

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

Harry Kachur Oral History

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Interviewer: BM – Bill McAloon

Transcriber: NCC

Bill McAloon: This interview is being held with Harry Kachur, a longtime friend of mine, and I know he's got a lot of experience spearing. So, we're going to start out by, Harry, give us a correct spelling of your name.

Harry Kachur: K-A [inaudible].

BM: Now, this is right on the North shore of Winnebago, close to Waverly beach. Is this where you do primarily all your spearing?

HK: Pretty much on the north end here, yes.

BM: Tell us a little bit about your family, Harry.

HK: I have two boys that fish with me. They've been fishing with me for – well, Mike since he's been fourteen, so over twenty years plus. He was there before he turned fourteen, started here in Menasha. So, he's been around a long time. Tim, as soon as he was old enough, he was out there too. As a matter of fact, I think his first year on the ice was when he was around six years old. That's about it for my family.

BM: Okay. Tell us a little bit about the equipment you've accumulated over the years.

HK: Well, I've got a good half dozen spears, which some have been passed on to my sons. They also each have their own spear too. So, everybody has at least two spears in their shack at any one time. As far as decoys, I used to make them. Now, my oldest son is into making decoys and does a real good job. I don't have to do it anymore. That's good [laughter].

BM: I've seen his decoys. They are excellent decoys. Now, getting back, what are some major changes that you've seen since you started spearing?

HK: Well, the biggest one, of course, is the sudden popularity of it, with clear water and everything like that. A number of years ago, a lot of people got into it and never were into it. At that time, you could buy your license, almost any time up until opening. If you have clear water here, everybody would buy a license. It just got so popular. When I first started, well, you and I probably were part of 3,000 maybe license tags. Now, they've got seven, eight, nine thousand. That's the biggest thing. Then the season changes to kind of put the brakes on the harvest. Other than that, there's a number of rule changes that went into effect that caused the slowdown of the harvest.

BM: You've got any other up here in this end, neighbors or old timers that you would recommend somebody interviewing about the old-time sturgeon spearing?

HK: Well, Wally (Mater?), I think he – Larry Mater, excuse me, but I think he's passed on. I'm not sure. I haven't seen him in a while. I know he's sick. The only other ones are the violators [laughter]. I started down in Oshkosh with you. After I moved here, I got a shack and started fishing here. I didn't really know that many people. I know Wally (Macieski?), who had since passed away. He was quite a fisherman and a smoker, sturgeon and carp and so on and so forth.

BM: You had one in your spearing group pass away too, didn't you? Worked for you there as a [inaudible]?

HK: Yes, a friend of mine by the name of Glenn (Olly?). He was an older guy. But Mike made him a decoy. At that time, the size limit was 45 inches. He said he wanted a decoy, 45 inches. So, Mike got ahold of a cedar fence post, made him a decoy that looks just like a sturgeon. I remember a guy coming into my shack saying, "There's one now." [laughter]

BM: That was a setup. I know my brother's nephew usually speared up here on this end. Is there anyone else in your group?

HK: Yes. Besides my two sons and your brother and nephew, there's a guy by the name of Bruce Nichols. I used to work with him. He's been pretty successful also. Me, I'm not so successful. I went twenty-two or twenty-three years before I got my first fish.

BM: Well, that's not bad. Our brother Bob hasn't got one yet [laughter].

HK: He hasn't got one yet.

BM: Okay. Now, I know you've had some incidents out on the lake. You broke your leg. Tell us about that. You have your new saw or something.

HK: Right. A truck broke through the ice over toward the river here in Menasha by Waverly. That was before it sunk. The retrieval team had a sled saw. I said, "Well, I've got one. I'll go home and get it." So, they could cut the ice and pull that truck off the bottom. As I was pulling the sled out there, I hit a patch of ice and slipped underneath me and broke my right leg, had surgery the next day and pinned it all back together.

BM: Let's talk about the little explosion out there on the lake.

HK: Well, I was fishing with a gentleman who I won't reveal his name right now. But I was lighting up the stove on the inside and little did I know that the stove was already on. The gas was already on, but there was no match to it until I got to it. The stove blew back at me, with a jerk and back away. I chipped my elbow. I had a lot of luck on the ice [inaudible] [laughter].

BM: Well, let's get to the major one. Harry had an accident out on the lake that could have been very serious. Every sturgeon fisherman thinks about it. There's a lot of guys that are using safety devices, so it don't happen. But we'll let Harry tell from the morning, the exact details.

HK: Okay. Well, the morning of this incident, it was real windy and snowing and blowing. My friend, Bruce, and I were going out off of the Fresh Air Camp in Neenah, started from Waverly, went down there. Both of my sons were up in Poygan. That was the 2000 season Poygan. So, they were up there. The two of us were down here. Bob and his son were up there. But just the two of us here, and we got out there. We left, I don't know exactly what time or anything like that. It took us a little bit to get out there. I got my shack. We only had one vehicle, which was

Bruce's. Bruce took his back to his shack, which I could see. But the unfortunate thing, the wind was blowing right at me. I got a kink in my knee or hip or whatever it was. I can't really recall exactly what caused it. But I lost my balance, and I fell in. I'm thinking to myself, well, I've been on this lake my whole entire life. I wasn't worried at all about the whole thing. Well, when you've got great big sub-zero boots on, and you got big, heavy, insulated coat and everything, and you're 8 inches below the floor, because of your framing of your shack, it becomes a problem [laughter]. I didn't want to take my jacket off. But I tried getting out, and I tried getting out. I couldn't get out. So, I hollered for Bruce. Wind was blowing right into my door, and he had just set up. So, he wasn't going to be coming out anytime soon. So, I tried and tried, but unfortunately, I missed – one of the weirdest parts of that was when I did fall in, I was in the water, and I felt something tugging on my head or my neck. I reached up, and I felt. I had a spear in my head. How I got this spear in my head, I have no clue. I don't even want to venture a guess. But anyways, I pull it out. I pull it out sideways. I rip my ear in half and wide open on the side of my face. Then when I came up, I looked around, and the water was just totally red. I was trying to get out. I'm sure losing blood, causing me to get weaker and weaker. So, after hollering and hollering, Bruce finally came out, and he looked over at my shack. My shack is brown. He looked over, and he says, "I didn't know that he painted his shack black." But what it was is the inside of the shack is black, and the door on the inside is black. The door was wide open. So, he saw it all black. "Oh, my God," he says, "The door is open." He jumped in the car, and he came over. Him being about half my weight, I've heard this many times, where he tells the story where, "Kachur, you cheap son of a gun, [laughter] you better have bought a leather belt. Because that's all I can grab a hold of." So, he grabbed my belt and threw me on the floor and rolled me up on the floor. Then saw there was a couple of guys that were just going out. He hailed them down to help get me in the truck. Near as we can figure out, I spent over an hour in the water. The doctor told your brother, Bob, he says that he was just seconds away. If he wouldn't have gotten out of that water, he wouldn't have been here. While I was in the water, I had that presence of mind. I was thinking, I'm just going to tie this rope around me, the spear rope, so that at least they won't have to look for me. I won't come floating up in spring. But as I had just about given up when he hopped in that car and came over, I guess. So, a lot of it is a blur. But like I said, my core temperature was 88 degrees, I believe, something like that. That's when they got me to the hospital. So, I don't know what it was when they got me in the ambulance. Cold [laughter].

BM: That's an experience that a lot of spearers hope they don't have to go through.

HK: Yes. By the way, I did get a big fish that year. I got a 300-pounder, but he got off [laughter].

BM: Well, due to that, what do you enjoy most about the sturgeon fishing in Spring?

HK: Well, I think for the most part, anybody who's been doing it the length of time that you and I have, it's probably the camaraderie, when I used to work, where they build up a ton of tension during the day and the week, and just come out and sit at the shack and just relaxing. Let your mind wander and so on and so forth. But it's really relaxing. Most people wouldn't like it [laughter]. But if you do it here, it's good.

BM: Have you heard anything about what illegal activities that have become good stories?

HK: Not really that they've become good stories. I know one gentleman down the road here who was spearing fish like crazy. He'd get on the cell phone. He'd call up somebody. They'd come out and take the fish. That particular day, it was opening day, as a matter of fact. He had four fish. Out of his shack, he speared four fish and called people. They came out and tagged the fish. That was bad. I have no room for violating in my group – in our group. There's just no way to do it. But this guy was bragging about these four fish down at Waverley. Unknown to him, though, the table right behind him sat four wardens [laughter].

BM: Oh, boy.

HK: They overheard him. They were right down to his house and then quickly found out who was all involved. They got him.

BM: What goes around comes around.

HK: Right.

BM: Okay, finishing up, Harry, about the recipes and food ways, we're getting all kinds of different opinions on this. What's your favorite way of preparing it?

HK: My favorite way is we steak it and then almost like fillet it and skin it and clean it up as best we can with the fat and stuff like that and deep fry it. I haven't had anything better than deep-fried, good deep-fried. Mike makes it [inaudible]. My wife makes it.

BM: I know Mike had brought up to the [Overly?] camp, some sturgeon that you had cleaned up. It's really good. I think that's a lot of guys' mistake. They don't get that lateral line, some of that red, yellow fat off. They get a good taste of that fat, and they don't want to eat sturgeon. Have you ever smoked any of it?

HK: I've never smoked any myself. My friend that I alluded to earlier, Wally Macieski, smoked them. They're not bad. I prefer the fried. I guess I don't really go for smoked fish anyway. But they're good but a little bit of them, you know what I mean?

BM: Well, I think we've got a pretty good interview here, Harry. Is there anything else you'd like to add for the future of sturgeon spearing or anything? I know you're on the Sturgeon Advisory Council. Where do you think that's going?

HK: That's a good question. I really don't know. I know that we went a long time between meetings this last time, and a lot of things took place in between those two meetings. I know that when I look around at those meetings, it's typical, almost everybody's older. They're going to be retiring. They're going to be passing, just hanging it up or whatever. I don't know if they're going to have the people come back and try to guide this thing or help out. Because the Sturgeon Advisory Committee, it's a citizens' committee. It's so important, I believe, they have citizens' input rather than just go by hearsay. I mean, there are some people that think we've got a lot of

deer in this state too [laughter]. But I just I hope they can continue with it. But I don't know exactly if it's going to. I know there's a lot of things that are in it now that have been passed, a lot of laws, mainly because of the rules because of the advisory committee or with the blessing of it. Hopefully, we don't need any more regulations [laughter].

BM: Yes. Well, I think this has been a pretty interesting interview here with Mr. Kachur. I'm sure we're going to probably have to have a chapter on the dangers of spearing. So, we'll wrap it up then. Thanks, Harry.

HK: Okay. Thank you.

[end of transcript]