Commercial Fishing
on Lake of the Woods

John Dobie

Lake of the Woods has been an important source of fish for the commercial market since the 1890s. At first its shallow waters yielded vast quantities of sturgeon and whitefish; later walleyes, tullibees, northern pike, and burbot made up significant portions of the commercial catch. In spite of the importance of this fishery to the economy of Minnesota, few records exist of early commercial operations on the lake. Thus, the photographs reproduced in these pages, taken in 1900 and 1901 by Professor Henry F. Nachtrieb of the zoology department in the University of Minnesota, provide a valuable historical record of an important segment of Minnesota's commercial fishing industry.¹

Little is known of the beginnings of commercial fishing on Lake of the Woods, and the complete story died with the last of its old-time fishermen some years ago. Probably the first commercial fishermen to operate in the Minnesota waters of the Big Traverse on Lake of the Woods were Wilhelm M. Zippel and Alonzo Wheeler, who settled on the south shore of the lake about 1885. Zippel emigrated from Rat Portage, now Kenora, Ontario, on the northern edge of the lake, to a spot near its southeastern end now known as Zippel Bay. Wheeler squatted on the Minnesota shore near the mouth of the Rainy River on land not yet open for settlement. Later,²

¹ The fragile, glass-plate negatives were discovered in 1943 by the author and Dr. Samuel Eddy in the basement of the zoology building at the University of Minnesota. Subsequently, they were misplaced. Fortunately, the bulky plates were rediscovered by Fred Duerr in 1955, and prints of the complete series of eighteen pictures are now in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

² Mr. Dobie, who is the author of a number of technical bulletins in the field of fisheries management, is a research biologist in the game and fish division of the Minnesota conservation department.
this area was called Wheeler's Point. Both
men erected dwellings and commenced
fishing, an occupation in which they were
engaged for the rest of their lives.²

BY 1894 at least three fish-packing sta-
tions had been built on the Minnesota side
of the lake. Zippel erected a fishery and
ice house at Zippel Bay, and the Sandusky
Fish Company and the Baltimore Packing
Company were operating at what was then
known as Oak Point near the mouth of the
Rainy River. The business of the two lat-
ter firms was described in the Report of
the Minnesota Board of Game and Fish
Commissioners for 1894, which stated that

² International Joint Commission, Final Report on
the Lake of the Woods Reference, 143 (Washington,
D.C., 1917); Who's Who in Minnesota, 540 (Minne-
apolis, 1941).

³ Quoted material in this and succeeding paragraphs
may be found in Board of Game and Fish Commissi-
oners, Annual Reports, 1894, p. 14, 15 (St. Paul,
1895). In a letter to the author, dated March 10,
1937, Mr. Lawrence Arnesen of the Arnesen Fishery
at Rocky Point on Lake of the Woods described the
making of caviar as follows: "Caviar was not cooked.
The eggs were screened through % inch caviar
screens. Then they were washed many times un-
til all the fat and broken eggs came to the top. They
were then salted —14 lbs. salt to 100 lbs. caviar and
water. Then stirred by hand until eggs became hard
and felt like fine shot. Then put on a fine screen and
dried. Caviar was then placed in wooden kegs from
70 to 120 lbs. At first they [the Lake of the Woods' fisher-
men] received $1 per keg. The next year the price went to $10 per keg."

¹ Edward M. Dawson, comp., Official Register of
the United States: The Post-office Department, 1899,

³ The catch of these companies and other
parties engaged in a similar business on
this lake" was taken to the Oak Point
packing stations where the whitefish were
cleaned and dressed. There, too, was "lo-
cated a caviar factory for both the above
named companies." The report added that
the sturgeon eggs were "worked up into
caviar, an article regarded by gourmands
as the par excellence of fish food."²

The board's report went on to describe
"the thriving village" of Le Clair that ap-
parently grew up around the commercial
fishing stations at Oak Point. It was, the
board noted, "composed entirely of men.
Several substantial buildings have been
erected by the companies . . . and during
the season it is a place of considerable
activity." The village was named for E.
T. Le Clair, manager of the Baltimore
Packing Company's plant. A post office
was established at Le Clair in 1898 and
continued to operate until 1902.³

Statistics published by the board make
it clear that the commercial fishing busi-
ness on Lake of the Woods was already
quite substantial. "The aggregate catch of
all parties engaged in business there for the
year 1894," the board stated, "was about
900 tons, representing a value of about $75,-
000 per annum." It noted that the
United States government had established
a revenue office on the lake, "and all fish
destined for points in the United
States are here placed in bond, and all fish
The engineer and his son loading wood for the Sandusky Fish Company's tugboat "Ada," which was used to tow the fleet of small sailboats to the pound nets along the south shore of Lake of the Woods each day. The fish company's building is at the left.

A close-up of the fish processing buildings at Oak Point. A supply of fish boxes and caviar barrels has been stored on the dock in front of the buildings. The man tending the cauldron was probably rendering sturgeon oil, which was used to remove tar from the men's hands.
taken from Canadian waters are cleared and the duties paid." The board commented that "the business transacted at this office is more than one would imagine, the official in charge stating that the receipts were $300 to $400 a month during the season from April 1st to the close of navigation in November."

PEOPLE living in the area referred to the Sandusky Fish Company's operations at Oak Point as the "Mouth of the River Fishery" because of its location near the Rainy. About the turn of the century, the firm had from thirty-five to forty pound nets, set from Oak Point westward to Willow River, a distance of thirty miles. Two steam tugs were used to tow the fishermen and their small sailboats to the nets along the south shore early each morning. The small boats dropped off at the nets along the way, and the tug went on to the end of the line, where it waited for the last fisherman to raise his nets. On the return trip, the tug picked up the boats that had not already sailed back to port under their own power. This system was used until about 1903 by the Sandusky company and its successor, the Armstrong Trading Company, which purchased the firm in 1901.\footnote{Interview of the author with Erick Starren, a former employee of the company, August, 1947. For information on another early Lake of the Woods fishery at Arnesen, see Dobie, "Northern Landmark Passes," in *Conservation Volunteer*, 9:34-35 (May, 1946).}

The bulk of the catch during this period consisted of whitefish, sturgeon, and wall-eyes. The dressed fish and caviar were shipped by steamboat to Kenora, where they could be transshipped by rail to eastern markets via the Canadian Pacific Railroad, which had reached Lake of the Woods in 1881. In 1908 the Great Northern Railroad built into Warroad on the American side of the lake, and two years later the Armstrong company established a fishing station there. After that, a barge traveled twice a week to Oak Point, Zippel Bay, Arnesen, Long Point, and other spots along the southern shore to pick up fish for shipment from Warroad. The Armstrong company, which later became a part of Booth Fisheries, continued to operate the Le Clair station until it was destroyed by high water in 1915. By that time, thanks to the railroad, Warroad had become the principal shipping center for Lake of the Woods' fish.\footnote{Interview with Starren, August, 1947; letters to the author from Lawrence Arnesen, November 14, 1945, Sivert A. Selvog, November 21, 1945, E. R. Eisenrich, November 23, 1945; Norman Thompson and J. H. Edgar, *Canadian Railway Development from the Earliest Times*, 144 (Toronto, 1933); Great Northern Railway Company, *Annual Reports*, 1908, p. 13.}

DURING the more than sixty-five years that have elapsed since the fishery became important, the type of catch as well as the method of shipping has changed. The earliest recorded statistics of commercial catches in Lake of the Woods date from 1888 when investigators for the United States Bureau of Fisheries reported that four pound nets were in use there. At that time sturgeon was the principal fish caught commercially in Lake of the Woods,
and the investigators commented that the lake was "the greatest sturgeon pond in the world." Until about 1892, the writers said, "sturgeon swarmed in this lake in almost incredible numbers."

Apparently, the sturgeon catch reached a peak the following year when 1,300,000 pounds valued at $26,000 were taken from the American waters of the lake. The yield of caviar in 1893 amounted to 97,500 pounds, valued at $19,500. After that the commercial sturgeon catch decreased rapidly, and in the first decade of the twentieth century it never exceeded 175,000 pounds. By 1909 sturgeon had virtually disappeared from commercial fishing records for Lake of the Woods.

In a detailed study of the fishery on that lake, Kenneth Carlander stated that the decline "was undoubtedly due to the heavy drain of the early commercial fishing, and in some cases to deliberate destruction. At one time, more than 320 pound nets . . . were being fished," eleven times the number set in the Minnesota waters of this lake in 1956. Dr. Carlander also reported that sometimes "sturgeon were removed from the lake and dumped on the shore in an attempt to improve the walleye fishing. Some fishermen took sturgeon just for the caviar and discarded the meat." He pointed out that sturgeon "are slow growing fishes which cannot withstand heavy fishing and consequently they are now almost extinct." 7

Walleyes have been an important commercial fish throughout the history of the lake, comprising from fifteen to fifty-seven per cent of the total catch. Since 1893 tullibees have provided the bulk of the commercial poundage taken from these waters, and increasingly since 1938 burbot has become important in the catch because of its value as food for mink. In 1955, for example, the latest year for which statistics are available, 591,516 pounds of tullibee, 272,157 pounds of burbot, and 233,689 pounds of walleye were taken in the Minnesota waters of Lake of the Woods. No sturgeon, and only 915 pounds of whitefish were caught in the same period. The total American catch in these waters in 1955 was valued at approximately $86,400.8

IN THE EARLY YEARS of the Lake of the Woods' fisheries, pound nets were used exclusively. Not until 1911 did Minnesota laws authorize the use of fyke and gill nets. At that time, fishermen were authorized to set gill nets for domestic use only, and the first commercial gill net licenses were issued in 1913. In 1956, twenty pound nets, twenty-three fyke nets, three deep trap nets, and 46,500 feet of gill nets were fished in the Minnesota waters of this lake, as compared with 193 pound nets in the heyday of sturgeon fishing in 1895.

Since the 1890s the Lake of the Woods' commercial fishery has changed in various ways—sturgeon are now a rarity, whitefish no longer make up a significant portion of the catch, and pound nets are not used exclusively. Methods of marketing and shipping fish have improved over the years. The settlement of Le Clair on Oak Point has vanished, and motorboats have replaced sails on the lake. On the whole, however, the fisherman's methods have changed surprisingly little, and present-day fishery buildings are still as weather-beaten and cluttered as they were in the days when Le Clair was a thriving village.


8 Carlander, "Commercial Fisheries," 1:90.

9 For a record of the commercial catch from 1888 to 1941 by species, see Carlander, "Commercial Fisheries," 1:41, 42. Statistics for 1955 are from the files of the bureau of research and planning, in the game and fish division of the Minnesota department of conservation.

10 Carlander, "Commercial Fisheries," 1:67-70; files of bureau of research and planning.
Near the fishery buildings on Oak Point was a small Chippewa settlement. Its inhabitants probably found work at the fish company lifting and mending nets, dressing fish, and building boats and reels and racks for drying fish.