

Remembering a Special Guide

By JoAnn Brunner Miller

Guides have appeared in history books and journals since the early days of Northwoods exploration. Fishing and hunting as a way of life became a source of income for many and helped to build a tourist industry in Manitowish Waters.

Experienced or a first-time fisherman could hire a guide through bait shops or resorts, or obtain a recommendation from a patron in a local bar. Guides developed repeat clientele who often booked their dates a year in advance. A few of the “old time” guides include Jens Larsen, Dick Sleight, George Bazso, Chief DeCoteau, Marty Cain, Chuck Johnson and my dad, John Brunner. All were characters and knew how to provide their customers with a memorable, entertaining day on the water. In those days, the idea of catch and release didn’t exist as fish were still plentiful.

My dad was a guide most of his life. He was born on Long Lake in Mercer and started guiding in his teens. After serving in WWII and then living in Chicago for a short time, he married a Manitowish Waters girl, Ann Startz, settled here and fished lakes in both Vilas and Iron counties.

Dad developed a reputation for knowing where the fish were located and how to catch them. He usually managed to fulfill a day’s quota for musky or walleye even if it required fishing more than one lake on the same day. If clients wanted to fish for bass, a float plane carried them to a secret landlocked lake that was loaded with bass.

A shore lunch of fresh caught walleye and diced potatoes cooked in huge cast iron skillet over an open fire was a favorite part of the day. My dad’s secret ingredient was Golden Fluffo shortening, which turned out tender but crispy fish without using a batter. After lunch, the pans were cooled, cleaned with sand in the lake, and dried with an old, soft tee shirt.

His largest musky was 41 pounds, 10 ounces, 53 inches, caught in Rest Lake with Art Lawson on June 18, 1953. My brother Art (Mr. Lawson’s namesake) tried to better that record but only managed to match it in 1980 with a Clear Lake musky weighing 41 pounds, 10 ounces.

Sturgeon season was the month of September, and trying to catch that fish required hours of sitting very still with bait laying on the bottom of the lake. On September 27, 1955, dad and his client landed a whopping 75-pound sturgeon on Dam Lake (later renamed Vance Lake).

Opening day of musky season was the most important date on my dad’s calendar. Unfortunately, in 1970, opening day happened to fall on the weekend I was getting married in Chicago. My dad was there to give me away on Saturday but drove home later and managed to fish on Sunday. I don’t think he ever really forgave me!

A few of the celebrities he guided included President Eisenhower, Bart Starr and Dean Martin.

Many of his clients became lifelong friends, and after dad’s passing they fished for several years with my brother. Today, the family legacy is carried on by Matt (Zeke) Thompson who has inherited his grandfather’s ability to “talk to the fish” and has developed his own reputation in Minnesota.

Dad loved teaching children how to fish and would patiently show them how to cast, how to reel in a fish while entertaining with tall tales that they believed every word of. The fishing pier in Koller Park that allows easy access for children was built and donated by our family as a memorial.