

Scott McLennan

Oral History Interview  
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Carson G. Prichard  
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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: Alright, Scott, so thank you for participating in the interview with me. Before we begin, can you just state on the recording, please, that you do consent to being recorded and participating in the interview?

MCLENNAN: Yes, I do consent to this interview and to having the interview recorded.

PRICHARD: Alright, thank you. So to begin—I like to start the interviews this way—can you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

MCLENNAN: Sure. So my name is Scott McLennan. I am currently the Mayor of Rogers City, Michigan. I have spent most of my life in Rogers City. I was born in Rogers City back in the fifties when we actually had a hospital here in Rogers City, and it was during the baby boom era. We had lots of children being born then in the mid-fifties. And so I grew up here. Married. Moved away for a time due to employment, that sort of thing. Healthcare—healthcare world—I'm a retired healthcare administrator and registered nurse. And I raised my family partially in another community and then moved back with

my family to the Rogers City area. So I've been here essentially all of my life. I'm now retired other than being mayor and serving on a few local committees. That sort of thing.

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PRICHARD: I'd like to step back to maybe your earliest memories or thoughts regarding the Lake Huron salmon fishery and step forward through time. I remember, last time we talked you kind of began with the beaches being awash with dead alewives. So I was wondering, could you take us back to that time, and then the progression of the fisheries in Rogers City?

MCLENNAN: Yeah, sure. And so Rogers City was initially a lumbering- and fisheries-type community. So we—I remember as a young man—and I say young man, probably more as a youth; probably junior high-high school-ish—I remember the fish docks, and there's a little harbor where just the fishing fleet would operate out of, and they had two or three fishing boats that would go out and net fish. And they had a pretty thriving business down at the Vogelheim Lumber Company yard-ish, down near the lake, near what is currently the marina. So it was—we always saw that. And as a boy, in terms of the beaches, we have beautiful beaches here. But every year there would be an issue with alewife die-off and washing up. So the city work crews would have to come along with their payloaders and—literally, with the payloaders and dump trucks—and load up the back of these dump trucks with the alewife that had washed up on our nice, pristine beaches.

PRICHARD: Was that a pretty regular occurrence? Or was it just, like, every so often? Or every few years, or so?

MCLENNAN: It was like every couple of years. There were some times that it was more significant than others because I do know that it hit the papers sometimes that, Oh, this year is a particularly bad year for the alewife die-off. There would always be some. But, right, not always a huge die-off. But there were years when there were some real significant die-off of alewife that had to be removed.

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PRICHARD: Then at—so at some point—well, I know that in the sixties the stocking initiative for salmon began, and then I'm less certain about the history in the seventies with respect to Lake Huron and Rogers City. And then I know that in 1983 is when the major stocking initiative for salmon began in Rogers City. So can you describe to me what that progression was like from going to not really have a recreation fishery there to the buildup of the salmon stocking initiative there?

MCLENNAN: Right. So when—again, then I would go back to—it was essentially 1970, I would say, about, before we, being my buddies and I—local, amateur fishermen—we liked to fish the inland lakes, always, and that sort of thing—well, right around 1970, give or take, the salmon started really being a thing in this area. And the salmon would be in the rivers. And we would spend many a Saturday, Sunday, et cetera, going up into the rivers and pulling out large salmon. Now, I will tell you that we would have fishing licenses, but I'm not sure we always abided by the rules when it came to salmon. The salmon were so so plentiful in those days. Large salmon. And the rivers were full of them. The only time we'd ever get in trouble is if we were trespassing on someone's property we would get chased off, that sort of thing, (laughs) but they—you didn't want

to break that—you knew enough—we knew anyway, our group—not to break the banks down, that sort of thing. Try to be careful. But there were just plentiful salmon in the rivers. And then it was probably, oh, 1972 or so, that we, anyway, started really going out in the lake and finding out that, wow, what a great sportfish this salmon is in the lake. It was quite a bit different than just trying to haul them out of the river. I mean, that was fun, but you get out in the lake and start fishing salmon—it was terrific. So that was a real peak time, in the seventies, for salmon fishing in the Rogers City area.

PRICHARD: The seventies you say, then?

MCLENNAN: Yes, all through the seventies was really good in the Rogers City area.

PRICHARD: Oh, okay. So that's before, really, the major stocking.

MCLENNAN: We went out regularly all through the seventies, and it was a very good time for salmon fishing. And then it just kept getting better as those years went on. But yeah, we had great salmon fishing all through the seventies.

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PRICHARD: Was that an important part of your life, personally—recreational salmon fishing? I know that you moved away from Rogers City in 1983, [ed. note: McLennan moved away from Rogers City in 1986, not 1983] so if I did my math correctly you'd be about twenty-eight, twenty-nine years old at that time. How important was fishing to you during that time period?

MCLENNAN: You know, it's interesting to look back on those years because what happened when I moved away, it was also a time that I was preparing to be married and starting a family. And in the mid-eighties—I married in '86—so, raised a family, and jobs, commitments, those kind of things, became the priority, so I lost track. I would hear from my friends, “Yeah, boy, come on out. We're slaying them out here.” But my life took a real busy turn. But they were—my friends who had boats in the Rogers City area—were out on a regular basis. And the other thing that I would see in visiting Rogers City is that there was a pretty thriving charter boat service, as well, taking people out. What was interesting was in the eighties, we have a marina, a marina that is very popular in the area, and it has a very large parking lot, relatively speaking, and that parking lot—I remember in the eighties—that parking lot would be full with boats and trailers and vehicles. And cars would actually be—vehicles would be parked up on the streets because there wasn't enough room for them down by the harbor. So many folks were out taking advantage of the great salmon fishing.

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PRICHARD: I remember when we spoke last that you said when you returned to Rogers City in 1995 it had an interesting feel. And my understanding is that the salmon fishing tournament was still going strong in the mid-nineties, and the fishing—the fishery seemed to still be going pretty strong. So I was wondering if you could elaborate on what that change in the feel of the city was between the mid-eighties and the mid-nineties, and how the salmon fishery played any part in that.

MCLENNAN: So I was gone for ten or eleven years and then did come back in the mid-nineties. That's exactly right. And I was very excited about being able to come back to Rogers City. I was very excited about that because I loved Rogers City. I found in travelling other places that the natural resources—that's really what drew me back to my hometown. Everything is so relative. You grow up here thinking this is the way it is out there in the world. Well, no it's not. This is a very special and unique environment here in Rogers City. So, I excitedly built a home in Rogers City. Moved my family back. But as we—as I came back to my hometown I noticed that things were actually very different. The amount of traffic was way down. The amount of young people on the streets and up and around were—just, the numbers were just so down. I grew up here at a time when my graduating class was about 180 students. The class ahead of me was a little bit larger than that. The classes behind me were also large classes. And in recent years, I know the classes are about forty-five students—the graduating classes—compared to our one-eighty. So, the population from 1970 here in Rogers City had steadily declined from a high of about forty-eight hundred people down to today's twenty-seven hundred people. And what we're seeing is the majority of those people—in that decline—is younger people. So, all of the homes today in Rogers City are sold. As soon as a home comes on the market, it's sold. But it's sold to either a single individual or a couple who are retiring here—they love the area, they love going for walks and spending time on the bike trail and the beach. So, when I came back to Rogers City in the mid-nineties, it was very noticeable that there wasn't the vibrancy that there once was. There wasn't the activity and the excitement. Back when I grew up, Thursday evenings meant the stores were open. That was the time that—Thursday nights you cash your check and everyone would

be downtown, buying groceries and going in and out of the stores. Well, no more Thursday nights now. They stopped that. There just wasn't enough traffic. So, in terms of the fishing industry, when I came back in the mid-nineties it was still going on. In fact, a fun part of that is that I have a very good friend—one of my best friends—and he has a great boat for salmon fishing, for the Great Lakes, and we would start going out again. So that was fun. And we would do fairly well. But I would say, “Wow, we're catching quite a few lake trout.” Yeah. It had changed. It used to be all salmon. I don't even recall—I don't recall, honestly, catching lake trout back in the day. But we did catch lots of salmon. Now it was kind of a mix, when I got back in the nineties, of salmon and lake trout.

PRICHARD: I'm kind of curious about your friend. Does he still live in Rogers City and still fish?

MCLENNAN: He does. He's an avid fisherman. Matt Hollabaugh. He's a great guy. He's—in fact, I ran into him this morning down along the shoreline as we were—as I was taking a morning walk, there's Matt. And he is getting his boat ready. He's got it in winter storage. It will be coming out shortly.

PRICHARD: Okay. Well, I might follow up with you after this interview and see if he might be somebody that would be willing to do an interview.

MCLENNAN: If he would, he's a wealth of knowledge. You bet.

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PRICHARD: So, I think it's a real privilege for me and for this project to be able to speak with you as the mayor because I just imagine that you have a lot of communication with the citizens there—especially concerned citizens who are interested in the current state of Rogers City and the future of Rogers City. And I was wondering, based on your interactions with the citizens there, what are their attitudes and values with respect to the fishery there? And then, maybe, how has that changed over time, compared to, say, ten years ago? Or, do you have any particularly memorable interactions with citizens regarding some aspect of the fishery?

MCLENNAN: Well, we have a number of folks from the Rogers City area, most of them natives, I would say, probably a 60-40 split of—when I say “natives,” they grew up here in Rogers City and stayed, and then maybe 40 percent that have moved here—and so there is a very avid sportsfishing community. We still have an annual—we have a couple, actually, of annual fishing tournaments. And it really is an area that a group of fishermen continue to be quite active. And I think that there's a lot of attention paid to what is happening with the sportsfishing industry. As an example, we here at Rogers City are on the borderline of the Native American treaty waters. And so if you go right straight out from Rogers City you're still in Native American treaty waters. You go a little south toward Alpena more, you're out of them. Catch limits are different in one side of the line versus the other. So, we're very—as a community, very focused on the sportsfishing industry. It meant a lot to us back in the day and many of us remember that. Now it's quite different because we're seeing—we saw the decline of the salmon industry. And that was just, that was very sad to see. Now, true, we wound up, because of the zebra mussels, having water that is crystal clear. An international dive team came here and said

it's the—it literally is the cleanest, clearest water, high-visibility water that they've ever been in, no matter where in the world they've gone. This is the cleanest, clearest. And I have no doubt about that. It is. But it also meant that—you know, when I grew up we used to catch smelt in Trout River, Nagel's Creek, Schmidt's Creek. You'd go there and you could fill up a—if you chose to, you could fill up a fifty-five-gallon drum in a matter of an hour or two. (laughs) But then you'd have to clean them, so we never did that. (both laugh) But it's so different now because no one even goes out for a smelt run now because it's so limited. And alewife, if you asked the new generation if they knew what an alewife was they'd [say], "I don't have a clue what you're talking about," whereas we grew up with that. So that's very different. So, yeah, it's a different world today. I think locally, now, the feeling would be somewhat toward encouragement that perhaps we're seeing some improvements. The salmon are starting to get a little bigger. Catches are coming back a little bit more. So I'd say there's a feeling of guarded optimism at the moment.

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PRICHARD: In our previous conversation I had asked—well, you had told me that you and Joe Hefele [Rogers City City Manager at time of interview] were strong partners and kind of re—coming up with a plan for the future of Rogers City and revitalizing the city. And I asked about the extent to which to which tourism would play a role in that, and you directed me to the *Economic Development + Community Marketing Strategy* [ed. note: “+” pronounced “and”] document, and I went through that. And one thing that stood out to me, and [you] kind of mentioned it earlier, is the issue of change. And one of the biggest weaknesses that was identified in that document as an internal aspect of the city

that is holding it back from success is a resistance to change. And in my background research for this project I remember reading, in the early eighties people were voicing objections to the major salmon stocking initiative plans, and the sentiment was resistance to change. But of course, changes happened in Rogers City with cutbacks from the major employers in town, and then the major Lake Huron ecosystem change. So, I was wondering if you're—in contextualizing the value of—positive value of change, is the salmon fishery that was built up in the eighties held as an example of, “Hey, here's a change that the city made, and it had a really positive effect”?

MCLENNAN: Well, I think that we were probably more on just the receiving end of the change that was occurring through the State of Michigan making salmon plants and building that industry. I don't think—you know, back in the day I don't recall anyone really objecting whatsoever to the salmon industry coming to our area. In fact, many people who were not even fishing families were the benefactors of people going out catching fish, filleting them—some people got extraordinarily good and very quick at filleting salmon—and providing them to a number of local families. So, I think over the years it would be safe to say that when it came to the salmon fishing industry—sportsfishing industry—in this area, there was always broad-based support for that. (Prichard: Okay.) Yeah. But other areas, no. (laughs) I don't think that Rogers City is probably unique in that sense. When you grow up in a small town, change is often difficult. And you say, “This just means there's going to be more people coming to our community.” And now the current push toward changing from an industrial economy—that is to say a limestone quarry, the world's largest limestone quarry, which now is becoming mechanized—in fact, it already has become very mechanized—and a United

States Steel [Corporation] Bradley [Transportation] sailing fleet of boats that used to sail exclusively out of Rogers City and now they're scattered to other ports

—all of that has led to a downturn in the economy and the number of families that that used to support. So, you now have to change. So if that's not going to be a stable economic force for our area, what do you do? Well, you look to maximize tourism because one thing that we do have that so many other areas don't have is a *beautiful* environment. An environment that is forests, fields, pristine water, shorelines that are second to none. So it's making that change, and sometimes people don't want to share that. And I mentioned earlier in the interview that I was walking along the beach this morning. I ran into one other person, because it's getting more that time of the year, but for much of the year it's just me, just me, my thoughts, walking along a beautiful beach thinking, Wow, is this gorgeous? Who gets to live like this? And now more and more there's people that are coming in through tourism saying, "Wow, I really like it here, and in fact, I think I'd like to buy a home here and live here six months," and I suppose they go to Tucson for the other six, or something.

PRICHARD: Yeah.

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PRICHARD: With respect to the economic impact of the fishery, and then the marina that was built there in 1996—or I should say expanded in 1996—how important is the fishery and the marina and the water resources there for the local economy?

MCLENNAN: So, at the moment, the fishery part of it is really minimal. There's not—so in the nineties as an example, all through the nineties, some of the eighties and into the nineties, all through the nineties, people would travel from the west side of the state to Rogers City to fish. And they'd shop here. They would fish. They would stay overnight. So that had quite an economic impact. That doesn't happen now because the fishing hasn't come back to the degree that it would warrant them driving from, say, Boyne City, Petoskey, Gaylord. You don't see too much of that. Little bit is starting, but not much. So that—we're not seeing that just yet. Now, the harbor itself, though, is a hugely important piece of infrastructure for the city of Rogers City, and here's why: not only does it have its inherent beauty—I mean you just love going down there and walking, and as you said, it was reconstructed and added on in the nineties and it's a great little marina—but it also attracts boats coming up and down the Lake Huron shoreline that pull in. They come in. They spend money. They fuel up. And fuel is a good way for us to pick up some money that supports the harbor. This particular year is projected to be our best year in the last ten or more years. We already have—I checked with the harbormaster yesterday and he said we have fifteen new boaters this year that—already, that—they just are coming in. They've never stayed here with us before, they've never slipped here. But they're renting a slip for the season and they will boat out of Rogers City. Well that's a big deal, and it means that our marina is making a bit of a comeback. Now, some of those people will be fishermen, but the majority of them will be pleasure boaters and sailboats.

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PRICHARD: I remember, when we talked before you talked about the significance of power boaters and fuel sales and that, kind of, being a major recreational industry in the

sixties and seventies, it sounded like, that I was less aware about. And so the decline in that kind of recreation actually had a pretty major impact, even compared to the recreational fishery, that kind of thing.

MCLENNAN: Well, that actually was probably the most significant part. So, back in the eighties, nineties, there was a lot of power boating. Yachts. (laughs) You know, yachts. And they're big. They consume a lot of fuel. And they would dock in Rogers City. They pump in a couple thousand gallons of fuel. That is a way that it really supported our marina. Back in those days, when we did expand the marina—I don't have the exact numbers, so I would tell you that we currently have something in the area of eighty-five to ninety slips. And that was expanded to that because we needed more dockage for the number of boats we were getting back then. Now the last several years we actually had discussions about—you know, we have to have upkeep on these various docks. We probably could do without a few. We probably could cut down to about, say, sixty slips, and still be okay. But now, (laughs) this year, with the number of new folks coming, and it looks like this is becoming a bigger deal, we probably will just pause and assess whether or not we want to just keep the number that we currently have.

I would add that one thing that we are seeing, and that, very importantly, is a lot of folks who used to jump on a yacht or a power boat in some way, they're buying pontoon boats now. That's a big deal. Pontoon boats. And they are going to our inland lakes. The inland lakes in the Rogers City area—Grand Lake, Black Lake; even smaller lakes like Lake Nettie, Lake May—you virtually can't buy a cottage there any longer because that is where people have invested is the inland lakes, and they're on these pontoons, now.

PRICHARD: Okay.

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PRICHARD: One thing I wanted to get your perspective on is—so in my developing of this project, and coming at it from understanding, or having a background in the fisheries science and understanding what happened to the ecosystem in Lake Huron, and how that affected Chinook salmon fishing, I probably, or may have had a biased set of interactions and perspective with respect to the *current* state of the coastal communities around Lake Huron where salmon fishing used to be a major thing. Places like Rogers City, Oscoda, Harrisville. My perspective is that because of the massive change in the ecosystem and salmon fishing, these places may still be in a state of having to recover from the losses associated with the loss of that fishery. And so I was wondering, what is your thoughts on the accuracy of that kind of statement? Or would that have been more accurate, say, ten-fifteen years ago, but now the feeling in Rogers City is not one of having to recover from the loss of the salmon fishery? What's, kind of, the story there?

MCLENNAN: Yeah, I would say that the loss of the salmon fisheries is something that is very important to the group that loves to go out and sportfish. But in terms of the economic impact, I think it's—it might be an exaggeration to say “negligible,” but it's somewhat negligible, I would say. The sportsfishing—so if you think about sportsfishermen as a whole, so when they're coming into Rogers City, they already have a full tank of gas that they've—you know, because they've prepared—let's say they're coming from Gaylord, which was not uncommon back in the day. So they—“Joe, we're heading out after work tonight. I'll have the boat ready to go. All we have to do is back

up and away we go.” Their tank is full. Their fuel tank—their gas tank is full. Their boat is full of gas. They drive over to Rogers City. They already have their sandwiches in their coolers, and maybe even some brown bottles of some substance to drink while they’re out there out on the lake. They pull in, they go out, they fish. They take some pictures afterwards by the Rogers City harbor sign. They laugh a little bit. They toast each other. They get in their vehicle and away they go. So, in terms of the economic impact on the community, as it relates to the fishing industry, no, I don’t think that there was ever any real—when the fishing industry, the sportsfishing industry, dropped—I don’t think that it had a significant impact on the other losses in the community. Our losses in Rogers City are more related to the automation, mechanization, of the limestone quarry that provided many hundreds of jobs. There was that. The loss of our local hospital, which also then lost *lots* of jobs. A number of professional people that were gone due to that. Then, kind of that domino effect of then losing some retail businesses as a result of declining population. So it was more that. But is sportsfishing and—was sportsfishing and is sportsfishing important to the residents of this area? Yes. It is. Not so much on an economic level, though.

PRICHARD: Okay.

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PRICHARD: Now this is just something that popped into my head, but I’m wondering—from some of my previous conversations with other people, one of the things that I became aware of is, perhaps, the people that were drawn to Rogers City because of the natural resources, including the fishing there, are the people that purchased houses in

Rogers City and Presque Isle County, but they don't necessarily live there. And reading through the *Economic Development + Community Marketing Strategy*, one of the major problems or concerns that was voiced in that document was, kind of, things along those lines. Or also, short-term rental properties, these kinds of things, that don't contribute to people in Rogers City for much of the year. So, maybe I don't have, exactly, a question, but I was wondering, could the natural resources and the fishery that used to be there have contributed to that type of scenario that's playing out with respect to houses and housing in Rogers City?

MCLENNAN: So yes, in terms of—yeah, I understand everything you've just said. And here's the way that all plays out. We've looked at this over the years, and here's what we're seeing. Currently, the greatest number of people moving into Rogers City and calling Rogers City home are people who have, perhaps, stayed at the local state park, and rode into Rogers City on their bicycles on along a beautiful coastline bicycle trail that comes into Rogers City. So they're out at Forty Mile Point lighthouse. The Hoefft State Park. The bike trail connects all of that. They come into Rogers City. They get an ice cream cone in the summer. They see that it's a very clean community. They see that people keep their homes up nicely. They see that there isn't a lot of traffic. It looks pretty safe. And they love the beauty of it. Some of them say—and I've met these people. As mayor I walk around and greet people on a regular basis that I don't know—and they'll tell me, "Yeah. Oh, I love it here. And my husband, he's an avid fisherman. And yep, we just think this is great. We moved here two years ago. Nice to meet you. Yep, he likes to fish. He likes to hunt. We love this place. We stay here all summer. We go the summer concerts—outdoor concerts that are in town. And then from November first through April

first, we live in Florida.” Or, “We live somewhere else.” But they—because they’re sissies. We like it here (Prichard laughs) in the winter. We’re okay with it (laughs). But they go away to where it’s warm. And so you’re seeing an influx of those people. So the demographics are changing very much so from the day that I grew up here. When I grew up here, it was large families. Lots of kids. Now it’s singles and single—couples. Couples and singles. That’s what you’re seeing a lot of in terms of moving into Rogers City. Great folks. Nice people. They love the natural resources here, including sportsfishing, absolutely. There’s a number of them that are interested in that. So, does it have an economic impact? Sure. In a related sort of way, yes.

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PRICHARD: So, I guess maybe we’re getting close to wrapping things up. I really want to thank you for your time and for the interview. And I’m sorry to maybe have contextualized the whole interview with respect to a decline in a fishery and negative things because—actually with my interactions with a lot of people I’ve gotten a whole different perspective on my understanding of even the exceptional fishery that still remains in Rogers City. And I’m glad to know that there’s people like you and Joe Hefele doing the work that you’re doing. So, I guess, before we end the interview, is there anything that you would like to add that you think is important for the understanding of the legacy of the Chinook salmon fishery in Rogers City?

MCLENNAN: Well, just a couple of items that I was remiss in not saying. Frank Krist has done just stellar work in trying to negotiate an agreement with the Native American group, and the federal government, [and] the Canadian government. So Frank is our local

ambassador. He's done a lot of work on that and that particular area. Because that's very important to us because the pressure from the netting of salmon, I mean, it really had quite an impact. So the loss of feed for the salmon was one thing—the alewife, the smelt, et cetera—but also the fishing industry did have quite an impact. One thing I failed to mention earlier, also, as a boy, that I remember is when we were in Trout River—that's the river that runs through Rogers City; small river—but I can remember in my youth that we would go in there and we would grab lamprey eels and throw them up on the bank. And it was steady! There were so many lamprey it was just, I mean, it was just a fun thing for us to do. We knew that they weren't good for the fish, and so we—but it was more just a fun activity, really. Like, see how many lamprey you could grab. And we would whip them up on the bank. And so we were doing our part to eradicate the lamprey back in those days (both laugh). But my point being that, wow, there were a lot of them. I go along the river now and I—it's—well, I was going to say it's rare that I see one—I can't remember the last time I saw a lamprey eel. So, that's been great. And of course when we'd catch the salmon—very common, about every third salmon would have a big lamprey mark on the side of it. Or a lamprey hanging from it. And so that was something I had forgot to mention, too. But yeah, I remember that in my youth they were—it was a crazy number of them back in the day.

PRICHARD: But yeah, that's pretty much under control now. Yeah.

MCLENNAN: We have the Hammond Bay Biological Station out here north of Rogers City and it's quite a large operation, now. They really—and they're good guardians of the lake. They're doing good work, I'm sure.

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PRICHARD: Alright. Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

MCLENNAN: No, I think that wraps it up. I appreciate your coverage of the history of fishing here in Rogers City. And as I said, my friend, he's an avid fisherman. He's a quiet guy, but he loves to fish. And he's looking forward to getting his boat out right this week, so—.

PRICHARD: Okay. Well, yeah, I'll follow up with you. I'd love to see if he would speak with me and contribute to the project. (McLennan: Sure.) Alright, well thank you, Scott, and I'll end the recording now.

MCLENNAN: Alright.

*end of interview*