

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish  
Elmer Kuchenbecker Oral History  
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Interviewer: DK – Dick Koerner  
Transcriber: NCC

Dick Koerner: My name is Dick Koerner. I'm going to interview Mr. Kuchenbecker, a longtime sturgeon, fisherman and wildlife fisherman from Neenah. Elmer, I'm going to ask you some general questions and then towards the end we'll get into the experiences. Elmer, when were you born? How old are you?

Elmer Kuchenbecker: I'm eighty-one years old.

DK: Eighty- one. Were you born in Neenah?

EK: Yes. I was born in the town of Neenah.

DK: Town of Neenah, okay. I see you live here on (Helen?) Street in Neenah. Elmer, how did you get interested in sturgeon spearing?

EK; Well, I worked at Kimberly Clark, this one year, or when I started. I went to work and this fellow, he said, "I got a fish any for sale." So, I said, "Well how much you want for it?" He said, "Elmer, you can have the whole works for \$25, the spear and the ice saw and the whole works." I said, "I'll take it. I'll be over there tomorrow." So, I went there, I was really all excited. In about three, four days, while the season was going to begin, I got my license and all that. I couldn't wait until I got out in the ice and I got it all located right off of the (Fresh Air Camp?). I got up early and got out there and got everything all set. About 9:00 p.m., I was on my way home. I went upstairs and my wife says, "Did you get one?" I say, "Nope." I said, "Anybody in their right mind, looking in that hole, is going to be down in Winnebago. So, I went to work that night and I sold my shanty and the whole works that night. Then I got off of fishing for a while until (Freddy Wittbend?), he begged me to come out, he had a work. He was a photographer, random, in a movie. He begged me to come. I said, "No, Fred. I don't want to." He said, "I'll buy your license." I said, "No, Fred. You don't have to buy my license." So, I said, "Okay. I'll be out Sunday morning about noon." So, (Jin?) dropped me off at the end of Wisconsin Avenue. We were fishing on the [inaudible]. So, I told her to pick me up at about 12:45 p.m. So, 12:45 p.m., while I was starting to look around see what I have to do to get everything all pulled up. I had no more looked and here's a sturgeon was in my coming into my hole. I got a shot at it and I got it. I was headed to the shanty all measured up, ready to go build another one for myself. So, I got into shore. I went over to Freddy's, I went and registered. It was a 72 pounder. It was my first dish. He says, "Why you lucky son of a gun." That's what got me turned on. From then on, I had my own shanty then after that. But he's the one that really got me going on it. He knew the lake and all the ropes. He was a diehard fisherman. He'd sit there all day long. He would never like let you put nothing down in the hole. He always wanted it natural. He didn't want no pipes or no potatoes or nothing down there. You look down in the hole and that was it. So, I tried it for years but then I went to [inaudible]. It made it a little more easier for you. But then in the modern years where then we went to (PCB pipe?) and that makes a big difference too. So, it was an experience from the beginning until I got my first fish. My largest fish was 110 pounds.

DK: Wow.

EK: My wife took me out to Wisconsin and there was so much snow. You just had to

turnaround, about a half mile out and I had a walk the rest of the way in about a foot of snow. There was so much snow that year. It always seemed like there was a lot more snow than now. But I know more and got out there, it was about 8:00. I always wanted to get out there by 8:00. I set up and I moved no more than sat down and here comes his fish. It looked like a Greyhound bus coming in just sailing real slow. I speared it, got it out of the shanty and here comes an airplane, the warden, right by my shack about 100 feet. He says, "Where is your car?" I said, "Well, my wife brought me out and I walked through the rest of the way." He said, "Well, bring the fish over to the airplane. I'll take you into shore." So, we brought the fish over the plane. He says, "Oh, you better carry the fish." I said, "Don't worry, I will." So, he went and looked at the shanty. Then I had to take the fish. I said, "Do you think it's got spawning?" "Oh, no. No, no. I think it isn't got any spawning." But it weighed 110 pounds.

DK: Wonderful.

EK: Yes. But it did have eggs in it though. But for tasting it, it wasn't the best fish. Give me a 50- or 40-pound fish or 60. This here was the meat was so sloppy. Just like a female walleye in the spring when they dropped their eggs. They're so soft. So, I don't know if you ever eat fish like that. Even perch, when they come into the lake, they're more hard. Meat is firmed up. But then he called for another warden to come, but then I don't know what the warden's name was. I know it too but he had to go to a meeting at 9:00, he says. So, he says he couldn't make it. So, then all of a sudden, here comes (Wally Jurgenson?) pawning with his car. He says the word and says, "Well, maybe there's a guy who will give you a ride." So, Wally came over and he said, "What's all the commotion about?" Warden says, "Well, we're trying to get this guy's fish in the shoreline." He said, "Well, just throw it in the back of the truck and we'll go in." He pounded it right to the shoreline and took me in. Wally, John's brother. I don't know if you know him or not, but he was a nice guy too.

DK: No. I knew a warden (Kevin Corvett?) work for the DNR in Oshkosh. It could have been him.

EK: It could but he was a pilot. But then this other warden, he was on duty off the (Fresh Air Camp?). I don't know.

DK: Okay. I know a lot of wardens.

EK: Yes. That guy, he was really trying to help me out but he was right on my spot. It was really something to see that fish come in. The water was nice and clear. That made it so much easier and they made them [inaudible] so much like you know yourself.

DK: Did anybody in particular teach you all this or did you kind of learn that on your own?

EK: Freddy told me everything, what he knew and what to do and what not to do, and when to spear and when not to spear. "Let the fish come in but don't let the fish hit your decoy. Get him before he hits your decoy. Because if you hit the decoy, it will flare off," he says. So, I just had a go along with Freddy. Freddy was, I would say a good, honest boy and everybody knew Freddy that he wouldn't say a bad word about anybody.

DK: I know one thing about Freddie. I tried to help him kind of hole once. He didn't want no help. It wasn't me or how I get it, he just was a guy that wanted to do it all by himself.

EK: Yes. He's had his chisel sharp as a razor. He would poke away with it, but like you say, he never wants to get too much help from anybody. He'd like to do it himself.

DK: Now, how do you think the sport has changed since you started spearing?

EK: Well, when I didn't have no snowmobile or four-wheelers, (Steve Schmidt?) and his brother  
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DK: Scott.

EK: Scott. They took care of me from moving. They moved me whenever I wanted it. But he was always there. They had snowmobiles. There's one time when we had snow but we had a lot of slush under the snow, and it was really bad. Even going with a snowmobile, you'd sink underneath the snow. But nowadays, where you've got four-wheelers, and I don't think we have got to snow like years ago. Now, they plow the roads too. But they got the four-wheelers and the snowmobiles and I never had that. I always had to depend upon some buddies of mine and help in that. But I enjoy it, but I sold my [inaudible] couple years ago, but I still miss it. But I maybe we'll get a take [inaudible] for next year. I don't know.

DK: How many years did you say you were spearing?

EK: Well, I started in 1946. But then I quit there for about eight years. I didn't go because I told my wife the guy that looks down that hole got to be in the nuthouse. But after you get that one fish, you get the fever.

DK: How many sturgeon you estimate you probably speared in your lifetime?

EK: No. I was pretty lucky. Like I say, I got a lot of knowledge from (Freddy Wittbend?). He says, "Elmer, you start off at the (otter bar?). He showed me the landmarks. He always wants to end up at (Limekiln?). At the end of the season, that's when you want to be at (Limekiln?). So, that's when I was on (Limekiln?). But I think I got more fish on (Limekiln?) than I did on (otter bar?). I got quite a few fish. But I can see almost everyone I speared. I'll never forget the time then that this fish came in and he hit that decoy. He was out like it was late, but I was got a shot at him and I got a lucky shot and I got him. It was about a 42 pounder. But I can remember that there and I can remember quite a few fish that I got.

DK: Me too, I can remember just about everyone and what happened.

EK: Every time a fish comes in, they act different tools. I mean, they are up or down or below.

DK: Have you missed many?

EK: These guys say, "Geez, I missed them." I thought to myself, "How can you miss a sturgeon?" But I found out how you could miss them. I mean, you got to judge especially if they're way down. That's my problem that I had, but I missed my fish too. I missed a few fish.

DK: I missed two I think out of all my fifty-five years of spearing.

EK: But I never speared a fish that got off my spear. When I speared, I always landed on the ice.

DK: Good.

EK: I never lost a fish.

DK: That's good. Did you have a backup spear?

EK: I had a backup. I always had a backup, yes.

DK: It's everybody's goal to get 100-pounder, you've already done that.

EK: Yes.

DK: I'm close. I have an 87-pounder that spawned off the year before. If that one would have been in a third or fourth stage egg development, mine would have them.

EK: A hundred twenty.

DK: A 100 pounds or better than that. That's the goal and you've already achieved that goal. So, that's good. Elmer, when the half-day spearing was on, we've made seventeen different regulation changes in the last ten years all to protect the sturgeon. The people here really are good about – they might grumble a little about a rule change, but I didn't think they would go for the half-day season. The people really, really seem to enjoy that. But I'd like to ask this question because just like muskie fishing, I always ask everything but where you were when you caught it or got it. Because nobody in his right mind is going to tell you that.

EK: Yes. [laughter]

DK: But I say, what's your favorite two hours of the day? When we could spear all day long, if you only could spear for two hours, which two hours would you take?

EK: I would say between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.

DK: (Danny Garrett?) said 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. himself. I like 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. I could spear more fish around noon than any other time. But it's just a question that's immaterial.

EK: I think if I was spearing, I think I would like that early morning spearing like a half a day.

DK: Yes.

EK: I think that's a good idea. I think that's a good idea what they brought in.

DK: You told me a couple of your sturgeon spearing. You got any other good memorable experiences that you can think of? Did you ever see two at one time come in the hole?

EK: That's one thing. I never saw two at one time. But I did see when I was just one year, I think it was in the early 70s, the water was clear. I think there's, I would say a hundred perch, jumbo perch, in my hole at one time. A big school of them and it was really a sight to see. But after that, I see maybe northerns or walleyes come in but not like perch.

DK: Okay. Now, you know that weather can get bad on the lake with snow and white outs and ice shelves and cracks. You got any bad experiences with any of them?

EK: I never had any bad experience. But like I said, I always like to be out there at 8:00 a.m. This one morning, (Wally Hoeffy?) was at the bridge down by Kimberly's Point and he was waiting with (Hub Parker?). (Hub Parker?) was sitting in his car. He wouldn't go out and help chip down that ice. That really got (Wally Hoeffy?). So, he said, "Elmer, what are you going to do?" I said, "I think I'm going to jump that crack." I had a big old mercury and it was about good 2-feet open. I said, "I'm going to jump here." So, I wheeled around and I got a good speed. I jumped that crack. I meet her and I got back. Then in my shanty, I'm wondering how I'm going to get back if it opened up. But then I got back to the bridge, the Rod and Gun Club, I think they had their bridge out there at the time.

DK: (I put it there?).

EK: They had it all fixed up that you could get over it. But that's the only experience that I had going out. But there are some rough days that you wonder if you're going to get back or not.

DK: How about coaxers? Some people like these, a lot of us don't really like these. I like certain colors.

EK: Well, my favorite color was red nose and a yellow body and a red tail. That was my favorite, right red and yellow. I always stuck with two coaxers. I never went with a bowling ball or I always had a coaxer shaped like a fish.

DK: What about eating recipes? Have you tried different ways?

EK: Well, I thought the better way the kids liked it was used like a shrimp all season. He put all seasons in the water and let the fish boil in all spices. They seem like that's what they liked the best. But I like them just fried in a frying pan. Cut them about a good half-an-inch stick. That's how I like to have them, eat them like that. I'd rather them eaten before they're froze. You don't want to leave sturgeon in a pack and freeze them too long in a deep freeze.

DK: Okay. Well, what do you enjoy the most about sturgeon spearing? Just camaraderie with

the boys?

EK: Yes. You always had company. You never know who you're coming in. I know I had speared a fish on the (otter bar?) and I got out. I got the fish into my little Subaru and here comes a truck. Here was (Amy?) and she says, "Hold it, hold it, hold it before you shut the door." So, she went to shore, she had her mother with her that year. First year she ever was out on the ice and saw fish. We talked for quite a while. Amy had her mother over there and she showed her the fish. But you had someone that knock at the door and guys that will come and visit. But a lot of guys, they had the radios in there. But I didn't have a radio like a CB. A lot of guys had CB equipped with everything. I just assumed being in the shanty by myself. I like company, but I just assumed be myself in the shanty.

DK: Same with me.

EK: I like it because some of the guys that you take along, they put their foot over the hole and move. I always tell them, "If you see a fish, don't point. Just tell me there's a fish down there. Don't go waving your arms down there." But I always like company, but you're always worrying about they're going to make a move when there's a fish in the shack. You don't get too many times when a fish comes in the hole.

DK: Well, Elmer, I thank you for your time, your interview. It was very interesting. A lot of the things you said and done, I've done the same. So, I appreciate your time in this interview and we'll hopefully see you out on the ice.

EK: Okay. But before you go, Dick, I want to show you that picture 110 pounder.

DK: All right.

EK: Okay.

DK: All right, Elmer. Thank you.

EK: Thank you for coming.

[end of transcript]