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Fishing in Manitowoc County. Monograph 9 1969

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FISHING IN MANITOWOC COUNTY

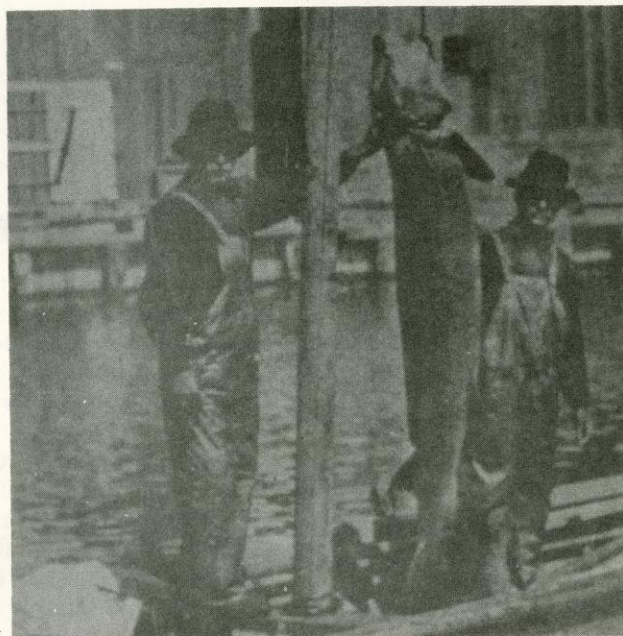
BY EUGENE KREJCAREK

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Manitowoc is a county which has rich agricultural resources. This suggests that the soil of the county contains those nutrients which would make it very productive of plants of every description, and of trees. In Falge's History of Manitowoc County, (vol. 1) we read that "When the first settlers came to the county they found it an almost impenetrable wilderness." The streams and lakes of the county of which there are a number, were almost as rich in aquatic life as were the forests in animal life. Falge comments about this thus, "In the streams, fish were abundant, including bass, pickerel, and bullheads, while in the lake, whitefish, trout and herring were caught in great quantities, Two Rivers being the center of that industry. In the rivers of the northern part of the county, particularly in Kossuth and Gibson, clams were abundant and several valuable pearls have been found. Crawfish are also numerous at the mouths and along the courses of the streams."

With the forests, streams and lakes so productive of animal and fish life, it is no wonder that the Indians who resided here, liked it here. Falge on page 20 comments thus, "In 1818, Captain Abram Edwards of Detroit, on his way to Chicago, passed the Twin Rivers, where the shores were lined with Indians, many of whom were in canoes spearing fish. They belonged to the Pottawottomie and Ottawa tribes, and according to an Indian philologist, the name of Manitowoc was given by them to the little village at the mouth of the river to the south, signifying that it was "the abode of the Great Spirit."

It was in 1837 that Captain J. V. Edwards came to Manitowoc Rapids from Green Bay, with Jacob Conroe, and started a fishery in Two Rivers. With one man and his son Henry, a lad of thirteen summers, and Perry B. Smith, he cast his seines about half way between Two Rivers and Manitowoc, and his first haul was intensely encouraging. There were ten barrels of fish and so pleased was he with



this venture that he determined to make fishing a business, which he did. He became the first fisherman to adopt the business in the county.

Captain J.V. Edwards built a fishing shack on the beach at Two Rivers. The rendering of fish oil, for which a market had been created by the whites, was an important industry. The Indians of Two Rivers, as well as those from the Rapids, and the Forks, frequently came to Manitowoc in large numbers, and camped around the store of old Peleg Glover at the corner of 6th and York Streets. Glover was an old Indian trader, who could talk with them freely in their own language, and consequently received a large share of their trade. They exchanged venison, fish oil, baskets, and other things for knives, ammunition, cloth and other necessary goods.

J.P. Clark followed Captain Edwards. At Two Rivers he gave employment to twenty men. Eventually Captain Edwards formed a partnership with Clark and the business became very profitable. It is said that in one catch fish sufficient to fill 175 barrels holding 200 pounds each, were secured, and for a number of years

the annual catch by the company was 2,000 barrels. In 1838 the fish brought twelve dollars a barrel at Detroit.

Concerning fishing at the mouth of the Manitowoc river, Falge remarks as follows in "History of Manitowoc County", (p.54) "When the boys of the village were not in the water, or raiding a vegetable garden or an orchard, they were probably fishing on the platform on the rear of Truman's flour mill, on the south side of the river, about four hundred feet from its mouth. However, no one was so serious about it to make it a business. It is true, there were a few professional fishermen who drew their seines in the lake, and exported salted white fish. Their shanties, erected on piles, were situated on the south side, east of the Eighth Street bridge. The river abounded in various kinds of fish, bullheads and perch predominating; but they also caught pickerel, bass, sunfish, and sometimes a sucker or sturgeon. Tackle and bait did not require the study they do now; like game in general, fish were tamer, also more abundant, and then the bait, the meat of a crab, ever ready on hand, was food, not a mere imitation. Here they

lay stretched out, line in hand, waiting for a bite, while watching the excursions of a water bug or a skater insect, or the kingfisher on a neighboring porch waiting for the appearance of his prey.

The logs near Guyles' sawmill, at the foot of Main Street, was a much frequented place. Running on the logs, not without the spice of danger, and fishing between the logs, were favorite past-times. Just outside the logs, in midstream, the wild duck plumed itself, and the plover and the hell-diver were nearly always in evidence. In the sedgy bottom, margined with wild grass, on the opposite side, the loon was at home, and cried often. Near the south shore of the river, under the railroad bridge — built long before the iron horse came — was a famous fishing ground. Here the untamed bass reigned supreme. It was a sequestered spot; its solitude was broken only by the chirp of a cricket, the hoarse croak of the bullfrog, and the fish as it described an arc. The rushes along the shore grew in Indian file, shadowing the dark current. The hill ranges in the neighborhood opened fine pictures of the windings of the river. It was then noted for its varied and beautiful scenery."

Eugene Krejcarek, authors unit on fishing

Eugene Krejcarek, principal of the Jackson Elementary School in Manitowoc, is the author of a fishing unit, written for the elementary school pupils of that city, especially for those who are participants in the sixth grade school camping program. He began his study of fishing in Manitowoc County by consulting newspapers of the early 1850's and certain other sources concerning fishing in those early years. He visited with an old-time fisherman, namely George LeClair, of Route 1, Two Rivers, and out of this was written an excellent unit on fishing in the early years.

In this monograph we shall publish only the informative materials contained in the unit. Teachers may wish to obtain a copy of the entire unit for included also are discussion questions, student activities, and an appendix which contains ledger records of receipts and expenditures of a fisherman. The unit also contains an excellent bibliography. The interview with an old time fisherman was taped...it is one hour in length. There also is a series of slides as an aid to teaching of the unit.

Since Mr. Krejcarek intended that the unit should be taught while pupils are at the Rahr Memorial School Forest for their school camping experience, and specifically indicated that the unit applied to fishing in that particular area, it is apparent that it could be applied anywhere in Manitowoc County.

We thank Mr. Krejcarek for granting permission to publish this unit of study as one in our series of occupational monographs.

A FISHING UNIT

by Prin. Eugene Krejcarek

Introduction

The abundance of fish in Lake Michigan was an important factor in the settlement and development of land all along its boundaries, and the School Forest lake frontage area was no exception. When Indians were the only inhabitants of Wisconsin, the abundance of food including fish from Lake Michigan explained early camp locations. The Menominee tribes were regular visitors to our forest site and very likely were the first to have a "fish fry" of whitefish or lake trout. White visitors of Wisconsin were influenced in their decisions as to settlement in an area by food and other resources as well. Fish were available in quantity both as a nourishing sustenance and as an economic resource for making a livelihood.

Because this apparent unlimited resource was available off the shores of the School Forest to both red and white man and was an influential factor in the development of the area, it merits a more comprehensive study. Those who are currently or will be in the future, using the site in their environmental and ecological analyses along with social and economic development of the area, will find the fishing industry an integral part of their evaluations. It was one of the big three early industrial operations of the area: agriculture, lumbering, and fishing; and continued over the years with various necessary adaptations to its present day status.

Purpose of the study of this unit, therefore, is to assist students to understand the impact of the fish resources in Lake Michigan on the social and economic development of the area surrounding their School Forest and including both of the cities of Manitowoc and Two Rivers.

History

Although records do not pinpoint the date of the first fishing operation in the area of the School Forest, there are accounts of fishing as a business being carried on, in and around Manitowoc and Two Rivers as early as 1837. Many of the early settlers of Two Rivers were French and were acquainted with methods of netting fish. Reports of the abundance of fish in the lake encouraged many to settle here and begin the fishing industry.

A newspaper ad in the Manitowoc County Herald, Saturday, December 21, 1850 read as follows:

Fishermen Ahoy!

Just received by the subscriber 1000 lbs. of gilling twine of all numbers and qualities which will be sold cheap for cash or in exchange of fish. Also constantly on hand a quantity of fish barrels and fishing traps.

Manitowoc, December 7, 1850

J. E. Platt

Another newspaper account dated February 12, 1852 listing the exports and imports of the port of Two Rivers for the year 1851 reports a total value of \$16,198 on fish exports from the port of Two Rivers. Likewise listings of ships arriving and clearing either port frequently indicated barrels of fish as export cargo. Lumber and other forest products, however, dominated the exports throughout most of the 1870's and 1880's. This was the period during which Nero (Two Creeks) was reaching its peak as the headquarters for the tanning industry. And obviously, barrels of salted whitefish and lake trout soon found their way to markets in Milwaukee and Chicago along with tannery and hides. The fishing industry was gaining in popularity as evidenced by a Manitowoc Pilot news item dated August 7, 1868 which said, "From a point seven or eight miles north of Two Rivers south to this place there are no less than one hundred men, who with their families, are dependent on this branch of industry for a livelihood."

Apparently, the number of people engaged in fishing and questions over fishing area rights resulted in the state statute regarding same as found in Chapter 197 of General Laws — State of Wisconsin. As stated in the law, this was an "act to protect persons engaged in fishing in Lake Michigan with trap or pound nets." It required a fisherman to "stake his claim" to a segment of the lake which was then recorded in a "Fish Claims Book" in the County Register of Deeds office. During the three-year period, 1864-1866, a total of fifty entries were made with detailed descriptions of "fish claims." One such claim read as follows:

"that said monument is a Birch stake driven into the ground and having a pine board nailed or attached thereto on which is painted the or printed the name of the undersigned and the true date of its erection as follows, 'C. Schoch, March 17th, 1864' — for the purpose of perfecting a claim or right to fish at said locality in the water of Lake Michigan with a trap or pound or pond net."

Names of people engaged in fishing

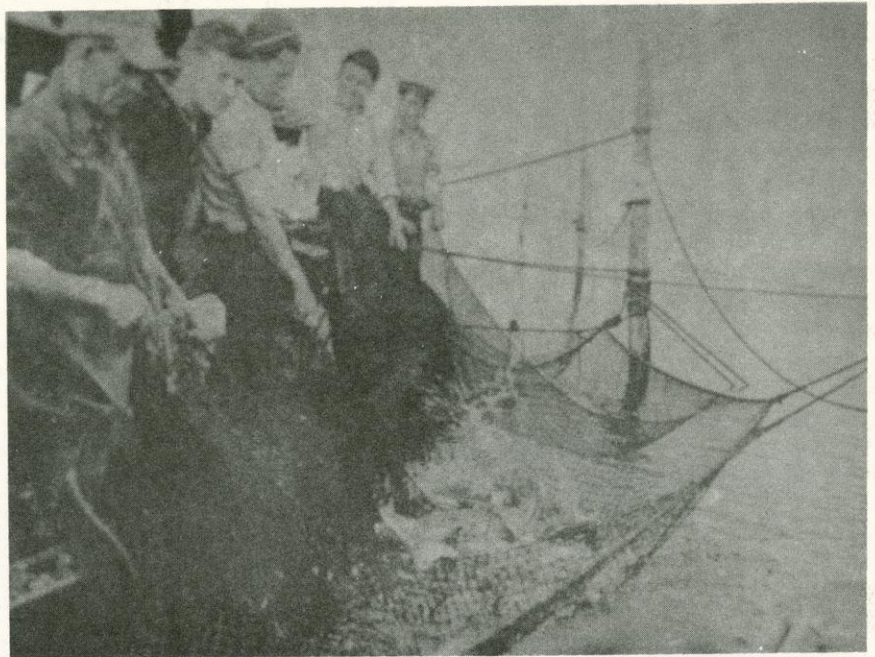
most frequently found in early reports include the following: David and Anna Smoke, Jacob Conroe, J.V. Edwards, J. P. Clark, F. Levenhagen, T. Harrington, S. Denis, A. Lamén, Perry P. Smith, A. Wooster, C. Bates, G. Eggers, C. Schochs, C. Westphal, J. Lamay, F. Pfunder, F. Boutin, N. Berner, and Lars Nelson. Later the names Vaudreuil, Schroeder, Lonzo, Gagnon, Allie, LeClair, and LaFond were synonymous with the fishing industry. In several families, two and three generations pursued this occupation. It is interesting to note that on the first parcel of property purchased for the School Forest, David Smoke's name is listed in the original land transaction in the abstract. He is also credited with catching what was considered to be the largest trout ever — measuring four feet four inches in length and weighing forty-three pounds and eight ounces. (Manitowoc Pilot, June 29, 1866.) And to establish some idea as to the supply of the fish resource in Lake Michigan, note the quote from the Pilot — July 1, 1864 — “Fishing Extraordinary — Two or three weeks more of such a ‘run’ will make them (fishermen) indifferent to the price of gold.”

Fishing Methods

The most common type of fishing used by fishermen was the use of “pound nets.” It consisted primarily of three separate netting structures. A “lead” net extended from shallow to deeper water serving as a directional net. Fish would follow the net from either side and enter the “heart” net structure named after its shape. Here they would swim around until they reached the heart point through which they entered the “pot” or “pound.” This net structure was usually twenty-five or more feet square and twenty to thirty feet deep with a net bottom. It was a net box or trap from which the fish were not able to escape. “Lifting the net consisted of literally lifting the bottom net and scooping out the fish — an apparent simple operation.

“Gill nets” were also used and as the name implies — caught the fish by their gills. It was a much simpler operation with a long net similar to the “lead” stretched into the lake to catch fish as they traveled about.

The pound net was more difficult to “set” with as many as thirty-four spiles required. Some of these spiles were up to seventy feet long. In early years these frequently were long tamarack poles but later were two pieces, one oak and one tamarack, bolted together at midpoint. It's difficult to imagine how these spiles were driven into the bottom of the lake



and anchored to support the nets and their catch. Ordinarily this type net was set in early spring or summer and hopefully, with the absence of storms, remained in position all summer. The “pound” could be lifted three times per week. Minor net repairs were made each time of the lift. The major advantage of the pound net was that fish remained alive until scooped out, whereas fish caught in a gill net were usually dead when removed. Capacity of an average pound was considered to be about 200 barrels of fish (200 pounds per barrel). The Pilot (7-1-1864) reported that “at Wooster's double net they are packing from 40 to 75 barrels per day. At Bates', Smoke's, Eggers', and Brenner's, about 25.” Fish prices were listed at about 2½ cents per pound.

Types of Fish

Whitefish and trout were the most common fish caught during earlier years with herring, perch, chubs, suckers, and carp taking over on their decline. Whitefish were considered by some to be the most desirable of all. Sturgeon were reported by some fishermen but never reached significant proportions in quantity.

As indicated earlier in this report, there were record catches of whitefish and trout in the 1860's and “fish claims” were necessary to prevent squabbles. Fish values were likened to gold and the rush to fishing grounds might well be compared with the gold rush. But something happened to the supply of fish during the 1870's and 1880's. News articles are totally void of fish catches from the Manitowoc Pilot report of July 1, 1864 to one small item in its July 25, 1878

issue — under Two Rivers News it states:

“Trolling for pickerel is about the only kind of fishing that pays now.”

In its January 19, 1882 issue an ad by J. Schuette & Bros. announces:

“Fish! — Whitefish and trout are scarce and high this season, therefore, we have laid in a good supply of salt water herring which we are selling at about half the price of whitefish.”

Another ad in its March 2, 1882 issue by Plumb & Nelson, grocers, lists a complete stock of imported fish offered for sale in Manitowoc and Two Rivers.

Obviously, many people were concerned about the decline in fish supply and in the Pilot — June 2, 1887 — William Nash of Two Rivers suggested that a fish warden for that section should be appointed. In the same issue a news item states that Game Warden Wentworth of Fort Atkinson is making appointments of deputies and will visit Manitowoc during the week.

And finally, in the Pilot — June 29, 1893 — under Marine News the total exports for the year 1892 lists 50,000 pounds of fish — or approximately 250 barrels.

During the early 1900's, the introductions of lamprey and smelt, and then later the alewife had a definite effect on the fish supply and fishing as an industry continued to decline.

Recent introductions of coho salmon and rainbow trout along with attempts of control on the alewife and lamprey are skyrocketing the hopes for the future of both commercial and recreational fishermen.

Fishing Boats

The earliest fishing boats were sailing types most common of which was the

Mackinac. It is reported that in 1880 Two Rivers had the largest Mackinac fleet on Lake Michigan. These ships were a two-man type but extremely narrow. These were replaced by boats powered by steam or gasoline engines. In the year 1899 an engine built by the Kahlenberg brothers provided power for a LaFond fishing boat. This new company later installed engines in other fishing boats and continues as an engine-building establishment today.

The derrick which was used to drive spiles was mounted on a flat-bottomed scow and was towed by the fishing tug. The derrick itself was powered by a steam or gasoline engine and in later years by an actual automobile or truck engine.

Marketing the Fish

Early fishermen sold their fish to both local markets and more distant ones. In most cases the fish were salted and packed in barrels of 200 pounds each. These barrels became ship cargo destined for ports such as Milwaukee, Chicago, and Detroit. Prices quoted per barrel ranged from five to eight dollars a barrel during the years 1864 - 1880.

In later years the fish were sent by rail packed in ice and finally by truck. In the period of 1919 - 1932 fish were selling at prices ranging from 10½ to 26 cents per pound by comparison.

Present Day

As noted earlier, the supply of fish has not been steady over the approximately 100 years of fishing reported herein. It reached fantastic limits in the 1860's but seemed to be almost opposite in the next two decades. There seemed to be an increase in supply again in the early 1900's but reached another nil period in the 1930's and 1940's.

Reasons for the great fluctuations vary with opinions such as the following most commonly offered:

1. Overabundance of fishermen and enormous catches.
2. No seasonal control which permitted fish to be caught during spawning seasons.
3. Restrictions on size limits of both fish and net mesh.
4. Introduction and ravages of the lamprey eel.
5. Introductions of smelt and alewife which overpopulated the lake.
6. Pollution of water in lake and tributaries.
7. Use of soil nutrients and pest insecticides.

Much has been done in recent years in attempts to solve the problems described.

The lamprey was considered to be eliminated but has apparently survived and needs further attention. Pollution is receiving national publicity and enforcement of regulations has been stepped up. Special efforts are being made to reduce the supply of alewife and the legality of the use of DDT is being examined.

It is interesting to note that in a one hundred year period, we have swung from an extraordinary supply of fish to the point where man is finding it necessary to plant rainbow trout and coho salmon to provide any fish at all for commercial or recreational fishing.

Future Years

Whether or not fishing in Lake Michigan will survive as an industry or sport depends on how well we can control the basic problems of pollution, pesticides, and nuisance fish. Can man restore some kind of harmony to the lake community? Will the introduction of rainbow and coho provide the answer? If the lake trout and whitefish, which were most numerous a century ago, should begin to increase, will

they be in competition with man's plantings? Which will survive? Some people are concerned about thermal pollution of the lake as a result of the construction of nuclear power plants. Will fish adapt to warmer waters? Or will the ever-increasing numbers of people who need fish for food and recreation create a greater demand than could ever be supplied? These are the questions for which answers must be found.

An optimistic view of the future appeared in a recent article by Jay Reed in the Milwaukee Journal with headlines, "Lake Michigan to Have Continent's Best Fishing" and "Lake Michigan, Fish Bin of the Future." In the article, Wayne H. Tody, chief of the Michigan Conservation Department, states his dream:

"of clear, clean water teaming with sports fish, a playground for recreation-minded America, — of a giant waterway to carry the fuel, the grain, the steel, the ore, the fiber of life to the heart of the Midwest, — of prosperity for those who call the shores of the lake home, — and of a biological desert returned to life."



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