

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

Bill McAloon Oral History

Date of Interview: January 30, 2007

Location: Unknown

Length of Interview: 00:09:21

Interviewer: EH – Eugene Herubin

Transcriber: NCC

Eugene Herubin: Bill McAloon, and I'm Eugene Herubin. I am going to run a little test here on our equipment to see if we are recording at the proper volume and tone, and if the machine is really picking up what we're saying. Is that okay with you, Bill?

Bill McAloon: Okay. I'll go on with that test.

EH: Well, I'll tell you, Bill, after rerunning that, it seems as though the stuff is coming through. I could understand myself. I hope you could. But you answered and I could understand your answer. So, I think we'll carry on at this point. Well, make it real official, Bill, why don't you state your name and give us a little bit of where you're from and so forth.

BM: Well, I'm Bill McAloon. I'm originally from New London. I have property up there. Even though I live on Lake Winnebago, I probably do seventy-five percent of my fishing on the Wolf River. That's kind of basically my background for fishing.

EH: Well, as you know, from when we reset this interview up, we're going to try to look at fishing, not in general, but we're going to look at sturgeon fishing. Some of the things that you know from all way back when you grew up and how you first were introduced to the sturgeon itself, when you found out what sturgeon really were. Just a little bit of what went on in your young life and probably, how well it's carried over and what you do now. So, let's just probably go way back with some little history, which I think everyone wants to hear about.

BM: Well, my father was raised on a farm very close to the Wolf River. His two friends have a farm right on the Wolf River. We purchased some land, and dad built a little cabin on the Wolf there. I was ten years old when we built that cabin. Of course, the sturgeon had to migrate right by that cabin. The old timers around New London, they had a tendency to, when the sturgeon were coming, they would help themselves to a few. I guess our family was no exception. I can remember my father having sturgeon in the garage, and we ate a lot of sturgeon. Very good eating. As we got older, of course, the risk factor came in. That risk factor was going to jail. So, we kind of got away from it. Now, I believe in really protecting them. I'm a member of Sturgeon for Tomorrow. I speared for fifty-some years. So, I guess right now, I am more concerned that this tradition can be carried on. Not the violating part of it, but the legal spearing part. I've got a grandson who happened to be with me one day when I speared a nice sturgeon. I look forward to the day when he can spear his first sturgeon.

EH: Say, Bill, I am really interested because I noted when you stated that when you were young, you had quite a smile on your face when you say that we took a few sturgeons. Would you elaborate a little bit about – because it seems as though from your smile [laughter] or whatnot, that maybe you people were really into harvesting these with considerable numbers. You kind of hinted a little bit at something about the legal aspects. If you don't mind, tell me a few stories about what you didn't [laughter] tell me at that time, if you're willing. I'm not going to break your heart.

BM: Well, I admit that I guess I got the fever too. When they're laying there rubbing on the rocks and all you've got to do is grab one, and they are good eating. Never got into it for profit selling or processing the [inaudible] like in the old days. We would take a couple of fish and

we'd eat. A lot of times, that fish never got out of the New London area. That old cook stove would be frying them up, and we believed in getting rid of the evidence. The best way to do that was eating it. So, no. It's been quite a few years. I lost my father when I was a senior in high school, and he was hooked. My mother would often say, too, "We drive all the way up here to spend the weekend, and your dad gets a sturgeon, we have to go home." [laughter] So, that's basically it. We really got away from it. I think finally, the DNR people got smart and they really made the fine perfect. You can lose your vehicles and what have you. The old poachers and violators are gone now. They're not around anymore. I think the younger people just aren't going to take the chance. They go out and spear. If they can't get one legally, the old saying used to be, I hope I don't get them two nights, I'll get them up on the wall. Well, I don't think that's going on. We have the sturgeon watch now, and we've got people who have that mind and attitude now that we've got to preserve these things. I guess I'm all for it.

EH: Well, that's really honorable. I'm still kind of interested in one aspect here. Because you did state something about when you were young and you kind of skipped over it. If you would elaborate a little bit about – I know you didn't sell, but your father did. Did he sell the caviar from the sturgeon? Was there a processing plant in the family [laughter], so to speak, that would take the raw eggs and turn them into caviar and so forth? Or [laughter] am I reading too far between the lines?

BM: No, not really. My dad had a friend – I could mention his name, but I won't. I'm sure he's got survivors [laughter] around here. But he had a good job at some paper mill down in the valley there at Appleton. The sturgeon would get caught up against some flu or intake. Of course, he told my dad, and then they would take it, and they'd process that caviar. Now, if they got a big fish with a lot of eggs that were hard and ready, then I would've to probably miss school because I'd be up all night helping process that. Working their steps through the screen and go adding the salt. But what we did there, my dad might sell a little bit at a couple of the local taverns. But we just realized that it just was too much to start trying to do it like they did when they were teenagers.

EH: Say, Bill, you mentioned now, [laughter] once in a while, you might have missed a day of school or so. Now, were you in high school at the time? Were you in grade school or did you start when you were real young?

BM: Probably, seventh, eighth grade, I was taught how to work the eggs.

EH: Well, we never did really ascertain your age. So, if you were seven or eight, how old are you now?

BM: I'm sixty-six.

EH: Oh, wow. That's pretty easy math. So, I guess we all could figure out [laughter] how old you were at that time. But you had seen sturgeon around and ate sturgeon way before your seventh and eighth grade.

BM: Oh, yes. It was a household staple [inaudible] [laughter].

EH: If it was a staple, then I guess that we could assume that that was year-round.

BM: Well, not really. Dad, in that spring run, that's when he went and got a couple fish. But he never monkeyed around with set lines or anything during the rest of the year. Dad would take his vacation for the spearing season. He sat in that shack and that was his vacation. That was automatic.

EH: So, then when like I trust then all this production of caviar then obviously, would take place during the sturgeon spearing. Was there ever a problem with the law enforcement at that time or not?

BM: Not since dad was really young. I think he just never got any citations or anything. He knew the ropes and they kind of made it a point of knowing where the game wardens were. I can only remember being along in the boat one time when dad was checking the rub line. We got a sturgeon in the boat, an old sixteen-foot wooden style. Its tail came up under the seat and tore the middle seat out of the boat. That's when I decided to swim to shore.

[laughter]

I didn't want to be in the same boat with that critter.

EH: Did your dad –

[end of transcript]