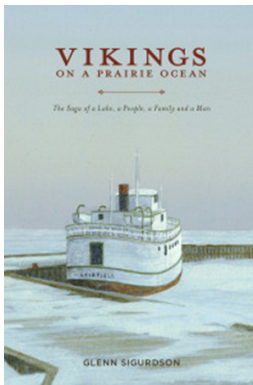


Making Change Work for You

P220 in *Vikings On A Prairie Ocean* by Glenn Sigurdson



Sig Fish had deep connections with the Berens River community. Dad, like his father and grandfather, knew everyone—their parents, their grandparents, their kids and grandkids. He worked closely with Chief Willie Swain to secure the regulatory change. In the early '60s, the Berens station was opened for both seasons, to be fished exclusively by community members. Similar community-based fisheries, open exclusively for area residents, were established at other locations. Several fishermen in Berens River established a co-op, which began operating out of Cubby Jacobson's old station on the mainland across from Sigurdson Island.

The challenges plaguing the industry in those years hit on other fronts as well. Markets were controlled by a limited number of buyers in Chicago and New York. They controlled the price, and the demand/supply equation was tipped all the more heavily in their favour by the perishable nature of the product. If not sold fresh, every day the fish spent in cold storage reduced the quality and increased the cost of carrying the inventory. After six months the fish was worth essentially nothing. There was talk in the early '60s of a "syndicate" buying everyone out. Who the so-called "syndicate" members were remained a mystery as best as I can recall. There were a variety of reports and recommendations made, and other freshwater lakes were subject to similar forces.

In 1969, after years of lobbying and a Royal Commission under George McIvor, Ottawa acted with legislation to create the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation with responsibility for controlling the marketing of all freshwater fish in the interior of Canada. The Sigurdsons found themselves in a different position than most of the other companies as these developments took shape. Their culture and allegiance had always remained closely tied to the lake and the fishermen, relying on their long alliance with Booth Fisheries for marketing. They were lake men first; marketing was a distant second. Most of the other companies on the lake made their money selling fish, not producing it, so the advent of a governmental marketing corporation eliminated their core business. Not so for Sigurdson Fisheries. They were the one major company on the lake prepared to continue as production agents for the corporation.

The provincial authorities stepped in with limited compensation for stations and equipment made "redundant." No compensation would be made for the loss of the good will. Many of the fish companies were not unhappy with the prospect of exiting the fishery, but not without compensation for the loss of their business.

For Sig Fish, the loss of the *Spear* had represented another challenge, but an unexpected solution was around the corner. BC Packers left the lake like all the other companies, and their freighter, the *Goldfield*, was for sale. Sig Fish acted quickly. The summer season of 1969 was grim, but there was one positive and surprising mid-summer development. For reasons that remain unknowable, the North End suddenly surged with small whites. Sensing a glimmer of hope ahead, but worried that these small fish could also fall victim to fishing zealotry, Dad recognized that tough decisions needed to be made. He visited Winnipeg

in late July to urge regulators to shut the season down to give the young fish a chance to grow. Soon after, the season was called to an end.

Then came danger from the most unlikely of sources. I remember Dad's call shortly after I began law school.

"Glenn, you won't believe what the hell has happened now." I could hear anger and alarm in his voice.

"What's going on, Dad?"

"They shut down Lake Winnipeg! Those damn scientists in Ottawa have gone completely crazy."

"What are you talking about?"

"They say there is mercury in the fish, coming from Dryden, Ontario. Nobody can make head or tails over this. I've been called into some meeting at the Freshwater Institute tomorrow, and should find out more then. How in the hell is that stuff in thermometers going to make its way hundreds of miles from Dryden, down the Winnipeg River to the South End of the Lake and 300 more miles to the North End of Lake Winnipeg?"

The results of widespread testing of the entire water basin were soon released. In the North Basin of Lake Winnipeg, more than 800 miles away from Dryden, excessive levels of mercury were detected in the fish populations. The scientists were firm; the threat was real.

Lake Winnipeg was closed.

If and when it would reopen, no one knew.

The prospect of the end of fishing on Lake Winnipeg was too much to absorb. My heart fluttered. For Dad, it was his life. He heard the alarm bells ringing in Ottawa as a death bell tolling for Sigurdson Fisheries Ltd., and the four generations of our family in the fish business on Lake Winnipeg. Everything that Afi Malli had ever said about the insidious threat of chemicals took on new meaning. The fact that mercury was an element, not a chemical, was child's play to his thundering rhetoric; he was now assured that the "chemical war" he had long feared had finally begun. But this was a war unlike any other, for you could neither touch nor feel nor smell the enemy, and the battle would be decided in labs and office towers in Ottawa. This was a blow that struck to the heart of our identity.

It would be three years before the lake fully reopened. "Make work" projects were put in place as a condition for qualifying for the minimal compensation. Afi's project was feeding carp at the mouth of the Icelandic River! Each morning he filled his skiff with sacks of barley to drop into the marshes at the river's mouth for these valueless scavengers that destroyed the spawn of other fish. His indignation at government stupidity reached new elevations.

But the long arm of the bureaucracy would lash back and try to take its pound of flesh from the old man. This was the year of Amma and Afi's fiftieth wedding anniversary, and the gift

from the family was a trip to Iceland. Tickets were acquired for a June departure before the opening of the season was announced. The first fishing allowed to resume was the summer whitefishery on the North End. The rest of the lake stayed closed. Government regulators were stringent in the requirement that anyone intending to continue fishing after the closure and all the other changes on the lake would have to be on the lake in person, and not by proxy. Afi was told he would lose his license permanently if he weren't personally on the lake. He had no intention of letting that happen. He asked Roy Mason to operate the boat that summer. Roy and he had been together for more than twenty years. Roy would be fishing alongside Oswald and Wally Hudson and their father Bill, each with their own whitefish boats. They, like Roy, were from Fisher River, and had been his travelling partners for many seasons.

High-handed tactics persisted with the old man. Word reached his old friend, and my former teacher, Wally Johanson, now a cabinet minister in the Schreyer government who had boarded with Amma and Afi for years debating statistics and world affairs with him. Through whatever combination of entreaties and threats Wally employed, the situation was resolved and Afi and Amma were off to Iceland and the men from Fisher River he had spent many years with, Roy Mason and Lloyd Sinclair, went to Warrens Landing. Roy and the other men from Fisher River were so excited to tell Afi about the outcome of the season that they were waiting for him at the Winnipeg Airport when he returned. After all those years on Lake Winnipeg, Afi Malli missed the season to end all seasons.

Dad went north to run the station at Warrens Landing, as Berens remained closed. Mom went north with Dad, just as she had the very first season in Catfish after their marriage, and as she had done so often in her life. She would say today that she wasn't busy at the time, so that was a good place for her to be. I suspect that a deeper reason was to be with Dad, as what lay ahead for the industry was far from clear. The most important question was, "Would there be any fish?" The deeper question was whether circumstances would prove to be a new beginning or a sudden end for Sigurdson Fisheries.

God smiled. God really smiled. Dad's instincts in the summer of 1969 proved prescient. To everyone's utter disbelief, the lake was absolutely full of whitefish. At one point fishing had to be halted because the freighters and the Marketing Board in Winnipeg couldn't keep up with moving and processing the bounty. Mom punctuates this with the story of Philip Orvis, several days late in arriving at the station. Every limit was filled and the operation was ready to close down and head south. Philip was not a popular man, but that would quickly change. He filled his limit in three days. His final lift may have been the largest ever seen on Lake Winnipeg. Mom was on the dock and greeted him when he arrived. Fish were everywhere, flowing over boxes all over the decks, and the boat was nearly sunk. Philip stood on the deck in fish up to his ankles, and as everyone watched with awe, Philip explained as if in a daze: "I always dreamed about going to the nets, and they would be floating with fish, and today it happened, the nets floated with gleaming whitefish like a blanket on the water."

The next year, 1972, the entire lake was reopened for fishing. As agents for Freshwater, Sigurdson Fisheries needed a new facility that could also act as a receiving depot for fish. The classic, original Sig Fish office was demolished and replaced by a long, flat modern building covered in blue tin. The symbol of an era evaporated within a day. The rationalization of the fishery that had been so long in coming had been thrust upon the

industry in the form of mercury. Everything had transformed over those years. There were fewer stations on the lake. Eighty whitefish boats had shrunk to 44, and the big *Goldfield* was essentially alone. She would no longer make the long trip to Selkirk. Her terminus point would be the End of the Road, where trucks would take over and travel the 18 hours into Selkirk and the Booth sheds. From there they went to Transcona to a modern plant of a federal corporation operated by a professional management team under the direction of a federally appointed board of directors, with two fishermen representatives. And the fish stocks had returned. Afi Mali's six miles of nets was now down to less than half a mile, and he filled his limit in less than three weeks in the North End that first year after the reopening. The whitefish youngsters had matured and were all over the lake. Pickerel and sauger were also plentiful.