

Louie Spray 59-8 Grindstone Lake, Wisconsin - 1939

So now, let's get to the most controversial of all record holders and/or contenders; Louie Spray and his 1939 fish from Grindstone Lake, Wisconsin. Louie did things his way and because of this he was controversial. Most of the controversy took place in Wisconsin, although there were concerns expressed from other parts of muskie-land as well. Most of the controversy that reached print nationally was through prominent outdoor writer Mel Ellis. In his article, ***Throw Those Muskies Back Boys***, in *True* magazine, Ellis wrote in part ***...Fifteen years ago the record muskie taken on a rod and reel weighed 52 pounds (12 ounces). It was a Wisconsin fish, but in 1938 the record went to Michigan with the capture of a 56 pounder.*** (This is in error, as were several outdoor articles of the time as the 56-pounder he referred to, Haver's 56-7, wasn't even a world record - see the world record list at this book's beginning, and Ellis missed three other fish that were world records).

The next year, however, Louis Spray, a former musky-hunting hero from Hayward and now a Rice Lake tavern keeper, came up with a 59 pound 8 ounce musky and it turned out to be the fish that was the first in a series that has been characterized in the press as not-so-nice smelling muskies.

His record catch was only second best for that year, however, because a short time later Percy Haver of Detroit, a professional muskie hunter who makes an art of trolling for the lunkers, smashed the record with a fish that went slightly over 60 pounds (again an error, as Haver's 1939 smaller record was caught before Spray's and it was John J. Coleman's 60 ½-pound fish that beat both Haver and Spray in 1939).

But Louie the indomitable came right back the next year with a whopper that went 61 pounds 13 ounces, and this was another fish some people insisted smelled as though it might not be strictly fresh (to be covered shortly).

Nevertheless, he claimed a world record and during the time that this fact was in considerable doubt, he announced that he would soon produce the necessary statistical proof...

Eventually along came notarized statements that the (1939) fish had existed, and had been caught by Mr. Spray. There were the pictures and further detailed evidence revealed that it had been weighed at a creamery station and a tavern and that it tipped the scales at 59 1/2 pounds and measured 58 inches (actually only one photograph and it wasn't even of Spray and the fish, it was his friend Alton Van Camp). Spray's 1939 fish had been beaten by Coleman's, which Ellis missed completely.

In the tome ***That Big Fat Musky Book*** Eli Singer revealed what he learned from Alvin Van Camp, son of Alton. Alton is shown holding Spray's record fish in the one and only photo of Spray's 1939 record known to exist. Alvin had told Singer what his mother and father had said about the goings on at the time and about Spray. He learned that Alton had referred to Louie as a "shyster" and that Alvin's mother Eva had related that lots of "metal" items had disappeared from their garage one day after Louie and Alton had been there with a big muskie. Eli also

learned that when Alvin tried to relate this information to John Dettloff, Mr. Dettloff didn't care to hear about it!

Eli Singer also questioned the lack of photos of Spray's record muskies. He was at a loss to explain why there was none of Louie with the 1939 record, only three of Louie with his 1940 and 1949 records. Eli wondered regarding the known Spray record photos, if Louie had disposed of photo's unfavorable to the fish. Could this be why Spray chose to use only the photo of Van Camp with his 1939 record? Singer also wondered why Dettloff's newspaper requests for more photographs had produced nothing. At least nothing new has been made public.

There have also been other comments regarding the shape of the mount of Spray's 1939 fish. In a letter from Spray to me in 1981, Spray had this comment about the mount of his 1939 fish ***...The thing made a very poor mount, due to the stretchy skin. Karl Kahmann, the taxidermist (sic) call (sic) me out to his shop and showed me. The form he had made for it was so small that if the skin had of been placed over it and allowed to dry, it would have shown wrinkles, according to Karl. He then pulled the slack up in back of the fish, while I looked at the front of it, and the fins then were very much distorted, and even the tail twisted a little. So he had to make a larger form which spoiled the shape of the fish.***

Actually, it was 'nt (sic) a bad looking fish in the raw, except for the very small head, as you can see from the photo with Van holding the fish. But the mounted fish was much distorted as described above...



Photo courtesy Louie Spray

We previously reported the story of the capture of Louie's 1939 fish so let's pick up Louie's story from there.

...We headed for Red Harmon's but still no one was up. Well, we got them up but quick. The door was not locked so we walked right in and hollered "muskie" and I wish you could have seen the goings on. It was in July and everybody was only half dressed, women and all, milling around.

I believe there was more booze at Harmon's place than there was in Spray's bar. Everybody had a bottle in his hand of all makes and description and everybody was bound we should

have one on them. So, on an empty stomach, well, you can guess the consequences. Finally, Tom and I broke away and started for home. However, when we hit the main highway I figured I would like to go over to Draper-Loretta way and show the boys over there how I do it now. There was no scale there that would weigh the fish, so someone came up with a bathroom scale. We put a board on the scale, weighed it, put on the fish, weighed it, subtracted the weight of the board and it came to between 59 and 60 pounds. A young man running a filling station, Widmer Smith, told me that he thought it might be a world record, but that it should be weighed on an official scale to be authentic. Somebody took it into Winter, Wisconsin, a distance of ten miles, and brought back the weigh slip of 59 1/2 pounds. The old record was 58 1/4 pounds.

So right now, the multitude gathered there, pronounced me the muskie king of the world, which naturally called for some whoopee, including some beverage gargling. While the gang was at it, Tom and I ate a lunch, then, headed for Park Falls to show off our catch over there. We did that all right, but in the ensuing hours, some of the gang, all my friends, stole my fish and proclaimed they would give it back only after they had run my tab up to about where they wanted it. To expedite, they finally gave it back to us and we started for home via Glidden and Clam Lake, on Highway 77. We passed up not one tavern. The next day I awoke about 3:00 p.m., and could not, for the moment, remember what had happened but knew it was something big. Did we win a lot of money, lose a lot in our business, or why did I get so plastered? It finally came to me and I hustled down to the tavern, unshaved and half undressed, to see if the fish had been properly cared for. My wife had had the porter put ice on it in the basement and covered it. I went upstairs into the tavern and the place was full.

There were reporters there with cameras, all asking questions of all natures, but mostly, "Where's the fish?" In my stupor, and from my experience the day before, in having my fish stolen, gave some weird answers such as "I gave it away, I can't find it, and give me time to get sober, will you?" All I knew was that I was not going to come up with that all important fish until after I had contacted Karl Kahmann, the taxidermist. He wasn't in when I called his place. About that time I met my wife again and she exclaimed in no uncertain terms, "You get up to bed and stay there until you are presentable." Which I was glad to do to get away from that mob and especially those reporters, who were half drunk and with that "you got to show me" attitude. I had just reached the apartment when up came Karl and was I glad to see him. My wife had shown him the fish and he said as long as it was kept iced it was okay. After the usual congratulations from Karl. I spent the balance of the afternoon in the house.

About 8:00 p.m., I went down to the tavern. The mob had left, just the usual crowd was around. I inspected the fish and found it well iced, so I went out and built a box to display the fish. The next morning I put the fish on display with a glass over the box, kept it well iced and offered a cash prize to the one who could come the nearest to guessing its weight and length, and put a book there for them to register their name and address. By then, for the first time in a couple of days, I was once again myself.

After 36 years, I am looking at that book right now. Pop Adams, who represented a bait company, was the first to register and Ray Noggles, a guide from Hayward, was second. There were 620 entries and after their guesses were all added up and divided by the said 620, the

average guess was within a pound of the actual weight of 59 1/2 pounds and there were nine ties. Some amusing guesses, mostly by women were weight 90 pounds, length 29 inches (it had to be 30 inches to be legal). Another was 75 pounds and six feet two inches long. The lowest weight guessed by a man was 46 pounds. The sports writers made much of the bathroom scales that had been used, with full knowledge that it had been officially weighed. Others claimed it was never displayed as I had given it away and others had their own ways of discrediting my catch. Mostly, sports writers in general ran down the facts first and then came up with a favorable story on it. Many of those writers later saw the book that I am looking at right now, and thought some day it was going to be a very prized possession.

In addition to the above story from Louie's book *My Muskie Days*, I have gathered additional facts and information to add to this story from a series of statements and affidavits that were prepared at the time. First an undated statement with the following.

We the undersigned wish to state and declare that we witnessed and saw a fish belonging to Louie Spray of Hayward, Wisconsin, on the 27th of July 1939, that the fish was a muskie, that we have seen several large muskies before and that this was the largest muskie we have ever seen.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Address</i>
<i>O.P. Ruid</i>	<i>Loretta, Wis.</i>
<i>Dick J. Hellerman</i>	<i>Loretta, Wis</i>
<i>Betty Boody</i>	<i>Ripon Wis</i>
<i>Jules Luppore</i>	<i>Hayward Wis.</i>
<i>M.C. Watrud</i>	<i>Spooner, Wis</i>
<i>Carl Watrud</i>	<i>Hayward, Wis</i>
<i>Robert J. Melville</i>	<i>Fond du Lac, Wis</i>
<i>V. Innchtnm (sp?)</i>	<i>Ashland Wis</i>
<i>Chas Boyle</i>	<i>Hayward</i>
<i>Nixon Barnes</i>	<i>Hayward, Wis. (involved in all 3 Spray fish)</i>
<i>J S Ponser</i>	<i>Eau Claire Wisc.</i>
<i>A.J. Barney</i>	<i>Superior, Wisc.</i>
<i>B.E. Brown</i>	<i>Rice Lake, Wis</i>
<i>J.C. Granger</i>	<i>Hayward, Wis.</i>
<i>Ray Ingersoll</i>	<i>Hayward, Wisconsin.</i>
<i>Reinold H Hoppe</i>	<i>Chippewa Falls Wis</i>
<i>Clifford Eytcheson</i>	<i>Hayward, Wis</i>
<i>Harold Gobler</i>	<i>Hayward, Wis.</i>

On a copy of the above statement that I received from Louie Spray, he had typed the following note.

SPRAY'S COMMENT AS TO THE SIGNATURES...

*The signatures were taken before the Fish was Officially weighed. Signed Louie Spray
10/30/79*

Since the signatures were obtained before the fish was weighed, the statements are useless regarding verification of fish weight and document only that it was the largest seen. Next was the statement of the catch released to the press by Louie.

Official statement of World Record Muskie, released for publication by Louie Spray on this 31st day of July, 1939.

The muskie was caught by Louie Spray, Hayward, Wisconsin, between ten and eleven A.M. July 27th, in Grindstone Lake, near Hayward.

The muskie was weighed at a cream station operated by W.J. Zecherle, Winter, Wisconsin. Also, at John Geschel's Tavern, Loretta, Wisconsin and on each scale weighed 59 1/2 pounds. The length was 58 inches. Several people witnessed the weighing and measuring and affidavits of same are on record in the Court House in Hayward, Wisconsin.

The man holding the fish is Alton Van Camp of Loretta, Wisconsin, a licensed guide and life long friend of Spray. The muskie is being mounted and will be on display at Spray's Cafe & Bar, Hayward, Wisconsin, as soon as completed.

***Signed, Louie Spray
Hayward, Wisconsin***

Louie sent me a note of clarification on the above Release.

OCTOBER 17, 1979

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

For purposes of clarification and with reference to the attached "Release," after the fish was weighed at the Cream Station, myself and my fishing pal, Tom Campbell, drove to Park Falls where I was raised to show off the catch. Some of my old buddies whom I was wining and dining, stole the fish, as a joke of course, and wouldn't come up with it until I had bought their fill of grog.

When they finally gave the fish back, Tom and I finished celebrating on the way home Via Glidden, Clam Lake, and every Joint on Hy-Way #77, and naturally got home very late like Two Bells in the morning, and was pretty stiff from the consumption of all the grog.

After the fish had been displayed at Spray's Bar for a few days, Karl Kahmann picked up and skinned it out in preparation for mounting. And when I started to look for my camera which had a full spool of film in it, I couldn't find it and never did. I recalled that Alton Van Camp had taken a few shots of the critter with his camera, but there was not a photo of me on it. There was a good picture of Van holding the fish, and this is the picture we used in Officially Registering the catch with the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

The attached "Release" was left at the Bar so the reporters would have the correct dope with which to draft their Story. But as it turned out, some of them did not follow the script to the extent they saw that the fish was weighed on a Bath Room Scale, which it was, but not for official purposes and they knew it.

I've said it before and I say it here now, that if you ever catch a world record muskie Reporters will delight in kicking you in the teeth, and their publishers are of no help in straightening out the wrong they did you.

Signed Lou Spray 10/17/79...

Louie then came out with the following affidavit.

We the undersigned wish to state and declare that we witnessed and saw a muskie belonging to Louie Spray of Hayward, Wisconsin, weighed and measured in John Geschel's Tavern, Loretta, Wisconsin, on the 27th day of July, 1939. The weight was 59 1/2 pounds and length was 58 inches.

*Signed Alton Van Camp Address Loretta, Wis
 Widmer Smith " " "
 John Geschel " " "*

Witness

O.P Ruid

Louie Spray (witnessing your own catch on a weight witness affidavit is unacceptable for record consideration)

Subscribed and sworn to before me

A Notary Public.

This 31st day of July 1939

Jenive Ruid

Notary Public,

My Commission Expires Aug. 20, 1939

Again we get clarification from Louie.

P.S. PLEASE NOTE:

The purpose of this Post-Script is for clarification only, and is not part of the Above Affidavit.

The above mentioned fish was officially weighed at the Winter, Wisconsin, Creamery, Winter, Wisconsin, and was officially recognized as a world record by the American Museum of Natural History, in 1939. And Widmer Smith, one of the affiants above, was the one who knew that the scales should be official in order to have the fish acceptable.

Signed, Louis Spray 10/7/1979

Later the following affidavit was signed by a Mr. Wm. Harmon.

AN AFFIDAVIT

I, William Harmon, of Hayward, Wisconsin wish to state and declare that on the 27th day of July, 1939, I rented a boat to one Louie Spray of Hayward, Wisconsin and that he returned to my boat landing on Grindstone Lake about nine thirty or ten o'clock the same morning with a muskie that measured 58 inches in length This fish would not weigh on a fifty pound scale that we had at the resort.

***Signed Wm. V. Harmon Signed and sealed
In the presence of;
W J Shuman
H Gregersnd***

***Subscribed and sworn to before me this 2nd day
of August, A. D., 1939
Wilbur J. Shuman
Notary Public, Sawyer County, Wisconsin
My Commission Expires August 23, 1942***

The final affidavit regarding the 1939 fish comes from a Mr. W.J. Zecherle.

Affidavit

I, W.J. Zecherle of Winter, Wisconsin wish to state and declare that on the 27th day of July 1939, I weighed a muskie belonging to Louie Spray, of Hayward, Wisconsin. The weight was 59 1/2 pounds.

Signed W.J. Zecherle

***Signed and sealed in presence of:
G.E. Phillips
H.J. Phillips***

***State of Wisconsin
County of Sawyer, SS.
Sworn and subscribed to before me this 31st day of July, 1939.
G.E. Phillips, (is it legal to be both witness and notary?)
Notary Public
Sawyer County, Wis.
My Commission Expires March 1, 1942***

In an August 1, 1939 letter from Louie to Mr. R.G. Lynch, sports editor of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Louie had the following statement.

Dear Mr. Lynch:

Gordon (MacQuarrie) was here Sunday and found me in none too good a shape Re: the fish. Since Thursday I had taken on a lot of that refreshment that comes in that Black and White package. However, it was a good thing he came along because he woke me up to the fact that Wisconsin as well as myself, had something and since Sunday I have straightened out everything.

I now have the fish back and absolutely under control. He will be in my place of business as soon as the mounting is completed. This however was no small job and naturally took a little time.

There is still one more affidavit to file and I will send you a copy as soon as I get it executed.

Re: these affidavits, they are recorded, but I would like them back if possible.

The only decent photograph I salvaged was one with Alton Van Camp holding the fish. Therefore I am sending a snap of myself, (still full of that stuff) if you care to run it along with the other picture. I still haven't found my Camera containing the best pictures of the thing.

As far as this being a Record Fish. I don't know anything about that, but I guarantee you that the fish is everything we claim it is and it will be here to be looked at by anyone who might be interested.

If there is any further information you might desire I will be only too glad to give it to you.

Signed, Louie Spray

Finally, Louie received a letter from the American Museum of Natural History, then keeper of the records and to whom he had applied.

27, September, 1939

Mr. Louie Spray

Hayward,

Wisconsin

Dear Mr. Spray:

I am returning your affidavits, as you request, of your record muskie. The one thing lacking is your tackle. Would you let us know exactly what it was. It is usual for us to retain the affidavits here, and although I have made copies of them, if you feel you could do so, we would prefer to have you deposit them with us as other holders of record catches have done.

We congratulate you on your World Record catch.

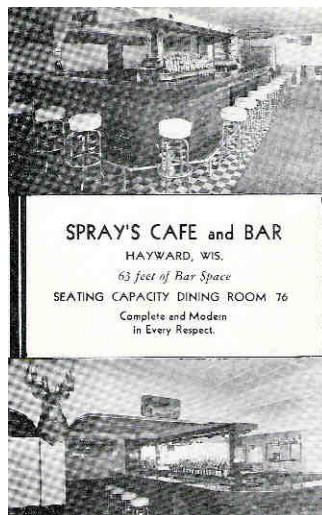
Sincerely,

F.R. LaMonte
Associate Curator
Fish Department

(PS:) It is also customary to have an affidavit from someone who actually saw you catch the fish. Were you alone in the boat, and if not, is it possible for you to get a statement from whoever was with you.

There is no indication in the files or my records to indicate whether or not Spray complied with the last two requests. As can be seen, Louie did things his way. It should also be obvious that record keeping requirements were less stringent in the early years of recorded muskellunge history. One thing that must be noted is that this Spray fish was never subjected to world record scrutiny by the American Museum of Natural History since Coleman's 1939 fish pushed it into second place in the *Field & Stream* contest. Professional photogrammetry has not been used to analyze the fish that Alton Van Camp is holding.

In a *Sawyer County Record* article by Terrell Boettcher and the obituary of a Mr. Karl Ogren provided to me by Eli Singer, we learn that in 1938 Ogren **...caught a 58-pound musky on Sand Lake [Wisconsin] which he sold to Louie Spray** (per obituary), and per Boettcher's article **...He (Ogren) caught a 58-pound musky in 1938 in Sand Lake, which he sold (mounted) to Louie Spray...** Was this the source of Spray's 1939 record fish as Singer alluded it could be? If already mounted, could this be why there are no photographs of Spray with the fresh 1939 fish? While never publicized other than appearing in a period post card advertisement for "Spray's Café and Bar," which also contained the mount known to be Spray's 1939 fish, this large mount was unlikely claimed by Spray to be his 1939 record, dismissing that hypothesis. In addition, it is counter to others claims of having supplied Spray with his fresh 1939 fish.



The two interior views on this post card show both ends of the "L" shaped bar at Spray's Bar (now the Moccasin Bar) in Hayward, circa late 1939 or early 1940. In the top view is the mount of an extremely long fish thought to be the Ogren fish. In the other view is the mount of Spray's 1939 world record.

When Eli Singer asked Spray historian John Dettloff about the Ogren story he was told that the Ogren story was fabricated. Singer was aghast at Dettloff's response. That Dettloff had no

interest in checking it out further totally baffled Singer! Although Singer had mentioned the Ogren story to Dettloff multiple times between 1999 and 2001, nothing about it appeared in Dettloff's rewrite of Louie Spray's biography.

In his *In Defense of Louie Spray* articles in *Musky Hunter*, John Dettloff dismissed the Ogren story as ...*made up*...

Two photographs that Louie had sent to me also appeared in his autobiography *Looking Back At That Phase Of My Muskie Days* written by him and published in 1979.



24# from 1924-----Unspecified

One photo was captioned in his book on page 7 as a 24-pounder he caught in 1924. The other appeared on page 141 and had no weight or date ascribed to it, but Spray's shirt, hat and pants are exactly like the ones worn by him in a photo of him with his 1940 record. When John Dettloff purchased the rights to Louie's book and did a re-write before publishing it in 2002 under the title *Three Record Muskies In His Day The Life and Times of Louie Spray*, he evidently decided to forsake historical accuracy and took "editorial license" in revising history in Louie's favor! Dettloff republished both photographs on page 153 of his version of Spray's life, however the 1924 fish nearly doubled in size as it was captioned as a 41 ½-pound muskie Louie supposedly caught in 1939! The other fish suddenly became another Spray 1939 fish and was dubbed as a 46-pound 3-ounce muskie that was 52-inches long!!

When Eli Singer informed John Dettloff what old-timers from Spray's home area had to say about Spray buying muskies he was dismissed. Singer had told Dettloff what several of the older residents of Spray's home area had told him with regard to Spray buying and offering to buy record class muskies or any large muskie, including one person that claimed to have sold Spray his 1939 world record fish and that Spray had not paid him. Dettloff reportedly dismissed all accounts. That "person" is still alive and perhaps one day that *story* will be told!

That takes care of the story of Louie's 1939 fish. Although covered only briefly in the WRMA's Spray Protest, the WRMA believes this fish is questionable (see Appendix). Professional photogrammetry has not been attempted on the only known photograph of Spray's 1939 muskie.



*Where's the pictures of
Louie with his '39 fish?*