

David Smrchek

Oral History Interview
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Carson G. Prichard
April 23, 2021
David Smrchek'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 Dave Smrchek at his home in Rogers City. Today is Friday, April 23, 2021. It is 1:27 p.m. So just before we begin, can you, Dave, please state for the recording that you do consent to being interviewed and participating in the interview?

SMRCHEK: I do.

PRICHARD: Okay. Alright, so, yeah, to begin, can you just tell me about yourself and your involvement here?

SMRCHEK: Okay. Well I moved—I came to Rogers City in 1970. (Prichard: Okay.) I graduated from Michigan State [University] and I was [a] speech therapist. I came up here. It kept me out of Vietnam. I got the last of the occupation deferments. So that's how I ended up here. I didn't know what a salmon was in 1970. I moved into an apartment in town, and that fall the DNR [Department of Natural Resources] was giving away salmon that they had taken from a weir somewhere. Show your hunting—fishing license and they

would give you a salmon. So I went to the boat harbor and got a salmon. Probably twenty pounds or so, and blacker than your tape recorder, (Prichard laughs) and I thought that I had just died and gone to heaven. I had no idea. Took it home, cut it up in steaks. The meat was white and so forth. But anyway, that was my first exposure to salmon. And then I got busy with a career and everything else. So I didn't do—I knew that people were fishing salmon a little bit, but it wasn't a huge thing in '70 around here. We were getting our token plant of salmon in Rogers City. Of course everything was going to Lake Michigan. It was just nothing that was in my, you know, picture, that I could picture myself wanting to do. I couldn't afford it, first of all. But then as I got acquainted over the next couple of years, there were people fishing salmon, there were lake trout, there were splake, there were brown trout, and there were steelhead that were pretty much a nearshore fishery at certain times of the year. It was a small boat fishery. The local guys were doing it in their fourteen-, sixteen-footers. (clock chimes) But nobody was coming here from very far away. And it took me a while to figure out what was going on. We had Harry Whiteley here who was on the Natural Resources Commission. Could have brought huge numbers of salmon, I think, if he had wanted to. But for some reason it wasn't happening. And it took me a few years to figure out that here was this little group of really good fishermen. They had their private little fishing world in Rogers City and they wanted their hundred thousand salmon, which was enough for them, but not enough to attract a lot of attention. They had the best of both worlds there in the seventies and into the early-eighties before we started getting the bigger plants. Well then the Indian issue came up, too, and that's how I got to know Frank [Krist], and the Hammond Bay [Area] Anglers [Association] got started. I was President of the [Presque Isle]

Sportsmen's Club when we had one of the first meetings about tribal fishing and Lake Huron, trying to develop community awareness of what we had out here and what we could lose if the negotiations didn't go—. Most of the local guys that I knew didn't care one way or the other. If this fishery went away, out here in Lake Huron, they'd go back into Black Lake and the little lakes and go fishing. They didn't what—they were going to go fish one way or the other. They weren't willing to invest a lot of time or money in that process. There was just a little—a hardcore group of people that wanted to protect Lake Huron from gillnetters. And I didn't—I still wasn't involved in it to any great extent up into '80, I think. I was busy with getting married and having a family and career and so forth. In the process I got involved with Ducks Unlimited, which is—indirectly got me involved in fishing. After we had—I had been involved with Ducks Unlimited for a while—Frank, and Bruce Grant, and a couple other guys from the Hammond Bay Anglers came—and it was in the, probably in the early-eighties, mid-eighties, and they said, “Can you show us how to make some money?”—using my Ducks Unlimited background—“Can you help us make money through the Anglers so that we have money for the courts?” That was how I got involved with the Anglers at that point. In the meantime, the friend that had gotten me involved in Ducks Unlimited had fished in Lake Michigan. He lived in Charlevoix for a while. And he said—and they had started the salmon tournament; that was going—and he said, “Well we can win that tournament. We only need to catch *one good fish*. There's nothing *to it!*” So we got in his fourteen-foot boat and went out here and went fishing. Well there was a few more boats around in the eighties. The first time we went out in the evening, we pulled out of the harbor, and everybody made a left-turn out of the harbor, they trolled down to Seagull Point, went out

to about a hundred feet, and went back around, trolled over to Adam's Point, and then came back up along the shoreline to the harbor. And that was the pattern. It was like a big parade out there that night. And when it got dark, here was this whole line of lights on the boats. Well that was my first experience out there. We didn't catch a fish. But we learned real quickly you didn't want to go the opposite direction of anybody (Prichard laughs)—everybody was mad at you. So anyway, we caught a couple of fish that—but then that was kind of—it was expensive, and I didn't really care that much. So, went down to the tournament, watched what was going on, and there was—you'd have a couple hundred boats. Finally, they got it up to about 350 boats. And I [thought], great, this is kind of fun to watch, but it's like, I don't really—. Well then I had another friend through Ducks Unlimited that had fished on the other side of the state down in southern Lake Michigan, and he said, "Well, you can catch fish in Rogers City," so he brought a boat up here, and he left it with me. And we were living here at that time. So I had his boat to play with all summer. He said, "You learn how to fish," and he said, "I'll come up on the weekends and fish." So that got me started in his boat, fishing a little bit. And I didn't have a clue what I was doing out there. Go out and go for a boat ride and catch the bottom or do what—you know, and so forth. But, after a year of that—and then, talking with Frank and being involved a little bit more with the Anglers and so forth, I bought my own boat. Bought a twenty-one-foot Bayliner, and then that's when I started fishing. And I had summers free, pretty much, (cat meows) with school. So I started fishing morning and evening, once I figured out what to do. And I threw a lot of tackle in the lake like everybody else. But we were part of—at that point, you would have two-, 250 boats launching every day to fish out of here, and weekends were worse.

PRICHARD: That's the mid-nineties?

SMRCHEK: Yeah, that would have been—I bought that boat in '89, so it would have been during the nineties. It was crowded around here. And I got more interested in the politics of the fishing, and the Indian issues, or the tribal issues, and so forth. Met a lot of people coming from all over. Not just in Michigan. There was a whole crew that came up from Indiana that I still have some contact with—the last of those guys that are alive. They'd come up for two or three weeks and fish. So, just being around the cleaning station, and in and out of the harbor, I met a lot of different people, and it was a big social thing. You come in and it takes you longer to get out of the parking lot than it did to catch your fish (Prichard laughs) because everybody's talking and everybody's sharing—a lot of knowledge being shared. And then somebody had a question about something and, well, there's three guys over there, so they'd—you get three different opinions of how to do—. So you would go try it out and see what would work and what wouldn't work. Pretty interesting social climate down there. There were a few guys nobody liked, of course. And then on the water, everybody on the radio—there would always be somebody that would—you'd wish they would shut up, that kind of—. You know, typical. But by and large it was a really fun bunch of people to be around. Anybody would tell you anything, *except during the tournament*. Then, everybody had all these codes and got competitive and nobody would share anything about how they were catching fish. But, wave a net, and here would come *everybody*. You could be five miles away from the closest boat and if you got a net out you'd have twenty-five boats around you before you got the fish netted. It was just—people following around that way. And the poor charters, it's like they had a magnet (Prichard laughs) on the transom of their

boat. Everywhere they went there was a parade following them because they were supposed to know where the fish were. And I fished alone, a lot. I just, I went through trying to organize crews, and it's like, "Okay, you want to go fish tomorrow?" "Well, no. I can't go tomorrow, but call me next time." After a little bit of that it's like, "Look, I'm going fishing. You call me when you can go." Most of the time I fished alone. So that got to be an issue when there were lots of boats. You get a fish on, and trying to stay out of everybody's way. So I got in the habit of getting up at four o'clock, launching. And most of the time I would be done fishing, I'd have my limit of salmon, before the rest of the boats got out and caught up with me. I was going back in when they were all coming out. And it didn't take a lot of people that were paying attention very long to figure that out. So more and more there was this early crowd. That—people watch, the other fisherman are watching what's going on and so forth. Well then the tournament thing, they had their run at it. There were some interesting dynamics with the tournament in terms of Rogers City. The one that bothered me the most, and it was the hardest to explain, was, during the tournament, in Rogers City, you could not have a boat parked in your driveway and a tent in the backyard. The fishermen could not camp at anybody's home in town. But, the next week, during the Nautical City Festival, the softball team could have a tent, camping in your backyard. The community, I don't—we got the sense that the community never really embraced fishing. There was a group of people that thought that all these fishermen were a bunch of drunks that were going to rape and pillage when they weren't out fishing, and they didn't care for that. Well, probably it was the local guys that were more that way than it was the people coming from all over. And they just—I don't think that they ever appreciated how much money was there. They would come down and they'd

look at all the boats, and, “Oh, gee. I wish someday I could afford one of those.” And probably most of the guys that were up here fishing for the weekend could buy and sell 90 percent of the people in Rogers City. They had their \$150,000-worth of boat, truck, and—back in the nineties—. They didn’t come just to party. They might party when they got there, but they came to fish. They had a lot of money invested. But you couldn’t find a place to eat after eleven o’clock, in town, during the summer, when we would be fishing until dark. You couldn’t find a place to eat. Everything was closed. It’s like the community, a lot of the community didn’t care. And we had the same issue with the tribal—. We needed money—the Anglers needed money for attorney fees. And the business community really never got behind it. It’s like, Oh, we were here before the fish. And we’ll be here after the fish. Eh, you guys go do—. The Anglers had a number of different meetings, and different—went through a number of different ways to try to give information to the business community and get their support to protect the fishery. And they’d say, “Eh, gee, I can’t make that meeting,” or for whatever reason, they never really figured out what they had in terms of economics. So then when things started to go away, with the mussels and every—the fishery just started to decline—they didn’t really, well, they didn’t really seem to care if it went away or not. There was people that were almost glad you didn’t have all these boat trailers up and down the streets and everything. And we struggled, with tournaments, to keep some of them going. And for a variety of reasons they went away—mostly because the fishermen weren’t coming because there were no fish. And then all the guys who had come here from other places chased the fish to Lake Michigan or Lake Ontario, but they were, the dyed-in-the-wool salmon fishermen were going to go wherever they could to find fish. So we lost a whole lot of those people. We

had a few people that, during the heyday, came and they bought property, built houses. Young retirees from downstate that came up here. A lot of them are still here. They're not fishing nearly as much as they used to be. They're my age or older. But they—it's just too late for them to move on. And they don't really want to catch lake trout. There's a big difference, which—. I'm fishing lake trout. That's fine. I just go fish lake trout. A lot of these people, Nope. I'm not going to go fish. Their boats are setting in the barn, or they've sold them, or whatever. They're just not interested. And we've had a great lake trout fishery the last four or five years. People won't come. They just—lake trout are not that fun to catch. They're big fish. But they don't make those runs and so forth. It's a whole cultural—or whatever. But the dyed-in-the-wool salmon fishermen do not want lake trout. And there's some of them still around. They haven't put the boat in the water in two or three years. We're going out and catching limits of lake trout every day, and it's, Nope, we don't want them. And these fish are better fish to eat than the other—the lake trout years ago that were eating (clock chimes) the alewives were real fatty and greasy, and these fish are eating gobies and are much better table fare. Probably better than the salmon. We still have a salmon fishery out here in the fall. It's not tremendous, but it's there. And there's steelhead. Last fall was a very good fall for steelhead out here. Who knows what the future's going to bring. It's hard to say.

But that's pretty much my story (Prichard: Okay.) over the years. I'm on my second boat now. I wore out the first one.

PRICHARD: That, the first one was the *Hounddog*?

SMRCHEK: Yeah. (Prichard: Okay.) Yeah, that one—that hull had to have—I’m guessing it had, it was approaching ten thousand hours of fishing time on that hull when I sold it. It was on its second power, I repowered it. The second motor had twenty-five hundred hours on it. And I wore out the first set at about twenty-five hundred a piece, or five thousand hours a piece. It was just beat from hours and hours and hours. Tired of putting money back into it. (Prichard: Yeah.; both laugh) But I’m still using some of the same reels, you know, rods and reels that I originally—. At one point there were three, four tackle stores in town. Now, there’s not a decent one. There’s—Ace Hardware’s selling tackle. Adrian’s still has some. And the Dry Dock still has a little bit. But that’s pretty much all over the state. Tackle business—

PRICHARD: Things go online.

SMRCHEK: —yeah, everything. Well, yeah, and then, if you’re fussy about what you get, you go online and get it. Back in the heyday, the one charter captain was repping for GW, which was a lure manufacturer back in the eighties and nineties, and he would always have some hot new—everyday he’d come up with some hot new lure and get on the radio and everybody runs to the tackle shop and, We don’t have that! Because it was some stupid thing that Phil would put together on his own or whatever. I used to tell him, “Phil, if you want to sell tackle, go look around on the shelves and see what—what lure is not moving. What’ve they got the most of hanging on the wall? Talk about that one for two day so the people will go buy it.” There’s all these, This is the only thing that will catch fish today. Well, I’m sorry, I fish the same half-a-dozen lures all season and catch fish every day. But that’s—.

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PRICHARD: So, when you started getting involved, was that around the 1985 Consent Decree, then, to raise money like you said?

SMRCHEK: I got involved, yeah I got involved with the Anglers—and I was fishing a little bit, had been—well I bought that boat in '89, so—the consent—they were still negotiating that consent agreement when I started fishing. And then when I got in—I don't remember exactly the year. (Prichard: Okay.) I know I went to a couple of the negotiating sessions with Frank [Krist] and Bruce [Grant], but that was real early in my process and close to when they were reaching the agreement (Prichard: Okay.) that we're trying to replace now. I wasn't real heavily involved in the negotiations themselves. But I think that there are probably still some people within the state Ducks Unlimited organization who will not talk to me because they wanted to take the state convention to one of the casinos—I think they were going to go the Soo—and we were right in the middle of that negotiation and I threw a fit at one of the state meetings about going up there right now and giving the casino, the tribe, that business, when they were still wanting to fish gillnets. My argument then was, How many ducks are caught in gillnets in the fall, and they never talk about it? And that never came up much. But I can remember one of the meetings that I went to with Bruce and Frank, it was a huge victory when the US Fish and Wildlife [Service] representatives finally admitted that tribal gillnet fishing was not compatible with lake trout restoration in the Great Lakes. For the longest time, they would say the tribal gillnet fishing effort is insignificant in the restoration process. But that was just a major, major victory for our side when they finally said, "The tribes have got to cut back on the gillnets because we want to restore

the lake trout population.” So, little victories. And the consent agreement has worked well—I think. The first year of the consent agreement, you couldn’t fish from here, from Seagull Point, up to Forty Mile Point. The tribes came in—and it wasn’t one tribe it, was all the tribes—they had nets set from thirty feet out to two hundred feet. And there was no way you could fish between them for two or—for that season. They wiped the whitefish out because they just overfished. And one tribe by themselves probably would have been okay. But when you had them all come in, fighting amongst themselves, they’ve—you know, there hasn’t been a good whitefish fishery out here since then. The emotion was running pretty high then. One day, I was sitting here, and we’d had a blow from the north. Frank called me in the middle of the afternoon and he said, “You don’t think anybody went out there and cut the floats off the tribal nets, do you?” And I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, there’s no floats left on the nets.” And they were fishing trap nets at that time. But anyway, he said, “The floats are all gone.” I said, “Frank, it’s been blowing for two days.” I said, “Just wait. Let the lake settle down. The floats will all come back up.” The current had taken all the floats down, but they were blaming the fishermen because they couldn’t find the floats. Just, let the lake settle down, and sure enough they all came back up. But we played that game with nets. And, you know, when you’re catching nets out there and just—for a while. And then over the course of that twenty years, there would be a tribal fisherman who would try to fish down here, and they might have nets out there for a week, and then they would pull them because they weren’t catching anything. The biggest reason we’ve had this free, you know, open up here is because there’s no whitefish left, or not enough for a commercial harvest. We’ve benefitted from—in the long run benefitted from their overfishing of the

whitefish, which has kept the sportfishing—kept it open for sportfishing. And now their effort, I think, has dropped off considerably. We haven't had to worry about breakaway nets for a long time out here. I don't know when the last time I've heard about somebody catching a net that, you know, when a storm broke it away. But I think they're doing a better job, too, of tying them down, anchoring them.

Who knows what we're going to get out of this next agreement. It's hard—it's really hard to say. If they get any increased lake trout fishing, they could kill the fishery in Rogers City. (Prichard: Really?) I think it's [a] pretty delicate fishery. Even though we're catching lots of lake trout, I don't think it's an inexhaustible supply, and any concentrated fishing effort by the tribes could pretty much wipe out our fishery out here. But, I don't know—things change. (Prichard: Yeah.)

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PRICHARD: Well I wanted to talk about, maybe, focus in on that time period of change—or maybe it's more of a drawn out change than I picture when I just look at the trawl data that shows the major change in alewife from 2002 to 2005—

SMRCHEK: Yeah, it wasn't—it was kind of, it was more gradual (Prichard: Okay.) than the trawl data would—I mean, the salmon were still around. Even though we didn't have the alewives, we got fish back from Lake Michigan. Our fish, they plant them here, and in fact there was data to show that the salmon plants that were made at the Swan, in Swan River, had the best survival of any in the State. You could have made a case to put all of the salmon in the Great Lakes in Swan River because they went everywhere. They were catching them in Michigan City in the spring. So our salmon would go over there and

then come back. Up here, we'd have them in the fall. But everybody wanted them in their own river runs, for the fall fishery, (Prichard: Right.) too. Politics got in the way of that. If you got some natural reproduction, that was great. Frankfort has natural salmon reproduction. We have natural reproduction in the Ocqueoc [River]. There's a fall run of salmon there. And on the other side of the lake there's (Prichard: Yeah.)—and I don't know where else, but there is a fair amount of natural reproduction. But in terms of the fishing, the economic impact of it here, it was pretty gradual. (Prichard: Okay.) You heard a few fishermen were going to go someplace else. Somebody would hear about a great fishery over in Lake Michigan somewhere. But it took a number of years for people to give up on Rogers City and go somewhere else. And it took a while for the lake trout to come back to get to the point where we were catching—there was kind of a dead zone in there. You could catch fish, but you had to work for them. It wasn't like you went and catch a limit every time you went out. And you had the, for lack of a better term, the meat fishermen who wanted to catch limits of fish every time. They didn't stay here. The good fishermen could go out and find fish. And we didn't—we really don't miss a lot of those people. It's been very nice. The last few years a big launch is twenty or twenty-five boats. We still manage to get in each other's way out there when we're fishing, but it's not anything like it used to be. And I quit fishing evenings, pretty much, because of the crowds, and just haven't gone back out. I fish mornings and usually I'm back in by ten-thirty—well, today I was back in at eleven o'clock. (Prichard: Oh, okay.) I had one lake trout. I fish until I run out of coffee (Prichard laughs) or I catch my limit, whichever happens first. (both laugh) That's kind of my rule. And there's a bunch of us that are that way. There's still a couple guys that will fish forever, and they'll stay out until they catch

their limit. If there's four guys on the boat they're going to stay until they get their limit. Eh, to most of us it's, that's too much work. (Prichard: Yeah.) Part of that is the transition that you go through from beginning hunting or fishing, where you've got to catch your limit, so you get to the point, I really don't care if I catch a fish or not. If it's a nice morning, go for a boat ride, watch the sun come up or whatever, and come home. Call it a good day. And you get from the—instead of, when you hit the shore someone says, “What did you catch?” it's, “Did you have a good time?” And that transition, I think a lot of our fishermen are at that point (Prichard: Okay.) now, around here. There's a young group of fishermen there, but it still is [a] pretty expensive sport. (Prichard: Yeah.) And this is not the richest community in the State by any means. There's a bunch of kids that have got some money. They've got decent jobs and they have a boat. But there's another group that just can't afford to get out there. (cell phone begins ringing in another room) I think that there are more good fishermen, more of the sportsman-type fishermen out here now, than the meat fishermen. There's a bunch that still like—a few that still like to catch a lot of fish. And we get a few of those boats coming in, too, and that's fine. There's some really good salmon fishermen that come in and show us how to catch salmon in September. They find them when we don't. But they work at it a lot harder than we do, too. So, that's fine. We still benefit from having some of those people. There are motels that will have four or five boats every weekend during the—from, oh middle of August into October, you know, the salmon people that are here. The town isn't overrun with fishermen anymore, but there's enough that I think the community benefits from it still. (Prichard: Okay.) If the lake trout fishing goes away—eh, I don't know if we'll lose—I don't think that that (clock chimes) will be that big an economic impact. I'll still be here

doing something, spending the money on gas to go somewhere and do something. And so will most of the other that people I know, but, my friends that I've—they'll be doing something.

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PRICHARD: I remember reading a letter to the editor you wrote, I think it was in 2006, and you were saying, I think, two things, mainly. It's like, *a*, the story of what happened in the rest of Lake Huron is not really what's happened in Rogers City. We still (Smrcek: Right.) have good fishing. We still have fishing opportunities. And then, *b*, it's like, all of the media, the press that we used to get, went away. And it was almost like a call for attention for what was still here.

SMRCEK: We worked, we the Anglers, Bruce Grant, primarily, worked for a long time to try to get the media to talk about northern Lake Huron, the fishery here, instead of everything about Lake Michigan. And that was an uphill battle to get that kind of recognition. First of all, we're not easy to get to—especially pulling a boat, a bigger boat up here. You just don't have the infrastructure—we never did have it—to get here, compared with going to the ports on Lake Michigan. But they got so much more press over there, which was—that's just the way it is. Our fishery was the last to die on Lake Huron. We stayed really pretty strong up here a lot longer than other places, and we were actually probably better than a lot of Lake Michigan at that time, too. It was interesting listening to the rumor mill—the fishery would, there would be two or three days of really good fishing in, say, Petoskey, Charlevoix, somewhere on Lake [Michigan], and then two or three days later we would have really good fishing. Or it would die over there, and as

the weather systems moved ours would cycle two or three days or a week behind it. You could almost predict when we were going to have a down time or have a really super fishery out here. But our fall fishery was always strong because the salmon all came back. When we were getting the big plants in Swan [River] we had a great fall fishery. Even though there wasn't a lot of alewife around, they were coming back looking pretty healthy. But they'd all go to Lake Michigan, spend the summer there, and then come back around over here. But it was hard to sell that. And we don't have the motels, we don't have, you know, we just don't have the accommodations. And I have—my sarcastic theory is that the people that have the money to afford to play some of those games don't care about the sunrise. They're up too late at night. They're more interested in the sunset—don't bother them about anything early in the morning. So the west side of the state is much more attractive to them than coming over here. We can talk about the sunrise, but they don't want to get up that early. They just—if you look at just general development. They just like the western exposure much better. (Prichard: Yeah.) It fits their lifestyle (laughs). But that's, for what it's worth, that's my observation over the years of a lot of things, why the west side developed. Obviously there's some other reasons with Chicago where it is. And this side was always industrial, more so, than over there. But you go to the Door Peninsula [Wisconsin]—the west side of the Door Peninsula is all built up; the east side is not. There's a big—a huge difference in the amount of development and resort capability there, too, so, whatever.

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PRICHARD: So I've got here, I think in 2003 is when you started becoming (Smrcek: Probably.) involved in managing the salmon tournament. (Smrcek: Probably, yeah.)

What was it like by that point? Did you already start noticing (Smrchek: We were—) declines in participation by then?

SMRCHEK: We were losing some of the fishermen, although we still had—the first couple times we still had, the first couple years we had decent numbers of people. But what had happened was the group that was running the tournament originally began to lose, through attrition they lost members on their committee. And they didn't do the solicitation, they didn't go out and get the support from manufacturers. But the competition on Lake Michigan took a lot of that support away, too. This tournament, even though it was the first big, major tournament on the Great Lakes, just kind of lost its luster because of the publicity that Lake Huron was dying.

PRICHARD: So sponsorships and that kind of thing went away?

SMRCHEK: Yeah, so you wouldn't get near the donations (Prichard: Okay.) or underwriting or any that they had. Originally, they had just piles of stuff from all the manufacturers. Well that got diluted. Like everything else, the more tournaments you had, the thinner that stuff got, the more it got spread out. (Prichard: Okay.) And by that time we—yeah, by the time I was actually running it, Bruce and I were running it, there was almost no sponsorship coming in. And we didn't have the manpower or the time, really, to go chase a lot of it, either. Everything was over on Lake Michigan. For a couple of years we kept it going. We had fairly good turnouts. And then we ran into some political issues locally with the tourism council and stuff that—I don't know if Bruce mentioned some of that or not—but it just—we just didn't get along with the administration. The tournament people, the original people would have given the

tournament to the Hammond Bay Anglers if we would have taken it. But we didn't want it because we didn't have the manpower. So they gave the tournament to the Presque Isle County Tourism Council, and then Bruce and I ran it for the tourism council for a couple of years. And then we just had a difference of opinion with the tourism council, the director there, and that was when we said, "Look, it's not in our best interest to stay here." There were some things that we did not agree with from a business point of view and we just said, "We're done with it," for our own protection, basically. They had the model. They had all the contacts. And then it just kind of went away. But by then it was pretty much a done deal, anyway. The Anglers started another tournament that we ran up out of Hammond Bay that was a big money tournament and we had a couple of good years with that. And then that went away, too, because there weren't any fish. So that was where the salmon going away killed those—the tournaments. Now the Fat Hogs have kept a tournament going, but it's a lake trout tournament. (Prichard: Okay.) And they don't care. Those guys are just, it's a bunch of local boys. Which is fine. They're putting on a nice little tournament, for their friends. There's probably more money won and lost on side bets than actual prize money in the tournament. They have a ladies tournament. They do some pretty neat things. I think they're kind of running into the same issue that everybody else does around here, you just run out of bodies to run—. This is an aging community. Every organization in the community is running out of bodies to run it. There's no Lions Club anymore because they just ran out of people. Kiwanis is—everything is. The Anglers are virtually down to just two or three people now because there just are not the young people around that are interested. If it hadn't been for retirees moving into the community over the last, probably fifteen years, a lot of the organizations

would have been gone. The young people don't—I think that a lot of them can't afford it. They're busy with their families and their lives. But they also—there's a very small group of people, I think, that actually get involved in the community and running things, and I think that's not unique to Rogers City, I think that's all over.

|00:42:04| to |00:42:46|: *Extraneous interfering sounds can be heard that were caused by a person in an adjacent room.*

SMRCHEK: There's just a small group—but there's a whole lot of people that use but don't want to put back. And that's affecting everybody. I see it in—statewide in Ducks Unlimited, all of our chapters, or most of them, are in trouble because they can't get the next group of volunteers. The Anglers are there. We've got a much smaller group to draw from in Presque Isle County than in the major metropolitan areas, so it's harder to keep all of those things going. And that's just society. Plus, now, everybody is, "I'm not going to get involved," you know, that whole attitude is affecting what's being done in service organizations of all kinds. You've got to have some kind of a catch to sell. Here, most of the guys that would be interested are—they'll go, "I'll go fish bluegills. If this goes away, I'll go fish bluegills. To heck with it." I'd rather go fish than work to protect the lake trout. (Prichard: Yeah.) I don't know how you fight that one. I don't know what you can do to change that attitude. It's tough.

|00:43:33| to |00:51:31|: *Extraneous interfering sounds can be heard that were caused by a person in an adjacent room.*

|00:43:43|

PRICHARD: Yeah. You kind of maybe already gave me this answer, but I was kind of wondering about the impact on the culture of Rogers City of fishing, and it sounds like, from what you said, Rogers City had its culture, its identity, if you could describe it that way, and then fishing came and it was—it wasn't well-incorporated or embraced, it was—kind of existed separate from the culture of Rogers City.

SMRCHEK: I think—yeah, I think that's fairly accurate. Most of the natives that have their hunting camps, and they have—or they have their farms or whatever, it's like they didn't need the salmon fishery out here. There were some people that really liked to fish lake trout. Back in the seventies, eighties, there was a decent lake trout fishery out here. When I started out, the spring fishery at Seagull Point, the lake trout would be in six feet of water. And there would be nights when there'd be a hundred local boats going around in a circle out there trying to catch lake trout that weighed about a pound-and-a-half. And there were guys—there was a lake trout reef off, out off the harbor that would hold lake trout during the summer, and there were several different people that would go out there and fish that. That was fishing in ninety feet of water and so forth. Now that we have lake trout all over the place, the last five years, the guys that were out there at that point who are my age or a little bit younger are not fishing. They haven't learned to fish—they pretty much gave it up. When that lake trout population went away, it's like, Eh, okay, I'll go fish walleyes, or they got interested in something else and they haven't come back. The fishery, it's not life or death for these people, for most of them. Yeah there's a hardcore—a little group of people that is hardcore. But, I think that many of the people here are more opportunistic. They're not going to invest hours and hours and hours to maybe catch a fish when they can go catch bluegills without even thinking about it. So if

this goes—I think the attitude still, in large part, is, if this goes away, Eh, we'll still have Black Lake. Or we have Lake Nettie, or wherever. We have another—Grand Lake. We can go catch perch there. It's not like this is the only game in town for a lot of them. For a lot of locals that seems to be the attitude. It was great when there was splake in the harbor, you could go catch those. Or when you had lake trout that were relatively easy to catch. And the salmon were great. That was a great opportunity. But, eh, if they're not there that's okay. We'll go do something else.

[00:47:13]

PRICHARD: So it was just a—had a lot to do with just the circumstances. Swan River (clock chimes) was a really great place to stock because the salmon survived well, and contributed to all of the fisheries that were of interest (Smrchek: It took a—) to the Michigan DNR.

SMRCHEK: Yeah. There were some really sound scientific reasons to stock the salmon in the Swan and have the egg harvest (Prichard: Yeah.) station there and so forth from the DNR's point of view, and the state fishery. The locals, Eh, gee, there's a bunch of salmon (Prichard laughs) up there, let's go catch them. But if, Well, they're not there, we'll go back—. What happened is that the salmon fishery protected a lot of the local lakes for a big period (Prichard: Ah.) of time. It took the pressure off of the inland lakes and let them kind of regenerate. But now it's kind of going the other way. There's more people—if they're going fishing, they're going inland. (Prichard: Okay.) But I think that's just the change—nothing stays the same. It's a constant—you know, the cycle of things. Atlantic salmon are going to be—they're okay. I don't think they're going to save the Great Lakes

fishery. They're a nice fish, but they're never going to be numerous enough to make it great fishing.

|00:48:45|

PRICHARD: Do you catch many of those?

SMRCHEK: We catch—I wouldn't say many. (Prichard: Okay.) We don't have a plant here. We catch them—our Atlantics come down from the St. Marys [River], or we probably get some coming up from southern Lake Huron. Kind of like the walleyes—we catch some really nice walleyes—just not lots. They kind of wander up, from Saginaw Bay and Alpena, up here. You would not come here as a destination walleye fishery. And this is probably not a destination Atlantic [salmon] fishery. It might become a destination steelhead fishery, but even that's pretty inconsistent. One day you can catch really nice steelhead and then you may go two weeks and not see another one. They just kind of wander in and out. The big advantage that we had here years ago with the salmon was you didn't have to go very far to get to deep water. It was a relatively nearshore fishery compared to Lake Michigan. We still have that advantage most of the time. But, be it climate change or whatever, this last couple of years the lake trout have gone really deep in the summer—this has warmed up out here—it would be sixty-five degrees eighty feet, eighty-ninety feet down because of the way the winds were blowing. When you had the prevailing west wind it kept blowing the warm water out and bringing the cold water up. (Prichard: Yeah.) But we've had so much north northeast wind that it's pushed the warm water in and down and pushed the fish out to two hundred, three hundred feet of water, to find cold water, and most of us aren't going to run that far, anyway. (Prichard: Yeah.) It's

just—we're not that dedicated. (both laugh) But we don't have to. It's not like we're charters on Lake Michigan that have got to go out in the middle of the lake to find fish (Prichard: Yeah.) for our clients. (Prichard: Get out of that warm water.) Whatever they are. You know, they'll go—they've got to go all over the place. And I've been around Frankfort the last few years in the summers—one of the guys from Indiana that I fished with, got acquainted, bought a trailer and a campsite over in Elberta, so we try to get over and see him every year for a week or whatever. The fishery there died this last summer. You could shoot a cannon through the parking lot. Five years ago you go over there and the municipal parking lot was packed. Not this last couple of years. They're just not there. The fish are not there, either.

[00:51:31]: A short interruption in the interview was cut from the recording.

SMRCHEK: So I don't think that what's happening here is anything that is necessarily unique to Rogers City. We may be ahead of the curve a little bit. But the other thing there is that a lot of the fishermen that were in Frankfort don't want to catch lake trout. (Prichard: Right.) They could sink the boat with lake trout over there, too, but they won't do it. This friend of mine, he doesn't want to catch lake trout. He says, "I know where you can sink—you can catch all the lake trout you want," but he says, "I'm not going in there." He says, "I don't want them." Some of the charters were bringing lake trout in. They've got to have fish for their clients. Will those clients come back? I don't know. If you've caught salmon, you're probably not going to be happy with lake trout. But if you're new to the sport, don't know what a twenty-five-pound salmon can do, you're probably going to be happy catching a ten-pound lake trout. (Prichard: Yeah. I—) The one I had this morning was probably seven or eight pounds. It was a struggle. It didn't

make any runs, but it—dead weight, coming in. It was, for somebody who wasn't used to catching fish, it would have been work. I've had people out, they get one of those and it's like, Oh my god. They're just *worn out* from that because of the adrenaline and they're trying to bring it in in a hurry instead of, whatever. So I think for—there's another generation coming that if we can maintain the lake trout fishing, they probably will take to it and be happy with it. But, they don't know what they've missed.

|00:53:11|

PRICHARD: Right. I've wondered about that. The angler perceptions of lake trout being influenced by the guides and—

SMRCHEK: I think it's going to take the outdoor folks—

PRICHARD: —because people fish for walleye, you know, and they don't [fight].

SMRCHEK: Well walleyes, you might as well catch sticks. (Prichard laughs) Lake trout have a little bit more—. But, there's a different—you know, walleyes are on lighter rods. And I've been using lighter tackle now. I don't use it right now because you've got the twenty-pound lake trout that are—ten- to twenty-pound lake trout that are just dead weight and too heavy for the walleye tackle. But later on in the season, if when you're catching five-pound lake trout you use walleye tackle, they're fun to catch. They don't make huge runs, but they do fight. And I think that the fishery, that part of it has changed—will change over time. There's going to be a group of people that want to get out there, on the lake, they're going to—just to go. And I think if it's handled correctly by the media, they can make that lake trout fishery a really desirable thing. And then you've

got the Atlantic and the steehead—the occasional Atlantic, the occasional steelhead.

There's coho out here occasionally, you know, you'll pick up—. And there's still going to be some Chinook around. Well, if you're fishing for walleyes and you (Prichard laughs) get a Chinook on, your heart's going to come right out of—the typical fisherman is going to have—. But you've got—it's a reeducation process. Probably a generational thing. You may see the change more—I'm not sure I'm going to be around long enough to see that change take place out here. I made the change. I'm happy to go out and catch lake trout. That's fine. I got people that are lined up to get them. I don't have to worry about, What am I going to do with the three or four lake trout, or five, whatever? Take somebody with me and they think it's just great to take home the lake trout after they've been out there for a morning. (Prichard: Yeah.) But that's, you know, the outdoor writers are a big part of, and I think that they need to quit pushing Lake Michigan salmon as the primary. Yeah they're fun to catch, but you're not going to do that. If you want to fish, you're going to have to do something else. Make the adjustment. And the charters are going to have to probably change their thinking a little bit, too. Walleye are fine. They're much better table fare, usually. Most people seem to like those. But these lake trout are so much different. They're not greasy at all because they're eating gobies and they're very lean. The fish I got this morning, the meat is the brightest orange I've seen in a long time. He wasn't eating gobies at all. If he was eating gobies he'd be all—or, I mean, eating alewives, he'd be white. But, I don't know what he was eating—the stomach was empty. But just as pretty orange meat as any salmon you'll buy in the store.

PRICHARD: Yeah. I've never—I never had, I never ate any of the lake trout while they were eating almost all alewife, and I've thought every lake trout I've ever eaten was great.

SMRCHEK: They're—after a while you don't want to eat (Prichard laughs) any more (laughs; Prichard: Yeah.). We're at that point. My wife, if I say, "Let's have a—," "I don't want a lake trout. *No no no*. Let's go have perch at the restaurant." (both laugh) But I think that the fishery is changing. I don't think that it's hopeless. The big variable is what happens with the tribes. That could end it (Prichard: Okay.) very easily, I think. If they don't reach some kind of a reasonable agreement with the tribes, and you have any kind of a free-fire competition between the tribes to get the fish that are out there, that could end the fishing for the near-term, I think. If they do to the lake trout what they did to the whitefish, you might as well close the harbor down. There's going to be a whole lot of flower boxes on wheels around because the boats won't be—and a lot of unhappy people. But, hopefully there'll be some reasonable compromise. We did it once, we should be able to do it again.

|00:58:16|

PRICHARD: If you think back, with respect to the salmon fishery, from your perspective, what were some things that you think were done really and what were some things that you think were not done well or could have been done better, I guess, with respect to the City of Rogers City? Michigan DNR? How the tournament was handled, maybe?

SMRCHEK: Hmm—well the city itself could have gotten more involved with the tournament. But the tournament people, the original tournament group, didn't go out and try to work with the community very much, either. I think there was blame on both sides. They did not encourage local businesses to bring concessions down there. The food tent that they had for two or three years was run by one of the churches and that was the only concession they would let down there. There was another vendor that wanted to bring a hotdog stand down and they wouldn't let him come even close to the tournament. They did a pretty good job of trying to discourage the businesses from participating in it. But the community, you know—it's the chicken and the egg. Which came first? And if they had worked more closely with some of the community, could they have had a better relationship? Probably. But I think there was still a group in the business community that, Eh, it's not worth the effort. It's one weekend out of the year. And we already are busy enough. And we know if they're in town they're all going to stop in and they're going to have to eat somewhere. Why would we have to give any more money or do any—? I don't know how they would have worked that out any differently. It would have been nice to try, but I don't know how much effort there was on either side, there, in terms of their cooperation. There was a lot of friction over boat trailers plugging up the streets. And then when the festival started there was a whole lot of friction over the tent going in the marina parking lot when we had two hundred boats trying to fish out of there and they thought, Oh, you fishermen are just all—you just don't want the festival. The reality was that they had necked down the parking lot to the point that if a blow had come up it would have been a huge safety issue. We could not have gotten that many boats off the lake in the time that we would have needed to. They were very fortunate that there wasn't

some kind of a disaster here. I don't think that we've lost a fisherman out here. There's been some near-misses, but there could have been a major disaster if the weather had changed quickly enough when they had the tent there and the parking lot full of people in the tent. So there were some issues with that. The community—a certain group in the community did not look at it from the fisherman's point of view. And obviously some of us did not look at it from the community's point of view with the festival, either. So, probably more communication on both sides.

And as far as the DNR, I don't know. I think they probably did—the DNR employees probably did as good a job as (clock chimes) they could given the politics of the situation. We're a very small voting group up here. Just numbers, you know, we just don't have the votes. And they have to respond to the numbers. That's just the reality of it. I think that they did a pretty decent job of maintaining our fishery.

[01:02:29]: Music playing in another room in the house can begin being heard and this continues for the rest of the recording.

They're kind of getting away from Swan [River] as an egg-taking facility and I don't understand that. They've had to come over here a number of times to get eggs because they couldn't get enough at their other sites. But they still, there's—some of the people in the decision making loop want to close this down. I don't understand that. It seems like it would make sense to maintain this as another option, at least. I don't think it costs them that much, but I don't know the finances on it. The other thing I would have liked to have seen, I think, more of, was the DNR going out and getting different strains of salmon. I think that the strain that they've got has inbred too much. They're still getting some

decent-sized fish, but I think that they've lost that initial vigor because they keep taking eggs from the same bunch of fish over and over. At some point it would seem like it would be in the best interest of the Great Lakes to go get different strains of salmon and introduce some new strains—and I don't know how many different strains there are—but bring in some fresh stock instead of using the same old fish over and over and over, generation after generation. But, overall I think they did a pretty decent job. I'm not sure they ever realized what they were starting when they planted. I don't know that they ever gave it a thought. I would hope that [Dr. Howard] Tanner, when he—in his wisdom would have seen this as potential for recreational fishing—I'm not sure he did. I think they were looking at getting rid of the alewife problem and then just never anticipated what they had. And I think, it seems like I heard that they thought that when they didn't want salmon anymore they'd just quit planting them and (Prichard laughs) they'd just go away. They never anticipated natural reproduction. So they've—the unintended consequences. But that's going to happen all the time. They are an invasive species. Turned out to be a pretty good invasive species in the big picture of things. Now we need another good one. (Prichard: Yeah.) Something besides the Asian carp coming! (both laugh) That's a whole nother—! (Prichard: Yeah.) Who knows where that's going to do. That's next generation's problem. (Prichard laughs)

|01:05:17|

PRICHARD: Maybe this was the answer to that, but I was wondering if you had any what-ifs, like, with respect to the fishery in Rogers City over the years?

SMRCHEK: What-ifs? In terms of, What if they had done this?

PRICHARD: Yeah. Or, what if things had gone this way?

SMRCHEK: It would have been interesting to see how the Great Lakes fishery would have held up—the difference in it—if they had planted everything in Rogers City, at least for a couple years as an experiment, you know, to see how far those fish would have travelled, and what it would have done in the long run to fishing opportunity everywhere.

I don't really have (Prichard: Okay.) any more what-ifs. (Prichard: Okay.) What-if gillnets come all the way down to Alpena? That's going to be a big one. That could have been a disaster back twenty years ago if that hadn't been settled the way it was. That would have made a huge difference. I think that would have made an economic difference here because there would have been people who would not have moved to Rogers City and built homes here and retired in the county. We would have been, probably, more desolate than we are now. But, hindsight's always twenty-twenty. (Prichard: Yeah.) I think all in all it's been a very positive thing for the county over the time I've been involved in it. It's cost me a lot of money, (Prichard laughs) but I've had a lot of fun, too. I've enjoyed every bit of it. Hope that it lasts for another ten years, or hope that I can *enjoy it* for another ten years. But I wouldn't change much of it, I don't think.

PRICHARD: But you never considered going somewhere else, or—?

SMRCHEK: No. (Prichard: No.) I'm not—I wouldn't move. If the fishing goes away, I'm not going to go chase fish somewhere else, probably. Probably my kids will have a boat to sell at some point. And I probably will still play around out here—if there's a few lake trout left I'll keep fishing out here as long as I'm able. I would much rather burn gas in the boat than hauling it down the road. If I'm going to spend the time I'd rather be on

the water than driving to someplace else. I know where to fish here. After thirty years I know where every—not quite every bump, but I know where most of it—the best chance of catching fish is. I wouldn't want to have to go learn a new lake or new harbor at this point. I don't think I have the time. Well I don't have the energy to go do that, either, it's just, (Prichard: Yeah.; laughs) I'm getting lazy—and old. (laughs)

|01:08:29|

PRICHARD: One of the things I was curious about, getting a sense of the impact of the fishery on Rogers City has to do with some of the longer-term trends in Rogers City. I know that if you go back to the seventies you had four thousand-some people in Rogers City. Now you're closer to twenty-seven hundred, and I think that by 2024 I saw there's a projection that it will be down to twenty-three hundred. And so I was wondering, maybe just your perspective or opinion on, what you think that kind of trend would have looked like had the fishing stayed what it was in the late-eighties, early-nineties.

SMRCHEK: Probably if it had stayed as good as it was—if the peak, if we were still fishing at the peak level, real estate would—well, real estate's worth a whole lot right now, anyway. But I would guess that we would not have lost population. You would have had more people moving in. Some of the people, some of the guys that I have known over the years, would have been more inclined to buy property here—the guy from Indiana, instead of buying in Frankfort would have bought something here, and would be around. (cell phone rings in another room) And then there would have been retirees, I think, coming—although I think that wave of retirees was unique to that time frame, when they got the bonuses and so the buyouts and everything to come up, to move up

here. But it also would have created a whole nother secondary job market by having another two thousand people around—not necessarily young people raising families, but relatively young retirees, retirees in their late-fifties early-sixties, who came around and who wanted different services. I think that the community would have grown, more so. Now, it's kind of withering up. And the county has lost population since I've moved here, too. It had been fairly stable, but it was aging because of retirees moving in and young people leaving. Obviously Calcite—whatever, Carmeuse, or whatever it is now—the decline in the employment there had a very negative impact on the community and keeping young people around. My kids didn't have the option of staying here, make a living. They left, and now they're—one's raising a family in Minneapolis. And then many of their classmates have gone, too. I would have been nice if we had had some things happening around here. If the fishery had brought in some more industry, light industry or something, it would have given more opportunity for kids to stay here rather than having to leave to make something more than minimum wage. And I think the fishery could have done that if it had held up. But, it didn't, and so they're gone.

(Prichard: Yeah.) Great place to live, though. I love it the way it is. I don't want any more people moving in. (both laugh) From a purely selfish point of view: *leave it the way it is*. Let's not advertise this side of the State. (laughs) And the real estate market right now is so hot around here that I'm not worried about—if I had to sell I wouldn't—it'd be more a case of I'd better have a place to go because it's going to be gone the next day if I put it on the market. So, from that perspective, I've kind of the best of both worlds. But it would have been nice for a lot of kids to have the option of staying here if they wanted to. And then a lot of them are coming back as they get older. But, still, the grandkids are the

ones that are going to miss out on growing up in this environment because it just, the opportunity isn't there.

|01:13:03|

PRICHARD: Well that about covers everything I had planned on asking about. Is there anything else you'd like to add about the legacy or story of the salmon fishery in Rogers City?

SMRCHEK: No, I don't think so. (Prichard: Okay.) I think you probably—that's my perspective on it, for what it's worth. And I'm sure that there's other people that will add to that and had different—point of view is different in a lot of cases. I was not in business. It didn't make any difference to me from a—I worked for the schools and my job was secure regardless of what happened. So that was not a problem. And it gave me the summers. Let me live the lifestyle that I wanted and play the way I wanted to and retire way early and really utilize the resource. And I'm very happy that I had that chance.

PRICHARD: Yep. Alright. Well thank you, Dave.

SMRCHEK: Oh, you're welcome.

PRICHARD: We'll stop this now.

end of interview