

# A Lake Sturgeon Tale: Part 2

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*Ed. note — Having spent a few days attempting to collect sturgeon roe and milt with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) crew, Casper was unable to collect with the DNR on a fourth day, due to his lack of rain gear. Thanks to the kindness of some locals from the Shawano area, Casper was instead able to spend the day at the Menominee Nation Sturgeon Feast. When we last left Casper, he was cooking Fry Bread for the feast.*

**T**he ladies told me that the Grand Entry was starting soon (Fig. 1) and that I should go out to the gym to see it. I found a seat on the bleachers and was quickly washed over by the many colors before me. Wonderful, beautiful costumes made of quills and feathers of every shape and size decorated most of the people. Breastplates, shiny hammered metal, elaborate leggings, and shirts with multicolored fringes could be seen. We were asked to stand, as first the honored veterans carrying flags and eagle feather staffs led the way into the room. They were then followed by the colorful Fancy Dancers (Fig. 2), then the women adorned in beautiful clothing, and last the children proudly wearing their costumes that their parents had skillfully made. To the

room's silence, the flag song was offered and I was swept over by the beauty, respect and wonder that filled the room. Tears filled my eyes and ran down my cheeks as great honor was shown to their elders and our country and I was deeply moved in my hopes for these people. Many dances were performed and guests were invited to the floor to circle with the dancers 'round the drum players. Drumming, songs and soaring chants filled my ears and the fragrance of smoldering plants the air.

During a calm period between dances I returned to the kitchen to offer any additional help. An older lady had taken my place and was cooking the fry bread to golden perfection. They smiled and spoke of years of experience and gave me a taste of the Hull Corn Soup. Delicious, but the actual feast was not until 5:00 pm and I was sent to get an Indian Taco, with typical taco fixings heaped upon one of the sliced and opened fry breads I had cooked. I enjoyed sitting with some of the children and noticed a T-shirt celebrating the feast up on the wall and inquired of it. Doug's wife handed it to me as a thank you for helping to prepare the meal. The shirt is printed in the Menominee language and reads "They are



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Fig. 1.

The Grand Entry with veterans leading.



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Fig. 2.

The Fancy Dancers and the Fish Dance calling the sturgeon home.

Coming Home.” I returned back to the kitchen as the pans of smoked sturgeon were brought in. A visiting lady rushed in with an empty cup to take some with her as she had to leave soon. Susi Oshkosh handed me a small piece, and my knees weakened as I closed my eyes and savored the wondrous taste. It was as if I could see eagles soaring and heard angels singing. Delicious beyond expectation, I was told that Doug had helped his brother smoke the sturgeon and I inquired of its preparation. Clean, rub with salt, smoke, rinse and smoke again. Maple wood. Nothing else. No marinating. No spices. I was floored! No wonder they have a feast each year! I quickly called Ed and urged the crew to attend if possible. He hoped they could but the sturgeon females were releasing their eggs and the crew was making good progress. The rains had broken and they were set up by the Shawano Dam. I assured him I would make it back to the motel that evening, but I urged him to try and get to the feast before 6:00 pm if at all possible, as the food would have disappeared by then.

I returned to the celebration and changed vantage points several times for photographs and experiences. I moved to stand near the drum circles and sent their sound and songs via my cell phone to Ed, and to my family and friend’s answering machines. I heard the speakers, the Menominee history, the wishes and prayers of the people for the sturgeon’s return and their desires for the future. They were appreciative of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) providing the 15 sturgeons for the feast but I could only think of the man-made dams and how they prevent the sturgeon from reaching their ancestral spawning sites. The Menominee people had been caretakers of this great resource long before we came and

nearly destroyed it. After the words in English and in the Native tongue, the wonderfully colored Fancy Dancers gathered and began to perform the sturgeon Fish Dance. They slowly skip-stepped along, circling the room with their arms outstretched calling out in a language I did not understand. Around the room they went, gently waving their arms from their sides, a bit faster with each step and yet even more gracefully as they circled ‘round again. Then, with arms reaching far, they stretched their bodies low and stopped as one. Their fingers waved and their hands and arms quivered to their shoulders, along the entire length of the procession. Voices filled the air calling the sturgeon home.

A prayer of thanksgiving was spoken and the veterans and elders were honored with the first plates of smoked sturgeon, wild rice, stewed green beans, hull corn soup, fresh cranberry and maple cake. The dancers and drummers were invited to join the line, and finally the women, children and visitors. I waited until last out of respect but worried that the meal would be gone as many, many people had gathered. The line stretched ‘round the gym and out and on to the kitchen. I wandered outside and admired the displayed art and crafts and but soon returned to see the line moving smoothly. An Indian woman came to my side and asked of me where I was from. To my surprise, she herself had lived near my home up on Signal Mountain. We enjoyed our conversations as we followed the line, now moving briskly. My concerns were needless as the ladies piled high a bit of each offering on my plate. No money was requested of me and we all shared in the sturgeon feast.

Satisfied, I went back to the kitchen to check in and the



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*Fig. 3.*

Precariously attempting to net a female sturgeon from a spawning group.



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*Fig. 4.*

Ed & Carlos hastily carrying a freshly netted male sturgeon to the work station.

ladies asked if my friends were coming. "I do not think so," I replied and they offered to fix plates for me to take back to them. With a full backpack, I asked if I could just take back a bit of smoked sturgeon for them to try and they fixed a large plate and sealed it in plastic for me to share. The consideration and kindness of the people were moving. I thought it best to check on the taxi service and when I called the receptionist said they did not go to the reservation, only to the casino which was back a mile or so away, and she said they would only be open until 9:00 pm and it was already well after 8:30 pm. Oh no! It was dark and raining and I knew I couldn't make it in time. I asked an older couple that I had first met upon arrival if they lived in Shawano but they did not. I told Doug of my predicament and he told me not to worry, that he would get me back. Thankfully I offered him any help in packing up. Relieved, I went back to the gym where the dancing was still going on, and several pretty, young Indian girls were performing a dance of many hoops and finally the Fancy Dancers had a competition where a winner was to be chosen. When they had narrowed the dancers to the final four Doug and I got to work loading the

trucks. Different people I had met through the day began to inquire if I needed a ride back to the motel — my worries were for nothing and their kindness was wonderful.

The next morning I was ready to assist the crew again in my big, water resistant suit of blue. I was jokingly told to stay away from the water's edge as I would alarm the fish, but we were soon focused on our work, as the water had warmed and the females were giving of their eggs (Fig. 3). A gate was opened to allow us to cross the dam and access the far bank. Within a few minutes we were catching sturgeon (Fig. 4) and collecting eggs and milt. Rain was blowing and we had to hold a tarp over the biologist's work to keep the eggs viable and the syringes and vials of sperm dry. During a break I walked to the top of the dam looking about 20 feet straight down into the dark pool. Massive sturgeon moved in and out of the shadows and I am sure several were well over eight feet long, though the biggest caught and recorded by the DNR had only been 84 inches — seven foot exactly (Fig. 5). Wow, these were big fish! I called to Hermy that a massive nine-footer was staying next to the bank and him and another fellow grabbed their nets and positioned themselves on the precarious



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Fig. 5.

The Wisconsin DNR crew bringing a newly caught Lake Sturgeon to the measuring board.

bank. Hermy pulled the net and the fish nosed deep into it. Wow, they were going to get it! The other fellow pulled his net up behind the sturgeon pulling the tail forward and deeper into Hermy's net. With a big twist the beast was out and away, now well aware something was after it. I would have loved to see that fish measured and seen the Wisconsin crew with a record broken! Up on the bank, the IMAX scuba crew was gearing up and they told us of their filming experiences down amongst them. Descending down to 15 or 20 feet and then looking back up to the light nearly blocked by the silhouettes of the shark-like sturgeon. Sunlight would break through in descending rays as their bodies parted and reassembled. The bottom was covered in layers of eggs, and suckers, redhorse and hellbenders were feasting on them. That water was cold, but if I had brought my mask I would have jumped in right then and there!

The day was pressing on and the crew that was due back in Georgia was already late. However, Carlos was reasonably satisfied with the efforts and we packed and loaded the rinsed gear, situated the eggs, fired up the generator, changed out of our rain gear and began the 17-hour return drive.

I will always be grateful for this experience. You can read more of the Menominee Indians on the internet. IMAX has a movie called "Mysteries of the Great Lakes" which I'm told features the Lake Sturgeon spawnings and is available on DVD. My dream would be to stand at the Wolf River Dam when the water temperature is 55 degrees and watch the Lake Sturgeon swim up the spiral structure and soar over and upstream to their ancient spawning grounds. 🐟

*Pupfishes of Ash Meadows*  
DVD for sale! See page 25.