about two and a half inches. I think they're about that long to start with. It depends on the fork, too.

MS: Do you use the pieces that you cut off to make the barbs?

JJ: No, I don't. That's one of the good things about the old spears. They're good tough steel and they're hard to cut. So, I cut them generally out of a big nail, a good size nail. Then I just saw

this taper on them, leave them stick up here, and then I weld them on. Then I cut this part off and I throw the others away. I got a box of nails just to do that. I don't know what size they are anymore, but they're pretty big nails. They're just brazed on with brass. Of course, there's eight of them altogether.

MS: So, if you have six tines, you have one barb on each tine. Except for the outer tines, you have two.

JJ: Yes. It wouldn't hit the fish good. You could probably hold them with the two outer barbs.

MS: That's just in case like you have a bad shot –

JJ: Yes. Right.

MS: – or he moves or something. You just get him with the last tine. You can still hold him on.

JJ: Yes. There's quite a few we get speared with one tine. [laughter]

MS: So, then once you got the spearhead done, then you have like a, what is that, a four-foot piece of black pipe?

JJ: Yes. It's about four feet.

MS: Then you have an intermediary piece that connects the wood to the black pipe?

JJ: Yes. There's a sleeve put on there. That's welded on. Then it leaves about three inches, stick out from the top of the black pipe. The reason for that is if cut your wood part down to fit in the black pipe, you get kind of weak because of the inside diameter of the black pipe. So, this way, you get a more sizable piece of wood in there, which makes it much stronger.

MS: Where do you get the wood part from? Is that actually from the old pitchfork, or do you just go to a hardware store and buy some handles?

JJ: Most of them from the pitchfork. If I get the old pitchfork, if it hasn't got a big curve in it – because they're hard to straighten even with heat and everything, this son of a bucking wood. If they leaned against the wall for a long time in the barn, it'd get crooked. [laughter]

MS: It's kind of like a pool stick, kind of want to hang it up to keep it straight?

JJ: Yes, yes. I can straighten them, but it's a lot of monkey work. You can see these. These will roll on here, and they're perfectly straight. You'll find different poles that are straight because of what they're made for. Now, this, you can tell is a pitchfork handle because they're tapered and they're made to shovel some water on. [laughter]

MS: What's the end length of yours about? What is that, about seven feet or something?

JJ: Yes. It's about seven feet.

MS: About seven feet?

JJ: That's without the spear.

MS: That's without the spearhead and probably another, what, like you said –

JJ: Spearhead. Yes.

MS: – about eight inches or something like that?

JJ: Yes. Seven.

MS: Seven, eight inches?

JJ: I'm pretty sure. Yes.

MS: I think it's pretty heavy, too, at the end result.

JJ: Oh, yes. I like to see them weigh between eleven and twelve pounds.

MS: Eleven and twelve pounds.

JJ: Years ago, a lot of the guys had sixteen pounds. But that gets pretty heavy, to each his own. Because if you get too heavy, it's pretty hard if you're throwing a spear off to the side for some reason if he isn't swimming underneath you, [laughter] which can happen pretty easy.

MS: So, how does your spear differ and/or similar to some of the other people around the area that are making spears as well? It can be different or the same.

JJ: Well, their things are different. A lot of them, the hold of the head in the pipe, different. Some of them, they'll drill a hole right through and through the tongue on the spear. Then they put a heavy matchstick or a carved piece, a round piece of wood or something in there. That's supposed to break when they hit, which it very likely does. But I really don't know how good it works. I don't have anything like that.

MS: Where did you learn? Did you learn this all from your father or did you learn this all on your own?

JJ: Well, some of it was my father, but a lot of it was my own. He wasn't too fussy how he made his spears, but he made them, so they work. He was good with the spear, too. That's important to be able to throw the spear good. He speared lots of sturgeon.

MS: What adaptions have you made that he didn't do, for example?

JJ: Well, he didn't use a spear like mine because he was (bought in?) spears. I don't even have one around here anymore. I used to have one. I guess some bar up west of here wanted one like that for – they were building a show rack, old equipment. They're square. This part of them is just square.

MS: Well, the edge is square instead of rounded on the head?

JJ: Yes. They go through a thing here. They had five times, I guess, the ones he used. They're just a little different. I had one, but I think I took it up there for that tavern. They wanted it. They got a place up there. They got all kinds of display up there.

MS: Do you know the name of the tavern? What town it's in?

JJ: I don't know my own name.

MS: [laughter]

JJ: My mind is getting so bad.

MS: It's all right.

JJ: I can't remember the name of the towns. That's a problem. I tell you where it is. It's west of here. It's up on the Wolf River. Fremont.

MS: Fremont. Oh, in the Town of Fremont.

JJ: The restaurant is right on the north end. It's a big restaurant. They have a big restaurant and bar and stuff. They got to show things up there.

MS: So, there's fifty to seventy-five feet of rope?

JJ: Yes.

MS: That rope is just kind of holding it on temporarily until the fish pulls out the head and swims away. Then it runs through that hole on the other end.

JJ: Yes. It can run through there. They don't have to.

MS: They don't have to run, I guess.

JJ: If the fish is pulling right away, you're not holding on that rope, he'll run with it. But if you're pulling back on the rope, you can hold that. You could stop him from going unless you just want to watch him swim around. But you can hold them back some.

MS: So, it's preferable just to hold onto the rope by the way, so he doesn't swim off along with that?

JJ: Yes. If you get a big fish and he wants to swim, then he can pull the line out because you help get them tired. Because if you get a real big one, it's nice to get them tired out a little bit.

MS: So, you said when you get the old pitchfork – if I remember right, the old pitchforks are curved and you have to straighten them out.

JJ: Yes.

MS: How do you do that?

JJ: You heat them.

MS: You heat it up. Then how do you straighten them? You get an anvil and you pound them straight?

JJ: My anvil and a mauler. Sometimes you only need a light hammer. You got to work it. It takes a while to work them down to get them nice and straight.

MS: Perfectly straight because a pitchfork is always curved.

JJ: Yes. They're old. Yes. They got quite a bit of curve in them. It takes a while. My dad used to have – what do they call those things? A little round outfit that you turned a crank and you had poles in there. They used them in the mills for (peating?) stuff where they had to bend something. Well, after they quit using them, they give him one because they didn't use it anymore, but it was handy. You could turn it. You turned a little crank that made this draft. Then you had charcoal in there. Well, you could get stuff hot in a hurry. My way is a little slower, but I don't have to get out of the house. I just come down here.

MS: This is all done in the basement, right?

JJ: Yes. It's all done in the basement.

MS: It's all done in the basement. A little gas stove and you can heat it up real hot.

JJ: Yes.

MS: What about spearing techniques? If you see a sturgeon swim into the hole, what's your technique to spear? What are some of the other techniques that you know that people do that maybe are similar or different than yours?

JJ: Well, the only thing I can think of [laughter] that's different is – and my family, all of us, we like to get the spear way down. We'd hold onto the spear handle if we thought we could reach the fish. We just keep running it down and then just stick it in them. But you got to be careful of that because your depth perception isn't as good in the water. But most of them that I know, with a seven-foot handle, they'll put maybe three feet in the water at the most and then they're

throwing it, which you're pretty risky on making a hit. I'm not saying they don't hit some fish, but I'd rather stick it in them without even throwing it if I could. [laughter] Then just hold onto the pole, let them run with the rope.

MS: So, you just kind of sneak it down there real slowly?

JJ: Yes. You can run it down pretty fast and just get it down. A lot of times, you're sitting there like this. A lot of times, you get it down like that and you're right down just where you're holding onto about that much of it.

MS: So, there's only a couple feet of it out of the seven feet that's out of the water?

JJ: Right.

MS: Most of it's all in the water. Then you just throw –

JJ: Then you give it a good shove. Of course, mine, I don't think are as heavy as a lot of them. A lot of them are heavier and a lot of them have a larger diameter. Their top of their pole might be that big around. I like these thinner, narrower ones.

MS: Do most people have this sort of black pipe and wood construction, or they're totally different?

JJ: I don't really know what they're all using on that part. No. I know they don't all use it like this, do it like this. I don't know of hardly any that don't have about 40 percent wood. But there are some that are all pipe. I'm not condemning them. They don't work that bad. I could do that just by this pipe, the length.

MS: Would you still use the lead if you had the whole seven-foot black pipe?

JJ: Yes, yes.

MS: You'd still use the lead bottom?

JJ: You might cut it down, but you got to keep that spear, so it wants to go where you throw it.

MS: You're right.

JJ: But I don't intend to change, anyway.

MS: You were talking about some of the Polish fellas in Menasha. What about their spears that's different?

JJ: Well, this is years ago, many years ago. They used longer spears. Their shanties had a very peaked roof with a cupola on it. So, they were quite high in the middle, so they could handle a longer spear. Then some of them, I said, they even made a hole in the top of their cupola and put

a sock or something on it, so they could have a longer spear. They'd have their spear shoving that far out of the shanty up in the cupola, if you know what the cupola is. That way, they could reach down further and spear. They knew what they were doing.

MS: Are there other examples in the area of kind of like different towns, maybe different ethnic groups or different towns that had different shanty construction techniques or different spear making techniques? Are you aware of any besides the Menasha one?

JJ: Oh, yes. There's a lot of difference in shanties. [laughter] There's flat-roofed ones. There aren't many around like ours anymore. They're down. Well, they're more work to build. Ours are a little bit different than we originally had. We originally had a four-sided roof and then the cupola. Now, we just use the two-sided roof and then the cupola in the middle.

MS: So, it's just a gable versus a hip? You had a hipped kind of roof before?

JJ: Yes. Right.

MS: Now, you have just like a gable?

MS: Yes. Then I had some friends that they had wings on their fish shanty. They would come separate. Each side had a three-foot wing, three foot on a slab like this. That went against their shanty. So, their shanty was six foot, so it ended up being twelve foot because they had a three-foot wing on each side. That way, they could see way off to the side. If they were fishing in a little shallower water, they had good luck with it, too. They got fish with it. That's the only one I know of. Their dad was a teacher in Neenah. Of course, he fished, too. He was a good fisherman. In later years when the fishing got better, the fish were pretty well used out of the lakes for a while there, my dad said. Way back when they could use set lines and they could set, what was it, three hundred hooks for every man on the boat. Can you imagine that? That's a lot of hooks. But I think that's before the turn of the century when they were doing that, or maybe early in this –

MS: I'm surprised they even have limits then.

JJ: Yes.

MS: Even though the three hundred hooks doesn't sound much like a limit. [laughter]

JJ: Well, they could use three hundred hooks for every man on the boat, my dad. That's what my dad told me. But then the season was closed for quite a while.

MS: What years are you talking about?

JJ: Well, I don't know when it started. But it reopened, I think, on 30 – was it the 32nd of the last semester [laughter], yes. How the hell was that? Well, I'd have been about two years old, I guess.

MS: Oh, you're saying like 1932?

JJ: Yes.

MS: The season opened again?

JJ: 1932, I think is when it reopened. But there was fishing went on before that. It wasn't watched that close, and there were fishermen on the lake.

MS: What kind of stories did your dad pass down, like the one with the three hundred hooks? Maybe even in relation to some of the old Menominee Indians or Indians in the area that also speared. Did he hand you down any stories like that, that you can recall?

JJ: No, not really. There were a lot of illegal fishermen fishing for sturgeon. The satellite up the river, it was unbelievable, the fish that were being taken. I don't know. Well, the DNR, I don't think existed then. Well, they had a much smaller operation. But there was sturgeon taken all up and down the lake, mainly for the caviar.

MS: Were there any commercial operations for caviar or sturgeon shipping in general? Were there any companies that you were aware of that actually commercially shipped or fished sturgeon?

JJ: There were guys that fished sturgeon and made caviar out of it and sold it. That was a lot of that going on. It was all illegal.

MS: Back then, it was illegal. It still is.

JJ: They still do. I know there was an old guy over in Winneconne. Because one time, my dad speared a sturgeon that was open and with caviar in it or eggs, and he didn't fix them. He knew the guy over there. He took him over there, the guy. That guy would take them to Chicago. Today, I don't think anybody running a hotel or anything down there would buy any [laughter] of that kind of stuff. But he took them down there in wooden pails. That's when they made wooden pails back then. [laughter] He'd take them down there and sell them to them.

MS: So, this was when you were a young guy?

JJ: I was probably five years old.

MS: Oh, so, in the [19]30s, there was a guy in Winneconne that would take caviar by the wooden pail, load down to Chicago, and sell them to restaurants and hotels and things?

JJ: I think the hotels. I think he had specific hotels. He's been dead long ago. I don't even know his name. Well, I wouldn't remember his name. But now, the fishermen are pretty honest, I think. Well, it's pretty risky. [laughter] In them days, you could buy a license. You could get five tags for a quarter, or you could buy one tag for a nickel if you didn't have a quarter. [laughter] Can you imagine? But you could buy five tags. What got it really going was opening

up the Upriver Lakes. There was a lot more fishing. They got a lot more fish. The fish were small, though, at first up there. But then they got closer. They know where the fish run now. The lake has opened up much more than it used to be. We're losing so much of it. Even for duck hunting, we're losing. I bet we've lost 50, 75 percent of the areas we like to duck hunt in on that lake up there, Lake Poygan.

MS: What did you lose it to?

JJ: What?

MS: What have you lost it to?

JJ: The stuff just washed out, the growth, and died. The bogs, a lot of that –

MS: Dried up and things like that?

JJ: Well, it floated away a lot of it.

MS: Oh, because it opened up more lake-like rather than more river-like?

JJ: Yes. Well, the water level wasn't controlled as well then as it is now. Now, they do a good job controlling the water because in the spring, a lot of times our place up there would flood. The water would be a foot deep all around our cottage or house. It really was a house originally and they moved it there. But now, you don't see that happening. They control it. They don't get it down. In fact, most times, some people are complaining that they get it too low and they don't get enough oil. This summer, they're getting hit pretty good because we're not getting any rain.

MS: Yes, we aren't either.

JJ: But no, it's much better. Like where we duck hunted, a lot of that, it's gone. The weeds and stuff we stayed in to hunt. It was a great duck lake.

MS: Was there caviar companies that actually made caviar, or was it always something done by local fishermen who caught their fish and made caviar themselves, or were there actually caviar companies that made it?

JJ: Yes. I really don't know. I really don't know. Now, across the ocean, there were areas over there where it was big business making caviar. But what it was here, I don't think it was ever legal to make it for sale around here that I wouldn't know of. But I'm not an old man. Well, yes, I am an old man, but I mean [laughter] not like a lot of the old-timers back then. There used to be sturgeon all over the place. Not only caviar, but there was smoked sturgeon.

MS: What surprises me that there weren't commercial operations for sturgeon fishing and caviar making, unless it was illegal.

JJ: Oh, it was illegal. [laughter] No question about that. As far as I knew, I don't think it was

maybe in the 1800s. I'm pretty sure that they fished in – I think that's what my dad – he wasn't involved, but his family was. Because he's the one that told me they were allowed, what did I tell you –

MS: Three hundred hooks?

JJ: – three thousand hooks.

MS: Three thousand or three hundred? [laughter] Three thousand hooks per guy on the boat or something?

JJ: Per guy on the boat. But that was before the turn of the century. I don't just remember exactly.

MS: So, there's probably people in the 19th century, they were probably doing some sort of commercial operation, would you guess?

JJ: Oh, there was illegal fishing. It was rampant all the way up the Wolf River. A lot of the farmers own land, most of them right up to the river, and them fish run up there. When they run, they're vulnerable because they're right out of water. You can go up there and watch them. It's kind of nice to go and see them sometimes, but it doesn't last long when they're running. I went up there for quite a few years. I went up for the DNR because they wanted volunteers to go up there and watch. You had to watch, but you watched for a half a day. It could be a half of the night or a half of the day. You just did it once. You went up on a Wednesday and you watched Wednesday in the morning until Wednesday night. That was it. You didn't have to go again. They had enough people. There were some kids in some schools that used to come and stay for three, four days. They had places you could sleep and different things up there. But they did a lot of help for the sturgeon.

MS: So, you don't think it was ever even legal for commercial sturgeon harvest or caviar making ever?

JJ: Not around here, not that I know of.

MS: Like you said, across the ocean they did, but not around here.

JJ: Across the ocean. Now, before the turn of the century, I would think there may have been some, but I really don't know.

MS: What about Great Lakes, like Lake Michigan and that stuff?

JJ: I don't know. It's hard to say. I don't know. Well, I really don't know if there was always so many sturgeons in the lake. I don't know if they just come all of a sudden. I don't have any idea.

MS: That's true. I mean, maybe there weren't that many then either.

JJ: Yes. [laughter]

MS: Did your grandfather spear, too? How did your father learn it?

JJ: I didn't have a grandfather.

MS: [laughter] You didn't have a grandfather?

JJ: No. My grandfather who was my father's father, he died when my father was five. He stepped on a rusty nail and got a lockjaw.

MS: Wow, what a way to go. [laughter]

JJ: In them days, they didn't have treatment. See, my dad was, I think, five years old. He was born in [18]97, I think, 1897. So, it would have been just over to this – well, now we're in the next –

MS: [laughter]

JJ: Yes. I didn't think I was going to make the next one.

MS: My great-grandfather was born in 1895 up in Lena.

JJ: My dad was 1897. He lived to be eighty something, eighty-two, I think. They were all papermakers. Now, don't copy this story. Can you stop it from copying?

MS: Sure, if you'd like me to.

JJ: Well, the problem, what it does for the economy is it's such a short period now. We have periods when sometimes a season is only two days or it can go up to about, I think, it's twelve days. It cuts down because everything on the lake is that short. But if it's reasonable fishing and the ice doesn't get bad, a lot of people spend a lot of money. You go to the bars around the lake. It's quite popular with them, not just for the drinking, but they want to know who got fish and what they got and all that. Now, since the fishing stops at 12:30, I think it is noon, so you got all afternoon.

MS: They spend money.

JJ: [laughter] Yes. The bars have to be making some money on it, but they're in there elbow-to-elbow in a lot of the places.

MS: It's almost like how a lot of American companies, their make or break is on the holiday Christmas rush. Is that same here with some of the bars? They make so much money because of the sturgeon?

JJ: Yes.

MS: What about hotels and campsites and motels? A lot of people come and stay in those for that, or most people like within driving distance, or they can just go home?

JJ: I think the bulk of them drive. I don't think there's that many stay-in hotels or that, but there are some. There are some because I know a little club. I'm in on the west side of the lake, up on this end. There is some of them guys are staying there, and they don't live that far away. But I think they like to come [laughter] and leave mama at home and we'll have a good time over there or something. [laughter] Well, I wouldn't say that was it, but there's a few. There are quite a few bars along the lake, especially over on the west side. There are some nice places to go and eat on the west side of the lake.

MS: Like Wendt's and things like that?

JJ: I said west side. Yes, Wendt's. But on the east side, too, there is some very –

MS: Stockbridge. Yes.

JJ: – nice places to go for dinner if you like to go. I used to when my wife was – we went sometimes across the lake on a Friday night or something just to go over there –

MS: It was across?

JJ: – and have supper and have a few drinks.

MS: So, most of the impact on the economy here is mostly like the taverns and things like that?

JJ: Yes. I don't think there's much else. I don't know what they'd buy for equipment or anything like that. Most of it is handmade equipment. They sell it in some of the taverns. You can go down there and buy a spear from Wendt's. But it isn't like a lot of other things where they can go and buy fish baits and maybe even a new pair of boots.

MS: What about people who come from further away like Chicago or something? Do people bring their wives up and their wives maybe shop throughout the day while they fish, or it's mostly they come up there with just a bunch of guy friends and that's it?

JJ: The ones I have seen, it's been mostly maybe a group of guys, maybe two, three of them for one shanty or something, or maybe there's a few of them had a big shanty one time down there that I think they could sit about [laughter] six, seven people in it. But now, they got a restriction on them. You can only be so big with your shanty. I don't remember what it was. I know I'm not that big. But other than that, I don't think there's many outsiders coming. I don't really know what to take as I had it here, but I think I threw that all out. I was kind of cleaning the house.

MS: Well, how many fish are you catching per season?

JJ: Yes. They had a list of how many outsiders came in. You could find that out from one of

the DNR people.

MS: Why don't we, at this point, maybe turn this off and maybe move it out to – is it the garage where your shanty is?

JJ: Yes.

MS: We can talk a little bit about shanty construction.

JJ: Yes. That's where my ice saws are now. I'll show you them.

MS: So, you have your sled saw that you constructed. Can you go through what it is, how you make it and things like that?

JJ: It's like a lot of the saws in a way. It cuts the ice with a chain. The only problem is they cut on the wrong side of the bar on most saws.

MS: It looks like a chainsaw, essentially.

JJ: It is.

MS: The bottom part. Yes.

MS: But see, this one, you cut on this side. See. I can't put it on the ice. See, this goes down. When it gets all the way down there, it will lock. I can't even get it that far, (here?). But on the ice, see, then you're pulling this towards you. So, you're cutting on the right side of the chain. You always want to be cutting on the side of the chain that's pulled. Where the other ones that are around, they run it down like that, and then they cut on this side. Well, then they got all that load on this roller nose, which you don't really want to have.

MS: So, what you did is you took a lawnmower engine of sorts.

JJ: Well, I bought them. These are bought. They're industrial-grade engines, but I got them.

MS: Eight horse. Then you attach the drive to a chainsaw and you built kind of like a sled frame out of more black pipe, it looks like, right?

JJ: Then there's a plastic runner under them.

MS: So, the chainsaw part, you can actually lower that down. So, when you start it up, you kind of lower it down until it starts cutting through the ice until it's vertical.

JJ: That's right.

MS: Then it locks in a vertical position. You pull it towards you, not push it away from you?

JJ: You just pull it like this.

MS: Pull it and you slide it.

JJ: I mean that cuts fifteen feet a minute.

MS: Fifteen feet a minute.

JJ: See, if you cut with this side, push the saw – and you can push it a little, or you start and give it a little push in the corner. But if you're pushing on that side all the time, that has to pull that around from here and you get all that load right on that roller nose. They don't cut as good, plus their machines are much heavier. I don't know if you've looked over at any of them.

MS: So, are sled saws something that almost everyone uses? Are they all homemade sled saws, too?

JJ: They're homemade. I don't know if any bought ones around. [laughter] But I don't think there are that many. A lot of them are just using a regular chainsaw. But then (you put your neat?) hip boots on when you run them because you're throwing so much water up. Where this, you could walk out there with just any kind of pair of shoes because you're not throwing the water up on you.

MS: I see that you have a guard –

JJ: Yes.

MS: – over there as well.

JJ: You get it down. That's for starting, so you can take the load off. Then you just let this down and then start your chain running. Then this folds down just like it was.

MS: The handle does?

JJ: (The handle wood?).

MS: Oh, so, it kind of collapses for portability?

JJ: Yes. So, you can get it in the back of your car or whatever you drive. Well, they work nice. They took them as far as Freedom. There's a guy up there that has a little machine shop. I don't know if he still does, but he was a basement builder, but he had a machine shop. Him and a friend of his wanted to take one for a pattern. So, I give them one to take along up there. Well, the machine shop at Neenah here, the guys out there took one for a pattern to make them.

MS: So, a lot of your designs are being made?

JJ: One guy came over here from Menasha and he had one just about all made. He asked if he

could come over and look at mine because he had a couple little things he wanted to see how I was doing it. He looked at them. I don't want to use the language, but he says, "I'm throwing that one at home I got just about done away, [laughter] and I'm starting over." He said, "There's no comparison." There isn't really. Some people, there's only one way. Their way is the right way. But these cut ice and they cut ice fast. They're light. They don't look light. But I mean you can pick them up.

MS: When did you make this? How old is this?

JJ: Well, the first one I made, I don't have anymore. I give that to a friend in Oshkosh, or I don't know if I give it to him. I may be sold it to him for what I had in it. We're friends. In fact, I talked to him today. He called me. He's wondering how my son was doing. No, I can't –

MS: When did you build it?

JJ: I don't know.

MS: You had one that you built. Is this only the (cycle?) one you've ever made for yourself?

JJ: Oh, no, no. I made about fourteen of them.

MS: Fourteen of them.

JJ: I don't have it quite all done. I could put a bar on it and run it, but I haven't. I don't need it and I didn't want to sell it. But this one, I think this is the second one I made. Well, the fellow you mentioned that interviewed me before.

MS: Dick.

JJ: Dick. I made one for him and one for his neighbor out there. I don't know, here and there, all over.

MS: So, this is the second one. So, when did you build the first one? How many years ago? Was this thirty years ago, or is this something you started only ten years ago?

JJ: No. I think it's closer to twenty-five, thirty. It's quite a while ago because I was still working. I was still working out at the water plant. Well, I worked at the water plant. See, I started in the plant, then I went downtown shortly after the guy passed away, and then I worked out of City Hall. But yes, it's a long time.

MS: So, when you started making these twenty-five or thirty years ago, were most people still using the old chisels?

JJ: Oh, yes. Chisels. Well, I used a little of that stuff, too, and hand ice saw.

MS: I can just imagine what the reaction of people was when they've first seen these on the ice.

JJ: Yes. Well, the other kind had been around, the old style where they pushed them. Did you say you've seen one now?

MS: An old one?

JJ: An old one.

MS: After this, I'm going to interview somebody who has one like that. He said it was pretty old.

JJ: Ask him which way he turns it. [laughter]

MS: If he pushes or pulls?

JJ: Yes.

MS: [laughter]

JJ: Because I know the guys, a lot of them were at the least knee boots to run them because you're throwing so much water right on you. Then when you throw that water on the ice, it's very difficult to push it. Where this, you stay perfectly dry.

MS: You got the little plastic runners to make it a little easier to slide across.

JJ: Yes. Oh, it slides like nothing. I mean, you can slide it.

MS: So, from beginning to end, how long does it take you to cut your hole?

JJ: About three minutes.

MS: Three minutes. [laughter] How long would it if you had just a chisel set like in the old days?

JJ: Oh, hour and a half.

MS: Hour and a half.

JJ: That's when you were a kid and could work hard. Oh, yes. You maybe had another guy helping you with a chisel. Yes. It was a son of a buck. If you got up around twenty-four inches of ice, it was tough. People talked about three feet of ice. Well, they never could read because I've cut thousands of holes out there and I've never seen – one year, I've seen thirty inches. Otherwise, it was (iceless?).

MS: How long is your blade? How deep can this thing cut? This looks like it could get almost thirty inches of ice, huh?

JJ: No, it won't. But I got another bar and chain in case I would have.

MS: So, what's this one cut?

JJ: In fact, I have been using that. [laughter] Well, I don't use that one. I really don't know. I'd have to measure it.

MS: This one looks like two feet pretty easily.

JJ: I think it's twenty-two inches.

MS: Twenty-two inches? We don't have to measure it.

JJ: I was going to measure it. See, you lose a little here. But when you tip this down, you're cutting almost right down to there, see? So, you're not just using that end out there. You're getting this down about even with this. See, this whole thing turns. (I don't like it?). I want to look at that anyway myself. See? I can't go all the way down to the end. But I'm just about even with here. So, that's about (what should be?) a good cut.

MS: Yes. That's pretty solid.

JJ: This was my spare for when the ice was really too thick. I've never had to take it off. The ice doesn't get that thick.

MS: Well, let's talk about your shanty that you have and how you constructed it, how old it is, kind of somewhat dimensions, the building materials used, things like that.

JJ: I don't even know how old it is, but it's been around a while.

MS: You built it, though?

JJ: Well, yes. I've built several of them. It's got to be at least twenty years old. But inside now, see, they have a little heater. I make them. I gave one to Ron Brooke the last time he was here for his dad. I knew he wanted one. It just burns regular house fuel.

MS: You bring a propane tank or something?

JJ: Yes. A propane, twenty-pound propane tank. That fastens on the outside. I don't like them inside because if you would have a leak and didn't notice it, you could end up with a fire in your face.

MS: It's valuable space because this is only, what, six feet square?

JJ: Six by six. Well, you've got to have a skimmer to clean out your hole a little bit. You always like to keep it nice and clean.

MS: You don't want ice floating in it.

JJ: Yes.

MS: So, there's only floor on half the side because the hole –

JJ: Right. It's half floor and half hole.

MS: What's the dimension of the hole that you usually cut?

JJ: It's three by six.

MS: Three by six is the hole?

JJ: Give or take. It [doesn't] matter if you cut a little back, cut under the floor. What's that?

MS: I think I just pressed the door.

JJ: Yes. See those two sockets down there or whatever you want to call them, when I want to move, I'll take the spear out of the pole and stick it in there. Then I stick the pole through this hole. Then I got a hole cut in the side of the pole that I use. You didn't see my spears. I hid them in another place.

[laughter]

They're the same. But then I run it right through here. Then I can tip the shanty over and go with it.

MS: I see there's a cupola on the top.

JJ: This is a cupola.

MS: So, you can run your –

JJ: I've got a vent in there, too. It's open. But if it gets smoky in here – well, I don't smoke or anything – or warm, you can open that and get a little circulation because it seals your clothes right in. Then I got one back of the stove there, too, a little –

MS: Well, at the gable, the roof, that's probably only six and a half feet high, anyways. So, you need that cupola to get your spear up in there.

JJ: Yes. Well, I can't quite reach it.

MS: When you got the cupola, that gives you a good eight feet or something.

JJ: Yes. See, they used to run these shanties, like I said, four-sided along the buoy.

MS: The hip ropes. Yes.

JJ: But I like this better. Then, like I told you, there's some of the guys over by Menasha, they used to have a hole up there. They had a much higher roof. They went up, I would say, another foot right here. Then they had the cupola on top. Then they had a hole in the top of the cupola in some of them with a sock on it. So, they wanted a long-handled spear. Well, it made sense. They could reach right down and spear the fish.

MS: So, it looks like you just used some two by fours and some two by twos for framing and then you –

JJ: Yes. This is just plywood.

MS: Plywood –

JJ: Then it's got metal over it.

MS: – and metal over it for longevity, a little sheet metal. You riveted those in there then?

JJ: Just nailed it to all this. (Yes?).

MS: Oh, just nailed in. Well, thanks.

JJ: See, this is for the spear rope.

MS: Oh, that's your anchor, so you can't ever take the whole thing on you?

JJ: Well, it's attached down here. That's where it's attached, on there. But you loop it over there back and forth. So, when you throw the spear, it can feed off of there.

MS: It's easy to get the slack out.

JJ: Yes. If the fish is way down and off to the side, you're going to take some of this rope to reach him, and then the rest is over here. He can take it all down and be pulling on that thing if he goes to the end of the rope.

MS: As far as he can go. So, there's no way you can accidentally lose it all?

JJ: [laughter] Right.

MS: [laughter] I'm sure that's happened. I'm sure that's why they have that little bolt there to tie it on ever since that time it happened.

JJ: Yes. These are for hooking the two main decoys one on each one. I hook it on there. Then I

sometimes have a little one I jerk around.

MS: So, you just got some –

JJ: In that, I just hang on –

MS: – fishing line that you hang down there and attach the decoy to the –

JJ: Well, they attach right on this string.

MS: Is that string?

JJ: Yes. Well, it's good string. Golden wire for something, I don't know what it was. [inaudible]. I think it's made for big fish. But they last, these shanties. I used to have a place to keep them inside. Well, now, I keep it in here because my wife is gone, and this was her car stall. But then I had it out by the lake. But you'll have one out there. Well, I did cover the hole. I got a cover made for it, but you still get full of bugs. It's there most of the time then because you only use it for a month. Not even a month.

MS: Two days?

[laughter]

JJ: Yes, two days.

MS: Well, John, I appreciate you giving us all this information and allowing us to interview. (Did you want?) another skimmer?

JJ: You need one of them. When you get done cutting a hole, you want something like that.

MS: That's the major skimmer.

JJ: Yes. Because you make a lot of –

MS: We have a lot of iced fish before. But those are small skimmers compared to what this is. This is like a regular fishing net.

JJ: Yes. There's a gaff hook. You want a gaff hook if you're fishing sturgeon. See right here. I got it hooked on there.

MS: Is that what you finally pull them out of the water with, is the gaff hook?

JJ: Yes, yes.

MS: So, that looks like it's a three feet with a big hook on the end in the middle, iron hook. You just put it right in their gill and pull them out?

JJ: Any place.

MS: Any place, wherever you can get it?

JJ: Tail or wherever you can get it in them. [laughter]

MS: Because they're probably fighting and splashing?

JJ: Yes, they will. You get them up in the hole, then they get a little nervous.

MS: They don't know what's happening.

JJ: You get them out.

MS: Well, I think that's about it. We've got almost an hour on here, so I appreciate it.

JJ: (I did?). [laughter]

MS: So, I appreciate it. This is the end of it. It's constructed that way, or have they only been around for twenty years?

Male Speaker: Gosh, as far as I can recall, they did, yes. I mean, there sure, to me, some of them that didn't, but the majority of them were these laydown shacks. A matter of fact, the (hosels?) that helped build my house, they helped me build my first one to get started. That's the shacks they had. They came from Stockbridge.

MS: Oh, those guys are there from Stockbridge.

MS: Yes.

MS: Back then, early on, people on this side, on the west shore really didn't have that kind of shanty?

MS: All tip overs.

MS: All tip overs?

MS: Yes. They had wheels on them. Some just had skis on it. I had some with skis on, too. Either way, you put skis on, or if you had a lot of snow, you put skis on.

MS: Because I can assume that a long time ago, it wasn't easy to travel from place to place, like certain towns or certain people had their own ideas. Over time, I guess, it kind of just all mixed up and everything.

MS: Now, that's why I got that smaller shack right there. Before, we had the four-wheelers to

get them big shacks – and a lot of snow was hard, too. So, they'd put skis on these little ones right there, and then they'd shove them out. In some years, we didn't even have any decent ice, like eighty, ten inches in some years we had. That's all we had. Then you didn't want to take these heavy shanties out with a car or something. You'd just shove these smaller ones out. I've already fished sturgeon at the end of the season on the north shore with these little fish traps. My boys and I went over there. The sturgeon was in there. You couldn't take a shanty or a car on a lake. We had these little fish traps that we pushed out and fished for the last three days of the season like that. You've seen those little collapsible, like a convertible roof on them, these little fish sleds?

MS: Oh, yes. Drag everything out there on it.

MS: Yes. Right. Yes.

MS: My brother has one.

MS: People (were fishing?) all the time out here.

MS: My brother has one like that.

MS: For sturgeon – I mean, for pike fish and perch.

MS: Well, good. Do you have any memorable moments, something that you'll never forget, sturgeon spearing, [laughter] like the most memorable moment, something you'll never forget?

MS: Well, one of them was what I just got hanged on a wall there. That's why she's hanging there. My buddy said it wasn't heading my way. I had run over there, and there it was. Then there was another one time – oh, I can't think of their name. Johnny Hewitt fished with them. Anyhow, my wife and I were in a shanty and one of the boys. About that time, two of his buddies pulled up, so there were five of us, the same one here, this laid down one. So, there was my wife and myself and my boy and these other two, so there [were] five of us in this fish shanty. I'm lying down on the floor like I always most generally do. I looked. (Here?), that fish, it was going through like this. I speared it and I let it go out, brought it back in. When I got it to where I could see it, I was just sick. The head was almost half again as big as the body. It was like about maybe sixty-nine, seventy inches long. I don't think the fish weighed sixty-five pounds. It's like a skinny rail.

MS: Like a pike. [laughter]

MS: A matter of fact, I brought the fish up to the hole when I saw it. I took the rope and all. (I threw the whole picking rope?) right in the hole. I walked out of the shanty. I was just sick. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. That same year, Johnny Hewitt and – God, (I can't think of?) the boys he fished with. Anyhow, the same year, a day or two later or a day or two before, I forget, I had one the same way. That particular year, evidently, was not enough feed for the fish or there were sickly for some reason or other. I have no idea. But I'll never forget that fish as long as I live. It was as skinny as it was. I couldn't believe it.

MS: Did you pull it out afterwards?

MS: Oh, yes. I took it home. But I was so disgusted. I just took the whole rope. I'm figuring ninety-five, eighty, a hundred pounds. I pulled it up. If it weighed fifty, maybe I'd be bragging. But not much skin. From the head back, nothing, nothing. I don't know if I got pictures of it or not. I'm not sure. Unreal. John Jurgenson's dad, he was one of the best sturgeon fishermen on the lake. Between him and John Gunlock, that's how I learned my fishing.

MS: Well, I think that'll do. We've got about an hour here. I think it's only an hour taped. So, it worked out nicely. Thanks again.

MS: (I like to give you?) some of these pictures.

MS: We'll look at them.

[end of transcript]