

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

David Kuhn Oral History

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David Kuhn: Okay. This is David Kuhn. I'm from Black Creek, Wisconsin. I'm sixty-three years old. I have a German background, except for I am one-fourth English. I was born and raised in Nichols, Wisconsin, just north of Black Creek. I can remember back when I was in grade school, I needed to go to school and do a show-and-tell story. So, I was talking to my grandfather. He was telling me that when he lived in Royalton where he had his car dealership, that the Indians would come into the town there with their spears. They would have a rope attached to the spear with a (barber?) on the end of that rope. The sturgeon, when they were spawning in the Little Wolf River in Royalton, they would spear the sturgeon and then throw the rope and the barber out, and then follow that barber with their canoes. So, that's about all I remember about the Indians back then. But that story was told to me like 50 years ago. My grandfather was born in 1875, and he lived to be eighty-three years old.

Male Speaker: You said they had the barbers because you thought –

DK: I think that the quality of their spears were so poor that they couldn't hang onto that spear because the sturgeon would get off. So, by throwing the rope and the barber into water and then follow with their canoes, the sturgeon probably get wore down. Then they could still get them into their canoe that way.

MS: You said that's when they're running. So, that was in the spring season?

DK: That would have been in the spring when they were coming up in the Little Wolf River.

MS: In Royalton, would that be Oneida, or they'll be Menominee or unsure of –

DK: Boy, my grandfather never did specify, I don't think, what tribe that they were from. But they were the Native Indians that lived right around Royalton at the time. I know there was by Leeman . There was a very, very large village just west of Leeman. But there was quite a few Indians around there. My grandmother was raised around there too. They would pick up all these Indian – so, anyway, I remember my grandmother telling that she had a whole cigar box – because we're getting back to the Indians now – my grandmother had a whole cigar box of Indian arrowheads that she had collected out of the field, a neighbor was interested in. So, she traded them for like a bushel or a bag of apples. Got them home and found out the apples were really not any good. [laughter] Anyway, how I got into sturgeon spearing, I guess, I was just interested in doing that. This would go back to like 1970 or 1971. I had bought a license, and I just took a walk. I went out to Lake Winnebago, and I started knocking on shanties. Finally, I knocked at a shanty, the guy let me in. He needed to go do something for like a half hour. So, my first years of sturgeon spearing consisted of about half hour spearing in a shanty that somebody just left me in. [laughter] But after that –

MS: Did you get one?

DK: No. I never saw a fish in that half hour. But they have speared some sturgeon out of that shanty in the previous times. But anyway, the following year then, a friend of mine had a shanty. He would let me go into that shanty for like maybe a day. I had taken a friend of mine along, who is now dead. I remember the one day I missed two sturgeons within an hour.

MS: You threw and missed both?

DK: I threw and missed both of them in an hour.

MS: [laughter]

DK: I still didn't have a shanty. So, then my friend and I built a shanty. He had a round roof on it, at least two sides were round. You usually don't see a shanty with round roofs.

MS: But it was a square base?

DK: It was square. The shanty itself was square, but the roof was round. So, we wanted to get some extra height out of the roof, and he was a carpenter and a pretty good one. Well, I guess I speared my first and last sturgeon on February 12th of '05. It was a 43-pounder, and it was 55 inches long. I speared it in Lake Winneconne at 11:45 a.m. I had 15 minutes left. The season was only six hours long that year. When I woke up in the morning, I wasn't feeling good. The fact is I had the flu. I was running a pretty good fever. So, from Black Creek all the way down to Lake Winneconne – and it was cold that morning – I had the windows opened in the car, trying to keep my temperature down. But I still speared. My son and I were spearing together. He left and went into another shanty. That's when I speared this one with 15 minutes left. I didn't see the fish until he was right under me. I quick – threw the spear, and it just hit him perfectly just about 6 inches in the back of the head. I got him out of the hole. I was so excited that I got my spear out of it with the flying barbs. In the excitement I forgot to put a tag on the fish. The law reads that you're supposed to immediately tag the fish. But I was too excited. All I could think of is get him out of shanty, tore it down, so I could take it off the lake with a trailer. I wouldn't have to come back out on the lake. Because I wasn't feeling good. I wanted to go home and get to bed. So, I'm holding the sturgeon roughly after the season was over. Then my son is taking a picture of it. This is like 45 minutes after the season is closed. It was like 12:45 p.m. I'm holding the sturgeon up. My son is taking a picture of it. Two game wardens noticed that there was no tag on it. So, they immediately came over and started asking me all kinds of questions, took me to the side. Then they both went in their pick-up truck. They both talk it in there. They were on the telephone for quite a while. I think they were kind of checking me out. Well, I had a friend, it was (Dave Olgin?) that I had mentioned a couple of times. I think they were checking with him. The one came out. He says, "I think they're going to let you go." So, then the other the guy that was driving the pick-up truck, he was the local game warden at Lake Winneconne down there. He came out and said, "Well, I'm going to let you go being that we checked you out pretty carefully here, and we think this was an honest mistake." So, I guess, I was kind of lucky there. I didn't get a fine out of there. Because immediately, it's like probably before 45 minutes.

MS: It's a matter of interpretation of what does it mean.

[laughter]

DK: Actually, my son, who is now 30, speared a sturgeon before I did. That was on Lake

Winneconne also. He speared that in February of 2000. He was maybe only about 36. It was just a little bit better and legal, I guess. It doesn't look like a real big sturgeon, or it doesn't have any length on it.

MS: Did you take your kids out with you when they were just little kids, out spearing with you?

DK: I would take my daughter. I took my daughter a number of times. Usually, I would tie a rope on her in the shanty.

MS: Just in case she fell in.

DK: But talking about safety reminds me, it was back in 1975, I was all alone. I went in Lake Winnebago. I noticed there was somebody that had pulled the shanty out some distance away from mine, and there was something red sticking out of the ice around there. A little bit of light was getting into my shanty. When I got over there, I realized it was a red carpet that somebody left behind. So, I had my chisel. I'm messing around trying to recover their red carpet. So, I could put it around my shanty. I'll be danged if I didn't fall into that hole, and nobody around. I only went into the water up to my hips though, and I was able to get out all by myself. But it was very cold then. So, I feel pretty fortunate I'm alive right now.

MS: So, you were in and out of that water in a matter of seconds?

DK: In seconds. Then another time, my nephew and I were sturgeon spearing in Lake Winnebago. This was about five, ten years later, well, about 1980. We were making a hole just before the season opened, two days, with his power auger. With those power augers, you get all that chips in there, and it was hard to see where the hole was. Well, all at once if he didn't fall into that hole. When I heard the splash and looked, all I saw is one of his two hands – just the hand sticking out of the water. His whole body was completely under. I grabbed the hand. Between him helping because he was like – well, I only go 164 pounds, but he weighs like 225 pounds. Between him and I, we got him out of the hole. I told him to roll in the snow. Because the snow is very dry, and it absorbs water. So, he rolled in the snow. It was, I would say, about 10, 15 below zero. He took his jacket off and his coat, and it stood right up on the ice. [laughter] It never even tipped over. He's stripped off of everything but his long underwear, jumped in his truck, and headed for Shiocton, where he got into the hot bathtub. He retired right there.

[laughter]

MS: That was the last time.

DK: It's the last time he ever sturgeon speared. [laughter]

MS: Hypothermia could have set in real quick.

DK: I don't know. I hated to go home with him because I needed to cover that hole up. Yet, I took a risk by not being along with him that he maybe wouldn't even made it home. But he did. But his wife had quite a talk with him, and he retired from sturgeon spearing. [laughter]

MS: Wow. So, you said you also have some, I don't know that story maybe, but a car going into the ice too?

DK: Yes. This is straight out from Waverly Beach where my nephew fell too. I had a shanty out there. There's a rock reef out there, a little bit to the west of Waverly Beach. The rock comes up pretty high. When the sun shines down to the ice, it hits that rock. It reflects back, and it deteriorates the ice. Well, I knew that rock reef was there, but I had my shanty on the west side of that rock reef. But I would only park my car on the east side, and I'd walk across that. Well, lo and behold, I'm in my shanty – no, I came out there one morning. Here, there's a big hole in the ice. Somebody, in the dark, they had driven across that – right between where I parked my car and the shanty, they drove through there with their pick-up truck with a cab on the back. The truck went down. The guy was able to get out. But he had a black Labrador dog in the back of that, and it drowned back there. So, that next morning when I was spearing down there, they had the hoist. They were able to get that pick-up truck pulled back up out of the lake.

MS: How deep a water was that right there?

DK: On the top of that rock reef, it was maybe only 6 or 8 feet.

MS: So that's why he was able to get out. It's the back end that usually goes.

DK: I think the front-end went in first at this point.

MS: Yes, heavier.

DK: They pulled it all backwards though.

MS: So, how did the dog drown if the front-end –

DK: The whole truck was submerged under the water. The guy just felt lucky that he got out with his life. He just couldn't get the dog out of there. It was dark and everything.

MS: It was a bad day, a bad day. What about decoys? Do you make your own? Do you use decoys?

DK: I have made all of my own decoys over the years, along with this friend that made the shanty for me with a round rough. Actually, even prior to that, I made about four decoys out of pine. I would drill big holes in the bottom, 1-inch holes. I had lead weight that I poured in those holes. Then you have to keep testing it in the water. So that I poured just enough weight in there, so that it would just sink and not be too heavy. I painted them white. I kept two for myself, gave one to my friend, and then a different friend was using one. Then by golly, it got away from him. It's down in Lake Winnebago right now. That guy is dead too.

MS: Did you model it after anything or was it just kind of –

DK: I modelled it after northern. But then later on, I made some that looked like – well, some like a white bass and some like the garfish. So, a man that I knew was spearing maybe one sturgeon every year. He had a string of these little pan fish ones. So, that's why I tried it out.

MS: Did you paint them all white, or did you have any kind of colorful spots on them to try to attract?

DK: The pan fish ones were all white also. My friend made some decoys and gave them to me. They were orange.

MS: Is that more so that he could see them in the water easier or maybe just –

DK: No. He had them painted orange because a friend of ours, who is now dead, he speared a lot of sturgeon over the years. He had an orange decoy, and they looked like walleyes. He had a white one with orange fins. So, my friend made them to look like our other friend, like what he had.

MS: Did you just use regular like little sheet metal or something for the fins?

DK: Sheet metal, yes, for the fins, yes, not all of them.

MS: Did you make your own spears at all, or did you buy those from others who had made them?

DK: The first sturgeon spear I ever had, it was cut with a laser, out of a big chunk of steel. So, it was just a big solid steel cut with a laser.

MS: The whole thing was made out of steel. It didn't have a wooden part.

DK: The head was. So, my friend had metal lathe. So, then we tapped a hole in there. We ran a pin in there, and we made a shaft. I still have the shaft in my newer spear that we made, which it detaches right by the head. But I sold that spear, just the head. I sold that later on to my nephew who I pulled out of the hole when he was completely submerged. He had bought that head. Then when I replaced that spear, I went over to Manawa and bought from an old guy in his machine shop. He had rods that he had flying barbs made with. Then from there, I went to Royalton where an uncle, a great uncle of mine lived. He sold me a bar. We drilled holes in there. It was 18 inches wide. We drilled holes in there. In fact, we screwed those tines into that. So, it's a great spear for the upper rivers, but it's a very poor spear for Lake Winnebago. Because Lake Winnebago has got deeper water. With that great big spear, by the time the spear gets down to them, those sturgeons are long gone. But on the shallow water in the upper river, the sturgeons don't have time to get out of the way. See, when I miss those two in one year, I thought, I need a wider spear. So, that's why I sold that spear to my nephew and made a bigger one.

MS: So, you made a bigger one for the lake?

DK: Well, I just figured 18 inches wide, how could I miss them? But only to find out that it's so wide, and there's so much commotion up above, by the time it gets down, say, to 16 feet, the sturgeon, they're out of there. They see all that coming.

MS: So, you got a smaller spear for the lake or a skinnier one?

DK: No. I still am setting with that big one yet. I've just realized this in the last year. Last year, I didn't go out into Lake Winnebago.

MS: Okay.

DK: I need to replace that spear and get a smaller one.

MS: Yes, something with maybe only like 8 inches across –

DK: Right, exactly.

MS: – with four, five tines on it or something like that.

DK: I'm hoping to get my friend's two spears, which are maybe a foot wide. But I have to talk to the widow. As far as poaching –

MS: Yes, the poaching stuff.

DK: – I'd say the first sturgeon that I recall poached, I was fishing with a relative on the Wolf River just south of Shawano. Man, this goes back fifty years ago. We had caught a sturgeon. It was maybe about 36 inches long. The sturgeon just jumped out of the water and jumped out of the water. Well, we decided that maybe we'd better keep them for food. So, there was an outhouse on the river there. We'd put him in the outhouse for until we were done fishing. Then we took the backseat out of the old fifty-three Chev and put them up underneath the springs of that Chevrolet and took them home underneath the springs in the backseat.

[laughter]

MS: You caught him hook and line, you said?

DK: Hook and line. He should have been released, but he wasn't.

MS: That was just south of Shawano?

DK: Just south of Shawano in the Wolf River.

MS: Did you say you also had your grandfather's spear?

DK: I have my grandfather's spear. It's in the basement. I have it on the wall down there.

MS: How is it different than today? Or can you explain what it looks like?

DK: It's quite a light spear. It's got a pretty good size handle on it. My grandfather used it mostly for spearing walleyes. It's basically made for walleyes. Of course, being that he was born in 1875, he had a farm just out of Black Creek. It was only about a mile to the Black Creek. So, he would go, and he would use jack lanterns. It's looking like a torch on the front of their skiff. He said that there'd be some nights that the bottom of the skiff would be just covered with walleyes.

MS: Wow.

DK: So, I had that spear. I used to use it for spearing carp. But it's a little bit on the light side.

MS: For sturgeon.

DK: Yes.

MS: Could you use it in a river situation where it's shallow and all that? It's no way you could probably shoot that down and –

DK: The handle is really too long for inside of a shanty, a sturgeon shanty. But basically, I think they speared anything that came up into the river. I'm sure that's sturgeon, walleye, northern, everything was coming up into there in 1900, 1905 or something like that.

MS: Is that about how old do you think it is?

DK: Yes.

MS: How many tines? How big is it?

DK: It's a five-tine. I think my great, great uncle was a blacksmith in Nichols. John Mielke made that spear for him because that would have been his brother-in-law. So, later on, when we had spears made, we fashioned our spears with that same design with the long steel shank after the spear and then metal coming out, so a handle went into that metal then.

MS: So, you have the head. You have the metal shank. Then you have the wooden handle there.

DK: These shanks on there, from the head to the rod, was a good 3 feet long.

MS: It's heavy too, right?

DK: It puts a little bit more weight on there, and it was nice and slender. The fish didn't see it maybe quite so quick when you were trying to spear them.

MS: It seems to me the kind of way to construct them too is having the head, the metal, and then



the wood. Some people pour lead down. Some use like a black pipe or something, and they pour lead down in there to weigh it down at the bottom.

DK: Actually, my current sturgeon spear is very much like my grandfather's. I would say that the steel shank on there is at least 3 feet. Then I screw my wooden handle into that. Because otherwise, it's too long to handle. So, I pull the head off, pull that long shank off there, and unscrew the head. I had a false floor in my sturgeon shanty. I had a little wing out there. That's where I always put my sturgeon spear at night so that nobody would steal it. Then I didn't have to take it home. They would never look underneath the false floor, I'm sure. Carpeting was over that anyway.

MS: Yes. How do you have your spearhead attached to the shank? Because it comes off. How do you have that kind of on there in the meantime until you're spearing sturgeons off of it?

DK: There's a spring steel. But there's little pins so that the spearhead cannot twist on that shaft. Then there's a little groove where that shaft runs on to the spearhead.

MS: It goes around the pin.

DK: The spearhead has got a little tiny rod that comes out of it. Then the shank gets hollow. So, it slips in there. Then that piece of stainless steel or spring steel holds that head from falling off. So that when a sturgeon is on there, it pulls off nice and easily.

MS: You have rope tied to the head?

DK: Actually, I have two ropes. I have one rope onto my handle and one rope onto the spearhead. So, when I spear a sturgeon, I quick pull out the smaller rope that's got the handle on it. Then my heavier rope has got the sturgeon and the spearhead on it.

MS: What's the rationale for the two?

DK: I guess the rationale behind that is I'd like to get that handle out of the way, because it's got that long shank on it, and just get it out of the water. Then when I'm fading the sturgeon all I have is a spearhead and the sturgeon on that rope. I don't have to contend with that handle when the sturgeon is coming up in the hole. It seems to work very, very well. But, yet all the shanties that I've gone into, they seemed to all have just one rope connected to the handle and into the spear.

MS: Yes. They have like a hole through the top of the spear. Then there's a knot tied on there. So, it can't go through all the way.

DK: Yes.

MS: What's the most memorable story you have? Years on the ice, is there something that you'll never forget?

DK: Well, one event I'll never forget, I was spearing out on Waverly Beach. When I got there in the morning, man, there must have been a foot of water in the ice. I drove out there. I got thinking, "This is crazy. Because if I'm going to be out here all day, it's just going to get worse." So, I turned around, and I drove back, parked the car on the shore. I was walking back out on the ice. A (Schrader?) out there, he had like the state record for many years. His shanty was like just a little ways away from mine. He had just pulled that big sturgeon out of the hole of – what the heck did that sturgeon weigh? It was I think the biggest sturgeon for a long, long time, 165 pounds or something like that. He had just pulled it out of this hole.

MS: It had that 1-foot water?

DK: All that water.

MS: [inaudible]

DK: Now, maybe his shanty made about into a higher spot. But that was the morning when he speared that great big one. I had gone back to shore to get my car off there.

MS: Terrible conditions. You had said that you got into it about like 1970 or something like that. Were you raised going to shanties as a little kid with your grandfather? Or was it something when you were finally coming of age, and you knew other people around you doing it? How did you actually get into it?

DK: It must have all stemmed back when I was a kid. My dad showed me, and my grandfather showed me how to spear. We mostly speared carp. So, I had speared so much over the years that when I got older, I thought, "Jeez, I got to try spearing a sturgeon." So, no shanty, no spear, but I still bought a license and –

MS: The rest we already know.

DK: Yes. [laughter]

MS: I was wondering about. Did your grandparents or your father ever spear a sturgeon? Or did they just do the walleye and the carp and things like that?

DK: Yes. My grandfather was with the walleyes and my dad with the carp. Neither one of them really speared a sturgeon.

MS: Did they do that mostly on Black Creek then, or did they go out?

DK: Well, my dad would spear the carp either on the Shioc or on the Wolf River, mostly on the Wolf River. My grandfather, when he would spear, it was on the Shioc – I mean on the Black Creek.

MS: When you go sturgeon spearing, do you always go out Waverly, or do you change it up every year? Do you have certain spots that you like every year?

DK: Well, I remember, one year, we went out from Oshkosh, just north of Oshkosh. I think there's Blackbird Islands out there. We're pretty close to that. The ice was so bad when we came off, I would not even ride inside the truck. I rode up on top of the shanty. We got pretty close to shore. The crack was pretty bad there. The ice was so bad. They had put some evergreen boughs around where they knew a truck wouldn't even make it across that.

MS: When you choose your spot, what goes in to choosing a spot? How do you decide where you're going to go?

DK: Actually, I had a spot one time. I had it lined up between a blue building up on the shore from Waverly Beach and there were some small stacks in Neenah from the paper mills down there, lined up with the tip of a point. It had some trees on it. I had that all written down. When you lined up those two spots, there was a sandbar right there. On both sides of that sandbar, there were mudflats. So, the sturgeon would go from one mudflat to another. But in order to get there, they went up over the sandbar. Then being there with sand below you could see the sturgeon better than you could in the black muck. There was this one spot – I mean I missed two of them there in an hour.

MS: Oh, was that the spot?

DK: I had that all written down. My nephew went out there and was doing something. That paper flew out of the shanty when he opened up this can. We chased after it. But the wind blew the paper faster than we could run. I lost the [laughter] bearings on that spot.

[laughter]

MS: Do you drill that pile hole first to see if the water is clear when you're going out there?

DK: Well, I had two friends, and they always went out there days before the season will open. They were drilling holes all over. Then we had little ropes, cords with something heavy hooked on the bottom so that we could cast in soil and see once if there were any worms down there. Then we'd be all auger-ing holes looking down in there if the water was shallow enough. I'd be on the upper lake. I'd talk to the fishermen – they were pan-fishing – what they were seeing down there, if they were hooking any sturgeon. The best tip I ever got was a friend of mine who was a game warden, and he told me just right where to go out there where he had been, over the years, seeing the most action. So, that's been a real hotspot when I can ever get a license on the upper river.

MS: Do they have the lottery system on the upper river?

DK: This was before the lottery. But it was every five or seven years. Then my son and I would always go out there. Even before my son speared, we would go out there. Then, of course, the other guys, kind of, followed me. Because the game warden told me where he would go if he was spearing. He was checking all the fishermen. He knew where they were doing the best. So, in '05, out of our group, I had the last sturgeon. It was some of shanties we were spearing too,

out of, all legal fish, just in the matter of six hours. [laughter]

MS: Did any of your fish ever have any caviar or eggs, black eggs in them?

DK: The last one I had here, it was a male. It was about twenty-five years old. Of course, no caviar there.

MS: Yes, no caviar.

DK: My son's, I don't know if his was old enough, or at least it didn't have any caviar in it. I'd forgotten all that if it was a male or female when he speared in 2000.

MS: Have you ever had any caviar from around here? Do you like or not like it?

DK: Caviar, yes, it's kind of a treat. I think I like it, yes. It's good. I think that stems back from eating fish eggs from either walleyes or perch.

MS: Your parents and grandparents did that too?

DK: My dad, if he had a walleye or with perch with eggs in it, we always kept those eggs. If it was a bigger fish, then we would cut that sack of eggs in half. We'd fry it. We'd eat the eggs too.

MS: So, you just fry it with butter and salt or something?

DK: Well, we'd fry it in some sort of oil.

MS: Some sort of oil.

DK: So, I've eaten thousands of eggs at one time, many, many times.

MS: What about when you caught your sturgeon, how did you prepare them? Any kind of recipes that you used to –

DK: The second year I ever speared would have been 1972. He speared one that year, and he gave me the whole fish to put it in my smoker and smoke it. So, the last one I got in '05, that one, I did quite a few steaks with it. Actually, I smoked about half of it. I've always had a smoker from when I would spear carp. My grandfather showed me how to smoke fish. So, I've smoked hundreds of –

MS: Do you use an apple, or hickory, or both?

DK: All the wood we use on the smoker is a fruit wood, whether it'd be apple or – or unless it was hard maple, sometimes hard maple too, cherry. So, I always have an orchard. Then I get the wood out of there.

MS: Yes, I saw that around here.

DK: But the maple is a good wood for smoking too.

MS: Okay. I think that's about it. I appreciate your time. Thank you. The date is August 3rd, 2007.

[end of transcript]