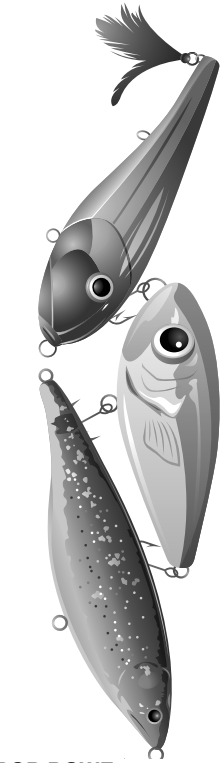


BETWEEN THE MARSHES

The Greatest Fish Story Ever Told On Earth



ROB BOWE

I first heard about the Great Kekoskee Fish Story in a blarney conversation with a guy I didn't know while enjoying cheese curds and a beer at the Pioneer Keg in Theresa when I moved back to Wisconsin about five years ago. The fellow who spun this yarn seemed as credible as any guy could be after spending an afternoon in a tavern watching a Packers game. It was a good story, but it sounded it like folklore blarney to me and I forgot about it. Several weeks ago when researching the history of the Horicon Lake and Marsh, I found a reference to this same fish story, in a paper titled "Horicon Marsh History," published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at www.fws.gov/uploaded-Files/Horicon%20History.pdf. So, I dug deeper and found the facts. What I am about to share is sworn to be truth by the man who reported it some 125-plus years ago. In 1892, Emerson Hough, a renown outdoor writer for *Forest*

and *Stream*, (the foremost outdoor magazine in America at the time) had been a guest on a duck hunt hosted by the Horicon Shooting Club on the great Horicon Lake/Marsh. Hough stayed at a hotel in nearby Mayville, visiting around town with several of the community's upstanding sportsman citizens. It was Dr. D.J. Clark, a noted Mayville physician and a member of the Horicon Shooting Club, who first told Hough about the great Kekoskee fish story during this hunt. Hough recalls that Clark emphatically told him that the story was fact and truth and was not a typical "fish story" and "should not be treated as such." Here is what Hough reported in *Forest & Stream*, headlining it as "The Greatest Fish Story Ever Told on Earth," published on September 29, 1892. (New York, NY, vol. 39 p. 296) "I tell [the Kekoskee fish story] in a careful and temperate manner," Hough stated. "I do not know how to better obey better this injunction then giving it in the words of Dr. Clark of Mayville." "The winter of 1860 was very cold," Clark said. "At that time, a vast lake covered the whole ground that ... Horicon Marsh now is. The lake was full of fish and had frozen deep ... these fish became distressed for air. The Rock River (which flows into the marsh/lake) ... has a swift stretch of water below the great dam at Kekoskee. This dam existed at the time of the story. (It is the) very spot where these startling incidents occurred. "The fish unable to

breath ... crowded up the channel of the Rock River ... six miles ... making for the hole ... which the swift water kept open below the dam at Kekoskee." Clark goes on to explain that the fish, mostly large bullheads and catfish, made a run that has never been equaled even by the great salmon runs of the northwest. Clark's words to Hough were, "The first arrival of the fish at the open hole was marked by a geyser-like eruption of bullheads, 50-feet across and 12-feet high. The pressure of the fish was simply enormous. The fish could not get back into the water and they slid out over the ice covering it in every direction for hundreds of yards varying in depth from 6-inches to 2-feet." The condensed version of Hough's story, as told by Clark, was that farmers and townspeople began to show up lining the river bank, watching the spectacle unfold. Locals filled farm wagons with fish, "shoveling them like potatoes," charging farmers 25 cents per wagon load. The fish were hauled off by the farmers and used as fertilizer, as well as pig and cattle feed. Countless numbers of fish were cleaned and kept frozen due the extreme cold and were used as people food. When hogs which were fed the bullheads that winter were butchered, the meat had a fishy taste. The widow Sneider, who lived on the road that led to the dam, claimed she counted 900 wagon loads of fish hauled past her place. The widow also commented she had no idea



A postcard photo of the Kekoskee Dam circa 1900, the site of the "Great Kekoskee Fish Story of 1860." The old Kekoskee bridge was located downstream to the left approximately 150 yards. (submitted)

how many wagon loads where hauled out of Kekoskee on the road on the other side of the dam, calling it a long wagon train. The fish pouring out onto the ice lasted two weeks. The area around the open water was bank-to-bank bullheads slurping and sucking air on the water's surface. The loud murmuring sound could be heard for some distance. Hough reported that you could almost walk across the slurping fish. He stated, "a farmer laid some planks over them at a narrow point and ran across it." A well-known Kekoskee citizen, Julius Cornell slipped on the ice, fell onto the burbling mass, and crawled back onto the ice without sinking into the stream. After the air-gulping bull heads finally thinned, the local folks had easy sport spearing pike and bass which had made their way to open water in search of oxygenated water. After being told this incredible fish story by Clark, Hough reported in his article that he had been skeptical. He either had the "sporting scoop" of the age or a story that would rank in American folklore with Paul Bunyan and Babe, the Blue Ox. After the hunt, Hough decided to go out into the community and conduct a bit of due diligence to see if Clark's fish story held water. He stopped at the law office of F.M. Lawrence, Mayville's leading attorney, and causally asked the lawyer about the Kekoskee fish story. Lawrence confirmed the event in such a manner that Hough thought the tale certainly had to have some credence. "Oh yes," Lawrence replied, "the Kekoskee bullheads. That was a great time. Widow Snei-

der, out there a mile on the road, counted 900 wagonloads of bullheads go by in one morning." Lawrence also told Hough about a man named Brush, a local express deliveryman, who had stacked several wagon loads of bullheads in his yard which he fed to his horse named Santa Anna all winter. Brush had moved away, but the old horse was still alive. The druggist knew the current owner and offered to take Hough to see the animal. Hough went next to Ed Sauerhering's drugstore and casually asked the druggist if had he ever heard anything about a big happening at Kekoskee. Sauerhering replied, "Oh ... those bullheads ...yes, there was alot of them. Mrs. Sneider, the widow, counted 900 wagons loads go by her house." The druggist also talked about Brush and his fish-eating horse, Santa Anna, and provided other information that confirmed to Hough that this happening was indeed an act of nature and a true story. That night, Hough's last in Mayville, the writer spent some time with the innkeeper of his hotel and casually inquired, "Anything ever happen up in Kekoskee?" The old German innkeeper replied in a thick German accent. "Oh dose awful bullheads ... Every one vas feeding dem to da pigs and horses ... I am so sick of bullheads for life ... And Brush – the express man, he feed his horse dem bullheads ...Widow Sneider, she always said she counted nine hundert vagonloads or more go by." A few more townsfolk came by the inn/hotel for some libation, so Hough questioned them. He

wrote, "One-by-one as they came in the door, they were asked without hint or possibility of collusion to stand and tell the Kekoskee fish story. One-by-one they did, without hesitation and all agreeing in unanimity on many points ... including the Widow Sneider's claim and about Brush and his fish-eating horse." Hough caught the train back to Chicago the next day and wrote his article. *Forest & Stream* published the story headlining it as "The Greatest Fish Story Ever Told on Earth." *The New York Times*, New York City's leading newspaper, also featured Hough's story, publishing it in the Sunday, Oct. 16, 1892 edition, headlining it, "Geyser of Bullheads, What Happened When Horicon Lake Froze Deep." In his article, Hough emphatically stated several times he was convinced the storied event was true. In his final paragraph he stated again it was "indeed truth" and closed with the following statement, "If the proof offered here is not sufficient, there is more in Mayville." So there you have it. The Great Kekoskee Fish Story, perhaps the greatest fish story ever told ... And it happened right here in the land between the marshes. Now before you accuse me of having an unbridled imagination, please remember this event was documented by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service (noted in this article) and Hough's article appeared in two other sterling publications. If you're still skeptical, you can also just Google "Kekoskee Fish Story" and see what you find. You will be entertained and remember, truth can be stranger than fiction!



The Kekoskee Dam on the Rock River as it currently appears with a newer bridge. The former Riverview Gardens dance hall and the Cooper Shop Saloon are visible on the east side of the river. (submitted)