

"Scientific walleye tip-up."

Ice Fishing Traditions in St. Lawrence County

By Melanie Smithers

and the Staff of the Center for the Study of North Country Folklife

Drawings by Deborah Weeks

INTRODUCTION

In a part of the country where there is "winter for eleven months, the rest of the time bad sledding," an occupation like ice fishing was almost certain to have persisted over the years and to have caused the development of numerous traditions attached to it.

The following article is an edited report of a documentation team of fieldworkers for the Study of Twentieth Century St. Lawrence County Folkways. Much additional information appears in the original article prepared for the archive, but space limitations required considerable omission. It is one of several such reports from this current project of the Center for the Study of North Country Folklife, affiliated as a research unit with the State University of New York Agricultural and Technical College at Canton.

Ice fishing can hardly be categorized into one particular "pigeonhole" of folklife study, although it surely has major elements of a craft — the combining of a science and an art, known best by those practitioners who have learned their lessons well and have perfected them to their own needs over the years. In this case, nearly all learning has been traditional, and many variations exist, both essential elements of folklore. Good examples of the craft nature of ice fishing include the team's report of the techniques of spudding the ice and the many varieties of building, setting up and using tip-ups. Perhaps even more fascinating to the student of folklife are the many other traditional attributes of this significant annual activity of a northern climate. Oral, customary, and material traditions abound. This report includes such folk names as "Fish City" and "crappie", such stories as the difficult taking of a fish by following it over clear ice and two fishermen fighting over the same fish between two holes. They report folk poetry in the rhyme about the wind, humor in the tricks

played on each other, and even folk heroes (or maybe folk villains?) in the stories about game protectors. There are numerous customary beliefs and attitudes reported, including feelings about the best part of the day and of the season to fish and attitudes toward government regulation of this livelihood/recreation. By now even the annual ice fishing derbies in several waterfront communities are becoming traditional festivals. In several ways the fieldworkers report traditional material cultural aspects of ice fishing. The tools and the tackle and the bait are some. There is even folk architecture in the shanties used and folk art in the decorations some put on their shanties. A more extensive study might well have shown examples of legends, games, costume, cookery, and other things traditional to at least some informants.

Three fieldworkers with no previous academic folklore experience spent many hours interviewing, photographing and otherwise researching ice fishing activity primarily along Black Lake and the St. Lawrence River in St. Lawrence County in the winter of 1977-78. They did initial interviews with 28 informants and spoke briefly with numerous others. One detail worth noting is that some of this research was done at fishing derbies — a recent phenomenon which emphasizes competition for money and recognition — a fact which could influence the informants there and not there and could possibly have some effect on how traditional some of the activity observed was.

Melanie Smithers, Peter Murphy, and Belinda Koch did the field research and initial reports. Melanie Smithers wrote the original article for the archive of the Center for the Study of North Country Folklife. Valerie Ingram, project supervisor for the current St. Lawrence County study, edited the article for publication. Varick Chit-

tenden, director of the Center, wrote the introduction.

The materials of ice fishing and the motivation of ice fishermen have changed drastically over the last 50 to 75 years. It seems that years ago one had to be dedicated to ice fishing in order to participate. Much time and energy was spent making or obtaining the tools of the trade — tip-ups, spuds, gaff hooks and minnows. Ice fishing was taken seriously as a valuable source of food or income. Before professional fishing was banned from Black Lake in the early 1940's, many men received a good share of their living from fishing there.

Now, one can ice fish with convenience and little work because of modern technological advances. The power auger has replaced the axe and spud for digging the holes in the ice; the underwater reel tip-up has replaced the handmade wooden tip-up and the more basic switches; shanties have replaced shelters improvised from tree boughs, snow, plastic or canvas. The snowmobile or four-wheel drive truck make fishing on different spots easy and render the use of horses and walking with toboggans obsolete. Clothing has also improved over the years, thereby encouraging the less hardy to take up the sport — down jackets and insulated boots have replaced the wool and sheepskin of an earlier day. While years ago all equipment was handmade by the fisherman, friends, or the local blacksmith, all equipment can now be purchased (including battery-powered bait aerators).

Many people still fish for food, but for many others, it is strictly a sport. The increase in this type of ice fisherman may be partially explained by the recent rise of the fishing derby. The substantial prizes awarded at derbies create an additional incentive for some to participate. Beginning at Sackett's Harbor about 15 years ago, the

derby is a relatively new event — the earliest in St. Lawrence County being the one at Black Lake beginning about 12 years ago. Several derbies were held this year on Black Lake and the St. Lawrence River.

Along with the great strides in equipment has come a parallel development — a decrease in the number of fish, especially the coveted walleye. John Goldie chuckled when asked about using the technique of jigging* *("Jigging" is the technique of moving the line up and down by hand to attract the fish. This technique is generally used only for the non-game fish.) years ago — he said there were enough fish then not to have to bother with jigging. The list of reasons for this decline given by the fishermen, and the discussions that accompany them, are long and involved and reflect many basic attitudes toward the local environment and changes in it caused by regulation and technological innovations. Recent changes in the popularity of certain fishing spots and techniques also reflect this decline.

FINDING A SPOT

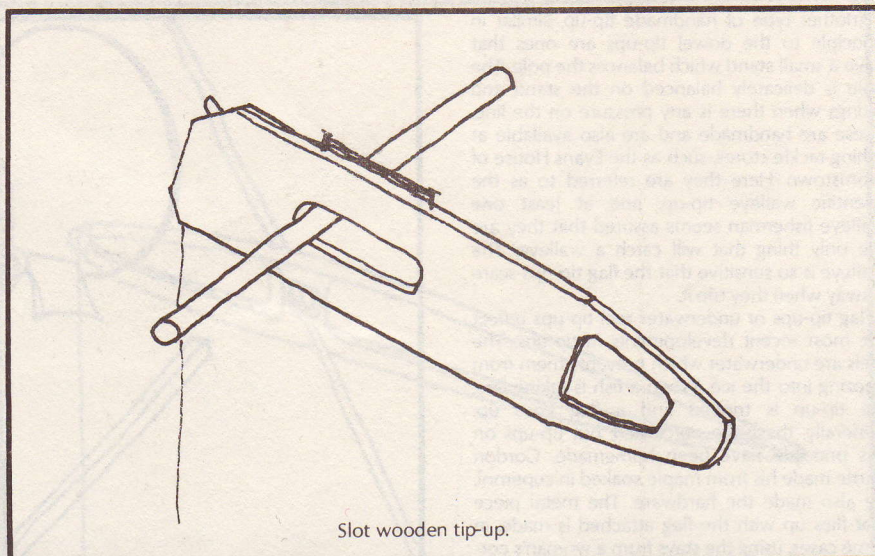
The first thing one must do when ice fishing is to find a location on the ice. In many cases that depends on the type of ice fishing one intends doing. Although people differ widely on their notions of where to fish, they all share the conviction that location is very important. Experience and tradition combine to create strong feelings on the matter. On the St. Lawrence River, George Paige has found that the area around Kring Point is a good place for perch fishing. Tom Cree suggested shallow water (5'-14') as a good spot in which to catch northerns and perch. This is usually on the edge of a weed bed. As for walleye, one person suggested the edge of a current. Another felt Norwood Pond or Colton were the only places walleye could be caught. Several mentioned the importance of shoals as a spot over which to place tip-ups. They located the shoals by use of triangulation points; that is, they carefully noted landmarks on shore opposite all sides of the shoal. In that way they could precisely locate the shoal each time that they decided to fish over it.

As in many other aspects of modern life, regulation has affected the phenomenon of ice fishing and dictated changes in this traditional winter activity. The regulations have also served to challenge the ingenuity of the resourceful fisherman. Years ago, ice fishermen were allowed to dig and tip-up fish fifteen holes and leave the holes baited overnight. This number was reduced to ten holes and finally to the five holes and two hand jigging lines allowed today.

Several fishermen shared stories of how their friends had been able to rig up extra holes. In one, the holes were dug, a stick with line, sinker and bait was set up next to the hole at the end of the small channel. The stick was covered with snow and the channel was allowed to refreeze, but the "blind hole" next to the set up was kept open. From the surface it just looked like an abandoned hole, but fish were retrieved from it using a specially-made L-shaped rod.

DIGGING THE HOLE

Although many people now use a gas-powered auger to dig their holes, the use of a combination of axe and spud is the most traditional way of accomplishing this task. The size and shape of a spudded hole is different from that made with an auger. Especially if the hole was started with an axe, it is football-shaped and very large near the surface. Lafe Young said that he would start his hole in deep ice to be the size of a table-top at the surface. Dugg Lavigne liked



Slot wooden tip-up.

the spudded hole because it was so large, and was thinking of ways to enlarge the hole made by a power auger by wiggling the auger around in the hole.

In years past most of the spuds were either made by the ice fisherman, by a friend or by the village blacksmith. Bob Russell, Potsdam blacksmith, made Royal Phillips' spud from a car steering wheel, which Mr. Phillips then filled with lead. The Madrid blacksmith made John Goldie's spud from the rear axle of a buggy. John remembers that he paid 50¢ for the spud and it weighed ten to twelve pounds. Pearly Bogardus, Depeyster blacksmith, made Ruth Hutton's spud and a Hammond blacksmith, Fred Mayor, made Avery McLearn's spud. Avery McLearn remembers that the spud was actually 3" chisel welded onto a pole, although now he would choose an even narrower chisel of not more than 1 1/2" width. Several men estimated that 20 minutes was about the time required to dig a deep 36" hole in the ice. One experienced fisherman pointed out the wisdom of cleaning out the hole with the ice skimmer just before going through the ice with the spud. He felt this saved a lot of clean-up time. The ice skimmer is an important tool the ice fisherman uses to keep the hole free from ice.

The hand auger and Swedish spoon, both of which work on the principle of a bit and brace are tools that rank, technologically, between the spud and the power auger. None of these methods are completely obsolete. Individuals can still be found who spud their own holes, but most prefer faster and easier ways to dig the all-important hole.

THE TIP-UP

Presumably, the very first ice fisherman lowered a line into the water and held onto it. Man's ingenuity quickly passed this stage and the use of an instrument which held the line for him was developed. It probably did not take long before ice fishermen realized that they could catch more fish if they knew when the fish was on the line and the tip-up came on the scene. The tip-up is little more than a tool to hold the line, hook and bait and also visually notify the ice fisherman of a fish. This is accomplished by delicately balancing the tip-up so that when a fish is on the hook, the balance is

lost in favor of the fish. The end of the tip-up toward the fish is pulled down and the other end swings into the air. This basic principle of the tip-up has been refined extensively over the years.

The most basic tip-ups described were simply switches which were found along the bank of the lake or river, stuck into the snow next to a hole and rigged with line and bait. Lafe Young remembers using red tag elder switches 1/2" to 1/8" in diameter and tying a slip knot in the line on the end of the switch, so that the fish would be able to pull out some line and not snap the line on the rough ice of a spudded hole. Extra line lay on the ice next to the hole for the fish to pull out. When the fish took the bait, the tip of the red tag elder would bend towards the hole and notify the fisherman.

The next tip-up developed is what Avery McLearn calls the "Black Lake tip-up." It consists of two pieces of wood - one being the dowel which acts as a fulcrum for the other piece, the swinging piece that holds the line. The most primitive of this type have a round hole in the swinging part through which the dowel fits. A further development in the tip-up took place when the hole was replaced with a slot. The slot allows easier balancing of the tip-up, especially if there is a heavy sinker or minnow at the end of it. The tip-up can be moved until it balances perfectly. Harold Brenno emphasized the fact that the tail of the tip-up should just be touching the ice. At this point in the development of the tip-up, patterns were made and fish-shaped and bone-shaped tip-ups appeared. The materials used in these handmade tip-ups vary from individual to individual. Cedar shingles, pine and ash are common.

The wind and the freezing water can adversely affect the operation of the tip-up, but the fishermen have discovered ways to counteract these problems.

There are two ways in which to attach the line to the tip-ups. One can either leave extra or "slack line" between the tip of the tip-up and the bait, or have the line tight from the bait to the reel. The extra or slack line is wound into a ball and a determined attempt made to have the ball tight enough so that it would not unravel when it was placed in the water. Again, many different techniques have been invented to take advantage of the positive aspects of these two methods and minimize the disadvantages of each.

Another type of handmade tip-up, similar in principle to the dowel tip-ups are ones that have a small stand which balances the pole. The pole is delicately balanced on the stand and swings when there is any pressure on the line. These are handmade and are also available at fishing tackle stores, such as the Evans House of Morristown. Here they are referred to as the scientific walleye tip-up, and at least one walleye fisherman seems assured that they are the only thing that will catch a walleye. The walleye is so sensitive that the flag tip-ups scare it away when they trip it.

Flag tip-ups or underwater reel tip-ups reflect the most recent developments in tip-ups. The reels are underwater which prevents them from freezing into the ice. When a fish is taking line, the tip-up is tripped and a flag goes up. Generally, these are purchased, but tip-ups on this principle have been homemade. Gordon Hartle made his from maple soaked in cupernol. He also made the hardware. The metal piece that flies up with the flag attached is made, in some cases, using the stays from a woman's corset. Tricky modifications, such as penlights and 22 caliber blanks that are set to trip make it easier to fish at night. Fluorescent tape is also added to some of the old-style dowel tip-ups for easier night fishing.

Store-bought aluminum tip-ups, open water poles and the pocket fisherman are also used today, but the old hand-made tip-ups can still be found without a difficult search.

Many practical jokes revolve around the tip-up as a prop. Bill Turner said that he remembers the Edwardsville blacksmith, Mr. Phillips, pulling in a band saw blade on his tip-up. Jokesters have also tied boots, stones and, in one case, even a rabbit, on the ends of the lines of their unwary companions.

BAIT

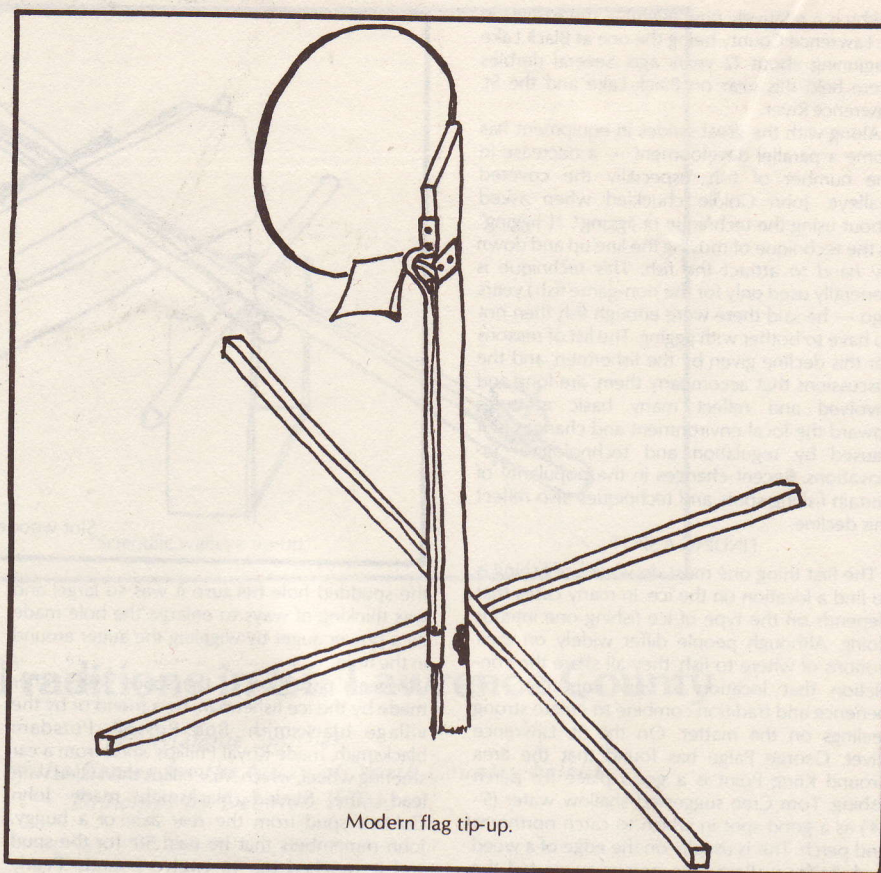
Certainly one of the most important items in the whole operation is the bait. Artificial bait in the form of yellow, green, and white jigs; perch eyes; Swedish pimples and mousies are commonly used. Ray Loucks suggests small 1"-1-1/4" chunks of meat and Moses Villnave uses pork rinds on which he first spits.

The most widely used bait, however, is the live minnow. Years ago many seined (netted) their own minnows in the fall for ice fishing and stored them over the winter in carbide tanks submerged in the water. Most did this for themselves, but one man developed it into a business. Although some people still seine for their minnows and keep them in minnow boxes in winter, most prefer to purchase them from a bait shop today. The size of the minnows used, as well as the size of the hook, is also debated. One man says that he always spits a little tobacco juice on the minnow, a trick he picked up from his grandfather.

SETTING THE TIP-UP

Once the location has been chosen, the holes dug and the minnows, hooks, sinkers and tip-ups on hand, one is ready to set the line into the water. The first step is to measure the depth of the water so the hook will be set for finding the proper depth above the bottom. A weight is dropped to the bottom and the depth of the water is then known. The bait is then attached at various positions above the bottom of the lake or river.

At this point several ice fishermen have devised a method for marking the depth of the water, so that they would not have to take new depth readings every time they removed the line from its proper position. They placed a but-



Modern flag tip-up.

ton on the line and moved the button to the surface of the water. In this position they could look at the button and know whether the line was in the proper position after rebaiting.

CATCHING A FISH

The taking of a fish can be an exciting moment and is the source of many ice-fishing narratives. Pulling a fish from the hole and removing it from the line can be a tricky business. The skilled use of a gaff hook is often required. Tom Cree remembered a time when his line broke as he was hauling up a big one and he reached into the water right up to his armpits to retrieve it. Mrs. Ruth Hutton and Avery McLearn remember catching a fish that wouldn't fit through the hole. It was a tense time while a companion enlarged the hole, being careful not to hit or break the line.

There are also stories about fish that pull the tip-ups right through the holes. This happened to Ruth Hutton and Avery McLearn. Ruth lost the tip-up, but the outcome of Avery McLearn's story is somewhat different. He said that the ice was clear and they were able to follow the fish and tip-up around the top of the ice. He said that the fish would stop travelling and he and his fishing companion would start to spud through the ice. The fish would hear the noise of the spudding and take off again. Mr. McLearn said they played this cat-and-mouse game with the fish for a good part of the day before the fish finally tired and they were able to retrieve the fish and their tip-up.

SHANTIES

Shanties have been used for a long time as a shelter from the cold. They have been improvised from canvas, snow, tree boughs, a model A Ford, a hay wagon, a cattle truck and have been constructed especially for the pur-

pose. Some are stationary for the entire season and others are mounted on runners for portable use. Hardwood runners were common in the past, but now pipe and fiberglass runners are common. Many ice fishermen used the most portable ice shanty - the car or truck. Bill Turner said that years ago it was easy to tell if someone had a flag up by the sound of the car door slamming. Besides coming in all shapes and sizes, shanty interior designs vary from the rustic to the almost luxuriously heated, furnished, and sometimes even painted and curtained. Many, however, still prefer to fish without the shanty.

John Goldie told an interesting story about fishing in his shanty, set up in "Fish City" on Black Lake, amidst several other shanties. He was jigging there one day when he discovered he had quite a bite. He fought the fish for 15 minutes in vain. A friend, Mr. Baker, did some investigating and found that Mr. Wayne Spearance had also been battling a large one for several minutes. Mr. Baker figured out that one of them had caught a fish which had tangled the lines under the ice and they were battling each other. Both Mr. Goldie and Mr. Spearance were afraid to really pull and thereby break the line on a big one.

WAITING FOR THE FISH TO BITE

Once set up, waiting for the fish to bite can be tedious. Ice fishing is actually fairly social, however, and many recreational activities take place in and out of the shanty. They include listening to ball games on the radio, cooking up hot dogs, hamburgers and fish, and card playing - although one fisherman said that he stayed away from card playing since he lost a big fish once when he was engrossed in the game. Others have checked out the area's trapping possibilities, gone rabbit or coon hunting, or

practiced target shooting. Young kids have played kickball, fox and rabbit, and skated. Skating was a part of ice fishing for the professional ice fishermen, too. Harold Barlay noted that he checked his holes by skating around and Avery McLear once skated to a location on Tin Island that he and his brother wanted to reserve for themselves for the winter when the ice was little over an inch thick. Mr. McLear explained that good spots were reserved when professional fishing was common on Black Lake and reservations were first come, first serve. He was punished for his daring by his father, but was glad to get a good fishing location for the winter. Mr. McLear felt the winters must have been more severe with less snow years ago, because he remembers lots of good skating on Black Lake.

OPINIONS, BELIEFS AND TRICKS

There are many interesting opinions on the effect of the wind on ice fishing, the depth at which the fisherman sets his hook, and the best time of day for ice fishing. Some of the most unique behavior used to attract fish involves pouring ginger brandy down the hole and waiting for the fish to arrive (made famous by Sid Patterson when he won the Sacketts Harbor Ice Fishing Derby and appeared on "Wide World of Sports"). Mrs. John Storie spreads liver in the place she intends to ice fish to draw the fish to that spot. Ron Gravlin claims that he attracts fish by using a spinner and applying mercurochrome to his minnows to simulate the coloring of goldfish, which are illegal to use as bait.

When questioned about the best time of the day in which to go ice fishing, the response regarding walleye was almost unanimous - in the very early morning and late afternoon with a lull in the midday. Some thought there didn't seem to be much difference in the time of the day when fish were caught, especially in the perch and pike category. One person, however, disagreed with most of the others in maintaining that the fishing seemed to pick up for the interval between 11 a.m. and 2:30 p.m.

When asked about the specific weather conditions favorable to ice fishing, several thought that bad weather, cloudy weather, or a storm was good. John Goldie felt that there were fewer people out on the ice making noise during a storm and that favored the fishing. Mr. McLear felt the fishing was best just before a storm. Harold Barlay even went so far as to say that sunny weather was not very good for ice fishing.

Wind direction and barometric pressure were felt to have some effect on the fishing, although many fishermen said that when they wanted to go fishing they went regardless of the wind direction or weather. Various advice, generally consistent with the following jingle, quoted frequently, was given.

When the wind blows from the east, the fish bite the least.

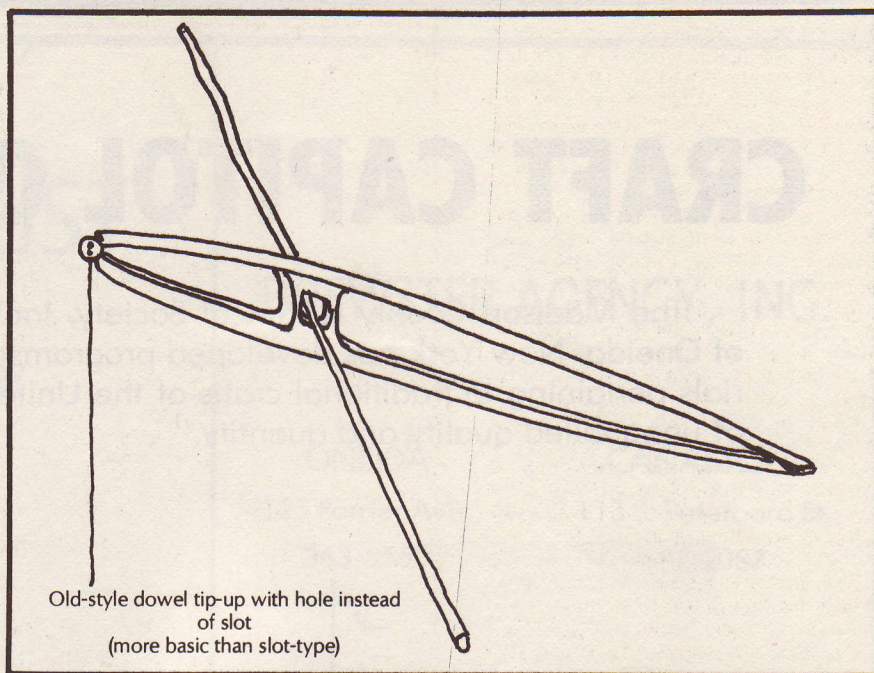
When the wind blows from the west, the fish bite the best.

When the wind blows from the north, the fisherman goes not forth.

When the wind blows from the south, it blows the hook into their mouth.

Opinions about the best time of the season in which to ice fish are also fairly unanimous, although the reasons given for this phenomenon are not. Most fishermen think that the thin early and late ice are the best times to fish.

Yet another variable felt to be crucial to successful ice fishing is the depth from the bottom at which the bait is located. Most of the ice fishermen we spoke with realized the value of



Old-style dowel tip-up with hole instead of slot
(more basic than slot-type)

changing the depth at which they were fishing if the fish were not biting at that depth. All those interviewed, except Mrs. Storie, a Yellow Lake ice fisherman, keep their minnows within three feet of the bottom. Mrs. Storie located her minnow one to two feet from the top of the water. It was suggested by Bob Bailey that the amount of light reaching the fish has something to do with the level at which the fish lived. He and many others felt that by trial and error they might be able to discover at what depth the fish could be found.

Bill Turner told an interesting story about setting the depth. He said the fishermen at Edwardsville generally fished 18"-20" off the bottom. When the 4:00 p.m. toot of the train was heard, however, he said it was the ritual to reset the bait to be located closer to the bottom 6"-7" up. The fishermen felt that they had better chance of getting walleye at that depth at that time of day.

A great deal of lore in the form of personal narratives about encounters with game protectors is generated by the ice fishing experience. Again, the concerns about regulation are part of the fabric of the story. In a non-malicious way, the ice fisherman usually manages to outsmart the warden. One such story told by a North Country fisherman involves an unnamed man who has taken his young son with him for a day's fishing on Yellow Lake. After catching more than his limit of northerns, he became concerned when he saw the game protector approaching him. He quickly buried several of the largest fish in a pile of snow nearby. The game protector approached and commented on the large northerns the man had caught, which were lying on the ice next to his hole. The man's young son piped up: "If you think those are good, you should see the ones over there buried in the snow."

This story was related by another unnamed ice fisherman who practiced his ice fishing on Black Lake. He and a fishing companion were fishing

with a shack and during the course of the afternoon had been quite successful in catching black bass. These fish are not legal to keep in the winter time. They had quite a catch lying on the ice nearby, when one of the men saw the game protector approaching. They quickly tried to find a hiding place for the black bass. There was not enough snow on the ice to bury them so they finally decided to put the fish under the shanty. The game protector approached and asked if he could use their shanty, saying he would like to do some jigging and bring home a perch dinner to his wife. They agreed to allow the game protector to use their shanty. During the course of time, the game protector heard a flapping noise under the shanty. One of the fishermen noted that the ice seemed to be shifting about quite a bit. The game protector went back to his jigging and heard the sound again. However, he never did find out what was making the flapping noise under the shanty, much to the relief of the fishermen.

The information in this paper is based on initial interviews of from one to three hours with Mr. Roy Apple, Mr. Bob Bailey, Mrs. Harold Barlay, Mr. Emmett Booth, Mr. Al Bogardus, Mr. Harold Brenno, Mr. Dick Burrell, Mr. Tom Cree, Mr. Dalton Fay, Mr. George Finley, Mr. John Goldie, Mr. Ron Gravlin, Mr. Gordon Hartle, Mrs. Ruth Hutton, Mr. Duff Lavigne, Mr. Ray Loucks, Mr. Avery McLear, Mr. Ben Nichols, Mr. George Paige, Mr. Royal Phillips, Mr. Jim Robinson, Mrs. John Storie, Mr. Gene Turnbull, Mr. Bill Turner, Mr. Moses Villnave, Mr. Lafe Young and Glen and Eileen Young.

Information was also supplied by Mr. Rosco Swem, Mr. Lyle Woodcock, Mr. Ralph Young, Mr. Steve Robinson and Mr. Don Sloan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Smithers, a field worker for the Center for the Study of North Country Folklife, has studied at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y. The Center for the Study of North Country Folklife, a research unit recently established at SUNY/ATC at Canton, exists to collect, record, study, and analyze the many traditional ways of life, past and present, in the northern most counties in the State.