

Joseph Hefe

Oral History Interview  
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Carson G. Prichard  
May 25, 2021  
WebEx video conference

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 joined by City Manager of Rogers City, Michigan, Joe Hefe via video conference. It's Tuesday, May 25, 2021 at 10:11 a.m. So Joe, thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview with me. Before we begin, can you please state that you do agree to being recorded and that you consent to participating in the interview?

HEFELE: I do.

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

HEFELE: So my name is Joe Hefe. I am the City Manager for the City of Rogers City. I've been in this position going on six years. My family moved to Rogers City when I was ten years old. And so when I took this position as city manager it was kind of a coming home situation. So I grew up here from the time I was ten until I left to go to college. And now I'm back, and I'm officially in my hometown.

PRICHARD: So you've been a city manager for six years, you said?

HEFELE: City manager here for six years. Twenty years total, doing this kind of work.

PRICHARD: Oh, okay. Can you explain what the role of city manager is, and then, kind of what your primary concerns are as current City Manager of Rogers City?

HEFELE: Alright, so city managers will oversee the operation of the local community.

So, as the manager, in a council/manager form of government, I report to a city council which meets typically once or twice a month. They ultimately are the decision maker but it's up to me to provide them with good information in order to make those decisions and also to run the day-to-day operation of the city, which here in Rogers City includes the oversight of the Rogers City Police Department, the water and wastewater systems, street systems, the office operations, and also the marina. In terms of my priorities, since I've been back we've been basically doing a lot of strategic planning, making sure that our oars were all rowing in the same direction. Making sure that we have comprehensive plans in order to replace and repair those things that need to be repaired and replaced. And we've also been working a lot on the local economy, and promotional efforts.

Rogers City was the fiftieth community in the State [of Michigan] to become redevelopment ready certified. That just happened here a short time ago—it's kind of a big deal, and we're working towards select status with the Michigan Main Street office. We're a community of a little less than three thousand people, and unlike larger communities including those that surround us like Alpena and Cheboygan, we don't have a fulltime chamber on record, we don't have a conventional visitor's bureau, we don't have a DDA [Downtown Development Authority] director. We get by on what I'm able to do, and what fourteen folks at the chamber are able to do, and then everything other than that is volunteers. So that really somewhat restricts what we're able to do from a

promotional standpoint and an economic development standpoint, and those are the things I am really working on for us, as it's those that I consider our top priorities.

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PRICHARD: Kind of thinking about those concerns and then maybe the role that tourism and fishing tourism might play or have played in the past, I was kind of hoping we could maybe step through your experience or observation with the Chinook salmon fishery that used to be a major thing in Rogers City. So, if possible, do you have an earliest first memory of just thinking about salmon in Lake Huron or either Rogers City?

HEFELE: I do. So Rogers City, again, so as part of the redevelopment ready community process we were actually required to—we got a consultant and we put together a community promotion and economic development plan. That plan kind of reiterated what we kind of know about ourselves, that the community is very clean and well-kept. It's on the shores of Lake Huron. The downtown, although it could be a bit more thriving, is kind of Norman Rockwell-esque. It has a quaint, kind of, step back into history appearance to it. And what we've learned is that those that are willing to accept that kind of quieter pace of life tend to come here and fall in love with us. So our goals, really, are just getting as many people to come within our city as possible to see what we're all about. And we hope that they will fall in love with us and we hope that they not only will come back for a second or third vacation but they'll choose at some point to say, "You know, I'd like to be in Rogers City or near Rogers City." The fishery has always been a giant part of that because the lake has always been a giant part of that. We're well off of any major interstate, but we are on Lake Huron and we have as much shoreline and—

public shoreline in Rogers City and Presque Isle County as about anybody in the State of Michigan. And this community, in terms of taking advantage of that asset, that shoreline, it's always been fisheries first. But from my youth, like a lot of people, I have fond memories of, not only the marina itself being full, and basically full of fishing boats, but of various tournaments including the large salmon tournament that just brought so many people including professional fisherman with all of the stickers all over the boats, into our community. And it just created an energy. It just created an energy that right now we're quite honestly in the process of determining how to get back. So the fishery brought the energy, and that's always how it was, and just, again, both locally and with visitors, just brought a vibrancy that we don't quite have since the fishery has become more diminished.

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PRICHARD: I'm kind of curious on your perspective of how much of that vibrancy was created by people that were more resident to Rogers City and Presque Isle County and participating in the fishery, versus, how much of a contribution there was from maybe the more transient angler coming in? Or how much of it was just around the tournament time? Or how the fishery extended beyond just the members of Rogers City itself?

HEFELE: I would say I think it was combination of both. Again, when we moved here it was the very early eighties. The fishery was booming and the marina was booming. And there was a waiting list for slips, and those were mostly local folks. And so they would have grill-outs and cookouts. And there was just a lot of camaraderie and a lot of energy and a lot of enjoyment down there. And then so many of the slips, with Rogers City being

a grant-in-aid harbor, have to be maintained and available to transient boaters. And so, in addition to the fact that there was a waiting list for the seasonal slips, throughout the peak season from early summer into the fall, with the fishery, it was a constant, steady stream of folks coming in with their trailers and then slipping here after they put their boats in, and taking a long weekend, or folks coming in from the water from elsewhere and slipping. So I would say it was a combination of the two. And there was a second part of your question and I think I lost it.

PRICHARD: Well I guess, I'm trying to think about how much the fishery became a part of the community of Rogers City itself versus the fishery just kind of was imposed on the city—I don't know if I'm asking that, kind of, the way I want to.

HEFELE: Well I see what—I think I know where you're going, and my recollection, again, having pretty much grown up here, is that the fishery was in no way a burden at all on the community. And I know when you have any type of a large influx of people from out of town, whether it's a festival or a tournament like this, some folks would just as soon have it be quiet and peaceful and not have all those people, but I honestly—I think the community welcomed and was excited about that tournament every year. Again, a big part of that tournament was the weigh-in of the fish. And so I just remember, even being a young person, we were all down there, and as the boaters and fishermen came in at dusk, or somewhere near ten o'clock to get in on time, and were waiting in line to weigh those fish. We were all sitting there and waiting to see because inevitably there was going to be multiple twenty-pounders and some thirty-pound Chinook salmon brought in literally every weigh-in. It was just cool to see that. And again, on top of that it was just the energy that everybody was having fun, they'd hop off the boat, and talking about how

they did, and there was fish stories being told, and there were some cocktails, and it was just a lot of fun. And I honestly think the community looked forward to it and embraced it, which is interesting because the big tournament that's literally every year right after our big Nautical Festival which also brought tons of people into town. I think it turned what was kind of a one-week party into in essence a two-week party. And I think for the most part most of the community at least were good with that. And it definitely was a huge boost to the local economy and very welcome. And on top of that, my younger brother, actually, in his youth was one of the dockhands, and that was actually a pretty in-demand job. It's not because it paid better than anything else; it didn't. I think it paid minimum wage which pretty much all the jobs for high school or early college youth paid. But again, it was just the energy and the fun. It was just the—again, it was not only the locals having fun but it was the different groups of people coming in all the time and the ability to meet people, and even other young people that were in with their families, for the fishing and marina. And so I know as those jobs every year were advertised they were in high demand because of that.

PRICHARD: Oh, okay. Did he work with Ken Rasche, then?

HEFELE: My younger brother had worked with Ken Rasche, he did, yeah.

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PRICHARD: I tried to get as much background history as I could before I started approaching people and I read through the back issues of *Presque Isle County Advance* and I saw that you covered the tournament for them in the late nineties and I just wondered if you had any memorable experiences from that.

HEFELE: You know, I don't. You're right though, before I became a city manager in my former life I did work for them. That was probably at the tail end of the fishery—was beginning the declines. We weren't seeing the numbers of fish. We weren't seeing the size of fish, and therefore we weren't seeing quite as many that were willing to travel great distances. It was becoming a little bit more of a local tournament because in its glory years, again, we'd go down there and look at the board of the top fifty which would be updated as fishermen were coming in, whether it was in the morning and they were taking a quick break or whether it was in the evening, and on the fifty if you saw three or four names that you recognized it was a miracle just because there was so much interest coming from those with expensive equipment and fancy boats and fancy gear from all over the place that—. And so my recollection was by the time I became involved and was covering that, it was still a lot of fun and there were still fish being caught but it wasn't quite the same as the tournament I remember from when I was ten or eleven or twelve years old.

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PRICHARD: Oh, okay. Then going into the mid-2000s, or like 2004-2005-2006 is when my understanding of when the major changes happened. But you'd say even in the late nineties you could kind of see there was—moving in—

HEFELE: The atmosphere just wasn't quite the same, I mean. So, in my youth, I mean, literally, the winning fish was going to be thirty-plus pounds. That just was the way it was regardless of the weather or whatever circumstances happened to be there, that was it. Those that were all on the top of the board were going to be in the mid- to high-

twenties. And again, I'm going on memory, and maybe I'm wrong, it's been a while, but my recollection was by the time I was covering that, it was definitely still a big deal, brought people in, but there wasn't any thought that you bring in a thirty-pound Chinook salmon if you were going to win that thing. That had kind of subsided a bit. I don't think at that point we knew really what we were in for. But from the stuff that Frank [Krist]'s been able to kind of describe with the changes through some of—the clean Michigan act and some of the invasive species, we didn't see that coming. But I don't ever remember it being quite the same as it was when I was a kid. And some of that, again, maybe it's being that you were a kid and look at things differently depending on your age.

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PRICHARD: I think that that aligns with my understanding as well. It's just hard to get from newspaper articles that are also trying to promote—

HEFELE: You got it. (Both simultaneously: Yeah.) Carson, you're exactly right. So when you work for a small-town newspaper, if there's some type of a ribbon-cutting or something and eight people show up, in the headline or the first sentence it's a great success. And that's just kind of part and parcel of a small-town paper. We're there to cover the local news but we're also there to build up, as much as possible, our small community. So, yeah, there could be something to that, having not looked at those articles in quite a while.

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PRICHARD: So, Rob Fairbanks, who I have not spoke with yet, but I know that he was the city manager from the mid-nineties I think into the mid-2000s, and so experienced some of the really good salmon fishing, but also was there for the early parts of the major decline. And I was just wondering if you have spoken with him at all about his experience and if anything that you had spoken with him about had to do with the marina, which he was a big part of, or the changing recreational fishery.

HEFELE: So I haven't spoken to Rob at all in quite a few years about anything of that nature. I would just tell you that—I became a city manager in 2001, and Rob was somewhat of a mentor to me in the early years, when I was in another community in northern Michigan and as I had questions I actually spoke to Rob, and Rob and I would sit down and we'd go over the things I was working on, and the troubles that he might be having or the successes he was having. But quite honestly it's been so long I just can't remember specifically what we talked about as it would have been related to the marina. At the time that I was just starting out, Rogers City was building its paved bypath that connects our entire park system and also extends out beyond Rogers City all the way to the 40 Mile Point lighthouse, which is about seven miles north of town. And so I remember having lots of conversations about invasive species—or not invasive species, endangered species—birds and things of that nature, that Rob was having to work around to get this trail completed. But I don't remember conversations specific to the marina at that point.

PRICHARD: Okay.

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PRICHARD: I was kind of curious, and you've talked about this some, that there is an impact there, but I was wondering, to what extent does Rogers City's history with the recreational Chinook salmon fishery affect what you do today?

HEFELE: Carson, have you spoken—another good one to talk to would be our museum—have you talked to Mark Thompson out of curiosity?

PRICHARD: No, I haven't.

HEFELE: I should put a—he's a wealth of information about the—I mean, this year is Rogers City's sesquicentennial. So the city began in 1871, and we'll be 150 years old this year so I've been working hand-in-hand with Mark, again, because of the missing—some of the folks that would normally be involved with organizing those types of things. And so Mark is a wealth of information. And next to our marina is what we call the old fishing harbor, and we're adding some historic signage this year, seven signs to go with the ones we already have up all over of the place, but one of those is actually information specific to the old fishing harbor, and that's what made me think of that. I think a guy like Mark is going to have a wealth of information about the overall fishery, including the Chinook salmon sportsfishery, and how that tied to the history of the town much more than I could ever answer.

PRICHARD: Okay.

HEFELE: I can just tell you that the numbers alone—I mean, obviously I wasn't the city manager at the time, but during my late high school and early college years I actually worked for the city in the public works department pulling graphs and doing that type of

thing, and my brother was working at the marina, and having now been the manager I can see the sheer numbers of fuel sales, and boat slip sales, and all of those things versus what they are now, and it's night and day. Again, a lot of the folks that are still around today are here specifically because of that marina. They're not all here specifically because of the Chinook salmon sportfishery, but a lot of them that are not native here, that are not generational from Rogers City have come specifically because of that facility.

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PRICHARD: I wonder if you can say how true what I'm about to put out there is. It seems to me like without the history of the recreational fishery starting in the mid-eighties (phone rings) and in the early-nineties, you wouldn't have exactly the same marina situation that you have now. It seems like the fishery contributed greatly to the marina expansion in 1996. Would you say that's true?

HEFELE: I think there's absolutely no question about it. So the marina's the harbor of refuge. But I would say, in Michigan, or in northern Michigan, the west side of the State has a lot of sailboats. The power-boaters kind of come and go and there are some power-boaters and a few sailboaters over here, but by and large that marina has thrived and expanded, without any question on the fishery and on the fishermen. It's been that way I think as long as it's existed. And it's actually gone through two expansions since it was originally built, including the one that you just mentioned, and there's just no question in my mind that just absolutely was not going to happen without the fishery. Again, when you have waiting lists, and work in that type of command, and that thing, again, was making so much revenue that I understand now that the city was actually siphoning

money out and using that to help do sidewalks and streets and everything else because it was such a surplus. And so it made sense to continue to expand and at that point it looked like the party was never going to end, the Chinook were thriving and from year to year there was no real change in it. But yeah, Carson, I just think it's absolutely, absolutely the truth without any question whatsoever.

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PRICHARD: A thing that I learned from talking with people that I wouldn't have been aware of had I not kind of really focused in on people in Rogers City is that the changes that happened in the ecosystem in Lake Huron, kind of, didn't affect Rogers City the way that they necessarily did other places like Harrisville or Oscoda where there was a complete loss of the salmon fishery and then there wasn't other species there to kind of fill in that void so much. But in Rogers City what I've learned is that you're kind of at the heart of lake trout natural reproduction—and that's Jim Johnson the biologist's words, not mine. And then from talking with Bruce Grant and others, the story, the ecological story of what happened in Lake Huron kind of blanketed everybody under the same story. And from Bruce's assessment and from others, a lot of the media that helped bring people to Rogers City in the earlier days of the fishery went away or shifted focus to Lake Michigan. And there's been a sentiment that that wasn't fair—we still have a really good fall salmon fishery because they still stock here. And the science has shown that the fish that they stock here can make it into Lake Michigan, feed, and come back and contribute to a fall salmon fishery, and they're still as big as they would be in Lake Michigan. Our lake trout fishing is the highest catch per effort between lakes Michigan and Huron, combined. So, as far as your role as city manager, do you feel like you're fighting for

coverage? Or is there—I just wondered if that plays a part, you know, trying to promote the fishery and compete with the coverage that they’ve described to me that Lake Michigan gets, or compete against the bad press that Lake Huron fisheries got, especially around the time of the alewife collapse.

HEFELE: Yeah I think there is some truth to that. So I think from the marina standpoint, Carson, what we know is there’s just simply fewer boaters out there for various reasons. So we’re all competing harder for fewer boaters. And as you mentioned, in terms of the fishery and what’s going to be stocked where there’s just no question that—you know, that there’s special interest in folks that live on the west side of the State, I mean they’re the same on the east side of the State, and we’re competing for limited State of Michigan resources and that’s just going to be the nature of the beast. I would say, here, that what gives me some peace of mind is that we seem to have some very good people in important positions. And I know that you’ve spoken with some of those—you mentioned Bruce [Grant]. And so Frank Krist is not only on the advisory board for Lake Huron [Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee], he also is the person that sits from the Lake Huron board on the Lake Michigan board, and he’s been doing this so long that I know that he has become a preeminent expert on this, and has the ear of the folks at DNR [Department of Natural Resources] fisheries, which we feel gives us a leg up to be heard at least, and keeps us in the game. If those folks were to, you know, be burned out at some point and say, “I’ve just been doing this too long,” and disappear from those from those boards, I think the challenge would be even greater than it is now. But for just as an example of this—and recently here Covid has kind of messed everything up—I know the DNR is looking for creating a more diverse fishery with types of fish that are

not selective eaters that can survive despite a lack of alewives or a lack of smelt. And so I know we were in the running and we put a bunch of information up in front of them in hopes of that, for instance, that the Atlantic salmon could be planted here and that we would become a primary stocking point for the Atlantic salmon to go with the Chinook. And the lake trout seem to be doing quite well and thriving through reproducing naturally out in the Great Lakes. And again, as we went through that process here at the city and built our argument, guys like Frank have all the information we needed to help us do that, so I would say that without question we're competing against folks on the other side of the State for the limited resources that the State of Michigan has at its disposal, but at least at this point in time we have some very good people in some very important spots that help us remain competitive for those resources.

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PRICHARD: Well I guess, I've got maybe one more question to kind of wrap things up, and I don't want to too redundant, but if you can just reflect back on what might have been the long-term impacts of the rise and the fall of the fishery, what is kind of the legacy of the salmon fishery on the culture of Rogers City?

HEFELE: Well like I said the marina is built around—the community is built around the marina. I mean, that's an asset that communities that aren't on the Great Lakes don't have. And so the fishery—and again, I'll put you in touch with Mark and he'll be able to go back in time further than my lifetime—but, again, having grown up here, we were at the marina all the time, there was energy at the marina. Like many—you know, I didn't have my own fishing boat, but I actually was able to fish with friends who had them, or

the folks had them—including some that you’ve interviewed. And, you know, some of my best memories of youth were sitting out there—especially in the early fall when you didn’t have to go through all the work that went with downriggers and changing all that out. As we got to early fall and the salmon were heading up towards the river and were in Swan Bay near Calcite—and again, as the season got later the salmon got bigger, so not only was it more relaxing and you’d sit out there and long-line with a J-Plug, but you had a pretty decent likelihood of catching a big one. And one of my greatest memories, honestly, was the one thirty-pound salmon I was able to bring in. And so, outside of my position as city manager, those my age and older, and even some younger than me, they’re telling those same stories. If there is anything we can do to have any hope of bringing anything like that back is—you know, I think it’s important to us that still call this place home that would love to be able to be in that position again, but it also helps us bring that energy that we’re so desperately trying to bring back. But I guess that’s how I’d answer that question.

PRICHARD: Okay.

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PRICHARD: Well I really appreciate you taking the time. That’s about all I had prepared to ask you about, so if there’s nothing else you’d like to add I’ll stop the recording now.

HEFELE: No, that’s good, Carson. And I will send you Mark Thompson’s email. It’s his Presque Isle Historic Museum email, and reach out to him. I’ll copy him on it just to let you know what’s going on. And he, again, is a wealth of information. He’ll be a real

good interview for you to kind of talk about, truly, the history of this and why it's important to Rogers City going back far before I could ever even comment.

PRICHARD: Okay. Yeah I'll definitely be interested in talking with him.

HEFELE: Absolutely.

*end of interview*