

STURGEON FISHING ON LAKE ERIE

An excerpt from *Grandpa Roy*

My grandpa Roy had a third grade education. Born in 1886, Gramps talked like Huckleberry Finn, rarely bathed, and bought himself a new Cadillac every two years. Many years passed before I realized that two generations of Weindorfs had made history as commercial fisherman on Lake Erie. It was the wealth generated by these activities that made my college education possible.

Great grandfather Mike, son of a Rhinelander, turned his back on carpentry to take up fishing. He and his brother Fred recruited a man from Sandusky, Ohio to show them the ropes. After two years, he left them on their own. At the time, no one in Erie, Pennsylvania was fishing on the lake, but only in the bay which lies behind the long, protective arm of Presque Isle. This is easy to understand because Lake Erie – though the shallowest of the five enormous lakes dividing Canada and the US – is famous for its sudden, treacherous storms.

Why would anyone give up carpentry for such a dangerous job? You can draw your own conclusions from the following anecdote. Once, Mike and Fred went out on Lake Erie to set their nets, but they had only half completed the task when a storm came up, driving them – fortunately – up onto the beach. By the time they were able to return and check their nets, they found over 70 sturgeons in them. Yes, although there are none today, fresh water sturgeons were once abundant in Lake Erie! The common practice was to return the males to the water, and harvest only the females for their eggs, or roe, in order to make caviar. The flesh was considered very tasty too, and was often smoked to bring a better price on the market. Although there are no sturgeon in Lake Erie now, my grandfather and his man George wrestled a 200-pounder onto their boat in 1929.

Gramps and his elder brother Arthur followed in the steps of their father. Roy, the younger, was the hands-on man and did the book keeping – otherwise known as ‘settling up’. By the time I became aware of the fishery and its activities I was in grade school, and my granddad and his brother were into their sixties. Uncle Art often stood in the shade and operated in a supervisory capacity. At some point my boy cousins were able to go out in the boat – a simple open, flat bottomed affair – and join in the work. This seemed like an adventure in which I would like to participate, but I was informed by my mother that it was out of the question: no bathroom on the boat.

Supposedly the hey days of fishing were waning by the 1920's, but I vividly remember the old green Ford flatbed truck that used to take the catch to market in crates stacked at least six high, and that was when I was a kid in the 50's.

Successful as fishing was, perhaps because it was winding down mid-century, it was still far from being a high tech operation. The fishery, or 'fish house' at the Mouth of Elk Creek, was a ramshackle structure with a couple of rooms on one side, which, to my amazement, had been the summer living quarters for the family when my mother was a young girl. It had wide doors both front and back, the latter opening onto an equally ramshackle dock on the 'slough' opposite a 'slang'... that is to say, a still-water inlet or estuary (slough) protected by a narrow strip of land (slang) that tended to shift with the seasons. It contained a commodious freezer and a tall 1930's telephone, the kind that you used by grasping the base in one hand and the cone-shaped receiver in the other. In front stood the gas pump, where gasoline was drawn for the boats.

The fish house smelled... well... fishy. Below a window looking out over the slang, a stood a bench, outfitted with a motor that drove an hourglass-shaped wood spindle whose axel was parallel to the surface. The spindle had sharp metal protruding in the central part, owing to the edges of the corrugated fasteners that had been driven deep into it. This was the fish scaler. Gramps would hold the fish to the rapidly turning spindle, regulating the speed with his foot, and off flew its scales! Then he would proceed to gut and fillet it. The delicious blue pike – a kind of walleye, but with a nicer name – are long gone like the sturgeon, but the little yellow perch are still around.

On one side of the fish house there was usually a pile of nets. The care of the nets represented one of the most onerous parts of the job. The nets needed constant tarring and mending to keep them usable. The entire process had three basic steps. First came washing. The nets were taken from the boat, loaded onto the flatbed truck, and transported to a site equipped with a long wooden reel a couple of meters off the ground, which launched the nets onto a broad slide where they could be hosed off on their way down. Of course, this process involved first hoisting the nets onto the truck, then lifting them from the truck onto the reel, and then hauling the washed nets over to the tar tank. (I supposed the crew might have dried them first in the sun, which would add yet another step.) In any case, in the middle of a humid summer day, the nets were dipped in hot tar and then taken to the nearby field and spread out on the grass to dry. Net mending, under the blazing sun, was work for the entire crew: my grandfather and his brother,

their man George, and one of my cousins or some random young fellow signed on for the high season. Of course, all the menders ended up spattered and smeared in tar. One solution to this problem – at least as far as removing the sticky black substance from hands went – was a jar of lard, like the one kept in the bathroom by Uncle Art's wife Clara. I have no idea how the tarry clothes were ever dealt with!

In contrast to all this sweat and grime was the ever-present magnificence of Lake Erie, in the glory of its four seasons. There are five Great Lakes, and all together they are sometimes referred to as the third coast of America. Indeed, they are more like fresh water seas than lakes. The opposite shore is rarely to be seen, except at the extremes. This absence represents a daunting challenge for swimmers who take inspiration from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who once wrote, "The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough." No matter which of the usual crossings you choose, you can plan on being in the water for around 20 hours at least, so you invariably start out with no coast in sight and will eventually be overtaken by darkness and possibly three-foot waves.

Neither my grandfather nor his brother Art knew how to swim. I never saw any kind of flotation device on the boats. Maybe his saying, "Red skies at night, sailors' delight; red skies in the morning, sailors take warning", actually stood Grandpa Roy in good stead.

Erie, Pennsylvania, is on the snow belt, meaning that fishing is a seasonal activity. Snow often falls upon trick-or-treaters in October, and may still thwart the blooming fruit trees in May. The fishing season is very intense. My mother, who kept house after her mother died, would leave my grandfather a slice of pie and some coffee to heat before he set off into the darkness to begin his day's work. He would return absolutely filthy ten hours later, and so exhausted that he would lie down on the floor and fall fast asleep.

I repeat, it was the wealth generated by Grandpa Roy's work that made my college education – and more – possible.