

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish  
Art Sonnenberg Oral History  
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Interviewer: DR – Dick Ristow  
Transcriber: NCC

Dick Ristow: Mr. Artie Sonnenberg, who lives south of Oshkosh on the 175. Being a sturgeon spearer, he also carves decoys and makes spears. But let's get a little history on him. Artie, when and where were you born?

Art Sonnenberg: I was born in the town of Friendship in 1916.

DR: Where's Friendship town?

AS: Right across the road from here.

DR: Oh, okay. How large was your family?

AS: Nine kids.

DR: Nine kids. Your parents from this area?

AS: Yes. My dad was born on the farm where I was born. But my mother come from about four or five miles West of there.

DR: Your grandparents were from where?

AS: Germany.

DR: Germany. Okay. Were they outdoors people or lumberjacks, or what was their background?

AS: No. I couldn't tell you that. But I know when we were kids, we used to talk German all the time. Kind of guy I wouldn't know too much about anymore.

DR: *Sprechen sie Deutsch*, huh?

AS: *Kannst du Deutsch sprechen* [laughter]?

DR: What did your parents do for a living?

AS: Farming.

DR: Farming?

AS: Yes.

DR: Dairy farmers?

AS: Yes. That's what I did too for a while.

DR: Okay.

AS: Then I did carpentry work.

DR: How did you get involved in the sturgeon spearing and fishing activity?

AS: Well, when I was young, like I said, we used to take a horse and a sleigh, a bunch of the neighbors and two, three shanties we had out there. Because there was no road problem or nothing then back in them days. Because there wasn't a four-wheel drive truck, we used to take a horse then we'd take a bale of hay along. This horse eats hay all day long. Then we'd come ride the sleigh back and forth.

DR: Were you real successful in those days?

AS: Oh, yes.

DR: What was the biggest one that you speared back then?

AS: The biggest one I've ever got is 85- pounder. But some of my friends – I don't know if you know Eddie Butzlaff.

DR: I know Eddie, yes.

AS: He got a 143-pounder. Then another one of my friends, (Harold Salzman?), had 131 and another one, (Ray Daniel?), 122-pounder and another one, (Leroy Pat?), had 120-some-pounder.

DR: That's almost bigger than you.

AS: Yes.

DR: Wow.

AS: Yes.

DR: Do you have any stories about spearing them back in the good old days, how you did it?

AS: Well, we used to have to chop a hole by hand in each opposite corner and then cut the holes by hand with a hand saw. Back in them days, we had 36- inches of ice, not like today. It took the neighborhood around half an hour for – a couple of us to cut a hole by hand. The most I've ever gotten one day is one morning, I speared seven.

DR: Seven sturgeons in one morning?

AS: Yes.

DR: Wow. What was the limit then?

AS: I don't know. I think three, if I remember. But no one paid attention to you. I don't even know if you had to register then.

DR: Probably not then.

AS: I think when I first started, it was \$1 for the license and then a nickel a tag for – you were allowed five.

DR: You had to tag them then?

AS: Yes.

DR: Do you have any of those old tags?

AS: No. That would have been back in the thirties.

DR: 1930s.

AS: A nickel a tag, they were.

DR: Was that a metal tag?

AS: Yes.

DR: Who were the guys that you speared with?

AS: Where what?

DR: Who were the gentlemen that you speared with?

AS: Oh, (Charles Pat?) and (Milton Pat?) and a couple of my brothers and (Robert Abram?). That's about the ones I can think – and Ray Daniels and his dad.

DR: Was this kind of a thing you'd do your chores and then go out and spear all day?

AS: Yes.

DR: Wow, seems to be a lot of the farmers did that years ago.

AS: Yes.

DR: That was their recreation for the winter.

AS: That's right. But back in them days, I don't think there was four hundred, five hundred shanties on the whole lake.

DR: Now they get that many on every bay.

AS: [inaudible] [laughter]

DR: What were the type of spears that you used back then?

AS: Well, there used to be a welding shop here in Van Dyne, (Wollenberg?) had a blacksmith shop. We used to have these old – we call them converted manure forks. Then he would make them into sturgeon spears, put barbs on them.

DR: How did you fight the weather in those days?

AS: It used to be quite a job. In a lot of years, there'd be so much snow. If you got off where these cracks were and you cut a whole, the next day you come out, you might have to wear hip boots. That much water would be around the shanty.

DR: Wow. Did you have any more of those spears left or the manure forks?

AS: No. I don't have any more of that.

DR: Because now we're looking for it.

AS: Yes. I know.

DR: Things for the museum.

AS: Well, there's one friend of mine here who's got this one – well, I had in that picture – but he wouldn't sell it.

DR: Well, for the museum, they don't want to buy it. They would want it to be donated.

AS: Yes. No. He wouldn't get rid of it.

DR: What were the biggest challenges you had when you were fishing or spearing?

AS: I would say getting around with the weather. Because we didn't have, like they got today, going right out in a truck. Back then we took a sleigh.

DR: Well, you took a one-horse sleigh, a bale of hay, and all your equipment?

AS: Yes, that's right.

DR: How'd you get your shanties out there?

AS: We loaded them on a little wagon with the horse pulling. Then some guys used to even make round shanties and tip them on the side and roll them. I don't know if you've ever heard of

them.

DR: Yes. I've seen some pictures of them.

AS: Yes.

DR: Do you have any of those old pictures?

AS: No. But then they used to turn them outside and then roll them from one place to another.

DR: They we're made out of metal?

AS: No, just wood.

DR: Wood?

AS: Yes. They're octagon or whatever them are with five or six corners.

DR: How do you think the sport has changed the most over the years?

AS: Well, it's a lot easier getting around today with four-wheel drive trucks and plows and all that stuff. We never had any of that equipment when I started. You either walk out or else take a horse and a sleigh, like I said.

DR: What's your favorite stories involving the spear fishing?

AS: Golly, I couldn't tell you [laughter].

DR: You have any stories about the big ones that got away or the ones that were speared in the dark or any of that stuff?

AS: No, not really. But I know I've missed five or six that I didn't get.

DR: You said that one time you speared seven of them in one day.

AS: Yes.

DR: Tell me about the seven.

AS: Well, out east of the sandbar fraction out here about a mile, a mile and a half. We cut in there the night before. The next morning, we come out there, and sometimes two, three at a time would come in the hole.

DR: Really? All my size ones?

AS: No. Most of them were 20-, 25-, 30-pounders. One was about 60. I've got a picture. I'll

show you. There's a picture of five. I gave two away before I took the picture that night.

DR: What did you do with them fish?

AS: Sold them.

DR: Smoked?

AS: Yes.

DR: Live weight?

AS: Yes. I dealt with (Johnny Quakey?), used to.

DR: Everybody dealt with John Quakey around here years ago.

AS: Oh, yes.

DR: I guess there was a real camaraderie here.

AS: Yes. Well, see, I grew up with John. When I when I was young, I used to work for the guy.

DR: On the Lake Winnebago?

AS: Yes. For John's dad, Mike.

DR: Is that for spearing or fishing?

AS: No. For walleye fish and all that stuff. I used to work all summer.

DR: How many people would you usually go with when you got on the lake? Do you have a big crew?

AS: Well, I'd say five, six, seven in our bunch. There wasn't hardly any over-spearing, like I said. You could move wherever you want to. Not like today, there are shanties wherever you look. Back then there was nobody. But we used to try to get along the edge of these reefs. That's where we used to have the best luck about where the reefs would drop off from 8 or 10 feet to 12, 14, 15 feet. That's where we used to get the most sturgeon. The Indians back then they used to say the edge of them reefs were the highways.

DR: Yes. Did you have Indian spears with you then?

AS: No.

DR: Or, I mean, were they around then?

AS: No. My dad knew some Indians, but I didn't.

DR: What did you like best about the spearing?

AS: What like what?

DR: What did you like best about spearing?

AS: I guess the thrill of getting one. [laughter]

DR: You're also a hunter, I take it.

AS: Oh, yes. It's a trapper.

DR: How old are you now?

AS: Ninety.

DR: Ninety. Wow. And you're still spearing?

AS: Oh, yes.

DR: Wow. Good. Who do you spear with now?

AS: A couple of my nephews but mostly, my nephew, Neil.

DR: Who's the most unusual character that you've met over the years spearing?

AS: God, the only one – I don't know if you knew (Jack Wheat?), [inaudible].

DR: No. I didn't know Jack Wheat.

AS: He was kind of an odd one for spearing. He used to spear with us too. Then I used to spear with Eddie Butzlaff.

DR: Are all those guys still around?

AS: No.

DR: You're the last of the crew?

AS: They're all gone.

DR: You're the last of the crew then.

AS: Getting to be, I think of them all old-timers, I think I'm the only one left.



DR: Wow. That was a lot of history gone there.

AS: Yes.

DR: If you had to say, back in the good old days, who do you think would have been the best spearer of all the crews that you knew were on the lake here?

AS: I would say Eddie Butzlaff.

DR: Eddie Butzlaff?

AS: Yes.

DR: Speared the most and the biggest?

AS: Well, yes. He was lucky in getting them. He speared quite a few hundred-pounder ones, Eddie did. He'd get the big ones, and us guys had to take the leftovers.

DR: What was your favorite type of decoy?

AS: Well, when we first started out, we used to have two cobs of corn. Then we'd cut the end of a bolt and stick a bolt in between two cobs of corn. Then that was what our – most years, our decoys were back then, two cobs of corn.

DR: What got you into carving all these fancy decoys?

AS: I don't know. That's made for the sturgeon, never for the people [laughter].

DR: Do you think they work?

AS: Oh, yes, especially them garfish I make. There's some connection between sturgeon and garfish that they hang together. I don't know. But I've had sturgeon come and lay right side them garfish, just lay right there.

DR: What are some of your tricks or the old-timer tricks that you used to do?

AS: Well, years ago, we used to bait them.

DR: Oh, well, how do you bait a sturgeon?

AS: With about a 5-gallon pail of cut-up suckers.

DR: That's okay. That's all right. Just anything over seven years is history. What did you do with the suckers?

AS: I get them out of the creek in spring. Then we cut them in chunks about inch square and drill a hole or cut a hole, side of the shanty, and drop them down about a 5-gallon pail full and then stay in that area. That seemed to hold them. If there was sturgeon there, they would stay in that area. They would kind of hold them.

DR: They like the suckers cuts.

AS: Oh, yes. Well, that's why we used to catch them all in the scent line with cut suckers.

DR: When you're on the scent line, did you use blood suckers too or leeches?

AS: Yes. We used everything, a lot of clams.

DR: What was your favorite bait on the scent line?

AS: Either clams or suckers. But today there are no clams. The clams are gone.

DR: I don't know if you can even do it today. There's a lot of restrictions.

AS: Well, the zebra mussels today killed the clams. They smothered them. We used to get them hooked on the scent. Once in a while, the clam, it'd be that big around one with zebra mussels, two hundred, three hundred zebra mussels on the clam.

DR: What's the best story you ever heard that one of your buddies or yourself were involved in?

AS: Well, the best one I can tell you about is that year when Eddie Butzlaff got that 143-pounder. It came through the hole the first time. He was going to spear it, and the head fell off his spear. He had it held on with a toothpick and a rubber band. Well, then he put his spear back together, and he said about half an hour, he said he figured the same fish came back.

DR: Wow, that's an odd one.

AS: That's an odd one, yes. But he figured the same fish – but when we used to have to stick the toothpick through the handle and then put a rubber band, and he must have had his toothpick got too old. He grabbed the spear, and the head fell off the spear.

DR: Guys are still using toothpicks, I see.

AS: Yes, I know.

DR: With a little rubber band to hold it.

AS: Well, I don't. These ones that I make today are what they call them – I make them myself. But they're like a ball plunger. They're ball bearing and then the spring and where they cross, you can adjust the tension. I'll show you one before I forget.

DR: Have you ever heard any illegal or poaching stories that guys have – you hear them in a bar all the time?

AS: Oh, yes. I can tell you something. I am not going to tell you the guy's name.

DR: That's all right.

AS: But the guy up the New London, about thirty, thirty-five years ago, got a 211-pounder.

DR: Really?

AS: Illegally. I knew some guys that lived in north Shiocton, and this one guy, one night, gaffed twenty-three of them that weighed a ton.

DR: Oh, my goodness.

AS: Yes.

DR: All up in New London, Shiocton north?

AS: Yes. When we were going up to Shiocton. He lived right on the Wolf River, right north of Shiocton. He got in the back of his garage; he had a pier boat out in the river. He gaffed twenty-three of them that weighed a ton. Then I can tell you about another guy from Stephenville, he was taking them down to Milwaukee. He had so many in a pickup truck. He got out, and he blew a tire out in his truck. He had so many sturgeons in it.

DR: Wow. You don't see that nowadays.

AS: No. Like we started that Sturgeon for Tomorrow, that was the best thing to save these sturgeons. I give old Bill Casper credit. He's the guy that came up with that idea.

DR: Oh, really?

AS: Oh, yes.

DR: When did they start that chapter?

AS: 1977. There was nine of us, I think, that used to meet down in the headquarters in Oshkosh Lake.

DR: Were you one of the originators of that group?

AS: Yes.

DR: I have a picture of the originators from Mike Wendt. I duplicated it.

AS: Yes. I don't know if I would have been in the picture. But there was a couple, the (Gretchels?) and a Schneider, I think, and a Robert Lang. Eddie Butzlaff was in on that. I was – that's about all I can tell you.

DR: That was in 1979?

AS: [19]77.

DR: 1977. Where did you meet then?

AS: We used to meet down in the basement of the DNR headquarters on Lake Street. It would have been with Fultz.

DR: Who was he? He was a biologist, if I recall.

AS: Yes. That's right.

DR: What prompted that Surgeon for Tomorrow meeting?

AS: Well, I know Bill Casper. I knew him. He came up with that idea to try to save them because there were so damn many getting poached off. Because years ago, back in the thirties, that's where hundred females went up the river, ninety of them never made it back. Somebody had them. He came up with the idea, and it just kept getting bigger and bigger. I guess now there's four thousand, five thousand people belong to that.

DR: It's a pretty big deal.

AS: Yes. But that's what saves the sturgeon here. Now, they want to open the blocks up. This Ed McCann, this warden, who I'm making the spear for, and (Bill Castranesk?) were all against opening the blocks. Eventually, if they do that, we're going to get some sea lampreys in here. Slow moving, them sturgeon, they will eat them up alive.

DR: Is the water clarity better now than what it was years ago?

AS: Oh, yes. It's a lot better.

DR: I mean, there's years that are exception to that, I guess, like this year.

AS: Yes. Well, you used to get them – I don't know if you remember back in about [19]68, [19]69, some of the years, you only get seven, eight sturgeons. The water was so dirty, you couldn't see a foot or so under the ice.

DR: How do the guys get them then? If they couldn't see, how could they get them?

AS: Snag them.

DR: Oh, really? How would you snag a sturgeon?

AS: Well, we used to use – put two to three minis on a hook and leave them laying on the bottom. When they bit, just pull them up so you get them high enough, so you can spear them.

DR: That's what you call your coaxer.

AS: Yes.

DR: Coax them in?

AS: [laughter] I know guys that did that for years. But then it got out of hand that one year, they got too many. Then they'd get in the [inaudible], and one guy tried to brag more than the other, when they got [inaudible].

DR: I think they used to call that chumming.

AS: Yes, that's right. That's what it's called.

DR: Do you have any other stories?

AS: Oh, [inaudible] not that I can think of.

DR: Do you remember old warden stories that you have heard in the past about your favorite warden?

AS: No, not really.

DR: Ever had any brushes with –

AS: No. I never had much trouble. I got pinched a couple years ago from not having no tags on some of my (coon?) traps.

DR: That's not a big deal.

AS: No.

DR: How did you prepare your sturgeon when you would get them?

AS: Well, me and my wife, we used to like them broiled for eating them.

DR: Well, do you cut them and dice them?

AS: Yes. My wife used to cut them and slice and then broil. That got rid of most of the fat out of them and stuff, like broiling them.

DR: You soak them in anything beforehand?

AS: I think she did overnight, I think in milk or something. We used to like them that way. I like them better that way than smoked.

DR: Oh, really?

AS: Oh, yes.

DR: So, far, the people I've talked to, most of them like it smoked.

AS: Yes, smoked.

DR: Do you think the flavor of the fish have changed with the shad?

AS: Oh, yes. They are a lot better tasting when they feed on these lake fly larvae.

DR: Some other folks have told me that same thing. Your nephews, they eat fish too?

AS: Oh, yes.

DR: Art, you've got quite a reputation for decoy carving. Tell me how you got into it and how you determine their shapes and colors.

AS: I couldn't really tell you. I've been spearing or making them decoys since back in the fifties, these wooden ones. It just kept getting bigger and bigger. I used to sell fifty, sixty every year, them decoys. But now, since I had that article here, I've been shipping them all over the country, these decoys. Then I got to sign my name on it. Some of these guys here, like in Ohio, sold one or two decoys. Some guy in Pennsylvania bought one or two decoys, them collectors. Then they wanted to know the name of the secretary of the Sturgeon for Tomorrow chapter. They each were going to send them a check for \$100.

DR: What determined your shape?

AS: What's what?

DR: What determined the shape?

AS: Well, I don't know, something to attract them, I guess. More or less, something for the people to look at, I guess, more than the sturgeon. But the only one with decoy, it'll stop a lot of times. They'll come up and look at it. It gives you a little better chance to spear.

DR: I know that you got garfish looking ones and fish-shaped looking ones.

AS: Yes.

DR: Which is the best?

AS: I would say the garfish. That's the ones we all use, us guys. It seems some – like I've had them sturgeon come and lay beside them garfish decoys.

DR: What determines the color? You got them on all different colors, I noticed.

AS: Yes. Well, that's the people too.

DR: Whatever is popular?

AS: Yes, that's right [laughter].

DR: What do you enjoy most about the sturgeon experience?

AS: Well, we get together. A bunch of us guys and get over to get together with a bunch of guys, have a little fun here and there.

DR: A lot of camaraderie.

AS: That's right, yes.

DR: Do you think this sturgeon experience has done a lot for the community in this end of the lake?

AS: Oh, yes.

DR: A little more close-knit group with the spearing?

AS: Well, years ago when they had that whole month of February, these taverns, they used to make a fortune, some of them taverns. But now, that's why the decoys and spears [inaudible]. You never know if you're going to have a one-day season or a three-day season. The spears I made, if you take care of it, it will last you a lifetime. Like this one I use, I made in 1960. I'm still using it.

DR: Are you passing your talents on to anybody?

AS: Well, just my nephew, Neil.

DR: He's a pretty good spearer?

AS: Oh, yes. He's beat me, too. He got an 88- pounder and then an 86-pounder so far. He beat me in size.

DR: Oh, good.

AS: But today, they're not going to get the quantities like we did years ago. Because years ago, we didn't register them.

DR: They'll never get seven in one day.

AS: No. Because years ago, we wouldn't register unless they were 70-, 80-pounders. All the 20-, 30-, 40-pounders, we took home.

DR: You put them in the frying pans.

AS: Yes, that's right [laughter].

DR: But you see you're going to be passing this on to your nephew.

AS: Well, I've got two of my nephews. Another one, Jeff, he goes all the time too.

DR: Yes. But you guys have your own shanties?

AS: Oh, yes. Everybody, we all got our own.

DR: They all help you put in all?

AS: Yes. Well, I don't saw anymore. My nephew, Neil, he's got a big saw. He does all the sawing.

DR: You stay at the shanty by yourself?

AS: Oh, yes.

DR: What advice do you have for anybody that's getting into this?

AS: Well, I would say, stick at it. One of my friends went eleven years without getting one.

DR: Finally had one though.

AS: Yes. Well, then you'll get it. It kind of goes in streaks. You'll get them for two, three, four years in a row; then for a couple of five, six years, you won't get any.

DR: You have to be very patient.

AS: Oh, yes. You can't give up. You've just got to grit your teeth and sit there. The OCs like looking at a television set without turning it on.

DR: Well, let's go out. We'll take some pictures of your decoys. Maybe we can get them in the book.



AS: Sure.

DR: Thank you very much, Art.

AS: Okay.

DR: Good luck in the sturgeon spearing.

AS: I'll see if I can find that.

DR: Transcriber, there are three articles in here that you might want to read. They give you a better history on Art than maybe what I have out of the interview. Very interesting articles that have appeared in newspapers and magazines. You might want to read them. We got Art's permission to copy any of this stuff. So, go ahead and do whatever you need.

[end of transcript]