

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

Mike Primising Oral History

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Interviewer: BM – Bob Marin

Transcriber: NCC

Bob Marin: We're going to get a little history of these two gentlemen, and I'll start with Dan first, name and birth?

Dan Folz: A long time ago I was born. Name is Dan Folz, F-O-L-Z. I was born [inaudible] 1934.

BM: [19]34, that's almost as old as me.

DF: [laughter]

BM: What year did you start with the DNR? How did you get involved to get started with DNR?

DF: I graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and I was a major graduate. Then I wanted to be an employee. So, I actually wrote some letters, and I ended up being hired in northern Wisconsin on the Five Lakes research project. I started the that spring of the year that I graduated, which would have been 1956. Then I worked at the Five Lakes research project for about three years. Then ultimately came down to Oshkosh as a biologist after taking a biologist exam. Those days, we have taken exam to become a biologist.

BM: You didn't have to go to school?

DF: Yes. You had to go to school, but then you had to take an exam on Fisheries Biology, basically. Of course, if you pass, that was one of the things, then you might be hired. If you didn't pass, they won't hire you. Because at that time, a college degree was like, as some of the old timers just call you – we were [inaudible]. [laughter] We were the smart college kids. Then I came down to Oshkosh in 1959. That's the first time that I was in Oshkosh. Then over my career, why I was the manager here or biologist here. Then I went to Horicon. I was what we call the area fish manager there for a while. Then I transferred to Waupaca and I was the area manager there for a while. Then eventually, came back to Oshkosh as the area manager in 1976, I believe it was. Then worked here in Oshkosh as area fish manager and retired about seventeen years ago.

BM: Seventeen years ago, you retired?

DF: Yes.

BM: Well, from the DNR, which you're still working with the sturgeon each spring. Am I correct on that?

DF: Yes. I'm still helping out in the spring. When I initiated the some of the programs that Ron Brooke is carrying on now, I was fortunate enough to still work the sturgeon run in the spring.

BM: Well, that's good.

DF: Of course, I should mention one thing. Now see you mentioned the DNR when Mike and I

both started. We were at the Wisconsin Conservation Department. We were both were working when they were organized, but we were the Wisconsin Conservation Department at that time.

BM: I'm going to go to the other gentleman now, Mike Premising. He can give me his birth date and when he started with the DNR.

Mike Premising: I was born in the northwest Iowa that's in [inaudible] in the corn country of northwest Iowa. I went to at that time was called Iowa State College. It's now Iowa State University out of Ames, Iowa. At that time, the Fisheries courses were in the department of the Zoology. So, my major was in Zoology, but then the Fisheries courses were in that particular department. My main Prof was a guy by the name of Dr. Carlander. Dr. Kenneth Carlander, who at that time was a fairly prominent a professor in Fisheries Management. I graduated in 1958, in the summer of 1958. As Dan mentioned at that time, of course, my senior year in college, I took a Fisheries Biology courses that different states were putting out that were recruiting new personnel for their department. So, I probably took a biology test for probably six to eight different states from New Mexico to Minnesota to California to Wisconsin. In August of 1958, my professor, Dr. Carlander, called me up at my apartment and said that he had gotten a call from Madison, Wisconsin and they were hiring six men as biologists, "And you were number 7 on the list." They thought that if you got a call from Wisconsin, if you went up and took an interview, you had a pretty good chance of getting on. So, I did that. In late August, I got the request for an interview at Madison and started with the state the 1st of September. I spent a year at Oshkosh working out of at that time what they call it the district headquarters or the area. I guess it was the area headquarters at that time. Then one year later was assigned as a district fish manager then at that time out of Wautoma, which covered five-county area. My first time up on the river with the sturgeon was the spring of 1959, which I think is the same time that Dan was up on the sturgeon run for the first time.

BM: Wow. That's 48 years ago.

MP: I retired from the department in 1989. But like Dan, every spring, we get a call from the now present biologist if they want us to come up and maybe help them out in a little way or at least go up and look at the fish every spring of the year. So, we've been doing that since 1989 also, even though I've been retired.

BM: What was that little thing you said to me earlier?

DF: When Dan and I started out, we were dealing with a living fossil, you know, the sturgeon that we were handling. In our interviews along the banks when people would come to see the operation and to see the fish, we had always introduced them as a living fossil. Today we're the living fossils. We're kind of older than a lot of the –

MP: The that's the thing that's real alarming is a lot of the fish that that we're handling or have handled is now we're older than a lot of them. [laughter]

DF: Yeah. So, you're looking at a couple of living fossils.

[laughter]

DM: Some of the gentlemen that you worked with.

DF: Well, our supervisor was Dick Harris who was well known and in the Oshkosh area. He was our supervisor.

MP: Russ Daly.

DF: Russ Daly was our assistant supervisor. In our area, our district biologist at that time was a super biologist, Vern Hacker.

MP: Vern Hacker, that's right.

DF: Then of course, with research at the time of that we came here, Gordie Priegel was the research biologist and he had replaced Tom –

MP: I think that's the way it was, Dan. Yeah.

DF: Then the research technician was (John Teprose?), who's passed away several years ago. Then, of course, there were other people that have helped us in the program. Then we had a lot of volunteer help back in the days that that we first started tagging.

MP: Yes. I think that's right, Dan. We had quite a little volunteer help there. Again, the restrictions weren't as tight as they are today as far as liability and all that type of stuff. It maybe was there, but we didn't pay too much attention to it if we give some help.

DF: There are a lot of things we didn't pay a lot of attention to.

BM: That's true. I guess that's a fact of life, yes. Just trying to think of some of the gentlemen that you worked with are retired also. They come and help with the sturgeon in the spring.

DF: Yes. In fact, one of the guys who's retired too that that actually was a biologist here before Mike and I [inaudible], who at one time was our "district supervisor." (Tom Timmer?), who works on sturgeon or worked on sturgeon who's now retired in [inaudible]. Then (Lee Myers?), who was actually an assistant fish manager here and did a lot of work with sturgeon. we also have to mention a good friend that [inaudible] who still helps us in fact. I think he started from day one when we started tagging [inaudible] was Mike Penning out of Green Bay.

MP: Then probably another gentleman that's worth mentioning. In fact, I think that you're probably looking at a couple of guys who were the first ones that attempted to take eggs from the sturgeon to hatch them artificially under hatchery conditions. The gentleman that had a hatchery at that time was a gentleman by the name of (Reverend Lange?) out of New London. He was a very supporter of the sturgeon program.

DF: Actually, (Reverend Lange?) was trying to [inaudible] trout. One of the first times that that

we took eggs, I believe that they cooperated with Sturgeon for Tomorrow and we put the eggs to (Reverend Lange's?) facility. He put the eggs up to see if they're hatched. One of the problems that we were dealing with then is his hatchery water was so cold that the eggs didn't really propagate properly. Then another one we should mention though Michael too, is at the hatchery of Wild Rose. Well, they successfully raised the surgeon and that he developed his own method too of taking eggs was [inaudible].

MP: That's right. Yes. He was a hatchery [for him?] and had Wild Rose Hatchery back in the [19]60s and [19]70s.

DF: He since has passed away too.

MP: That's correct.

BM: Did you people work with the wardens as far as watching the sturgeon trying to keep the poachers over or you just kind of did your own thing working with the sturgeon?

MP: Well, I, I think at that time, if you were at a station like off a county trunk X, instead of having sturgeon watchers that had a certain period of four hour shift. When we were up there, we were up there twenty-four hours a day. If the sturgeon looked like they were going to run or if they quit running and looked like they were going to come back and we stayed right there. So, starting out, no. There was no such thing as sturgeon washers.

DF: No. In fact, as I recall, even like law enforcement, of course, that's changed a lot of views too. But there was like only one conservation warden per county, as I recall. They had to cover the whole county and they divided the [inaudible]. But you only have like you had a warden, (OK Johnson?) on channel and (Ken Corbett?) in Clintonville.

MP: And (Rex Hope?).

DF: (Rex Hope?) in Waupaca. So, you only have basically, one warden. Of course, you're going to have some special wardens. But you didn't have a lot of law enforcement personnel on the river at that time.

MP: Yes, that's right.

BM: Tell me some of your exploits working with people. I heard something about a film fighters.

DF: We have a lot of stories about it, so now it can be told. [laughter] We wouldn't tell them when we were working.

BM: Snow snake medicine.

DF: Yes. We should tell you that. One time, I know if we were like rogue biologists, but we sometimes did things we weren't supposed to do.

MP: Rabble rousers, I guess that's a good word.

DF: [laughter] Yes. One of the first occasion, I remember that it was this first year that Mike and I went up on the river. We tagged all day and all night. Actually, what we did at that time we probably only had like seven to eight people –

MP: That's correct.

DF: – tagging. We had talked about that before where we actually had – there were trees along [inaudible]. We actually strung lights from the trees. We had generators there and we powered up and that furnished the light for us to tag by all night. I guess one of the things that I recall, we were tagging all night. I remember Mike, when we're getting up in the morning and Mike got out of the water and I said, "Where are you going, Mike?" He looked at me. He says, Dan, "I'm going to the car." He says, "I'm going to sleep a little while." He says, "Because I'm sick, sick, sick of this shit." [laughter]

MP: Yeah. I've enjoyed as much as he did but [inaudible].

[laughter]

But there were some long days and long nights, that's for sure. Then, again, if you work – what you just did. You kind of packed up your groceries in the back seat in the sleeping bag and when you left, kiss the wife goodbye while you were going for ten days or two weeks, as long as it took. You just took off on the on the sturgeon.

DF: We never knew how long it would be.

MP: If you weren't tagging while you were scouting. However, at that particular time, there was, wow. In fact, I don't even know if I could find some of the spots where they were called the old hotel. That was a favorite or a traditional spot for sturgeon spawning and the – what was the name of that farm?

DF: The Stueck Farm.

MP: Stueck Farm was another one. Today, I don't even know if they check them or if they even tag them.

DF: We still check them in. We should tell you that some of these places I might mention with the names. I don't know about his first impression. But mine was when they said like the old hotel. I had visions of a nice, old historical type building on the Wolf River. Maybe we were going to tag that. Actually, what it was like the old hotel was like the remnants of a guy who did logging and that was where he kept his horse when he was logging. So, that was the old hotel. Then the Stueck Farm we had visions of these are probably a lot of trees and a lot of branches or maybe some dead falls in that there. Actually, the stick farm, that was a family that owned the farm. So, I think it was S-T-U-E-C-K. So, that was Stueck Farm. Another place that –

MP: The Trailer?

DF: The Trailer and (Conley's bar?).

MP: (Conley's bar?), that's right.

DF: People are going to say, they're going to wonder like, "Those guys probably felt right at home in (Conley's Bar?) But actually, (Conley's Bar?), again, that was the owner and (Conley's Bar?) was like a rock bar on the river. So, there was no bar there much to our dismay. [laughter]

MP: Those were some of the memorable times for the first time. I can remember, as I say it, when you were at a spot, you were there usually twenty-four hours. There was nothing like – or even today, there was nothing like sitting on the banks of the Wolf River at about 2:30 a.m. and listening – when everything is quiet – listening to the great horned owl or the barred owls cut loose along the river. Or if you have your dip net at that time, well, I think they still are probably, well they're probably fiberglass now, but the handles were aluminum. The hole in that was aluminum. If you had that laying in the water and the sturgeon may not be working the shoreline, but they'd be out a little bit further spawning, that dip handle net would actually vibrate. You could hear that dip net handle vibrating as the sturgeon out there was actually spawning. It would sound on a calm night, quiet night, like thunder in the distance. That would be the action of the sturgeon actually on the river itself.

BM: I've heard them make that noise and it's almost sounds like a [inaudible] drumming.

DF: Yes.

MP: You're right.

DF: That's right. Actually, Mike, when we first went on the river and they said that you could hear them spawning, I kind of thought, "Yes, sure." But in fact, I distinctly remember, like Mike said that they were with this rumbling. In fact, I even looked up at the sky. It was nighttime and I looked up and I thought maybe, I said, "Maybe it's going to rain."

MP: Yes. Maybe there's a thunder shower.

DF: Actually, it was a crystal clear night and these were the fish, like Mike said, spawning a little deeper. The vibration from the spawning was what we were hearing.

MP: There's definitely another thing I can remember one time. They should have been – well, let's see north south out of New London. A place that we used to – off of 45 used to call the Trailer.

DF: Yes.

MP: Dan and I got up there, we were scouting. I think we were eating lunch along the bank. A

nice kind of warm day and we sat there. Two sturgeon came up and they kind of slid their nose right, kind of up on the bank just out of the water. They looked at us and they say, "Well, hello, Dan and Mike. Glad to see you back." They just kind of backed off and swam away.

Remember that?

DF: That's true. That was Mike's comment there like, wasn't that something? We we're sitting and there come a couple of fish up there to look at us. That was before the actual – the real heavy spawning in sturgeon.

MP: That's right. That was really something.

DF: Another thing Mike said too, like back in the "good old days," back in the in the late [19]50s, like you said, we used to scout. We used to drive around the river all day and all night. We knew about, Gordy Priegel knew about when the temperature was that the fish were going to spawn up. But we only had about seven sites that we checked because it's not like now because we have very limited spawning sites. We would just drive around the river all night. We would check Northport or New London. Then we would just make our run with all our known spawning sites and end up at [inaudible]. If their fish weren't spawning, then we'd get in the car and we drive all the way back down, check the sights on the other side of the river and start over again until the fish came in. So, lots and lots of nights we spent on the river roaming and looking for fish.

MP: Another memorable time of course, I say, people always when you're working with the fish and you have an amount of water, well, I'm a little head upward – the night that we took the first eggs. We caught a female fish that was ripe probably about 1:30 a.m. Then of course, we wanted to get a couple of male fish to fertilize the eggs, get the milk from the male fish to fertilize the eggs. We just had a deuce of a time of getting the fish. We had a guy, Russ Daly, who was watching the fish on the canvas, the female fish on the canvas. Dan and I were netting and every once in a while, we ask Russ on shoreline, how is he doing. He says, "All right. Just give me another 5 gallon bucket of water." He'd throw it over her head. Then finally, about dawn, and that would have been probably a couple hours later. We finally got a couple of male fish to fertilize the eggs. The next day we were tagging along County Trunk X at Northport. Of course, people question, how big have you seen one today or what's the biggest one so far? How long can you keep an eye of the water? When they asked me, "How long can you keep an eye of the water, I looked up and it says 2 hours and 43 minutes.

DF: [laughter]

MP: That's about as long as we had that old girl out of the water. There again, she turned every color there was from the steel gray that they are to garner to white back to steel gray. But she did, probably half hour after her sunup, finally swim away. I had that old gal out of the water better than two hours.

DF: We held her in the water until she recovered. It took a while, but she finally came too and she swam away. So, [inaudible] for where the other thing too. We have another we used to when we go up to Shawano. I can remember on one occasion when Gordi the [inaudible] was

almost coming to a close. Gordi Priegel, I think maybe it was 1960 to just needed more data on female fish. So, I remember with [inaudible] and I, they said, "Well, you guys go on up to Shawano and but just try and dip female fish. Then we'll relieve you like later, later on in the day." Well, John and I went up there. As I recall, it was like it was over Easter. John and I went up there and we stayed there. Before we got relieved, we were there for thirty-six hours straight before anybody came to relieve us. I think that we probably got about fifteen females or something. It wasn't very many. We didn't have the numbers of fish that were working with. Then the people felt so sorry for us. I was just thinking I remember a young couple coming down there and with a sister-in-law to see if we were still there. This is like after the tablets had closed at like 2:30 a.m. My comments to the husband, I said, "Yes. It would have been nice if you would have come out if you had brought us some coffee." He said, "You want some coffee." He threw his keys at his wife. He says go get these guys some coffee. So, the two girls went up, and brought us back a cork jar full of coffee. John and I and any guy came back the next morning. He said, "You guys are still here." I said, "Yes." He said, "What do you want for lunch today?" He says, "You want turkey sandwiches or ham sandwiches?" I said, "I like turkey sandwiches." He said, "Okay. I'll be back at noon with sandwiches." He sure came at noontime. He brought us sandwiches back to eat. In fact, you know that occasion when you have like a drink and he actually brought us a martini to go with our ham or turkey sandwich.

MP: Probably one of the things that the way it started out, it was done primarily for another purpose. But it served the sturgeon population well was riprapping of the shoreline itself to retard erosion. State and federal programs of course, cost shared landowners to do this. When it came into effect, lo and behold, what we noticed is that the sturgeon, instead of spawning it just the two or three or four sites that we knew of, took to this new riprap. Actually, it not only retarded erosion, but also provided a lot more spawning sites for the sturgeon. In doing so, of course, it spread out the deposit of eggs overall a wider or more area. So, therefore, the possibility of hatching and/or survival was greater. So, I think that probably, when Dan and I started in the late [19]50s, today, I think that there is a lot more sturgeon swimming in the Wolf River today than there was back in 1960.

DF: Like I mentioned we only had about seven sites that we actually looked at when Priegel and Worth were doing the doing the research. I think when we started tagging again, I think it was about 1975 or 1976 when we started everything. Once they had learned early life history, there was basically, no work done on the surgeon. When I got to Oshkosh, we reinitiated the tagging program. But I think then I think we had about fourteen sites. Like Mike said, that was a result of people riprapping their shoreline. Now, I think there's probably in excess of fifty different sites where we've seen Sturgeon at one time or another. They don't use all those sites every year. What we would declassify as major sites and minor sites and major sites would be where we'd find the highest concentrations of sturgeon. Some sites we may be able to tag twenty fish if things slow down and we swung around looking for fish. But usually, we concentrate most of our efforts on some of the more heavily used sites.

BM: Most of your efforts with the sturgeon on the Wolf River alone?

DF: No. The majority of the work was done on the Wolf River. But on some occasions, we did go up on the Fox River as I recall. Even when after I had gone to Horicon one time, there were

some fish spawning in Berlin behind the old hotel which would be on the Fox River. Then one year – and again, I don't remember what year it was. But again, it just was to point up the new riprap. But I think it was bait and campsite on the Fox River. One year, we got a call from [inaudible] and he says the fish you are using has new riprap. We went there and we tagged quite a few fish on that new riprap on our rolls. Now I think whether there's fish spawning in Princeton and –

MP: Yes.

DF: [inaudible] there's some fish spawning, but most of our effort was on a Wolf River. Because that's where the bulk of the fish went. I should also mention like one of the things that's changed a lot when we first started doing this. In fact, when we reinitiated the program, we consider it a good spring if we tag like 300-plus fish. But we don't have like seven to eight people that would run the whole river and tag and work the fish and measure and do what we did. So, it's not like now where we have where we have a lot more people putting a lot more concentrated effort and which is much better because we get much more data.

MP: What do we do per day now?

DF: Yes. Actually, we probably see most sites have 100-plus fish on them. So, I mean if we did like I say 100 hundred fish, I think when Gordy was doing, I think we were lucky if we got like 130 and 140 in a spring. In fact, Mike said we used to work like when the fish were there 24 hours a day. On many occasions we would go from one side to another with our "skeleton crew." In fact, I remember on one occasion, we went from North Port or New London all the way up to Shawano. We got up there like maybe I think it was like 1:00 a.m. after working fish at Northport all day. None of us had slept and we had two, two really good energetic girls that were on our crew, (Nancy McNaughton and Gene Binsfeld?) They were really hard workers. We went up there in fact, and another guy that we had with us too. They probably won't believe that.

MP: Davy Crockett.

DF: That was his name. He was Davy Crockett. In fact, when he when he was hired as a new biologist here and he told me his name was Davy Crockett. I looked at him and says, "You got to be kidding me." But that was his name. I think he was from Kentucky when we might.

MP: That's correct.

DF: But we've got up to Shawano and of course, we kind of looked at it each other. We were all tired. So, what are we going to do? I said, well, as we put our weight [inaudible], we toggle up tag fish. And Mike Penning, who we mentioned, we didn't, we didn't have lights. What he did is he had Coleman Lantern and Mike brought the Coleman Lantern along. He liked that on shore. Then there there was a little light up that channel that we could see from streetlights and stuff by the dam. But then the fish would be brought in and the tagging would take place on. Basically, what we had was tags and a part and a measuring board and our dip. So, that was it. We tagged on one occasion out there, I remember that we tagged from 1:30 a.m. to about 4:00 a.m. as I

recall. We were exhausted, and of course in those days, it's like, "Well, let's go get some rest." So, our idea of rest was we all went and got in our cars. In fact, I think Mike and I had stayed at Matador's.

MP: Matador Motel we used to call.

DF: So, we want to get our Matador Motels and everybody got in their cars and we slept in the cars until daybreak. Then we went to town and got something to eat and went right back and started tagging again.

BM: Thank you very much.

MP: You're absolutely welcome.

[end of transcript]