



## DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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### Early History of the Lake St. Clair Fisheries Research Station

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*The Lake St. Clair Great Lakes Station was constructed on a confined dredge disposal site at the mouth of the Clinton River on Lake St. Clair. The station opened for business in 1974. In this photo the Great Lakes Station (red roof) is visible in the background behind the lighter colored Macomb County Sheriff Marine Division Office.*

Lake St. Clair Fisheries Research Station  
Website: [http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-10364\\_52259\\_10951\\_11304---,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-10364_52259_10951_11304---,00.html)

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FISHERIES DIVISION

## Early History of the Lake St. Clair Fisheries Research Station

During spring through fall, 2010, I conducted a series of interviews with Robert Haas, station manager at the Lake St. Clair Fisheries Research Station (LSCFRS), and Jack Hodge, research vessel boat captain, with the purpose of documenting as thoroughly as possible the history of fisheries assessment efforts by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) on Lake Erie, the Detroit River, Lake St. Clair, the St. Clair River, and southern Lake Huron, since the 1960's. We also referred to cruise logs and visitor records kept by the captains of the *R/V Channel Cat*. In a few cases, official department memorandums or interoffice communications were found in old files that also provided historical perspective. A few vintage photographs from the station archives have been scanned and included to provide visual context when available.

### **The 1960's:**

In the beginning, Steve Swan was the district fisheries biologist at the Pontiac Office. The front office in Lansing instructed Steve to start a creel survey on Lake St. Clair (LSC) in January 1966. Steve hired Warren Alward as the lead creel clerk for the survey, along with Lee Force and Robert Wojociechowski (Robert was in the National Guard and would be called to duty in 1968 to patrol the streets of Detroit during the 1968 riots). In May 1966, Dr. Howard Tanner (Fisheries Chief and later, DNR director) hired Robert Haas, freshly graduated from the University of Michigan (UM), to lead DNR fisheries work on LSC (under the Pontiac District). This new effort on Lake St. Clair coincided with the germination of the MDNR Great Lakes program, including the introduction of salmon to the lakes. To start with, Bob worked out of his house in New Baltimore supervising the creel clerks working on the creel survey on the lake. Later in 1966, Bob moved into an office at Schmidt Marina in New Baltimore. Bob scrounged up some trap nets and a work barge (powered with an old outboard motor) for netting work on the lake. The creel survey continued through 1967, and possibly into 1968, and included both the open water and ice fishery. During the winter, the creel survey crew hauled a big old wooden shanty out onto the ice by Fairhaven and used it for storing equipment and data sheets.

In 1967, Bob borrowed a big Thunderbird (whaler-like hull) from the Charlevoix Research Station to use for netting work. Fisheries Division apparently didn't want Bob running the bigger boat, so a Law Enforcement Division (LED) boat captain was loaned to Lake St. Clair to run the Thunderbird. The captain was Chuck Forge (nicknamed "Tarpots"). Chuck was a commercial law enforcement officer/boat captain, and actually was the captain on the patrol boat *Chinook* when it was a LED commercial fishery patrol boat (the *Chinook* eventually became the Fisheries Division survey vessel for Lake Huron). Like many future Fisheries Division research vessel captains, Chuck Forge had a family history that included commercial fishing (Bay Port area).

In 1967, Bob spent part of the summer working on Lake Erie with the Ohio DNR and actually stayed on their vessel. They spent part of the summer trawling in Michigan waters of the lake. One time, while running to a station, they lost the trawl off the back of

the vessel and didn't realize it until they arrived at the station and found the cables, doors, and trawl were gone. After completing Lake Erie survey work in late summer, Bob couldn't get back home through Detroit due to the riots. So he had to navigate a circuitous route through Ann Arbor and Pontiac to get home to New Baltimore.

Later in 1967, Bob was doing commercial fish sampling on Lake Erie on a trap net boat (probably at the Laginess fishery), and met Harlan Maybee, who was visiting the commercial fisherman. Harlan asked Bob if he wanted to buy a boat. It turned out that Harlan, who was then 60 years old and a rather little guy, built Lake Erie trap net boats, all by himself, near Toledo. At the time Bob met him, Harlan had a hull almost finished (see photo below) for a commercial fisherman who had backed out of the deal. So Bob went and checked it out and ended up buying the hull for \$8,000. The vessel was not yet powered, so Bob arranged to purchase the engines directly from Detroit Diesel, and then Harlan installed them. Harlan strongly recommended having the vessel documented by the USCG, which required a unique name. Bob recalled that at this same time, Fisheries Division was heavily involved in trap and transfer of channel catfish from Anchor Bay to Holloway Reservoir and some impoundments on the Kalamazoo River. Apparently, this work was the inspiration for the name of the new vessel, *R/V Channel Cat*. MDNR took possession of the *R/V Channel Cat* late in the summer of 1968. Additional work on the vessel to rig for trawling (dual warp set-up) was completed in fall of 1968. Bob captained the *Channel Cat* until 1970, when Chuck Forge was permanently transferred to Fisheries Division as a boat captain. The vessel was moored at Schmid Marina in New Baltimore until 1970.



*This 1967 photo shows the newly built Lake Erie trap net hull that would eventually become the R/V Channel Cat. Note the vessel has not yet been powered; no shafts, skegs, screws, or engines installed. The transom visible in this picture would be removed to facilitate trawling.*

In 1969, a gill net survey was started in Lake Erie with the new *R/V Channel Cat* as the work platform. Catches were amazingly low. One lift in April, near Monroe, resulted in only 2 perch and 1 walleye caught in 1200' of 15' deep gill net. Another set just south of the River Raisin channel caught 2 walleye and 1 perch. Bob remembered that Lake Erie biologists from other jurisdictions were very concerned that walleye were in danger of going extinct in Lake Erie at this time. In 1969, John Williams came over to Lake St. Clair from the Hastings Research Station and worked with Bob on a muskellunge survey on Lake St. Clair. Randy Eschenroeder, a biologist working at the Alpena Research Station also came down to work with Bob on a trawl survey on Lake St. Clair.

**1970:**

In 1970, mercury contamination was discovered in the St. Clair River and health officials closed down the fishery in the St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair, Detroit River, and Lake Erie. Fishing was actually banned by the Governor, and conservation officers posted "No Fishing" signs along the lake. In fact, the Wayne State University photo archives (searchable on-line) include a picture of CO Dick Sawkins posting a sign at a Detroit River site in 1970. Bob said that there was basically no enforcement of the closure, so people still fished and some still kept the fish and ate them. There was no change in DNR survey programs as a result of the mercury contamination. During summer of 1970, the mooring for the *Channel Cat* was moved from Schmid Marina in New Baltimore to Minnicks Landing for the summer, and then to the Black Creek (Metrobeach) in the fall. Mel Sadecki was hired as a technician with the Lake St. Clair unit in 1970. Mel would eventually become the Superintendent of Hatcheries for the State of Idaho.

In 1970, the *Channel Cat* made its first trip to Saginaw Bay (SB). In fact, the vessel traveled to Saginaw Bay for both summer and fall surveys. The survey work included both trap netting and trawling in the Bay. The crew camped at Sleeper State Park near Port Austin. Bill Bryant transferred from a district office position to fill a biologist position at Lake St. Clair and started working on the *Channel Cat* (Bill worked for Water Bureau on river biological sampling prior to working with Fisheries Division). Bill Mason (notorious snorer) and Ray Shephard spent time on the *Channel Cat* during the Saginaw Bay surveys.

During the early 70's, the "office" for the Lake St. Clair fisheries unit moved from Schmid Marina in New Baltimore to the Port Huron Field Office, and then to a rented building on Irwin Drive in Harrison Township, off North River Road near I-94.

**1971:**

April 1971 found the *Channel Cat* working on a salmon gill net survey on southern Lake Huron. Bob remembered there was still flow ice drifting around at the time of the survey. Nets were fished out of Port Sanilac, Forrestville, and Harbor Beach. The gear caught lots of coho. Lots of Fish Division staff helped out on the Lake Huron survey including: Bill Rupright (eventually tech supervisor at the Jackson District Office), Dave Weaver (probably district biologist at that time), and Dave Havens (Fisheries Division net builder) all worked on the vessel in May. Dave Havens would eventually build the large

trap nets that have been used by Lake St. Clair staff for surveys from the mid-1970's through 2014. Other visitors during the salmon survey included Tom Opre (outdoor writer for Detroit Free Press) and Al Lesch (one of the well known early charter captains).

During July, while the *Channel Cat* was docked at Port Austin after survey work on Saginaw Bay, Larry Shubel (a Port Austin resident) walked out on the dock to see what was going on. Larry had both a fisheries degree and experience. Bob offered Larry a job on the spot, and Larry accepted and started working on the vessel right away.

The mooring for the *Channel Cat* moved from the Black Creek to the Fire Dock at the new Harley Ensign boat access site in July, 1971. The vessel conducted gill net surveys on Lake St. Clair in September and surveys on Saginaw Bay in October. R. Eshenroder (biologist) and Bill Cross (boat captain) from Alpena Fisheries Research Station were both on board for the Saginaw Bay survey work. The survey included fishing an 800 hook setline for catfish off Bay City, trawling and gillnetting in both Saginaw Bay and in Lake Huron. After returning to Lake St. Clair, the vessel headed to Lake Erie for the gill net index survey which started in late October and ran into early November. The nets caught lots of carp, perch, and shad. Bob remembers there was snow and ice on the vessel's deck while lifting the nets. The survey concluded on Nov. 10<sup>th</sup>, and the vessel returned to Lake St. Clair for a survey that ran from Nov. 12<sup>th</sup> to Nov. 17<sup>th</sup>, and included both trawling and gill nets. The *Channel Cat* log indicates lots of weeds and moss were caught in the trawls, while gill nets produced lots of walleye, catfish, and carp.

### **1972:**

The 1972 field season started with salmonid assessment off the Thumb in early May. Bob Haas recalled that this work was a nightmare. The salmonid assessment protocol included bottom, surface, and deep gill nets. The *Channel Cat* conducted gill net sampling near Port Sanilac and Port Crescent, as well as trawling east of Port Hope. Later in May, the *Channel Cat* served as a stocking platform for walleye fry flown in from Onieda Lake, New York. A total of 254 boxes of walleye fry were stocked in the Wildfowl Bay area as part of a walleye re-establishment effort for Saginaw Bay.

By late May, the *Channel Cat* was back at Lake St. Clair and fishing ten foot high trap nets in Anchor Bay in 10 foot of water. Lots of muskies were caught in the bottom to surface sets, but there was lots of trouble with boats damaging the nets too. Records indicate muskellunge eggs were collected. After the trap net survey in Lake St. Clair, the *Channel Cat* returned to southern Lake Huron for gill net and trawl surveys in late June. Muskellunge were stocked in Lake St. Clair during late summer. The fingerlings originated from either Lake St. Clair or Indian River muskellunge captured earlier in the year. This was a result of experimental GL muskie rearing program, fingerlings produced were then stocked back into Lake St. Clair. Gene Schabath, a reporter with the Detroit News was on board for the stocking. The fingerlings were marked by removing fins.

The remainder of the 1972 field season included summer trawling in SB, trap netting and trawling in Lake Erie in August (lots of small perch and gear damage from snags), trawling in Lake St. Clair in September, trawling and gill netting in September in Lake Huron (off the thumb), trawling and gill netting in Saginaw Bay in October, and trawling in Lake St. Clair in November. The vessel was hauled out on Nov. 21.

### **1973:**

By 1973, assessment netting surveys had been established on Lake Erie, Lake St. Clair, and southern Lake Huron (including Saginaw Bay). The 1973 field season started in early April with gill netting and trawling on Lake St. Clair, followed by gill netting in Lake Erie later in the month. Walleye abundance in Lake Erie remained low, with single digit walleye catches for a box of twine, common place. The vessel returned to Lake St. Clair in mid-May and a gill net survey off the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club caught lots of perch and walleye. Bob recalls the Thames river walleye stock was doing well. The late May/early June trap netting in Anchor Bay continued with the 10' deep nets. Records show rainbow trout and Chinook salmon were caught in the muskie nets. Big channel catfish were also common. One lift included 204 catfish in one net set and it took all day to empty the net. Bob initiated a muskie tagging project to investigate muskellunge movement and survival.

Summer 1973 included a gill net and trawl survey on southern Lake Huron in July from Port Huron moving up the lake to Port Sanilac, Harbor Beach, Port Austin, then around to Bayport. Trap netting in Saginaw Bay in early August caught lots of catfish and white crappies. By late August, the vessel was back at Lake St. Clair and conducted gill netting and trawling in Anchor Bay – this work included the first record of a sturgeon being caught during a LSCFRS survey.

Fall sampling took the *Channel Cat* to Lake Erie in September for gill netting, then up to Saginaw Bay for gill netting in early October. The field season wrapped up with gill netting and trawling in Lake St. Clair in early November. The *Channel Cat* was hauled out on Nov. 14<sup>th</sup>.

A Fisheries Division memo, dated Dec. 17, 1973, described a new Urban Fishing Initiative and specified the LSCFRS mission to include expansion and improvement of metro fishing opportunities, besides continuing stock assessment programs. This emphasis never materialized.

### **1974:**

Field sampling in 1974 started with work in Lake Erie in April. The *Channel Cat* docked at a new dock in the Clinton River on May 13, after limping back from Lake Erie on one engine after a transmission on one of the diesel engines went out under the Ambassador Bridge on May 10. Transmission problems were a big pain. The crew had to remove the transmission, haul it to Indiana, and have it rebuilt several times, every time as they pulled away from the dock after putting it back together it would blow up again. The problem turned out to be the transmission cooler was full of steel particles

and needed to be flushed. Once the cooler was flushed clean, the transmission problems were gone.



*In the above photo, the R/V Channel Cat is moored at the original dock on the Clinton River at the new Lake St. Clair Fisheries Research Station. Note the vessel is only 36' long, the aft cabin "wall" is canvas (rolled-up in this photo). In this photo, Bill Bryant and Chuck Forge are visible on the deck of the vessel, along with an assortment of fish tubs. At least some of the plastic yellow tubs, lime green tubs, and dark green fiberglass tubs were still in use at the Lake St. Clair station in 2014.*

The new Lake St. Clair Great Lakes Station building at the Harley Ensign boat access site opened and staff moved in during July 1974. The new station hosted a meeting of the Great Lakes stations for 2 days in July. The station included Parks and Recreation staff from 1974 until about 1980 when the Parks and Recreation Field Office on Old North River Road was opened. Parks and Recreation staff used the small garage and also kept cash on-site in a large safe. The station was burglarized twice in the 1970's. The first time there was not much damage. However, the second time (probably in 1978 or 79) was a mess. The burglars used a torch to try and cut open the Parks and Recreation safe (used for night deposit for access site fees) and filled the building with soot, emptied drawers, and broke stuff. State police investigated and determined it was an inside job and one of the Parks and Recreation Division workers was implicated.

The annual station report prepared in 1974, detailed results of ongoing tagging studies for muskellunge and smallmouth bass in Lake St. Clair. The report highlighted concerns about low survival of smallmouth bass in Lake St. Clair. A yield-per-recruit analyses supported an increase from the 10" minimum size limit to a 12" minimum size limit (the statewide bass minimum size limit was raised to 12" in 1976).

The *Channel Cat* was in Saginaw Bay in late July and August for trap netting. The catch included loads of channel catfish and white crappies. After the survey the crew pulled the nets, mended them, and then sent them back to the LSCFRS on a flatbed stake truck.

A UM wildlife graduate student, Steve Dawson, stayed at the LSCFRS while conducting field research on duck food habits study during the fall 1974 waterfowl season. The station had facilities that could serve as a temporary residence for one or two workers at a time.

Originally, the *Channel Cat* was fitted with a portable gas powered gill net lifter. In 1974, it was converted to hydraulics, but developed problems with slipping.

### **1975-1979:**

For the rest of the 1970's, the field season would start in early April and run through November. The RV *Channel Cat* made the transit from her home port on Lake St. Clair to Saginaw Bay and Lake Erie several times each season. Most of the survey work was conducted without any notable incidents, but occasionally vessel logs highlighted noteworthy events.

While trap netting in southern Lake Huron in July, 1975, a sudden storm capsized a sailboat. Bob went into the water to help get the sailboat crew to safety.

Later during the summer of 1975, the *Channel Cat* met up with an Ohio DNR vessel at Put-In-Bay for a "meeting" and overnight stay. Crew members suffered from severe hang-overs the next day. Greg Olson, known as the "deck ape" was particularly hurt by a local beer – "Pride of Cleveland".

Late summer and fall trap netting on Lake St. Clair in 1975 was complicated by heavy algae fouling of the nets. Biologist Bill Bryant fell off the open transom of the *Channel Cat* on Lake St. Clair.

In early November, 1975, the *R/V Channel Cat* was hauled out at Krueger's Marina in Alpena and trailered to the DNR Gaylord Repair shop for lengthening. The expansion design work and actual cutting and reconstruction of the keel and hull plates was performed by Harlan Maybee (the original builder of the vessel) and Leonard McDonald, the Regional Commercial Fish Law Supervisor. Archie Reeves, Forestry Division, did a lot of the welding. Bob Barber, a boat expert with Research Section, was also involved in the project. A section about 10 feet long was added to the boat just behind the cabin. This allowed the engine hatches to be moved rearward, behind the cabin, and then the cabin was enclosed with a rear wall. This greatly reduced the engine noise inside the wheel house and allowed the addition of storage cabinets and countertops inside the cabin. There was also much more below-deck storage space as well. The cost of materials for the expansion was around \$60,000. The project was completed by mid-April and a big celebration party was held at the Alpena yacht club. The *Channel Cat* was back in service on June 7, 1976.



*This photo shows the newly lengthened (from 36' to 46') R/V Channel Cat as it is loaded onto a flatbed DNR truck at the Gaylord field office. The vessel was freshly painted after the extensive welding completed at the shop. Note the canopy over the engine hatches and rear deck was not yet constructed.*

During July 1976, trap nets were fished north of Lexington for a walleye tagging project. One of the nets was not fishing well, so crew members Olson and Pacic dove on the net and found a boulder on the wing of the trap net.

During August 1976, the *Channel Cat* served as a platform for a big Fisheries Division cruise. After meeting up with the *Chinook* north of the Charity Islands, a 3 hour on-water fish fry ensued.

During the November 1976 trap net survey on Lake St. Clair, catches of channel catfish were extraordinary. On November 1, two of the lifts contained over 500 channel catfish each. On November 2, there were over 700 channel catfish in 2 lifts. On November 3, there were so many catfish in one net, that it was impossible to lift the net. Eventually, the crew had to cut a hole in net #7 and counted 2,606 catfish as they swam out of the net.

While setting gill nets off Port Sanilac on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1977, the *Channel Cat* experienced a close call with an upbound freighter. Later that summer, while trap netting at Port Sanilac in late June, the *Channel Cat* towed a rowboat containing 2 young boys back to shore.

On July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1977, while gillnetting off Port Austin, the *Channel Cat* crew brought up a missile in the net. The vessel hauled the missile to the dock and called the authorities. Air Force staff eventually arrived and took possession of the missile. Deckhand Greg

Olson theorized that the net pulled the missile off a plane that was down. The missile oozed and bubbled while sitting on the vessel's deck.

Biologist-in-charge Bob Haas spent much of 1977 working in Lansing, during the Tribal Fishery negotiations.

In 1978, Jack Hodge was hired under the Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) program. Jack would end up working at the LSCFRS for the next 33.5 years. He would work his way up the ladder as a boat assistant, then assistant boat captain, and finally as boat captain from 1998 through his retirement on April 1, 2012. While still a temporary worker, Jack was given the task of driving the flatbed truck full of wet trap nets down to the LSC office after the Saginaw Bay trap net survey was completed. Due to poor weight distribution, the front wheels actually came off the ground while he was driving down the highway. Since he had no steering, he ended up going off the road into the median (fortunately, no one was hurt).

On July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1978, while in transit to Port Sanilac, the *Channel Cat* had an oil line blow and had to shut down. At the Coast Guard station, 8 quarts of oil were pumped from the bilge. In August, 1978, new transmissions were installed and tested on the *Channel Cat*.

Bob Haas recalled standing on the shoreline of the Detroit River while doing a creel survey in the 1970's and watching blood, cattle skins, and chicken parts drifting by from the slaughter house effluent on the upper Detroit River - someplace near the old cement plants near Belle Isle. During early August 1978, the *Channel Cat* worked on the upper Detroit River. One specific task was to check the DuBois sewer outfall for slaughterhouse effluent (mainly blood and hides). Gill nets set in the upper Detroit River in late 1978 caught lots of algae and other unpleasant stuff, but no fish.

The 1979 cruise schedule for the *Channel Cat* included survey work from April 10 (trawling on Lake St. Clair) through November 2 (trawling and gill netting at Lake Erie). The vessel and crew were on travel status for 98 days of the 201 day field sampling season.

In April, 1979, the *Channel Cat* was trap netting at Monroe. There were several Conservation Officers on board to collect fish fillets (walleye and perch) to use for their annual spring fish fry for local magistrates. This was common practice that eventually was terminated by upper levels of the department.

Gill nets were set in Lake Huron, off Port Sanilac, in late July 1979 with some sites as far as 9 miles offshore. In those days, there was no GPS, so relocating the nets the next day, that far offshore, was challenging and sometimes time consuming.

During the summer of 1979 a new faculty member at the University of Michigan, Jim Diana, called Bob Haas and told him he was planning to set gillnets in Lake St. Clair to catch northern pike for a study he had underway. Bob strongly advised Jim not to try and fish gill nets in Lake St. Clair during the summer, but Jim thought he knew better.

As Jim tells it, he set a gill net in Anchor Bay, and within half an hour, a cigarette boat ran through the net and cut it in half. Undeterred, Jim pulled the net, tied it back together and tried again. In a short time, another boat tore through the net. Finally, he tied it together for a third time, and this time anchored his boat at one end of the net. Sure enough, another large speed boat tore through the net. Jim was convinced the speed boats were actually attracted to the net markers rather than repelled! Jim did eventually obtain some northern pike samples from the Ontario waters of the lake.

Trawl comparison experiments were conducted in August, 1979 at Oscoda. Trawls of different sizes (33' headrope, 40' headrope, and 50' headrope) were fished by the *Channel Cat* with the *Chinook* working alongside – testing substrate. *R/V Canvasback* (Alpena skiff) was used in an effort to measure the opening of the trawl. Greg Olsen was diving on the trawl while the gear was underway, and Bob was driving the skiff over the trawl and measuring depth to the top of the net.

On September 27, 1979, while trawling, there was an electrical fire on the *R/V Channel Cat*. The engines would not shut down and kept starting up on their own. Greg Olson went down below and had to disconnect the batteries to stop the fire. The engines were rewired and the port alternator fixed on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, and trawling resumed on Saginaw Bay on October 3<sup>rd</sup>.

The fall gill net survey on Lake Erie in 1979 was conducted without a hydraulic lifter. This was the first time gill nets were lifted by hand on the *Channel Cat*.

### **1980:**

The *Channel Cat* was launched on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1980 and headed to Lake Erie for the spring trap net survey and walleye tagging. Yellow perch were very abundant in the trap nets, with 4,800 perch caught in one lift! The vessel returned for the trap net survey on Lake St. Clair on May 15<sup>th</sup>. Mike Langworthy was hired (Laborer) and started work on May 16<sup>th</sup>. Trap netting on Lake St. Clair ran through June 10<sup>th</sup>.

On July 28<sup>th</sup>, the *Channel Cat* headed to Lexington for a trap net survey. Six trap nets were set off Lexington to tag walleye from southern Lake Huron. This was part of an effort to better document the movement of walleye between Lake Erie and Lake Huron through the connecting waters. Catches of both walleye and yellow perch were good. The vessel returned to the Clinton River on August 28<sup>th</sup>.

The *Channel Cat* headed to Saginaw Bay for the fall trawl survey on Sept. 29<sup>th</sup>, returned to the Clinton River on Oct. 9<sup>th</sup>, and then departed for the fall Lake Erie gill net survey on Oct. 14<sup>th</sup>. The vessel was back at the dock on Oct. 23 and hauled out for the winter on Nov. 18<sup>th</sup>.

### **1981 – 1982:**

In addition to the “standard” surveys which had been established in Saginaw Bay (fall trawl survey), Lake St. Clair (spring trap net survey), and Lake Erie (spring trap net survey and fall gill net survey), a new 2-year walleye diet study was conducted on Lake

Erie during the field seasons of 1981 and 1982. Field sampling for this study involved trawling and gillnetting for 10 days straight, once a month from April thru October. Each sampling period included at least one 24 hour sampling effort with 4 six-hour shifts. An experimental “hooded” trawl was used to catch adult walleye for diet samples. This trawl had a panel on the top that helped increase adult walleye catch rates. Ellen Pikitch was an Indiana University doctoral student working on the study (Ellen would eventually become the executive director of the Institute for Ocean Conservation Science at Stony Brook University). The monthly 10-day sampling effort for the diet study, plus the “standard” surveys, resulted in the *Channel Cat* crew spending a large portion of the field season on the road, away from home and family. Stories of the partying and carousing at Monroe, by the crew, during the feeding survey sampling periods would be retold and enjoyed by new crew members for years into the future.

*Channel Cat* logs indicate that yellow perch catches remained very high in the Lake Erie trap net surveys in 1981 and 1982. A few sauger were also caught in the trap net survey and noted in the logs both years. Diet survey sampling sometimes resulted in heavy lifts of gizzard shad. Swarms of midges were annoying during the night sampling periods.

The *Channel Cat* logs contain several notes about ongoing issues with net tampering and damage during the trap net survey on Anchor Bay. The survey was in June during both years. Eventually, the frequency of negative interactions between the trap net gear and recreational boaters would result in the termination of this survey.

In 1981, Ernie Kafcas was hired by Wildlife Division as a wildlife biologist and stationed at the LSCFRS. Ernie was the first Wildlife Division employee housed at the station. Ernie would remain in this position until his retirement on January 1, 2011.

Also in 1981, Fisheries Division underwent a reorganization that included reassigning technicians from research to the management units. Al Sutton was permanently reassigned from his position at the Institute for Fisheries Research (IFR) in Ann Arbor, to the LSCFRS. At this time the Great Lakes Stations were considered part of the management branch of Fisheries Division, not research facilities. Al commuted from Ann Arbor to Mt. Clemens until 1985, when a new technician position at the IFR became available and he returned to work there (permanently).

On July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1981, a large group of Region III (southern lower peninsula) fisheries biologists took a tour of the Detroit River on the *Channel Cat*. The list of passengers included Don Nelson, Russ Lincoln, Dave Weaver, Ron Spitler, John Trimbunger, Dave Smith, Dave Johnson, Bill Deephouse, Ray Sheperd, Bill Mason, and Ken Dodge. The vessel moored at Cobo Hall, and the group went to lunch at a restaurant within walking distance of the river. Capt. Shubel stayed with the boat for security reasons.

Bob made arrangements with a local commercial fishermen (Peterson) at Monroe for the *Channel Cat* to dock at his fish house (quonset hut) on the River Raisin. This included space for picking nets and working up fish during the monthly walleye diet sampling periods. Peterson also commercially harvested snapping turtles. While

processing fish samples at the fish house, the crew witnessed the details of turtle processing.

During this time period, a small work vessel, nicknamed “The Weaver-craft” was used by station personnel for various activities on Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie, including on-water creel surveys. Once while Bob was running the Weaver-craft, the fuel hose blew and the boat filled up with gasoline! Another time, Jack Hodge was conducting an on-water creel survey on Lake Erie with Craig Gedelian and had to run it up on the beach to keep from sinking during a big storm.

In December 1981, Bob Haas proposed establishing new combined yellow perch and walleye index surveys on both Saginaw Bay and Lake Erie that would include concurrent sampling with both 33’ headrope bottom trawls and index gill nets. The cost estimate for the 10 day survey on Saginaw Bay, including salaries (with fringes) for a 4 man crew, travel costs, boat fuel, oil, ice, etc., was \$6,962. The Lake Erie costs for the survey were estimated at \$6,762. Total costs including both sampling cruises, lab work at the station (scale pressing, scale aging, net construction and repair, and report writing) were estimated at \$22,851. The proposal was not funded.

During 1982, the State of Michigan budget was in bad shape. As a result, the Fisheries Division budget was trimmed and lay-offs were made. On June 24, Jack Hodge was laid off. The *Channel Cat* 1982 planned cruise schedule reflected the budget troubles with the field season trimmed down to 179 days with the crew only spending 80 days on travel status.

### **1983-1985:**

The State and Fisheries Division budget problems continued. Fortunately, the US Army Corps of Engineers contracted DNR Fisheries to conduct a winter navigation impact study on the St. Clair River – Lake St. Clair – Detroit River waterway. The “Winter Navigation Study” included sampling the fish community with nets, as well as measuring the recreational harvest of fish from the connecting waters. The netting portion of the study required sampling fish weekly, throughout the open water season, with small trap nets, from March 1983 to March 1985. Recreational harvest, including the shore fishery, was measured with a creel survey design that required 6 clerks for on-site interviews of boat and shore anglers, and aerial flights for boat counts. The creel survey began in April 1983 and continued through March 1985.

The funds from the ACOE saved the budget for the LSCFRS, and helped out some other units too. Jack Hodge was recalled from lay-off. Danny Manz joined the crew. Ken Koster joined the staff (recalled from the Parks and Recreation Division lay-off list) and would remain a fisheries technician at the station until his retirement on January 1, 2011. Several Fisheries Division employees from other units were at least partially funded under this project and helped with field work, data compilation, and analyses. Jake Snyder, Tim Walker, Kelley Smith, Merle Galbraith, and Andy Nuhfer were among those who worked extensively on the surveys, data analyses, and final report preparation. As a result of the extensive netting and creel survey efforts required for the

Winter Navigation Study, a large number of short-term workers were hired. Several term data entry clerks and lab assistants were also hired. The creel survey was largely staffed by workers hired off layout lists (bad economy and state layoffs), with most from Human Services. Bob remembered they interviewed lots of candidates to find a few good ones.

Two heavy-duty 18' Shaeffer-built flat bottomed boats (with trailers) were purchased to conduct the Winter Navigation Study trap net sampling. These boats were powered by 55 HP outboards with tiller-steering. The Shaeffer crews conducted the weekly trap net surveys at sites on the St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair, and the Detroit River from March 1983, through March 1985, including winter months when ice conditions allowed. This was brutal and sometimes dangerous work. The trap net crews initially loaded the Schaeffers with 4 traps, 16 anchors, lines, flags and crew, but soon determined conditions on the connecting waters often required more free board, so fewer nets and anchors were loaded on rough days. The trap net crews had trouble with duck hunters cutting off the orange flags on the staff buoys at the Powder House Island site, apparently because the orange flags were scaring away the ducks. When the white bass were spawning in June, the trap nets crews would fish near the power plant on lunch break with seat cushions hung over the gunwales to cover the DNR stickers (undercover fishing). Danny Manz, the biggest crew member, nearly jumped out of one of the Shaeffer boats at the hole-in-the-wall site in the lower Detroit River when a large American eel slithered out of the trap net onto the deck.

During this period, the "standard" trap net surveys on Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie were conducted as normally scheduled. However, due to conflicts for vessel time, some of the standard surveys were conducted by partners. The annual LE fall gill net survey was conducted by the Sandusky US Fish and Wildlife office in 1983. The annual Saginaw Bay fall trawl surveys in 1983, 1984, and 1985 were conducted by the *R/V Chinook* with LSCFRS staff assisting on the Alpena vessel.

*R/V Channel Cat* logs indicate that sauger were still a relatively common catch during the spring trap net survey on Lake Erie in 1983-85 (within 10 years, sauger catches in the trap net survey were near zero). Yellow perch catches in the trap net survey also continued to be very large. During the trap net survey on Lake Erie in April, 1984, there was a big storm that churned up the lake. The wave energy ended up filling the nets with debris, including lots of dead fish, and the nets collapsed from the weight of the debris. While running one of the trap net leads to clear the debris, Craig Gedelian nearly sank the skiff.

On June 11, 1984, the *Channel Cat* was the platform for a tour of the superfund sites on the Detroit River. Passengers on the tour included DNR Director Skoog and other Lansing dignitaries. During the tour, Capt. Shubel had a close call as the vessel nearly grounded off Turkey Island in the lower Detroit River. As planned, the tour was a one-way trip as the passengers were dropped off at Riverside Launch in Trenton where vehicles were waiting. The vessel was back to the Clinton River dock at 7pm.

Also in 1984, Bob and Tom Todd (USGS Great Lakes Science Center) undertook a study of walleye genetics in lakes Huron, St. Clair, and Erie. Walleye samples were collected from numerous spawning populations across this area and also included monthly samples from the St. Clair system. Tom ran the electrophoresis analyses in his lab in Ann Arbor at the Great Lakes Science Center.

In 1985, Bob Haas and Andy Nuhfer conducted an impingement study (fish sucked into the screens) at the huge Detroit Edison Monroe Power Plant at the mouth of the River Raisin on Lake Erie. On a weekly basis, Andy (with assistance from other LSCFRS staff as available) shoveled buckets of dead fish out of a hopper and spent hours measuring and weighing the samples. Gizzard shad were the primary species involved. This was an extremely stinky business. Andy used a Dodge van (column stick shift) from the Waterford office for hauling the sampling gear around (tubs, measuring boards, scale), and no amount of cleaning/soap could ever remove the smell of dead shad from that vehicle. The monitoring of fish mortality at the plant continued in 1986.

In 1985, the first and only Summer Softball Challenge between Lake St. Clair Fisheries Research Station and Imlay City Fisheries (District 11) took place. LSCFRS featured a prominent and veteran lineup featuring Bob Haas, Jack Hodge, and Larry Schubel. Imlay City brought their big guns featuring Bill “going deep” Deephouse, Vern “miller time” Nurenberg, and a scrappy-looking rookie named Joe Leonardi. The game took an unfortunate turn in the 3rd inning when station secretary Bonnie Menovske took a short-hop line drive to the mouth. With blood spewing everywhere, both teams decided to call it a draw and revert to doing something they were actually good at – drinking beer.

### **1986-1988:**

Fisheries Division budgets improved with a fishing/hunting fee increase and an accompanying increase in federal aid funding. As a result, there was an increase in surveys and vessel operations at the Lake St. Clair station. All the long-term monitoring programs continued: Lake Erie spring trap netting and walleye tagging, Saginaw Bay fall trawling, and Lake Erie fall gill netting. In addition, an intensive effort was mounted to better understand the predator-prey dynamics of walleye and yellow perch in Saginaw Bay. This effort included monthly sampling from May through October with trawls and gill nets at sites across Saginaw Bay. Diet samples were collected monthly with a 24 hour survey that included trawls every 3 hours and concurrent 6 hour gill net sets. During the monthly 24-hour diet sampling, two crews manned the vessel, with one shift working from 3pm to 7am, and the second shift working from 7:00am to 10pm. Several graduate students also participated in the field sampling and conducted research projects in conjunction with the predator-prey study, including Dave Lucchesi, Ron Salz, and Jeff Schaeffer.

The Saginaw Bay predator-prey survey generated a large volume of lab work. In addition to a heavy load of scale pressing and aging, the contents of large numbers of yellow perch stomachs had to be examined, identified, and enumerated. Yellow perch were also “cooked” with drying ovens to measure water content of the viscera and somatic tissue. This lab work required an intricate accounting system of custom made

aluminum foil “boats” and precise weight measurements. It also generated a uniquely unpleasant odor in the lab each time a new batch of fish was placed in the drying ovens. State workers were hired to help with both the field work and lab work, and for the first time, 2 research technicians were on the staff at the LSC station (John Clevenger joined the staff before the 1986 field season began).

With the station staff spending so much time at the Saginaw Bay ports (AuGres, Bay City, and Caseville), extra-curricular activities at local watering holes were common place. Some gained particular notoriety in *Channel Cat* crew lore. Most are not appropriate for inclusion in this document.

Great Lakes water levels were at record highs in 1986. That summer and fall, employees at the Lake St. Clair station often found South River Road flooded. When the wind blew from the South or Southeast, the waves would actually roll across South River at the Blue Boat bar and lap at the porches of the homes on the north side of the road. Those homes had sandbag barriers along the road to try and hold back the water. Some employees with small vehicles had to park further inland and shuttle back and forth to the fish station with a DNR truck that was kept at the gas station at Jefferson and South River Road. Some of the station staff, including some Michigan Civilian Conservation Corps workers actually worked in St. Clair Shores to help residents there with filling and placing sandbags to protect their properties.



*View heading west on flooded South River Road, just outside the Harley Ensign Boat Access Site during the record high water levels of 1986.*

During the percid survey on Saginaw Bay in July 1987, the *Channel Cat* was moored at the Army Corps of Engineers dock on a small dredged channel off the east side of the Saginaw River (now Coast Guard property) near the power plants. The *Channel Cat* would raft off the starboard side on some old barges stored at the site, with the bow facing out towards the river. One morning, while getting underway, Dave Lucchesi ( a UM graduate student) was on the barge and pushing off. Apparently, after giving the vessel a hard push, he forgot to step across onto the *Channel Cat* and was left on the barge. After Assistant Captain Jack told Dave he had better jump or he would be left because Captain Larry Shubel would not come back for him, Dave took a step back and made a mighty leap and landed flat against the side of the *Channel Cat* cabin with a terrible thud which was loud enough to get the Capt. Shubel's attention. Larry took the engines out of gear and all he could see from the cabin was two arms hanging off the starboard side of the cabin. Dave's grip eventually slipped and he ended up hanging by his arms from the walkway alongside the cabin, where he was helped back aboard by the crew, wet and somewhat embarrassed, but otherwise intact.



*Setting Gill Nets during a 24-hour Survey on Saginaw Bay, ca. 1987  
(Crew members L to R: Jack Hodge, Dave Lucchesi, Ken Koster)*

**1989-1990:**

With the conclusion of the Saginaw Bay predator-prey study in 1988, the *Channel Cat* returned to a “normal” cruise schedule in 1989. This included the long-term surveys on Lake Erie (spring trap net and fall gill net), as well as the annual fall Saginaw Bay trawl survey. In addition, in mid-May, 1989, Bob designed a unique study to evaluate the efficiency of the standard 10m headrope bottom trawls by enclosing a portion of Anchor

Bay inside a large blocking net (called the Ha Ha net), seeding the enclosure with a known number of tagged yellow perch, and then trawling inside the enclosure and recapturing some of the marked fish. The planned length of the enclosure was ¼ mile, to allow room for the *Channel Cat* to drag the trawl at least 5 minutes. By all accounts, deploying and retrieving the blocking net was a frustrating endeavor, made worse by the current in Anchor Bay and spiced up by boat traffic. Few perch were recaptured during the trawling trials, leading the crew to suspect that they were escaping from the enclosure in locations where the blocking net was not firmly anchored on bottom due to vegetation or other debris.

In the *Channel Cat* log, Captain Shubel noted that zebra mussels were fouling the trap nets set off Monroe in April, 1990. This was the first record of zebra mussels seen on the trap nets during the annual spring survey at Lake Erie. The zebra mussels were firmly anchored on the lead lines on the bottom of the nets and really tore up the gloves of the crew. Also in 1990, Bill Bryant transferred to a vacant inland biologist position at the Rose Lake Office. Bill had been a biologist at the Lake St. Clair station and crew member on the *Channel Cat* since 1970.

### **Noteworthy Technological Changes:**

#### **Computers -**

Originally, datasheets were sent to Ann Arbor, where data cards were keypunched and then fed through the mainframe computer. This practice continued through the 70's.

First computer at the LSCFRS was one Bob borrowed from Wayne State University (WSU) that used the phone line (headset on a receiver) to send data to a mainframe computer at University of Michigan or at WSU for processing. This may have been during the mid-1970's.

By 1984, during the Army Corps of Engineers winter navigation study, data were entered and summarized with 2 Apple IIe computers in the office, and data were archived on 5.25" floppy disks.

#### **Vessel Technology -**

In the late 1970's, the vessel navigation aids included a magnetic compass, a paper depth plotter, a radio direction finder, and radar. A speedometer was installed in 1979. A Loran C navigation unit was added in 1986. The first GPS navigation unit was installed in 1994. It was upgraded to differential GPS in 1996.

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