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Profile of a Fisheries Pioneer

by DAN GUTHRIE

"Ivan speaks precisely and he liked to use the unfamiliar word. I remember a tour of Bonneville when he had my class deep in the powerhouse, surrounded by all that sound down in the bowels of the dam. He said: 'Put your hands against the wall. Do you feel that? That's *cavitation*,'" recalls Howard Horton, fisheries professor at Oregon State University.

We were comparing notes on Ivan Donaldson, one of the 37 enrollees in the school's inaugural fish and wildlife class. Like many others from that 1935 cohort, Ivan went on to a career marked by firsts. He was the first fish biologist hired by the Army Corps of Engineers on the Columbia River, where he served from 1941 to 1973 as district biologist in charge of fish passage at the river's dams. He was general instructor on Washington State University's first Columbia River Gorge short course, a position he retained for 11 years until failing eyesight kept him from the annual summer event in 1984. And he was among the first to take a scientific interest in the river's white sturgeon. For almost half a century he has collected photographs, observations, anecdotes, article and sturgeon samples. He keeps the photos and their annotation in manila envelopes in a long box.

Last month I became acquainted with the contents of the box while visiting Ivan at his home in Stevenson, Washington. It sat between us on a couch where I plucked out pictures one by one. He identified each of them with the help of a magnifying visor. Then, flipping up the visor and closing his eyes, he provided what is missing from the mind of Minolta and other cameras: memories.

There are many giants in the box, includ-

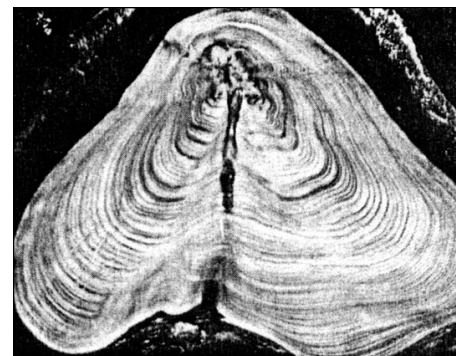
ing the record 1,500-pounder taken from the Snake River near Payette, Idaho, (the angler used a jackrabbit for bait and tied his line to a willow tree until the fish was exhausted.) There were cross-sections of pectoral fin rays whose rings reveal a sturgeon's age (the oldest in Ivan's collec-

tion had 82 rings; it came from a 900-pounder captured on an Indian setline near The Dalles). There were sturgeon fatally battered by fishwheels or stuck beneath floodgates, and there were even more deformed survivors: a fish without a tail, a fish blinded by overgrown sockets, a fish alive in spite of the cleft that hinged its skull from ear to ear.

"The tenacity of sturgeon is overrated in one case at least," said Ivan. "Most people think you can hold them out of water for hours. My experience was just the opposite. I used to haul fish across Bonneville Dam in an old Model T to the hatchery. They were out of water only 20 minutes, but half those sturgeon died. I maintain you should treat them like trout."

Ivan is regarded as a resident Columbia River historian nowadays, but he did not begin life near the great river's shores. He was a drylander from Eastern Oregon raised outside Maupin near a somewhat lesser waterway — Bakeoven Creek.

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This 900-pound white sturgeon was taken August 17, 1951, on an Indian setline near The Dalles. It was 82 years old, according to the rings of its pectoral fin rays (see above cross-section).

Profile of a Pioneer

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and I fled like a quail.

"But I overcame that, and in time they did realize I working for the fish."

Indeed, in time Ivan became known by his accomplishments. He led thousands of students, citizens, and such dignitaries as Aldous Huxley on tours of the dams, educating them in the difficulties migrant fish must overcome. He and classmate Frederick Cramer co-authored "*Fish-wheels of the Columbia*," a book that greatly disappointed him because three-fourths of it was cut by the publisher (but see Lee Kuhn's comments elsewhere in *News and Views* for a ringing endorsement anyhow). Twice, he had the honor of instructing his old fish and wildlife mentor, Pro. Dimick, on the Columbia Short Course. He even acquired a modest reputation as a bagpiper.

All the while, he continued researching what had begun as a "hobby interest": sturgeon.

When his vision began to deteriorate four years ago as a consequence of cortisone

therapy for another condition, Ivan bundled up 830 samples that included his extensive collection of pectoral fin ray cross-sections, and he consigned them, along with many scientific articles, to the care of Howard Horton. His collection of photographs he intends to divide between the Fisheries and Wildlife Department and the Oregon Historical Society.

In talking with Ivan, it soon becomes apparent he has more than photographs and pectoral ray samples to pass on. He has points of view. One of them emerged while we discussed the claim by some tribal fishermen that Columbia sturgeon females mature when only five feet long, and that they spawn infrequently or not at all after they exceed six feet. (Oregon law prohibits anglers from keeping sturgeon more than six feet long, as most readers of *News & Views* know.)

These really big fish, according to the Indian argument, just hang around competing for food with younger, more productive sturgeon. This, Indians should be allowed to take the big fish as a means of keeping the population strong.

Ivan wouldn't say whether he thought Columbia sturgeon as a rule were able to lay eggs at the tender length of five feet. He preferred to leave that part of the controversy to economists and field biologists. Instead, he looked at the problem

from a different angle.

"Philosophically," he asked, "is it true that all animals subservient to us should be sacrificed to our appetites? That seems to be a prominent view. I'm not a good philosopher, but I don't subscribe to that view. I would like to know there are sturgeon 10 feet long in the river yet."

Ivan just turned 76. He and his wife, Louise, planted May apples in their yard long ago, but so far no summer has been warm enough or long enough for the fruits to ripen. He thinks this might be the summer when, finally, he will taste a May apple. He would like that.



Ivan Donaldson pours water into a tarp-lined pickup bed before trucking sturgeon to hatchery.



Ivan Donaldson studying a sturgeon at Bonneville Dam.



Ivan Donaldson harvested sturgeon roe for studying.

Resume for

Ivan J. Donaldson

0.01R Cameron Lane
Stevenson, WA 98648

EDUCATION:

Maupin, Oregon, High School Diploma.
Benson Polytechnic.
Oregon State University: graduated 1939 - Fish & Game.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES:

U. S. Corps of Engineers, 1940-42.
Army Air Corps, 1942-1946.
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fishery Biologist, 1946 until retirement.

OTHER:

Co-Author of book: **"Fishwheels of the Columbia**, published 1971.
Lecturer for Columbia River Short Course, subjects: archeology, history, fisheries,
dams and transportation through the Gorge. 1971-1982.
Associated Power Biologist: Secretary, 1973; President, 1984.
Skamania County Historical Society President, 1972-73.
Skamania County Historical Society Board of Trustees, 1974-1984.
Member of: Native Plant Society
American Bamboo Society
Oregon Historical Society
Skamania County Historical Society