

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

Howard Wruch Oral History

Date of Interview: October 12, 2006

Location: Oshkosh, Wisconsin

Length of Interview: 00:13:13

Interviewer: DC – Dominic Carmona

Transcriber: NCC

Dominic Carmona: Hi. This is Dominic Carmona. I'm here today with Howard Wruck to conduct an interview for the Sturgeon History Project. It is October 12th, 2006. We are in town of Algoma. Hi, Howard?

Howard Wruck: Hi.

DC: I just wanted to thank you for seeing us today. Just wanted to ask you some basic background information on yourself before we get started. Where were you born?

HW: In the town of Friendship.

DC: Friendship. Then what size family do you have?

HW: It was four of us kids.

DC: Four of us. Then I guess what got you started in sturgeon fishing, I'm sorry.

HW: Well, my brother was in it and he got me into it.

DC: So, this is like a family thing. Who taught your brother?

HW: Well, his friends from the east side. We started on the east side of the lake.

DC: That would be Lake Winnebago?

HW: Yes.

DC: So, how long have you been at this then?

HW: Since the late forties.

DC: Late forties. Then anything within that time? That's a pretty long time. Have you done it every year since?

HW: I've been doing it every year since.

DC: Really?

HW: Yes.

DC: I'm sure you have a lot of stories that you would care to tell. Tell me about anything unique, like for instance, your biggest catch and how big was that catch?

HW: Ninety.

DC: Ninety pounds. How long ago was that?

HW: [19]90.

DC: Oh, [19]90.

HW: No, not [19]90, in 2000.

DC: That's pretty recent.

HW: Was that night fishing? Were you around then?

DC: No. There was night fishing?

HW: Yes, I speared at night.

DC: Really? I just thought this was at daytime.

HW: They did away with it right after that.

DC: Oh, they did? They stopped doing the night spearfishing. I thought it was just the daytime spearfishing.

HW: At night you use lights and really worked nice.

DC: Really?

HW: [laughter]

DC: Now, this night fishing, did you think that had better results than the daytime fishing?

HW: No, I don't think so.

DC: No? But you said something about where I'm sure there were some benefits at fishing at night.

HW: Well, I knew the spot where it was. I knew they fed there at night and I was right [laughter].

DC: Then as far as knowing where to go, did you have special spots or did the spots rotate yearly?

HW: We had special spots, but we moved. The sturgeons weren't always in the same spot. We had to move to find them.

DC: So, yes, I guess more with the actual activity itself, what sort of equipment do you need to do sturgeon fishing?

HW: Well, you got to have a chainsaw to cut the hole. Really you need a four-wheel drive to move around out there and the spears and gaff hooks.

DC: Now, did these spears and gaff hooks, how did you go about getting these? Did people make them special for these activities?

HW: I had two of them made specially for me.

DC: Who made these things?

HW: Rashay, a friend of mine. He's dead now.

DC: Did he make them for anybody else?

HW: Not very many. I was his favorite one [laughter].

DC: Now, who is this person in the photo with you?

HW: Scott Edinburgh.

DC: He is?

HW: He's been fishing with me since he was sixteen years old. It was too heavy for me to hold up [laughter].

DC: That's a big one. So, he was sixteen. Why did he start?

HW: He wasn't sixteen there [laughter].

DC: Oh, yes, he is. But how did he get started in fishing? Did you just take him out or –

HW: Well, another friend of mine I speared with, he had kids. He'd come out with the kids and he was lucky right away.

DC: He was?

HW: Yes.

DC: He didn't have any problems.

HW: No.

DC: He got a catch. So, other than this one, I'm interested in this big catch here. How long did it take to get him in?

HW: I killed him when I hit him.

DC: Oh, you did?

HW: Yes.

DC: Right in the spot?

HW: Hit him in the spine and he went right down the bottom and laid there.

DC: This was the night?

HW: Yes, 5:30 a.m.

DC: 5:30 a.m. This was on Lake Winnebago?

HW: Yes.

DC: This was back in 1990?

HW: Two thousand.

DC: Two thousand. So, you're still at this. Are you going to continue spearfishing?

HW: Oh, yes.

DC: You'll be out this year going out?

HW: Yes.

DC: So, you said your brother had taught you how to do this, right?

HW: Yes.

DC: Did you guys go out a lot, like every year?

HW: Oh, yes. Well, he bought a tavern on the west shore, and he really started fishing from out there.

DC: He lived out there.

HW: He lives in [inaudible]. There was no fishing off the west shore.

DC: What type was this?

HW: Tanks.

DC: Tanks. So, it was just you and your brother that started doing this activity?

HW: Yes.

DC: Just it grew from there.

HW: It grew fast. When it started going, it went fast.

DC: Now, after you catch these fish, do you do anything with them?

HW: Smoke them mostly.

DC: You do that. Do you have any special recipes that you –

HW: He does smoke them.

DC: He does?

HW: Yes.

DC: Then I'm interested in what kind of taste do they have?

HW: I love them.

DC: Is it an acquired taste?

HW: Well, I know a lot of people don't like them, but I love them.

DC: You love them smoked. Well, is there any other way?

HW: I fry them too.

DC: So, basically either smoked or fried?

HW: Yes.

DC: Exactly how many sturgeon fish have you actually caught?

HW: I couldn't tell you. I know I don't keep track.

DC: A lot though.

HW: Probably, I don't know.

DC: Are you pretty successful?

HW: Over the years a lot of them. You got good times and you got bad times. That's the last time I speared, since then I don't see nothing [laughter].

DC: Really? So, this is two thousand and in the last four or five years you haven't.

HW: That's right. A little one, that's all.

DC: Now, is this a male or a female, do you know?

HW: It was a female.

DC: Was it?

HW: Yes, it had eggs in it.

DC: So, after you catch it, what happens? What do you have to do with the fish after you catch it?

HW: What do I have to do?

DC: Yes.

HW: Well, you have to take it and register, is the first thing, and clean it up. We take it to a carwash and use a pressure washer. They're slimy and that pressure washer takes the slim off and it really does a good job of it.

DC: So, does everybody take their surgeon to these car washes to clean them?

HW: Yes, usually a couple other guys. I haven't helped clean them for a few. I know we'll go as a bunch [laughter].

DC: So, I guess what do you like best about this activity?

HW: I like when the season is longer and a bunch of guys get together. Togetherness with a bunch of guys, I think.

DC: So, it's a pretty important activity that goes on around here.

HW: Yes.

DC: Do you think the rest of the community is pretty devoted to this activity?

HW: I never heard anything against it.

DC: Let's see. Is there anything else, Howard, that you would like to say?

HW: Well, I'll tell you about the first one I speared.

DC: Excellent.

HW: In the late forties, my nephew and I went out. We drove around the lake to come out from Kellnersville. Just got in the shanty and he was starting a fire. He was a poor fire starter [laughter]. I was standing there, I looked and there was a golf ball coming and going through the hole. I said, "Oh, it's got to be a fish." I speared it. He walked over the hole and when the fish rolled, he got off to spear it. We tried three several times and there was no fish. Oh, I was disgusted, I left. About two hours and a half later I came back and I didn't get out the car and I could hear him hollering, "Howard, there's a large one and now it's gone." Here he laid way over to the side. The first time I threw to even reach him, I had to straddle a hole and throw as hard as I could and I got him [laughter]. He was dead laying there.

DC: So, this was your first one?

HW: My first one.

DC: You were with who again, your brother?

HW: Nephew.

DC: Nephew. This was at what part of the lake?

HW: Kellnersville.

DC: Now, I've read stories about the different seasons of good and bad sturgeon fishing. A lot of times I hear about the ice melting away during the sturgeon season. Now, see, I have heard that trucks have actually fallen in the cracks, fell through the through the ice. Have you ever had any experiences or seen anything?

HW: I've seen the cars drop in, but I never dropped one in. I go too fast [laughter].

DC: Then has anything seriously happened with the ice cracking or –

HW: Well, I guess you drop a car as you're spearing.

DC: Well, I guess I don't have anything else. If you want to add something else about this activity.

HW: No, I don't think so. But when we first started it was all hand work. You had to chop a hole and two corners of the hole, chopping through. Then you used a hand saw to saw them. He always asked me was it hard work sawing a hole? I said, I don't know. He was worn out when he got done chopping the holes.



DC: Then the shanties, what are they and exactly how are they used in the activity? The shanties.

HW: Shanties?

DC: Yes.

HW: They're just like shanties [laughter].

[end of transcript]