

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish
Ron Vanderzanden Oral History
Date of Interview: October 15, 2007
Location: Menasha, Wisconsin
Length of Interview: 00:20:43
Interviewer: DK – Dick Koerner
Transcriber: NCC

Dick Koerner: This is a test. My name is Dick Koerner. I'm here to interview Ron Vanderzanden for a sturgeon interview. Just checking out the equipment to see if it works. Ron, do you want to say something to me?

Ron Vanderzanden: My name's Ron Vanderzanden. I'm here with Dick Koerner.

DK: This is for real. My name is Dick Koerner. I'm here to do an interview with Ron Vanderzanden. Ron is a dedicated fisherman. He fishes about every day and all kinds of fish; perch, walleye, sturgeon spearer, and all the rest. So, we should get a good interview here from Ron. Ron, I'd like to ask you first of all, where and when were you born?

RV: I was born in Appleton in 1949, January 10th.

DK: Where do you live now?

RV: In Menasha on John Street.

DK: How did you get interested in sturgeon spearing?

RV: My dad was an avid sturgeon spearer. He took me along as early as I can remember, which was probably about five or six where I'd sit in the shack and watch a hole with him. So, brought me along every chance that he could when I was home. That's how I got started.

DK: Now, there's also a hook and line season on some of the lakes out in the western part of Wisconsin. Also, the border rivers, like the Menominee River in Michigan and in Wisconsin. I've fished it myself, hook and lining. I actually caught a legal sturgeon, a 50.5 incher a few years ago. But now the size limit is raised to 60. Have you ever done that, fished in the river?

RV: No, I never have. I know a couple guys that do fish it. If I ever had the opportunity, I probably would go and would like it.

DK: Well, I got a friend of mine that just got back from Yellow Lake over in the western part of the state. They had six sturgeons in a week. You can only get one a day or one a season rather. But they released them. But to catch six of them, 60 inches must have been a pretty good fishing day for those guys. Who taught you, your dad or a friend or pretty much everybody.

RV: My dad –

DK: Your dad.

RV: – and people he'd go with. Sat with quite a few guys that my dad didn't want me either in his shack or in other shacks. So, just kind of watching him and listening to him and what he said and what he told me to look for. Although when I was a kid, I never saw one [laughter].

DK: Oh, yes. Ron, how has the sport changed since you started spearing?

RV: It's changed quite a bit. To me it's for the better with the regulations and things with raising the fees and stuff like that. Before, in the early days there are a lot of violations going on, buying tags when somebody would get one or buy one for a friend or whatever. Or a lot of times, different people would buy one for their wives. There were a lot of wives that got sturgeons every year.

DK: [laughter]

RV: But that isn't the case anymore because I think with the regulations and increase in fines, it's helped to reduce the illegal activity and stuff. So, it's changed. Especially the thing I like is the half-day season because you're not sitting out there all day. Half a day is plenty to sit there especially when you go the whole season.

DK: I agree. I know I've been spearing for about fifty or fifty-five years. When the season was all day, I was there all day and it was tough. You didn't want to wimp out and quit early.

RV: You're afraid that if you went out, you'd miss one going through.

DK: Yes, that's for sure. But we've made over seventeen rule changes in the last few years. It was all to protect the sturgeon. So, I know we're on the right track and I'm happy about that. I'm glad to hear your comments that you agree with those changes. Ron, how many years have you been spearing?

RV: Well, I started spearing probably sitting in a shack alone before I was even supposed to. I didn't have a tag. But a lot of times my dad would walk over to another shanty and get some information or just talk to another person. So, probably sitting in the shack alone when I was probably eight or nine for a short time. Then whenever it was legal, twelve, it probably was back then where you could get a tag, twelve or fourteen. Then from that point on, I started going and sitting in a shack alone quite a bit.

DK: I don't know how old you are, but does that relate to forty plus years?

RV: Yes. Probably at least forty-five. So, it's been quite a while from when I started.

DK: A non-spearer thinks that every time you go, you get one and all that. How many have you speared?

RV: I've speared seven. It was quite a while before I got the first one [laughter].

DK: [laughter] I know a lot of guys that said, "I've been spearing twenty years and I haven't got one yet." The reason I was somewhat successful is I put my time in. You got to do that. I fish every day. I've got about twenty-seven, but I've been doing it for a while. Have you missed any in that period of time?

RV: Yes. I missed a few of them. But they were side shots or just see part of them. Not good shots. So, few of them that I missed, but not that many. Not many at all.

DK: Did you ever have any on the spear that you lost?

RV: No. But two of them were very close. One I gaffed, threw on the floor, and the spear fell out.

DK: [laughter]

RV: Another one I gaffed and threw outside the shack and the spear fell out when I got outside. So, that's about as close you're going to get.

DK: Well, Ron, it's a goal of every spearer it seems that I know, the magic number is a hundred pounder. I haven't reached it. I speared one that it spawned a year before and was 87 pounds. Had it had eggs yet, I would have gotten my hundred pounders. So, I haven't got one yet. Have you?

RV: No. My biggest one was just under 60 pounds. I saw one that was over a hundred pounds, but it was the day before it opened.

DK: [laughter]

RV: The reason I know that, it was on Poygan and the hole was 72 inches long. When he was going through, he was going really slow. I looked down, his nose was just going through one end of it, and it went on the other side the shack and the steel was just coming through. So, it was a minimum of 72, but I figured about 76 to 78 inches.

DK: That's a big one.

RV: Right through the middle of the hole. It was only five feet of water, so it was one big fish.

DK: Yes. You could gauge that pretty good. Do you use decoys?

RV: Yes, I use decoys every time.

DK: Some people like to, some people put too many. I don't know if there is such a thing as too many. But I don't like myself a lot of lines in the hole. But some people don't believe in any. As far as color, do you have a favorite color?

RV: I had probably orange or kind of an orange brown that's worked pretty good through the years.

DK: Do you have a favorite time of day now? It's changed now with the half days. So, most people are out there from, say, 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. for sure, or 12:30 p.m. But I have a favorite time. If I could only pick two hours to be there, I would say 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. But if I could have four hours, I'd say 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. But I like that noon as it seems like that's when I've had my best luck. Yet I know a guy that swears by 8:00 a.m. he got to be there,

come hell or high water. What do you think?

RV: All the sturgeon I've got have been from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. I would say right in that 9:30 a.m. to maybe 11:30 a.m., 12:00 p.m., somewhere in there. Yes, right around that morning part, later morning, has been the best for me.

DK: Well, Ron, what is one of your most memorable experiences while spearing?

RV: There's a couple of them. My first one that I ever got, which I was just about ready to give it up but my dad asked me to go because there was an open shack of a senior. So, I went and I hadn't seen a sturgeon, never saw a sturgeon, but listened to all the stories my dad said. So, as I was sitting there and alone in the shack, I saw something on the bottom that just maybe looked like a big walleye or something like that. But my dad said, "If you see something moving on the bottom, more than likely it's a sturgeon." So, took the spear, threw it at the biggest part. It was only about maybe a foot that I could see. I threw it at the biggest part. I started pulling up and didn't think I had anything. It was about halfway up, I thought it's got to be out of mud by now. I looked down, there's a sturgeon on the end of the spear. So, that was the first one. That's what got me hooked.

DK: Yes, that's memorable all right. It doesn't matter how big it is, you got a notch on the spear handle. Yes, that's a lot of memories. It's just like deer hunting. You could sit around a campfire and tell sturgeon stories just like deer hunting and other things.

RV: Yes, there was one other time that one guy I fish with, once he throws the spear, he's pretty well done and he starts shaking and he can't do anything. So, I pretty well take over. He speared a nice one, one year. I said, "Okay, here you take the rope." He said, "I can't pull it up." I said, "Well, take the gaff." He said, "I can't gaff." I said, "Well, I'll pull it up and when it gets to the top, grab the rope and I'll gaff it." So, I did that and I gaffed it. I was a nice 85 pounder. I took it and I threw it out the shack. I said, "Okay, now get it in the truck before everybody sees it." So, after about forty-five minutes, he didn't come in and I yelled out, "What's the problem?" He said, "I can't lift it."

DK: [laughter]

RV: I said, "Get in the shack here [laughter]." I said, "I'll do it." So, I went out. By that time, two guys were drilling right next to us [laughter].

DK: Oh, yes. Ron, in your experiences on the ice and you know how weather changes. Have you run into any bad ice conditions like snow blizzard cracks, open water springs?

RV: Yes, just like everybody else, all of the above.

DK: All of the above.

RV: You really have to watch it. You have to know what you're doing. I've seen whiteouts and if you had a car, you'd probably get lost. A truck, you'd get above some of that whiteout which

helps. But need a compass and you need to know the lake. You just can't go wandering around because there are springs around there. You got to know where those springs are. You got to talk to other fishermen and just not go cross country and stuff. Because even when there's a lot of ice, there's places that aren't safe.

DK: Well, that's true. You said the key word, compass. I take a compass with me all the time in the wintertime and in the summertime as well, because you never know when a ground fog is going to lift and set in or whatever. It's just important to have a compass. Any superstitions that you might have spearing? It's got to be certain color coats or certain color socks that you wear? [laughter] It sounds dumb, but I know a guy who mistakenly put on one blue sock and one green, he got a fish that day. From then on, he always wore one blue and one green.

RV: Not really. We try different cloaks. It depends. Somebody will tell me about something, and I'll try it. It works one time and it won't work another time. For me, it seems like I get my fish on a half an hour. It's like 9:30 a.m., 10:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m. So, if there's anything, it's more the half an hour time than anything else.

DK: What's another favorite story that you can remember? Anything that you can relate to a friend of yours that it happened to or something? I've heard of guys putting a fish in the back of a pickup and losing it and going up in the ramp and then didn't know it. Going to register it and by the time they got there, there was no fish.

RV: Well, they did. One story, since we're talking about compass. We were going out one day and it was so foggy you couldn't see more than 50 feet ahead of you. I told the guy I was with, he said, "Well, the shack's out 3 miles straight west." He said, "Well, you still want to go?" I said, "Yes, I'll look at the compass and you look at the odometer. When get out 3 miles, tell me and then we'll get out." So, we got out 3 miles and you couldn't see any shacks. So, we got out the car and I said, "Well, I'll walk a circle around the car and kind of go out about a hundred yards." When we got out there, walked around and I went around the half circle. Probably about 75 yards away was the shack. I found it through a compass and kind of how far we were out on sand. This guy's brother, it was his shack and it took him three hours to find it until the fog lifted.

DK: [laughter]

RV: Because he didn't use the compass, he just kind of went out. What he thought was where it was supposed to be and he couldn't find it. So, a compass definitely helps and can be a lifesaver.

DK: You better believe it, yes. How about recipes? Do you have a favorite recipe? How do you fix your sturgeon?

RV: I like it fried. I just put a little batter on it and throw it in the deep fryer and fry it. I baked it already. I've had it smoked, but my preference is to throw it in the grease and fry it up.

DK: Do you use small pieces so they cook through or –

RV: I cut them up in small strips, so they cook through the chunks. Kind of steak them in smaller strips so they go all the way through rather than take a big chunk and fry it like that.

DK: Yes, I know. I learned that lesson in a hurry because when it was gold and brown on the outside, you dump them in a dish and then all of a sudden, the inside isn't done. So, I learned a lesson, cut them smaller.

RV: Then soaking them in whole milk or buttermilk before you freeze them seems to help with the flavor.

DK: How about caviar? Have you ever eaten caviar?

RV: I've eaten it. It tastes kind of like salty fish eggs.

DK: Well, Ron, what do you enjoy the most about sturgeon spearing?

RV: Just camaraderie if somebody else is there. But the excitement and the adrenaline rush when one comes through. You can be sitting there for a week and not see anything. Then all of a sudden, it's there and you got about two seconds to react. It's just an adrenaline rush that you can't explain until you get one.

DK: Exactly. It isn't like deer hunting when you can hear a shot and then you hear leaves and branches cracking and then you anticipate. But this is nothing and nothing and nothing and all of a sudden there it is.

RV: I do muskie fishing and deer hunting and big northern fishing and salmon and everything else. When somebody asks me what do you like the best, it's not the sturgeon fishing and sitting there watching a hole and not seeing anything. It's when it comes through. That's the biggest adrenaline rush and most excitement as far as I'm concerned with any sport that there is.

DK: I want to thank you for your interview, Ron, and the time that you took to tell us your stories. I do appreciate it. Looking forward to seeing your story printed in the book that we're going to put out. Incidentally, this book is put out by the Department of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Great Lakes Water Institute, Sturgeon for Tomorrow, University of Wisconsin Sea Grant, and the Oshkosh Public Museum. So, when this book is complete, it'll be for sale and hopefully we're all around to read the stories when it comes out. So, at this time, Ron, thanks again. This is the end of the interview with Ron Vanderzanden. This is Dick Koerner signing off.

[end of transcript]