

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

Bill McAloon Oral History

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Interviewer: DR – Dick Ristow

Transcriber: NCC

Dick Ristow: Transcriber, this is Dick Ristow. I'm at my residence at 1624 Western. I have Bill McAloon from (Decor?) Beach. We're going to be talking about the Sturgeon for Tomorrow project and his experiences in sturgeon spearing. So, Bill, will you tell me where you were born and things about your family?

Bill McAloon: Well, I was born in New London, Wisconsin. I have an older brother and a younger brother who are also very much involved in spearing. Being born in New London, Wisconsin, back in [19]39, my father lived and was raised on a farm very close to the Wolf River, south of New London. So, my first sturgeon experience took place on the Wolf River, not a spearing experience on Lake Winnebago. Back in those days, when the sturgeon would run, it was kind of like the local people around there, the sturgeon are coming and everybody got their sturgeon. Then they didn't necessarily go and spend the winter spearing. So, that's where I started out. Of course, my father, being raised on a farm there, lost his father when he was about fourteen years old in the eighth grade. So, they took advantage of going down there and getting those fish. Somewhere along the line, dad and a couple of his friends, that also had a farm that was exact right on the river, learned how to process caviar. So, they picked up a little extra spending money by processing the eggs and making caviar, which drew a good price in those days. Of course, when I got to be fourteen, fifteen years old, I accompanied my father on some of these expeditions of running snake lines and getting their sturgeon. A few years back, the DNR contacted me to go down to Fort McCoy and speak to the warden recruits down there. I would always tell them the story down there that I wouldn't even be down there talking about sturgeon if it hadn't been for sturgeon. Because one night, my father and his two cohorts who happened to be brothers from up there, were hiding their catch under an oar pile. When the conservation warden by the name of (Al Dunham?) tapped them on the shoulder, and it was jail time, et cetera. But father took the option of going up to Glendale, Wisconsin and joining the CC camp. While he was up there, my mother was from Glendale, Wisconsin, and he met her. So, that's where the saying comes from that if it hadn't been for sturgeon, I wouldn't exist. Then of course, when we moved to Menasha, where I basically grew up and went to school, my father was very active in spearing. He and his friends always speared right off what they called the old Muni Beach – municipal beach in Menasha. I can remember days when he'd get up early to go in the morning. I'd even ride my bicycle a mile out on the Winnebago to sit in the shack with him. I was fortunate enough to be with him when he got several nice fish. I guess it just kind of gets in your blood. After dad was gone, of course, I continued on spearing. I was fortunate to have some friends. I had a kid that I went to school with by the name of Wayne O'Connell. His dad knew my father and they had an extra shack. They always made sure that I had a place to go spearing until I got situated enough where I could build and acquire my own shack. That's basically how I got started in the spearing. I do it today. I've done it for over fifty-some years. I think it's a great sport. I always tell people, if you haven't ever done it, don't start. Because if you're in the shack and one of those fish swims and you're hooked, you're going to be spearing for the rest of your life.

DR: Bill, remember when you were at Tomah training the wardens, some of the experiences you had there?

BM: Well, this was quite an experience to – I have been a classroom teacher for thirty-two years. To see a class of these young people that are going into the DNR enforcement end of the

business, and to think of the old-time wardens that I have known and that I have dealt with and always been favorable. I've been able to keep my nose clean as far as that goes. But Dennis Jones, our warden supervisor, he's the one that first contacted me to go down to Fort McCoy and talk to the recruits. I spent a weekend down there. At the time, the first time that training session, the officer in charge was Warden (Moronk?). It just so happens that that year, Dennis Jones and Moronk had been able to get away and spear. They each had a nice sturgeon. Nothing of record size, but they were really glad they got one and they were very proud. They were telling the warden recruits all about their sturgeon they got. At that time, we had a bunch of pewter pins that we had made. They were little sturgeon pins. I took enough down there to give each of the warden recruits a pin. Then I gave Dennis Jones and Moronk, the two wardens, a pin. They were sitting there on the side of the room and I was up giving my presentation. I said to them, "Now, Mr. Jones and Mr. Moronk each got a sturgeon. So, they were holding out their shirt with this nice pewter pin on it. At that time, some of us had speared from our directors. We had ordered some of these done in gold, which were a little bit more expensive. So, we didn't give those out to the class. But I happened to have a gold one on my shirt. I said to this class – it was approximately thirty wardens. I said, "Now, if you happen to get two in one year, then you get one of these nice gold ones." So, I went over like a lead balloon, nobody said a word. About ten minutes later, I think it was Moronk, all of a sudden realized what I had said and he started to laugh. Nobody knew what he was laughing about. So, finally, he said something, "Boy, fine bunch of words you're going to be. It's against the law to spear two in one year." That was one [laughter] of the things that I remember down there. Another thing, some of the questions that these people would ask. I met people that were transferring in from the state of Washington, Oregon, Iowa, Illinois. These people had been in law enforcement, had been in like fish and game enforcement in other states. But they wanted to come to Wisconsin because they'd heard so much pro things about Wisconsin and the way the wardens worked and were treated. Of course, the salary was better than some of the Western states. But this was quite an experience for me also to go down there and meet with these young people. We'd have a social hour and get together and have a few beverages and talk about our experiences and so forth. So, this was one of the things that I really enjoyed doing. I got to do that through Sturgeon for Tomorrow and our Otter Street Fishing Club, which always provided me with some films and stuff to take up to the lake and the fishermen out on the lake.

DR: What other experiences have you had while you were spearing?

BM: Well, I've had some good and bad experiences. One of the experiences that I had was of a little gas stove explosion in my shack. I took a friend of mine out, who I hoped to interview later who has been known to have had accidents. While I was clearing the ice from the hole, he was going to light the stove. He turned the valve and then his matches were damp. He couldn't get an ignition on a match or whatever. So, instead of turning the valve off, he went to look for a dryer match. When he came back in the shack, thank God I was outside at the time, there was a loud poof. The shack, which was a very heavy shack – students had built the shack for me in the industrial arts at our school. That shack picked up and moved about three and a half feet and also blew the window out. My buddy, Harry, who jerked his elbow back, had cracked some bones in his elbow. But when he came out, he was minus eyebrows and hair on his hands. But other than that, well, put a little tarp paper over it, moved the shack back on and sat in there and speared. Some of the things that I remember is one day when it was foggy, and we had our

shack about two and a half miles offshore, and there was a really heavy fog and mist that morning and nobody could find their shacks. You drove around, drove around. Then finally, just stood still and parked because there were a couple rivers in the area off Oshkosh and Neenah. So, you didn't want to be driving around out there in a blind fog. But that was probably one of the scarier experiences that I had. Because I remember being parked and having no idea where I was. You try and read the compass, but after a while, you just decide it's best to sit and wait for this thing to raise. I had some experiences with cracks. Had to get assisted out of cracks already where the back of the car slid in. But that's all, I guess, part of the game. If you do it that many years, you're going to run into this type of situation now and then.

DR: What were some of the things you heard over the years or seen done or some of the – possibly today, they'd be illegal things?

BM: Well, there was a lot of baiting that went on and guys were – practically, whatever you want to put down a hole, it was legal. I can remember seeing large sheets of aluminum. I worked for six years at Kimberly-Clark and there was a white pulp that they used. The guys that put sheets of that down there, fellows that worked at the canning factory to bring a whole box full of the tops of tin cans and dump them in the holes. Of course, there was nobody making any effort to retrieve this stuff. When you moved your shack, you moved it. As far as hook and line, I used to enjoy sitting in my shack, I have a middle on a bobber and watch it. Because a lot of times, if minnow got really excited, that was a good inkling that the fish might be approaching. But the guys started to abuse that privilege. I'd say we were out fishing for walleyes or perch, you got six- or eight-pound tests. But when you walked into the shacks, guys had eighty and ninety-pound tests lying down and tremendous hopes that you could have caught a shark on. You knew exactly what they were doing. There was so much of that going on that we pushed to have that illegal. You cannot have a hooking line down in that sturgeon hole. I think this is a good thing. I think here people agreed with that because there was just too much of that going on. You'd have a year when you couldn't see down three or four feet, yet guys are coming up with these big fish. Well, they're getting them on lines. I can remember one time, we were fishing off of the Yacht Club, and it just so happened that I had had back surgery. I came down a mountain out in Montana the fast way. I had had back surgery. I ended up going to Mayo Clinic a couple times. I wasn't even going to put my shack out that year. But a couple of my friends went over, they got it, put the shack out, cut the hole, got everything rigged for me. I got out of therapy in the hospital, and they were waiting for me, "Come on. You're spearing off of the South Side Yacht Club." So, I went out there. I was very fortunate enough to get in my shack about a half an hour and have a nice fish – nice big fish. Well, I came back the next day with a friend of mine to open the hole up. This is when the wardens [laughter] had derived this, where they would cut a hole alongside your shack and put in a long device on a bent rod that could sweep under your shack. If there were any lines down, they would hook it. So, we came out there that morning. I was of course walking about very gingerly because of my surgery. I stepped in that hole and fell down. The fellow that was with me said, "How come there's a hole there?" I said, "I have no idea." Well, the DNR had gone that night and checking all the shacks like that, doing their job. But he was very upset about it. He said, "They should have marked that hole." I said, "Well, I'm not going to get too excited about it because I didn't get injured." But it was my first experience with their checking the shacks without moving them or without unlocking the door. So, they had to come up with these methods to quell this type of violation.

Then another thing that started that I never got involved in, it was the nighttime spearing, where they would put bright lights down in the hole and spearfish at night. The guys were very [inaudible]. It seems that the sturgeons were attracted to that light. I think now, even in the regulation, it's not allowed at night. There's set hours now, but you cannot legally put a light down in your hole. Even in the daytime when your shack is dark. I believe it says you cannot use any form of artificial light to put down into that sturgeon hole. So, there's all these little things when people come up with some kind of idea on how to enhance or get their fish. If it's not legal, it's just a matter of time and the sportsmen and sportsman's groups, such as Sturgeon for Tomorrow will see that that is quelled.

DR: What other things have you seen used for decoy?

BM: Over the years, I have one decoy that my father carved, and I kind of put that down for sentimental value. I take that every year. But I have seen guys go down with corn cobs. One year, I even knew a guy that put a dead rabbit in a wire basket and put that down in the hole. He picked up off the road. Everybody would get wine bottles, toilet seats, toys, you name it, somebody has probably put it down here. A sturgeon supposedly is a very curious fish. A good friend of mine who worked as a diver when they were laying a pipeline under the river in Oshkosh would tell how they would be working there, welding underwater, and huge sturgeons would come and nudge you. They'd come to that light given off by the torch. He said, "It was quite frightening to be thinking you were all alone down there in twenty-foot feet of water and all of a sudden, this fish comes right alongside you. They were curious. They look at things. I've been making my own decoys and making decoys for years and experimented with all kinds of different colors. I've got one color that I really like. Because I've had sturgeon come in and get that thing right on their nose and just balance it on their nose. Like I said, well, when I go out, I probably got seventy, eighty decoys with me. If something doesn't work for two or three days, I change it. But I basically think – oh, I know a fellow who put a bowling pin down there. He had good luck with that. One of the most successful fishermen I knew, he put down an empty tin can on the end of a stick. In fact, he got a couple of the largest [laughter] sturgeons in the last couple years with that darn can on a stick.

DR: I understand years ago, they used to put bait down too. What were they using for bait that was illegal?

BM: They would chop – they call that chumming. The guys would – oh, smelt. Or every time they cleaned fish, they would chop it up and go out. If the sturgeon fishing opened the second Saturday in February, maybe they'd go out two or three weeks earlier and drill holes. Maybe drill ten holes every eight feet apart. Then they'd dump this cut bait down or try to form a line that sturgeon might follow. Then on the end of that line, that's where they'd set up their shack to spear. I remember one time, when the season was open on Lake Wagon, there's a big dealer over there who sold minnows and he had kept the dead minnows. But he did that, and he paid a fine. Called it chumming. It was an illegal baiting for sturgeon.

DR: What's the biggest sturgeon you ever speared?

BM: Well, in the [19]80s, probably the biggest sturgeon that I got was, I took my son out

fishing. He wanted to try it. He was out of college, and I said, "Look, if you want to go, you're going to have to get your own equipment. It's expensive." So, he made a shack. We went out in the Silent Bay and our friend, Dick Brush, just made a sled saw. So, he cut two holes for me. So, I set my shack on one. I set my son's shack on the other one, and he says, "Dad, I want one of your spears." I said, "No. I told you if you're going to spear, you go out and buy a spear." I said, "I want two. I always want to have a backup spear in the shack." So, my other buddy who I spear with, I hunt with and fish with, he gave him a spear, which I call a carp spear. So, here I'm out there at daybreak and he doesn't show up until about 10:30 on opening day. It was snowing a little bit. I heard him pull up. He went in the shack. I could hear him kind of cleaning the hole out. All of a sudden, he is over by my door. He says, "Dad, I got one." Well, then right away, knowing he had a poor spear, I had a quick snap on mine. I started taking one of my spears down. He says, "No, no, it's on the ice." I turned around, went outside, and looked. Laying behind his bronco was a seventy-three inch, ninety-seven-pound sturgeon. He said, "What do we do now?" I said, "Well, we go down to Jerry's and register it." So, we took it down there and registered it, and that was it. He didn't spear for four or five years. He didn't care for it. Well, then I got a grandson come along who wanted to sit with me. So, my son finally started sharing my shack. One of the last times we were on Poygan, we each got a nice fish on Poygan. But I guess it's just not for everybody. He did not care for it sitting in that shack.

DR: What do you prefer? Spearing sturgeon on Poygan or on Winnebago?

BM: Well, I've speared on Poygan quite a few times, and I've been very lucky on Poygan. But the last time when I speared on Poygan, we had very dirty water on upper river lakes, and we just didn't do anything. Very few fish taken. Well, then I had to sit and watch all my buddies spearing all the whole season on Lake Winnebago. One of them, I sat with his wife. So, I got to get a lot of time in the shack. But I'm not going to make that mistake again. I like to sit in the shack. I like to spear, and I'm not going to get hooked into one- or two-days' season. I think that's some of the pitfalls and all by the new way they have Poygan set up.

DR: Who's the best spearer you know? The most successful?

BM: Probably, the most successful spearer I know – boy, I know several of them that forgot the old horseshoe in the hind pocket. But well, there's Wayne O'Connell from Menasha who I hope to get a chance. He now lives way up north. I saw him this year on the lake and talked to him. We've been good friends. That family has probably got more equipment. Wayne's got four or five boys and he has a daughter. I know one year, his daughter had 114 to sixteen pounder. She speared when she was about fifteen. They go all over. They spear. Their shacks are very mobile, and they catch fish. They're kind of a legend up on that Waverly Beach end of the lake. They get fish. I don't know, they're very successful. But like I said, I know some young guys. A good friend of mine, Kevin Blanck, runs the Supper Club over at Johnsburg, spears. His boy Mike, who probably is thirty years old, he, a couple years ago, speared the largest sturgeon on the whole lake. I believe it was about 139 pounds. Well, here, this last year, he had one again, about ninety pounds. He just gets fish. But I know that when they get in that shack – a very nice shack, he gets in there and he's in for the duration. They're very diehard spearkers, that whole clan over there. The Blanks, they are from the other side of the lake, and they get fish.

DR: What's the trick that they are so lucky?

BM: I think they do and they spend a lot of time on a lake. They fish all year round. They're tournament fishermen. I know I was fishing with Kevin in a tournament this year. We were pre fishing and we saw several sturgeon roll on top of the water this year. Well, he punched that in on his GPS. He says, "This area's worth looking at." They go out and take core samples of the bottom to see if there's red worms there. I mean, it's a full-time job for them. They spend time.

DR: You said that they take mud samples. What's the deal with taking a mud sample?

BM: They're looking for larva, for the red worm larva. Some places, it's very thick, and that's one of the main foods that sturgeon feed on. They like to get into a heavy concentration of red worm larva.

DR: So, you're saying rather than be where there is rock, you should be where they have natural food?

BM: Right. Now, this has changed over the years too because one year, the water was not real good. In fact, the ice was the main concern here a while back. In front of my house, there's a lot of rock. I went out with my old window sash, and I took sampling. I had rock. Because I swim there, and you had to wear shoes to go swimming. I went out and I found that in seven and a half feet of water, the rock ended and the black mud and loon kind of started the soft bottom. So, I had the shack set up. So, it was half and half. About 2:00 p.m., I had a friend stop to see me, who is older than I am and has never speared a sturgeon. He's been close to getting them, his friends and so forth. He was in the shack with me talking. We had one come in and it glided right in and bumped into that decoy and stopped. He turned to me, and Bob says to me, "What do we do now?" I said, "This is what [laughter] you do," and I speared it, and I cleaned it. I had three-quart jars that I took out there were full of crayfish. Now, that fish was on the rocks and sucking up crayfish. So, maybe if a guy finds crayfish. But the next year, I set up in there for half the season and I didn't get any. Didn't see any fish. Nothing but black bass. So, the guy can kind of psych himself out about that spearing. You can only be in one place at a time.

DR: There's a little bit of luck with it, huh?

BM: Oh, yes. I think that what I would like to really see is that they say, "Look, here, you go out and you pick your spot and you cut a hole and that's it. You only get to cut one hole." But now, with the saws and equipment they got – I thought I'd been all alone in a place, and in a matter of hours, there'll be thirty-five shacks moving right in on you. A lot of people don't like being in groups. They'd like to say, "Well, here's a clear path. At least the fish can get to my shack without swimming underneath ten or fifteen other shacks right in line with me." So, that's part of the problem.

DR: I've heard old sturgeon spearkers say blow hole. What's a blow hole?

BM: Well, I think what they're talking about is if you get on a soft sand bottom, the sturgeon,

when they come along feeding, with their suction type mouth, they get in, if they get into an area where there are red worms, they'll kind of suck that silt up into them. Then it was explained to me, then the sand will come right out of the gills and the gills kind of entrap the larva on red worms, and then they ingest that food. People will come into a sturgeon shack. Maybe they've had their sturgeon shack and had it happen to me. There hasn't been the bottom is perfectly smooth. The next day, you'll get in there and you'll see a couple of lines and you know that that's where that fish went through sucking up. They blow the sand out. I guess that's where that term comes up for blow hole.

DR: When you were a kid back in the good old days in New London, what was it like when there's ice and go out in the river and the sturgeon would be in town, so to speak, or in the river?

BM: Well, like I said, the people who wanted to get the sturgeon – now, there's a lot of people up there that do not spear. They'd like to get one fish to eat. I can remember being out on X when I was probably twelve, thirteen years old. Those sturgeon would be in there so thick that people would be looking at them and you'd swear that like a lumberjack running on logs that a guy could actually run on their backs. That was many years ago. Now, I go out there, and if there's fifteen or twenty sturgeons there, the people working fish, mud, and stuff, they've got to get all excited. I was there with my uncle who's ninety-three years old. He used to go with my dad. I know that. He looked at me and he said, "Well, there aren't many sturgeons left if that's all there is." [laughter] One of the fishery guys heard that, oh, God, we got more sturgeon now than we ever had. Well, some of these old timers, I don't think they buy that. I think we had a lot more fish back then.

DR: But that was their experience and they've seen it. So, it's kind of hard to disbelieve. Are there any other tricks of guys using to coax them in?

BM: Well, I've heard some strange, strange things. But some guys will take – when the shads were coming in – I know a fellow that had something he used for trolling on lake Michigan. It was called a Christmas tree, but it was a bunch of little, twisted piece strips of bright chrome metal that you would hang ahead like a dodge instead of a dodger for your bait on Michigan. You'd use this. They fanned out and it looked like a school of – probably, there'd be twelve, fifteen of them out there. It looked like school bait fish. I know guys that have sat there and jerked that and wiggled that in a hole all day and they've got fish. Nowadays, I've seen people – in fact, the guy that put the wheels under my shack, he has a track made that goes around his hole that runs in a battery. There's a little track that runs in his culture continuously swims around the hole real, something like that. You hook it up to a twelve-hole deep cell battery, and that thing will fire around all. They move around like that. He's got a fish in the [laughter] last couple years. So, if you tried to – like I said, if you sit there, you got a lot of time to think.

DR: Are sturgeons attracted to noise? Like, these guys make these feeder knockers?

BM: I don't know. I've heard guys talk about, if you put a quart fruit jar full of bumblebees and then weighed it down so they'd buzz in that jar or [inaudible]. You hear all that stuff. I don't know. I never tried any of that.



DR: What kind of a spear do you use?

BM: I've got a spear that my father had made. One of his best friends worked at Hewitt Machine in Neenah, and he made the spears. I have a spear. It is not a flying barbed spear. The barbs are welded onto it, and it's probably got eighteen, twenty pounds of lead. It's very heavy. So, you're in twenty feet of water. If you just drop it, you're going to get that fish. That's my main spear. But then I like to have a backup spear. I got a spear from one of his other old partners, Norm Steffens. I got his spear when he was quite ill and knew he wasn't long for this world. He called me up and said, "You've got to come and get that spear." To me, they're cherished possessions, both those spears. That one is a little lighter. It's better for shots out on the side if you get a spear out under the ice mower. But the main spear that I use, it was my father's. I'll probably pass that on to my son and to my grandson.

DR: So, spearing is really a misnomer. You really just with your spear, you just drop them.

BM: Yes. Well, they're so weighted that you don't have to throw them. I think a lot of guys, by trying to throw them, get into some problems. Because I've been in shacks with guys since (hydroplaning?).

DR: Bill, where do you usually spear at? South? North? On the Winnebago or the Poygan?

BM: Well, I got all my experience of course being in the north, having been raised in Menasha. My father used to go out – in those days, he'd go off of the old Muni Beach until he'd lined up some church tower and that's where he sat. I can remember going out there and cutting those holes by hand where there'd be two guys chiseling. The kids would be in the hole with a scoop shovel. Sometimes we'd take [inaudible] in the morning and get a hole chopped. Dad's shack holes are always three by six. In my shack now, I'm down to about – I like a little small hole. Mine is probably thirty inches by five feet.

DR: When you get a sturgeon, what do you do with it? Do you cook it? Do you bake it? How do you make your sturgeon?

BM: Well, I like to smoke. I usually smoke about half of it. But I like to trim it up real good. It's one thing about sturgeon, there's a certain amount of waste meat on it that's very strong and very fishy. That's along that lateral line and the red skin. You can actually see the yellow fat on it. I even go so far as if I'm having a bunch of friends over, I will power boil each state, dip it in the water and power boil it. Then let it chill down and then bread it and then fry it. Sturgeon is such a tough consistency. I think it's a lot. I've had people that thought they were eating pork chops. They try and break it with a fork, and it won't break. But also, I have tried baking it and stuff. But one thing I do when we have sturgeon, we always have a couple lemons sliced up. We like to put fresh lemon juice on it.

DR: What other recipes do you have?

BM: Oh, that's basically it. Sometimes you get fish that are a little bit stronger than others. I think that's due to their eating the shad. When my son had that ninety-seven pounder, I even

smoked it. It was not a good eating fish. It was really bad. So, a lot of times, what I'll do is I'll soak it overnight in milk. That seems to draw some of the fishy tastes out of it.

DR: Has sturgeon spearing affected your life and the community? I mean, through social events and whatever?

BM: Well, I'll tell you, there's some people that it's the only time of year I see them. But they're good people, good friends. I'll have people come up and say, "Hey, I've got this new saw. We want a hole cut. We'll help you move your shack." People knew that I had back trouble. Geez. They'd bend over, you know. When we go out, it's kind of a social [laughter] event I would call it, because you're going out. Then of course, there's always some pretty popular watering holes during that season where people meet afterwards. Now, with our half day seasons, that gives you all afternoon to socialize a little bit. So, I've been a director of Sturgeon for Tomorrow and I think I've seen some of the things that they've done and how they've promoted the sport, and it's great. One of my goals is, I hope that it's still around when my grandson gets really interested in the spearing.

DR: He's only twelve now, you said?

BM: No, he's sixteen now. But right now, it's either sturgeon or girls, and I think the girls won out [laughter].

DR: What are you going to be spearing? You said earlier you weren't going to be spearing on a two-day deal. So, evidently, you're not going to be spearing anymore on Poygan.

BM: No, I didn't even apply for Poygan. I mean, I live on the lake, and for me to go from my front yard and drive all the way over to Lake Poygan – I've got real good spearing. They took some nice fish right out in front of my house again last year. That's to do it this year again.

DR: That's in the mud?

BM: Yes. That's very, very muddy out there. Yes.

DR: Well, let's hope to see you on the ice.

BM: I'll be there, God willing.

DR: [laughter].

[end of transcript]