

Sturgeon Fishing In the Choctawhatchee River

Ira Talbert, who lived all of his life where his father and grandfather lived before him, on the banks of the Choctawhatchee River where it meets the Pea River, remembers the time that sturgeon fishing was a profitable industry in Geneva from the early 1900's to about 1935.

A sturgeon is a common name of a larger fish living in the North Temperature Zone. They are caught for their meat, which is usually smoked, and for their eggs, which are used for the preparation of caviar. "I can remember some of the prices would go - 30 to 35 cents a pound for the fish and \$2.00 to \$2.50 a pound for the roe."

Ira "Talbot" Talbert remembers his father telling him about the first sturgeon fishermen on the river—about 1915—the Wilcox Family, a father and two sons, George and Merrill. They once caught 300 sturgeon in a three-month period. The Wilcox family stayed several years in Geneva, running their lines, packing their catch on ice in barrels and shipping them to New York fish companies, Big Loft and Taylor are two companies Ira remembered. The fishermen usually waited to ship by railroad until they had a carload.

When the Wilcox men left, Ashley Holland, Gus Braswell and Lonnie Gresham took over the business and later passed it on to Thomas Talbert, Ira's father.

He closed out his father's sturgeon venture in 1935, the year his father died. He was a teenager then and ran the fishing business when his father was ill. "I finally had to phase it out, mainly because there [got](#) to be so many outboard motors on the river that they kept cutting my lines all the time."

Ira remembers helping his father run the lines and clean the fish. "I will never forget how after we'd cleaned them, another boy and I would take the heads and innards in a big tub and dump them on the other side of the river. The vultures liked sturgeon so much they couldn't wait until we dumped the load. They'd land right on the edge of the tub there in the boat. We'd really get a kick out of that."

"I caught one from the river here, Geneva about 1935. I remember that I cleaned it - cut it off the head and tail and gutted it. Couldn't do anything at all with those tough plates except leave them alone. I put that fish in the Geneva Ice House, thinking I would catch more but never did. About a year later I shipped that one fish off to the company in New York and they took it, but they wrote me not to keep them so long after that this."

The fish have slender bodies covered with rows of bony plates. They were once abundant, but over fishing, dams, and pollution have greatly reduced their numbers

Sturgeons, according to Ira, are primarily a salt water fish, but come up the river to spawn. Like catfish, they prefer muddy water, which is rising. "We'd catch plenty of them

then. But if the river was clear and low, you'd save time not even trying to catch them," Talbert said.

The season for sturgeon fishing, according to Talbert, was from March 1 through October. "We'd start just below the Florida State line and run our lines up eight or nine miles into the Little Choctawhatchee. We'd have nine to eighteen lines out at one time, and in high muddy water we'd work the lines just about every day.

The lines were fastened just above the waterline on the high side of the river, usually to straight iron bolts driven into the riverbank. The line was run across the river and fastened on the other side. Heavy weights, usually rocks, were used to weight the lines so that they stretched just under the water. Each line of three-quarter-inch manila rope had pieces of double quarter-inch grass rope hanging from it and, at the end of the rope was a hook about 8 inches long weighted so it always faced upstream.

"The sturgeon didn't bite the hook, but used it to scratch his belly the hook caught him in the belly, the only soft spot on the whole fish -and even that was tough. They used those 'knuckles' or the edges of the plates, to fray away at the ropes until they were free. We'd find them lots of times in the river with the hook and rope in them." *Written and Submitted by Rhonda Stone, 1569 Westmont St, Geneva, AL Sources Family Stories, Geneva County Reaper*

SUGAR CANE SYRUP, MAKING

When my father, John Z. Anderson, moved his family to a farm he had purchased about one mile north of Coffee Springs, Geneva County, Alabama in 1918, many of the farmers were raising sugar cane. There were very few places in that area where the cane could be made into syrup. My father hired someone to build a furnace to support a standard syrup-making pan. The furnace was constructed of brick with a firebox at one end and a chimney at the opposite end for the smoke to escape. The pan fit over the firebox extending to the chimney. The pan was approximately eight feet long and 40 inches wide. It was divided into compartments so that juice could be with held or added to the syrup. There was a shelter extending over all to protect from the rain.

Dad also bought a mill to press the juice from the stalks of cane.

The mill consisted of large rollers that fit inside a steel frame. A long pole fit on a spindle connected to the rollers at the top. The pole extended in opposite directions. When the pole was pushed or pulled in a circle the rollers would turn. If cane was fed into the rollers the juice would be pressed out and funneled into a large barrel by the mill. A mule was usually hitched to one end of the pole and a weight was placed on the opposite

end so as to balance the pole as the mule circled the mill. A laborer fed the cane into the rollers. There was a pipe, which was connected to the juice barrel that led to the end of the syrup pan near the firebox. A shut off valve was connected to the pipe so that juice could be let into the pan only as needed.

Mother and Dad spent many days in the fall of the year making syrup not only for them selves but also for many of their neighbors. Dad made the neighbors syrup for one gallon out of every four.

Each morning they would fill the pan to a certain level with juice after they had built a fire and cleaned the pan. One of my parents would stand on one side of the pan as they cooked the juice, when foam appeared they would skim it off with a long handle strainer and put it in a barrel. As the juice boiled they would watch and check often. When the syrup was of the right consistency, they would open the outlet of the pan near the chimney and allow the syrup to run through a strainer into a five gallon can. When the five gallon can was full and cooled a bit, the syrup was transferred to gallon cans and sealed.

The skimings from the syrup were carried to the hog pens and poured in the troughs for the hogs to feed on. Because of the quantity, sometimes it began to ferment before it was completely consumed. As a result, some of the hogs became tipsy and caused a lot of amusement.

I will never forget my childhood when I played, rolled and tumbled on the cane poming pile (cane stalks where the juice had been pressed out were fairly plyable and limp), with my brothers and many of the neighbor children.

People would gather from far and near for a drink of cane juice and some of the golden, sweet, sugar cane syrup. *Submitted by: Rillie Anderson Simmons, Coffee Springs, Alabama*