

John Bruning

Oral History Interview  
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Carson G. Prichard  
April 23, 2021  
John Bruning's house  
Rogers City, MI

Project—Human dimensions of the Lake Huron salmon fishery crash: Using oral histories to assess the attitudes, values, and beliefs of anglers and non-angler stakeholders in Great Lakes coastal communities

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PRICHARD: My name is Carson Prichard and I'm here with John Bruning in his home in Rogers City. Today is Friday, April 23. It's 10:00 a.m. So, before we begin, John, can you please state on the recording that you do consent to participating in the interview and being recorded?

BRUNING: I do consent. Yes.

PRICHARD: Alright. So to begin, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

BRUNING: Well, I was born and raised here in Rogers City. I happen to have not made it very far in my fifty-some years. I was born across the street, (Prichard laughs) actually, where the old hospital—. So I've grown up here. I went away, of course, for a few years for college and then was fortunate enough to come back and be able to work in the area and the community. And of course fishing, and living here on the shore, that's been a big part of my life recreationally, and even somewhat financially, directly and indirectly, from working on charter boats, and—my parents had a charter business and so forth—

and then in working—I worked for the city for a while, a little bit in economic development, but then as a city manager, of course, which involves some of that, as well. So, really—born; raised. Enjoy the outdoors, so it’s a great place to live. And really have had no desire to leave. Although there are some challenges in a rural area with economics and things like that. It’s, fortunately, worked out fairly well for me.

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PRICHARD: What do you remember about the mid-1980s with the start of the salmon stocking initiative in Rogers City?

BRUNING: Well I remember—probably in the earlier eighties, probably when that was beginning to be discussed, I happened to grow up about a block from our small boat harbor, so—and I fished—so we were on the lake. Up until that point there wasn’t a whole lot of big sportfishing in the big lake. My dad always said when he was a kid, which of course was many years before that, “The lake wasn’t good for anything more than a darn cold swim.” And that was just—nobody really fished it. There were lake trout and things out there. Of course the salmon population came in later. So I saw that evolve. And of course being very close to it—we would fish at the harbor. In those days there were probably in the—I’m trying to think timewise and how old I was—there was a lot of fishermen that would fish from shore in the fall when the fish got in close. And that of course evolved into a much more robust recreational fishery with almost everyone having a boat, and the boats getting larger and more expensive and more sophisticated. But I remember our neighbor, because we were so close to the harbor and his wife was somewhat of an entrepreneur, and he fished some, but I think they saw an opportunity

because there was discussions of increasing the plants. I think we were getting around a hundred thousand planted in the area at the time, and it was going to go to a million. And so they had a little place that they had operated—I think a child’s clothing store and stuff that was on their property. So they opened a bait shop. As they were talking about that it was really exciting to me because we had one or two others in town at the time, but that was right next door. For me it was like a candy store.

PRICHARD: Was that Blair’s?

BRUNING: It was Blair’s. (Prichard: Okay.) Yeah. And I worked for them for—oh, I don’t know, up through, maybe up into college. I probably started there when I was sixteen. I think I did some things for them [when I was] fifteen but I actually worked there and staffed the store—it was a little tiny store. One room. Pretty small. And very much oriented towards the salmon fishery at that—salmon and lake trout, the big lake fishery. They had other things, too, but that was the emphasis. And so that was really exciting for me to see that because that was additional opportunity, certainly for me personally, but also for the community because it was an indicator of what was to come. Which, really—you know, I don’t remember how quickly it changed, but obviously it did because in a matter of just a few years those fish that were planted were large, and pretty plentiful. And so it drew people from other areas, other ports. Especially if there was bad weather, or maybe a week of bad fishing because of previous bad weather or whatever somewhere else people would come here. There was a salmon tournament that was formed here. And I wasn’t very involved with that, but that was quite significant. Drew lots of people. Fished in it a couple of times. *Very stressful.* (laughs; Prichard: Really?) Well some of it was I was working on charter boats, so for me, again—now this is

probably into the mid- to late-eighties—I graduated in 1986, and so around that time I was working as a first mate on one or two other boats—one primarily. I did dabble with a couple others, I guess. And then that was about the time that my dad decided that he was going to try—a couple of his friends—one of the guys I worked with was sort of a friend, and there was another friend that had a smaller boat. So he thought that it would be a good opportunity to fish. And growing up there was one—there was really probably two charter boats here in town prior to that. I don't know how their business was. The fishery—there were salmon, there were lake trout and other salmonid species. But I don't know how well they did. But for me that was kind of like the—that was a dream job. Until you're living it, then it's a little bit more—getting up at four o'clock in the morning, getting to bed at midnight and doing the whole thing. And fishing for somebody else was—it was exciting and it was fun, but it could get old really fast, too. So I watched that fishery change. My dad decided to purchase a boat. And I can't speak for the business side of it. I don't know how well he did or how—it paid for the boat, you know? It was a part-time thing. He worked at the quarry. He was a machinist in their machine shop there. And so this was a part-time job during—he would take some vacation in the summer and I would work with him. We each actually got our charter boat captain's licenses at the same time. I think I was kind of a contingency plan. I was in college at the time. I was, I don't know, nineteen. And he was older. And out of a—the education—you know, the test taking, because there was a test involved and so forth. He did fine. But we both went to Toledo, took the exams, and passed. And so I was able to—I don't know if I ever did run any charters on my own. I usually just worked with him, or on the other boat, which was owned by Keith Pekrul. And I fished with him for several years. And I don't

remember—you know, I was home after school was over in the spring. I would be home for the summer. I would work at the bait shop at least for a few years after college or during college, I think—I don't remember the specifics—and on the charter boats. So it was exciting. And tournament time was very busy. Having the bait shop right next door was convenient. And I needed the money. It was a good opportunity for me to work in the summer and make a few bucks. And tournament time was busy. It would be open earlier in the morning and later at night because by the time weigh-ins and things were done, your typical convenient business hours didn't really work. So they needed more staff, so I would fill in and so forth. It was some good opportunities. And I don't know if you've got other guiding questions that you want to segue into (Prichard: Well, one thing that—) from that point. Or if I've missed something that you'd like me to address.

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PRICHARD: One thing I was curious about is—how competitive was the chartering in Rogers City? I know that there were other smaller cities that had many more charters, so I was wondering if the need or the demand for them was filled here. Or how competitive was it between (Bruning: Well—) the people that were chartering?

BRUNING: It was competitive—. I don't know how competitive it was. There were some strong personalities in charter captains, and so some of them maybe viewed it more competitive than others. I think for the most part, from my perspective, and others may have had different experiences, I think for the most part things were pretty cooperative. My viewpoint, there was three—the fella that I worked with, another guy that had a boat similar to my dad's that was a smaller boat, and my dad. And my dad had a twenty-two-

foot boat, the fella that I worked with had a twenty-eight-foot boat—I think they were all licensed for six passengers—and the other fella. There was like the three of them that were a little bit closer than some of the others. Although they all interacted, for the most part, with the one or two exceptions. And the other fella had a smaller boat. He had a twenty-footer, my dad had a twenty-two. So the smaller boats weren't that comfortable with more than just a few people. And so I think it was more, you could kind of fit in those smaller groups and take that load off, where the other guys if they could fill up they could make more money. It was a per person business in most cases. And so, to a point that filled these little niches as far as the smaller groups and larger groups. There was some reputational—you know, who caught fish and so forth, too, certainly, that played into it. But there was at times more demand than there was supply. You know, you've only got one morning of the day and when you take a charter out it would be either for the morning or maybe split morning and afternoon with the same crew. And so, fairly few slots. And when you got into the shoulder seasons, not so much. It was sporadic. There'd be people here and there, depending on their vacations. The salmon fishery, especially earlier in the year, would be augmented with lake trout. Maybe you'd catch several lake trout and one or two salmon, and then as the salmon picked up later—typically it picked up later in the year, things would shift over. People really like to catch the salmon. Lake trout—I love them. You know, I like to eat—I mean, they're a good fish. But they're not a great scrapper compared to a salmon. They didn't get as big. Back in those days they were much smaller fish. Now we've got some reasonable-size lake trout out here. They're still not terribly strong fighters compared to the salmon. And so people really got enthused about catching salmon, and we would emphasize that, of

course, because that was the big item. And they were pretty plentiful. You know, it's fishing, so you always have good days and bad days. But overall, I remember, probably, in the mid- to late-eighties—and my timeframe's, I'm trying to recollect where I was, what I was doing, to try and keep it pretty consistent—but when I was working on the charter boat that wasn't my dad's boat, particularly, because sometimes my brother would work with my dad and I would go—because I would be booked with him—there might be split charters—maybe there was a big group and there'd be six or eight guys and three or four would go on one boat, three or four on the other or whatever. And we would—it was hard, as I recall, to catch limits, which I think was a five fish limit in those days, if you had a crew of five or six fishermen. That was a lot of fish. (Prichard: Yeah.) But it wasn't uncommon, as I remember, to get a dozen on some of the good days. So you could have two guys limit out, maybe three. And when the pink salmon were plentiful it wasn't hard to fill a limit, although a lot of them were maybe perhaps smaller pinks. And of course in those days it was kind of an every other year—I think it was the odd years were big for the pinks. I actually did my bachelor's degree final paper on looking at the stomach contents and the diet of pink salmon and lake trout, because I was interested in it and I was in a program and needed a project and that was something that I thought was interesting. I sort of wish I would have went a little bit more into it and published it because it would be interesting to compare that with some of the current data because at the time it was heavily dependent upon the forage fish. The fishery was good because the bait was here. And the fish grew and they thrived. And so we had a lot of alewife. And what I saw—in a fairly small sample, so I don't know how strong of conclusions you could draw—but I saw the pink salmon predominantly eating alewife

and the lake trout were eating smelt. Stickleback—you know there was always some other things in there, too, and some overlap, but I think it was because of largely where they preferred to reside within the water column. And now it's a whole different fishery, I mean, things have changed drastically on a number of fronts. Certainly, invasive species have had a big impact. The collapse of the alewife has really hampered the ability for the salmon to thrive. Lake trout have adapted to eating gobies. There's some smelt now, I think, but not—it's just completely different. In my lifetime, to see an ecological shift like that is just phenomenal. And so I might be getting a little bit off topic. But I remember, I started fishing out here when I was too young to fish. I mean, we would go out—my dad had—this was probably in the early-seventies, mid-seventies there was a handful, literally a handful of people that fished out here. And my dad, a couple of his cousins—well, maybe more than a handful now that I'm thinking back to some of the old-timers. But a really small group of people. And as I recall, my dad's first—he first fished, I think, as far as like lake trout in the deep water, big lake fish, with a cousin—maybe they did some here, but I remember they had gone over the west side of the state and Lake Michigan and trolled with wire line, which was just an unbelievable amount of work compared to the advances with downriggers and things like that. If anybody's familiar with that at all it's just a completely different ballgame. But in the early days I can remember going out with my dad and he had, I think, one downrigger, it might have been a purchased one, it might have been one that he built. I think he maybe bought one and then he built one. And he would run one of those lines and then wire, you know, I don't know how many (Prichard laughs) yards out. It was just out forever. I was way too little. I would go along and watch and try to stay out of his way, for the most part. But it

was mostly lake trout fishing. And then as things evolved and the salmon got more plentiful, then it ended up more of a combined fishery. So I saw a lot of—in the early days there were people that would get fish in the river by whatever means they would—however they got them. And people would can them and that would help sustain them through the winter because it was, you know, in a rural area, in a community like this—and I don't think you see it quite as much, although maybe a little bit more of a resurgence in the home-prepared, home-preserved foods, and things like that. So people would use it for a food source. There was some sportfishing when I was in probably junior high to high school. Again, I'd mentioned this earlier, I think the boat harbor, our small boat harbor—and it's evolved a little bit; there's been some breakwalls added on and so forth, but—about Labor Day weekend, we couldn't wait for—it was bad because we had to go back to school, but it was great because the salmon would be close to shore, and I would spend every waking minute that I could, and I'd come home—the rule was come home, get your homework done, then you could go to the harbor, [as] long as you where your life-vest. I was a twelve-, fourteen-year old kid or whatever. And there were days when the breakwall, the outside of the breakwall would be lined, we would say “shoulder-to-shoulder,” but within a rod's length away so that you weren't bashing your neighbor in the face with the end of your fishing rod, all the way down the whole breakwall. Casting. As the fish would get closer to shore they'd start coming into the harbor. People would be fishing off the docks inside. And it would be busy. You'd have to get down there pretty early to find that spot on the wall that you wanted because—oh, you took—it was better on one end than it was on the other and as it filled up you ended up getting down towards the not-so-desirable end. And that really changed. When the big

plants came and we had—the fishery itself was evolving. People were learning. Downriggers, and bigger boats, and stuff was much more the norm, I guess. In those early days, I can still remember, I was thinking yesterday, we were out, and now you go out and you put whatever lines out, whether it's lead or copper or downriggers, and you put a spoon or a plug or something on and you just run it back. In those early days we were learning a lot. The lake trout, typically you'd use something like a herring dodger with some kind of a bait behind it to attract them. And when we first started fishing salmon, at least out of here, we almost always ran some sort of a herring dodger, even a six-inch dodger ahead of a spoon, because we didn't really fully understand how effective it could be to just run the spoon. And maybe it was—maybe the water clarity—there might have been some other variables. Maybe it helped, maybe it didn't. But things really evolved and people started—you know, they weren't terribly difficult to catch. I mean, certainly some fishermen were better than others. And time on the water and tracking, like with any fishing opportunity, being aware of where the fish are or where they weren't yesterday so you avoid that and go somewhere else. You increase your odds of success. But people were catching fish. And they were coming. There was—the little bait shop I worked at, we'd get constant calls from people, either trying to plan their stay, or maybe make a decision as to what port they were going to go to. Because when you're—a lot of the people from here, since we're up north and rural, there's certainly a core of local fishermen, but a lot of the folks were coming from the Detroit area. And I don't know so much about the southwest part of the state, but certainly on this side, the Detroit area and the [Saginaw] Bay area and those guys would come up here. And for some of them it wasn't a whole lot different to go to Pentwater or wherever than it was here, it

just—did they veer right or did they veer left? And so they would call. We would provide reasonably accurate reports. As good as you can—how they did that morning or whatever. And we started to build a pretty good reputation. I think it flourished. I don't know, because I was in a different segment, I would assume that the restaurants and the hospitality, the lodging and so forth, industries did fairly well, as well, because people had to stay somewhere. Short-term rentals or whatever. Because some people would take their vacation and they'd come up and they'd fish salmon. That's what they did. And it was, it was pretty good. And I'm thinking, those were probably—I would think those were probably the years I'm thinking of that were the best were the late-, mid- to late-eighties. (Prichard: Okay.) I don't remember exactly when the first big plants came. I think they were probably in the early—(Prichard: Eighty-three.) yeah. Yeah. So, three years after that. And for a time period it was really good. And then when I—well, I graduated from college and was fortunate enough to begin working, actually in Atlanta, but I drove from here. I lived in Rogers City and I drove down there. Atlanta, Michigan, obviously. And life changes. I had a fulltime job and so I wasn't as dependent on the charter industry and so my involvement directly in that aspect of it faded probably about the same time that the fishery started to decline. So I can't speak a great deal to that. Although I know it was drastically different several years after that. (Prichard: Okay.) It just wasn't as good anymore.

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PRICHARD: What did you notice? That was around 1990-1991?

BRUNING: That's when I kind of started to get away from it. There was a—I might have mentioned this early on, but when—charter boat fishing and working on a charter boat sounds good—and it was great. It was enjoyable. But there are some not—you know, it's pretty rigorous. It's pretty demanding. And when you're driving—you're trolling, so a lot of the time I spent driving. And you're falling asleep at the wheel because you only got three hours of sleep. Even at twenty-two-, twenty-three-years old (laughs) it's exhausting. And so it's one thing to look out and say, "It's a nice day. I think I'm going to go fishing." And it's another to look out, and whether it's a nice day or not, and say, "I've got to go fishing." (Prichard: Yeah.; both laugh) Because you're on the clock. And so I kind of—I probably had experienced a little bit of burnout, too. And so when I got a fulltime job that wasn't fishing—I was busy, I had my days obligated—and I actually even didn't even do a whole lot of recreational fishing for a few years because it was just not appealing after that rigor of—. Still enjoyed catching fish, but it was—it just, the novelty sort of wore off—for a little while. I think it was in me, so I eventually—I fish a lot now and stuff. But it's a little bit different when you're fishing for yourself recreationally than when you're making a business of it. But it was enjoyable to watch other people enjoy what I enjoyed. And folks with virtually no experience, because they relied on you as the charter boat operators to find and get them into the fish. And that was sometimes, although challenging, the easiest part of it because once you've got them on the line, in most instances you've got to have a little bit of skill, or you've got to at least take direction well. Especially with large fish. And I could—and the operators can do some—I remember, the guy I worked with really liked working with me because if I couldn't make it and somebody else—he realized how much I did. And not to blow my

own horn, but when you've got a fifteen- or twenty-pound fish dragging behind the boat and you've got a lot of lines running you can't just stop. So you've got to rely on turning the right way and not getting everything fouled up, and keeping the fish off to the right side, and which way, whether you're quartering into them or away from them you can kind of control a little bit—it's not very responsive, but you can kind of control a little bit how much pressure the individual's putting on the fish and if you've got somebody that's either horsing them too much, or not putting enough you can—by which way you direct the boat you can alter that a little bit. But ultimately they've still got to either have a darn good hook, or—you know, hooked in where it's not going to come out, or a lot of luck, on some of those, to get them to the boat. So that was always interesting because you'd have people that fished a little bit and thought they were experts, and others that really didn't have a clue but took direction well. And so that was enjoyable, to see people enjoy that resource that I liked and enjoyed, without really investing any time or effort or equipment or whatever, and they could still enjoy it. It was pretty neat. So I liked that. As things slowed down—again, that was about the time—you'll probably learn from others some more of the intricate details because I wasn't as active in it during that time period. But I was pretty involved when it really started to take off. And that was great. I really enjoyed it. It provided some great opportunities for me. Didn't get rich at it. But for a kid working at a bait shop, that was something I enjoyed. I knew a lot about it so it was second nature. I got to talk to the fishermen, I got to get firsthand fishing reports when I was working, so I had a—if you can't be on the water yourself, at least if you could talk to people you can keep a pretty good idea on what's going on and what's happening

where, so when you do have an opportunity it heightens your chances at least of—a little bit—of success. So it was really enjoyable. I really liked it.

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PRICHARD: When you started getting more back into recreational fishing for your own, like, personal enjoyment, sometime in the nineties, I guess, were you still targeting salmon at all? Or were you really going after lake trout by that point?

BRUNING: I liked the lake trout. They were a little bit more suited to my schedule (Prichard: Okay.) to a point. They were there when you were. If you could find them you could usually catch them. It didn't matter if it was noon or six o'clock in the morning. And in the salmon, especially as it got tougher, I remember it, and even today, it seems like the bite is best first and last light. And especially when I started to get back into it and I was working more I had other obligations. I had bought a house. I was working on the house and things like that. I didn't always want to get up before daylight and head out on the lake for the chance of catching a salmon. And quite frankly I preferred eating the lake trout, which I did. And so I fished primarily lake trout. I did fish some salmon. Depending on the day, maybe if it was a particularly hot bite and I wanted some additional—a little change, or a little additional excitement—I would certainly go after them. But I would say most of my effort was on the lake trout. And at that point they weren't even, they weren't very large lake trout. As I was a kid we could catch lots of them but they were relatively small. Now they get—they're getting to where there's a few big ones once in a while which is kind of cool. They used to—you know, when I was younger, I can remember one trip in particular—well, I don't remember all the details

because I can't remember if it was a five fish limit or if it had already changed to three—but we had a cooler, you know, whatever size cooler we had, and usually the fish were a very small part of the volume when you had your limit. And one day we had fish that were probably in the four to six pound range, and that was a large average catch because a lot of them were two, two-and-a-half pounds. But they were, for us, relatively easy to catch. Good eaters. And so we enjoyed that. I enjoyed that. Now they're a little bit bigger. Little different—it's just different than it was. But I still—even now, most of the time when I fish I get up, I get some work done, and then I head to the lake about the time everybody else is coming off. And there's nobody—you know, the parking lot's not as busy—not that it's busy anymore like it used to be, but it just works well into my schedule. And the lake trout, if I can find them I can catch them in the middle of the day. (Prichard: Okay.) So, just, kind of personal preference there.

PRICHARD: Okay.

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PRICHARD: From 2002 to 2005, that's my understanding of when the huge changes in alewife—you basically went from having them to not in that time period. So, I was wondering from your perspective, how obvious and what was that change like, for you and your interactions with the fishery?

BRUNING: I remember it. I remember a lot of—if I wasn't fishing you're still interacting with fishermen, and I remember a lot of complaining. It's just, "It's not what it used to be. The fish are hard to find. They're smaller." I don't know, particularly myself all of a sudden saying, "Oh my gosh, (Prichard: Okay.) it's the alewife

population.” I don’t remember, like, that as a revelation. But reflecting on earlier years and the contrast, hanging around the boat harbor, even in the summer there would be carp swimming around and it was just cool to be around there. And there were times when the alewife—huge schools of alewife would be in that harbor because you’d see them, they’d lay on their sides as they—in the school, so they were silvery. And just massive balls of them. I don’t remember the big die-offs like they had, especially over on the Lake Michigan side where they were washing up on the beach, but we had tons of them. And then we didn’t. You didn’t see them at all. The fish didn’t have any in their bellies. And it became evident—. But you don’t always catch fish that have—it’s not like all of a sudden, the one day they’re stuffed and the next day they’re gone, because you catch fish that are stuffed some days and then three days later there’s nothing and then they’re stuffed again just depending on, whatever. So I don’t remember that as significant from the alewife population per se, but I do remember the decline of the fishery. About that time is when I had transitioned and I was working for the city. And the marina had been a big part of the draw to get people here, having the facilities here. There had been some renovations done to it, some additional grant funds, and I think some—if I’m remembering right; this is going back a little—some bonds, and they had to be paid by marina revenues. And when you don’t have the fishermen that you were depending on, because they weren’t coming here, it became quite challenging. And it was really difficult to promote a fishery that was really struggling. You know, it wasn’t what it was. And if there was another port somewhere else where it was even slightly better people were going there, and so they weren’t coming here. And so it created a real challenge for the community, I think, from an economic standpoint. It was harder to attract people. The

tournaments weren't as attractive. I don't remember—there were some other issues with our tournaments, too. People, behaviors and practices and things, I think, that acted to the detriment of them, as well. But it's a whole lot easier to attract people when the chances of catching fish is good and the chance of catching a big one is good. When you don't have any bait the fish are smaller, they're less plentiful. It's hard to get a tournament—the good thing is you can catch—you can be lucky and catch one nice one and have a good chance of winning something, or placing, because nobody else is (laughs) catching anything. But it's hard to attract people. And we really struggled from that standpoint because the marina had been, I think, pretty self-supportive. And if you talk to people that are in current city leadership you might get a more-refined perspective. But I know even then we were trying to figure out how to promote ourselves, and how to get people—to keep people coming here. There were talks about emphasizing other species. Trying to promote steelhead or brown trout or the Atlantic salmon, whatever, because it was tough. And it got much more competitive to attract fishermen if they had a chance of going somewhere else and doing better. Or if it was bad all over, why drive up north for three or four hours if we can have about the same experience at an hour-and-a-half from home? And it was difficult, and challenging. And I'm sure the hospitality industry had to have felt that. I mean, (Prichard: Yeah.) that was pretty evident.

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PRICHARD: I'm kind of curious your perspective on the future prospects of a lake trout tourism-based fishery in Rogers City. And, kind of, your perspectives on why there is some disparaging of lake trout among people, especially those who really glamorize salmon. And what are your thoughts on, just, those kinds of sentiments toward lake trout?

BRUNING: Well, I think it's—you know, I grew up catching lake trout. I enjoyed them. I like to eat them. Some people just don't like them. I like all kinds of fish. From that standpoint, if I'm going to go and fish, I'm—I'll do catch-and-release, but it's nice to go and catch something, if you're lucky, and be able to have a dinner from it. I enjoy that. And I like all kinds of fish. Salmon isn't my favorite. I would prefer—I guess if somebody said, "Here's lake trout, or here's salmon," I would probably gravitate towards the lake trout. So that sort of drives my preferences. Some people just don't like them. I don't know why. But people have different preferences. I think, the glamorizing of the salmon isn't necessarily unfounded because they're fighters. They can be big. They can be theatrical. They can rip across the water. You just don't see that with lake trout in particular. Steelhead, you can't keep them in the water—you can't keep them on the hook as easy, either, because they're out of the—you know. They're fun. And a lot of the other—you know, brown trout, Atlantic salmon, and so forth are more fun, I think. It's more exhilarating. And if you have people that—from a charter standpoint, or from even a recreational standpoint, the thrill of that fish, you know, "zz-ss," zipping across the surface and peeling line off—it's thrilling, quite frankly, and people enjoy that. I've caught hundreds of salmon, and it's fun. But I don't always need that to entertain me. Some people, that's just their thing. So I don't know. The popularity of lake trout is—it is what it is, I guess. Some people like them, some people don't. For some, it's something better than nothing. They're not that difficult to catch, I don't think. Back in the day they were maybe a little bit more challenging than the salmon. It was a little bit different fishery, though, and so I don't know if that really played into it much, that the salmon weren't necessarily easier to catch, I think they're just more exciting. (Prichard: Okay.)

And people like that. (Prichard: Yeah.) And they're bigger. I mean, even when you get into a big lake trout, we're not catching twenty-five- and thirty-pound lake trout regularly, where, when the salmon fishery is good, twenty-five-pounders, twenty-pounders, and—way more scrap, per pound, way more scrap. And people like that.

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PRICHARD: Do you fish walleye out here at all?

BRUNING: I haven't really targeted walleye out here. I've caught a few incidentally, trolling for lake trout or messing around. There's a lot of water around every fish and I haven't put the effort in to really target them and try to narrow it down, so mine have been caught—. There was one trip where I said—I think I caught my lake trout limit and I thought, I'm going to go in. I've got a couple of hours yet and I'm going to go in and catch a walleye. And I actually did. But it was a completely freak coincidence. Right place right time. But I've only caught a handful of walleye out here. *Some guys catch more.* I don't know how much targeting they do here. Further south along the shoreline it's more popular, and I don't know if that's simply because there's more fish, or the fishermen target them and they're better at catching them, you know, finding them and catching them. Half of the battle, probably 90 percent of the battle is finding fish. Then you've got to figure out how to get them to bite. But you've got to be able to find them, first. And when you've got cubic miles of water, some are easier to find than others.

(laughs; Prichard: Yeah.) It's an interesting aspect, though. I like eating walleye. In my mind they kind of fight about like a lake trout. They're not a terribly strong scrapper. But they're delicious. And again, I mentioned this, I like to eat all kinds of fish. I can eat lake

trout fairly regularly, but I like a meal of perch, or walleye, or pike, or whatever else might be around that I've—and maybe a change of pace instead of going at lake trout. The other thing, too, for me, I have a small boat, and that limits me a little bit on the rougher days, of getting out on the big lake, but I might be able to go to an inland lake for a change of pace, too. And that can play in, probably, to my desire to fish lake trout versus salmon because if I can find them even in the middle of the day on a nice day I can get them. You get a real nice bluebird day, it's not great for salmon fishing, especially after that first hour of daylight or the last hour of daylight. You've got a lot of water to churn in the meantime with little results.

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PRICHARD: How much of a part of the culture of Rogers City was fishing and salmon fishing, maybe going from the late-eighties, nineties, and then how that might have changed until more recent years?

BRUNING: Well I think it was more a part of the culture then, when it was booming, than it is now. Just on proportion of mass and activity, I guess. I don't know, because I was so immersed in it, at least in that late-eighties period that it was definitely a part of me and what I did. How far that reached into the community, I'm not really certain. Certainly there were others that benefitted from it and recognized that—the hotel industry, the restaurants, and so forth—so certainly it had influence. But I don't know, I really don't know how—. It's difficult for me to say, I guess, (Prichard: Okay.) from my perspective because I was so close to it. If I didn't step back and say, "Well, how did this affect somebody else?" I'd say, "Well this was everything," because at that point I was

really involved with it. It was important, I think, and I think people beyond the fishermen recognized it and felt it and maybe depended on it a little bit, but I don't know to what degree it was.

PRICHARD: Okay.

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PRICHARD: I was just wondering, maybe even with respect to your role as city manager and other government types of positions you had, what proportion or how much of your time or things that you were working on had to do with things concerning the fishery or the marina? (Bruning: Well—) And you kind of already touched on the marina a little bit.

BRUNING: Yeah. That would be—from an economic development standpoint and attracting either new businesses or supporting the businesses that were here, since it had been an important component, the fishery really drove parts of that industry, you know, in the heyday, in the eighties. It was still important, but it was hard to get a hold—you know, it wasn't there. So we were trying to figure out alternative ways while still trying to figure out what to do, or what kind of new approaches maybe could help us with the fishery and help strengthen it and bolster it. I wouldn't say—from my perspective, it was hard to say, because as city manager you're responsible for everything. And we had a harbormaster that dealt with the day-to-day harbor issues. DPW [Department of Public Works] took care of DPW. There was some periodic or regular concern, I guess, with it. Again, trying to figure out from the marina standpoint, what kind of impact, financially, is the reduced revenue. You're not having as many people paying daily launches. You're not having as many fuel sales. You're not having as many slip sales for the transient

fisherman, people that might trailer up, park their boat in the harbor for a few days and then head back home. So there were struggles associated with that that we were dealing with. I was—I worked for the city from 2001 to August of 2006, first as assistant city manager and then as city manager, and during that time period, the marina bonds, paying for that stuff, was important. And it was becoming increasingly more challenging because the revenue that had been there wasn't. Or it was greatly diminished. And so it was certainly a challenge. And I'm sure that that challenged extended beyond when I left because conditions really didn't change much, and you still have obligations. And so we thought about it. We have a harbor advisory committee that would make some recommendations and try to figure out how to market, how to promote Rogers City as a good place to come and fish, and bring with it all the economic benefits that that traffic does. But working with the chamber of commerce and the tourism groups and so forth, but it was challenging. I don't know beyond that how much more detail I can give you, I guess.

PRICHARD: Okay.

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PRICHARD: That covered a lot of what I thought to ask you about. I was wondering, maybe as, kind of, we wrap up the interview, do you have any particularly memorable stories with respect to the salmon fishery here? Anything that you'd like to add about what the salmon fishery, kind of, legacy was?

BRUNING: Boy, that's a tough one. I've sort of bounced around, I think, in the conversation with different little highlights and so forth. Nothing particularly really

stands out, other than, for me, having the opportunity to benefit from it, both from the enjoyment of the fishing and catching itself, but also economically and personally. You grow, as you're working with the public and you're working with people, certainly that helped me. I was very much an introvert. And so some of the things I gained from it weren't necessarily monetary. It was the involvement and the interaction with people. Working at the bait shop and interacting with people on a regular basis really helped me grow as a person, so that certainly is important. As far as standout moments—with the fishing itself, there were a lot. It's hard to separate them out. I remember a few particular, either difficult or really rewarding charter trips that were memorable. But it's hard, really, to separate those out. I think, really, for me, the timing of it was good. I was in that really excited childhood, junior high—you know, I was independent enough that I could go to the harbor and actually—I used to put a lot of hours in; didn't catch as many fish. It took me a while to—once things (snaps fingers) clicked, then, you know, I caught all the fish I wanted. But I just spent a lot of time down there and it was just really cool. There was a culture, you know, a group of people you had. There was always a few new ones, but there was always that core. Like I said, I would get home, I'd get my homework done and I'd race down to the—grab my fishing rod and head to the harbor. And you'd recognize vehicles, and some people in their favorite spots. And it was just a sense of community, almost. Challenging, because you wanted to get a fish before the next guy. But it was all—pretty much all in good fun. And that shifted a little bit as more and more people had boats, and it wasn't as emphasized or as significant. It was part of the opportunity, but it wasn't all of it, where, initially, that's where everybody went if you were going to—you didn't need a boat. You needed a decent fishing rod and some casting spoons and you

could stand almost as good a chance as the next guy. It was a great opportunity and it was a lot of fun. I do really enjoy those memories. But then beyond that, just the other opportunities to be able to work, make some money, help put myself through college, and things like that, it was—and my dad with the charter business, for him to be able to afford a boat that we wouldn't have been able to afford. You don't always get to use it when you want to use it because you're working. You've got to make the charter customers happy. But it was—it was pretty enjoyable. I think it's completely different now. And I'm in a way different part of my life to be able to relate directly to it, but if I reflect through a fourteen-year old boy's eyes today versus what it was when I was fourteen—completely different. Or fifteen, or eighteen, or whatever I was through that entire period as it grew—vastly different. Not even remotely recognizable, probably.

Anything else, Carson, as we—I mean, I've covered a lot of ground (Prichard: Yeah.) and bounced around a lot. My wife always says I talk too much. (Prichard laughs)

PRICHARD: Well unless you think there's anything else that you'd like to add that would, kind of, depict the story of the salmon fishery in Rogers City, [we] basically covered everything (Bruning: Okay.) I thought to ask.

BRUNING: Okay. I don't—I probably would be repeating myself even more.

PRICHARD: Okay. Well I'll stop the recording now. (Bruning: Okay.)

*end of interview*