

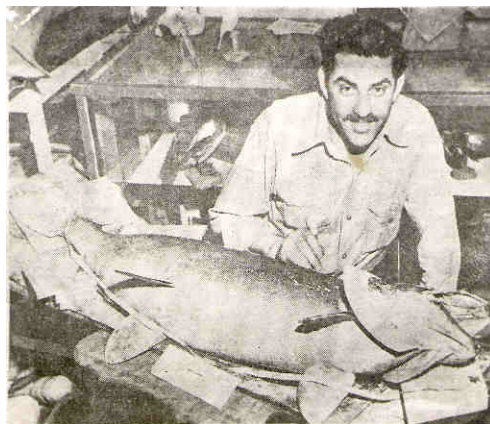
Robert Malo 70-4 Middle Eau Claire Lake, Wisconsin – 1954

One of the more controversial fish stories in muskie angling history took place in 1954. It was early morning June 6, 1954, when Robert Malo of Port Arthur, Ontario, fishing with George Cruise of Chicago, reported hooking a huge muskie on a sucker. Ultimately the fish was reported to weigh 70-pound 4-ounces and was taken from Middle Eau Claire Lake, Wisconsin. After beaching and shooting the fish, people at the resort were alerted. The fish was then taken to a taxidermist in Duluth, Minnesota where it was weighed and skinned for mounting. At the weigh-in, the fish was thought to weigh 69¾-pounds. When opened for mounting, the fish had rolls of fat, a partly digested 5½-pound northern pike and 8¼-pounds of eggs. The next day, the Minnesota Department of Weights and Measures was asked to verify the scales and the inspector found the scales to be 8 ounces “slow.”

Like other record muskies of the day, there is concern about there being a dearth of photographs of Malo’s muskie. Other than the one known photo of Malo and George Cruise taken with the fish when brought in, the only other known photographs are of the fish during the mounting process and after the mount was completed.



Malo mount during initial mounting stage. Taxidermist Flaim (l), Malo agent Baroo (c) and Malo partner Cruise (r)



Taxidermist Flaim working on Malo mount

For a year and a half around 1977, the late Peter Haupt and I investigated and researched this fish. Peter and I spent several evenings burning the midnight oil, as we carefully went over every

aspect of the case. In all, over 225 man hours and several hundred dollars were spent on the review. Also, many hundreds of miles were driven and all available key persons were interviewed in order to get their story. When I made a visit to the Eau Claire area to interview some of the people who also lived there at the time of Malo's catch, there were nearly as many versions of the facts in 1977 as there were by reporters covering the story in 1954.

During my visit I talked with Wilbur Smith who has been a muskie guide in the area for over 30 years. Wilbur had gone to Madison the day the fish was caught and didn't get to see the Malo fish. For a time, he said that he doubted a fish that size had come from Middle Eau Claire Lake. It supposedly was not a natural muskie lake. Then in a following year, after the Malo fish scenario, Wilbur saw a muskie several times in Mid Lake that he thought would go nearer to 80 pounds! Later, he said ***Someone broke a spear off in the fish and it was never seen again.***

While there I took the opportunity to view the mounted fish before it was put on public display in 1986.

When Peter Haupt interviewed the taxidermist he was told ***Ugliest muskie I ever saw.*** This taxidermist, at the time, mounted at least one a year over 50 pounds, sometimes up to 55 pounds from Lake of the Woods and also mounted the first 60-pounder in history, which came from Eagle Lake in 1939. Peter's statement after visiting with the taxidermist was ***At this point I'm convinced Malo's fish weighed 70 pounds 4 ounces.***

Myself, I'm convinced a tremendous muskie was taken but the one thing that was uncertain was the accuracy of the weight measurement. A weigh-in discrepancy kept Malo's muskie from being accepted as a new world record by ***Field & Stream***. There seemed, at the time, to be no disputing the fact that a big muskie had indeed been produced. ***Field & Stream's*** letter to Malo agent Hank Baroo came from Hugh Grey, then ***Field & Stream*** Editor. That letter of rejection indicated the scale was indeed the key item. The utility bathroom scale that had been used was marked only in pound increments with no ounce marks according to scale owner George W. Flaim. The estimate at the time of the original weighing ranged from 69½ to 69¾-pounds, but of course there was no way to know for sure. Malo and Baroo, the resort operator, believed the fish tipped the scales at the 69¾-pound mark when first weighed. Taxidermist Flaim thought it 69½ pounds. When the scales were determined to be ½-pound slow, Malo and Baroo added this to the 69¾ and came up with 70¼-pounds.

After our research, I drew a conclusion against the Malo fish which went into the 1st Edition of my book ***A Compendium of Musky Angling History***. In looking back at that review, I was guilty of being in sympathy with the then-recognized world record holder, the late Art Lawton. Lawton was at that time, a friend and excellent muskie angler. Robert Malo, in my opinion, hardly knew what a muskie was. Of course, that shouldn't have made any difference. Fortunately, I felt that Malo's muskie should be recognized into a prominent place in muskie history. Thus, I placed it third on my all-time list of big muskies at 69-pounds 8-ounces.

During the 1970's there were a couple of major changes in freshwater world record keeping from private to public organizations. The NFWFHF became involved in record keeping in 1970 and in

1978 *Field & Stream* turned over all of its freshwater records to the International Game Fish Association (IGFA), salt water record keepers since 1939.

When Dun Rovin Lodge owner Denny Johnston of Hayward, Wisconsin purchased the Malo mount in 1986 and notified the press, the Malo stories were dusted off and again made news. I again reviewed my 1977 notes about the Malo fish and realized how incomplete my previous search had been. As a muskie historian, representative of IGFA and Chairman of the World Record Board of Review for the NFWFHF, I felt perhaps I had an obligation to re-open the Malo case and do an intense and more thorough job of fact finding.

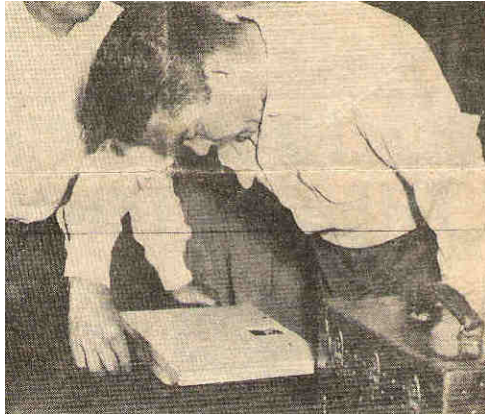
Prior to publication of my 1st Edition *Compendium* in 1982, I became privy to all correspondence between key persons involved with the Malo muskie and *Field & Stream* magazine editor, Hugh Grey. Of course, *Field & Stream* was the official sanctioning body and steward of all fishing world records.

In re-opening the Malo case, my sole intent was to determine if, in fact, the Malo muskie had received its just dues. Peter Haupt echoed my sentiments, when he said *We must address the matter of Malo's fish now in 1987 and not turn our backs on it as did the keepers of records 33 years ago.*

My approach to the investigation was to first review the vast amount of data I had accumulated, list all discrepancies, and from this, develop literally dozens of questions on all aspects surrounding the catch and subsequent events, i.e., transporting the fish to the taxidermist, measuring, weighing, skinning the fish, weighing stomach contents and having the scale checked. Once these questions were developed, I set about trying to resolve them. This was done by cross referencing the discrepancies against the affidavit facts.

Suffice it to say, a book could be written about this fish. In fact, I wrote a booklet on our late 70's investigation and my later findings in 1986. It was published in 1987 and was used to make a case for the recognition of Malo's fish by comparison of all of the misinformation vs. the facts. That case was subsequently, rightly rejected by both the IGFA and the NFWFHF, again based on incorrect scale verification protocol. That booklet *Is This The World Record Muskellunge* is reproduced, nearly completely, in the Appendix.

In retrospect, the only acceptable "scale reading interpretation" for the Malo muskie by record protocol could be 69-pounds 0-ounces by rounding down to the lower of observed readable scale increments with the needle resting between two. Even though the scale was proven to be weighing "8-ounces slow" at 70-pounds, official scale protocol was violated when the weights and measures tester "readjusted the scale to zero," and tested the scale at the weight of the muskie rather than the weight of the muskie plus the weight of the board it was placed on.

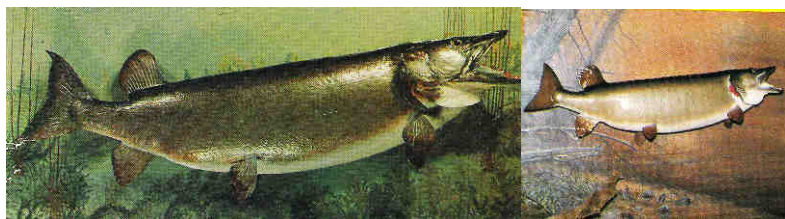


Weights and measures tester Axell making the “fatal” scale adjustment to zero

When Eli Singer interviewed the taxidermist that he said remounted the Malo muskie prior to it being put on display again in 1986 he learned, as reported in his *Musky Chronicles III* that the skin had not been pulled together in the back side of the mount and the inside fins were lower than the outside fins.

Singer then asked this second taxidermist what exactly he had done in reworking the mount. The taxidermist said that included in the remount he had made the tail fin longer. Singer also learned that the hide was in one piece.

In looking at the before and after photos of the Malo mount, there appears to be no obvious difference in the look of the mount. To clear up the matter I contacted the second taxidermist and he related to me that he *didn't* “remount” the fish. He told me he did remove and replace the rear paired fins, repaired all fins and repainted the mount. He also related that there was a huge gap in the skin on the backside of the mount indicating girth enhancement. He did confirm that it was a *...big fish*.



Original finished Malo mount (l) and repainted/repaired mount (r)

In March of 2006, I had two different people tell me quite a different story about the Malo fish. Both stories were similar. The stories, from local folks, were about the area where many big muskies had been “poached,” below the Winter Dam on the Chippewa River. They related that *this particular fish* (the Malo muskie) *had been taken illegally during April and frozen solid in a block of ice to keep it fresh looking*. Supposedly, the story goes, that poachers took the fish to Spray’s Bar in Rice Lake the following spring and placed it in his freezer while he was sleeping. When Spray awoke and discovered the fish he explained to the bearers that he couldn’t bring this fish out as he was still getting “heat” over his 1949 fish. It was then said that since Spray owed Hank Baroo, lodge owner on Middle Eau Claire Lake, a favor, he gave the fish to him. The fish

surfaced during the muskie season. This “claim/story” is in direct conflict with reports at the time of the Malo catch, wherein two witness accounts claimed that the fish *...still had life...* and *...its gills were still moving...* Then there is taxidermist Flaim’s statement that he was sure *...it was fresh...* made in 1954, although this latter statement was countered by him in a November 4, 1987 *Sawyer County Record* article by Terrell Boettcher who wrote *...When presented to him, the fish, “...looked dead a couple of days, all dried out. The skin was cracked. It could have even been in a freezer for a while, improperly wrapped (Flaim quote)...!”*

Louie Spray protested the Malo fish to *Field & Stream* and was *supposedly* at a loss to why Malo hadn’t tried to claim his \$2,500 reward. Was this “protest” merely a “smoke screen?”

WORLD RECORD MUSKIE CHAMPION

LOU SPRAY AGAIN OFFERS

\$2500⁰⁰ CASH PRIZE

TO THE FIRST PERSON TO BREAK THE

MUSKELLUNGE WORLD RECORD

OF 69 POUNDS — 11 OUNCES

Present World Record

BROKE RECORD IN 1940

61 LBS. 13 OZ.





69 LBS. — 11 OZ.

BROKE RECORD IN 1939

59 1/2 LBS.



RULES:

\$2,500.00 CASH will be paid by LOU SPRAY of Rice Lake, Wis. to the first ONE to break the MUSKELLUNGE WORLD RECORD of 69 lbs. 11 oz. in 1957.

The fish must measure at least 5 ft. in length or over (this is for obvious reasons) and have a girth of 31 inches or more and must not have swallowed just previous to the catch any lead, rocks, old iron or other artificial weight.

The fish must be weighed, examined and measured at SPRAY'S BAR by Lou Spray of Rice Lake, Wis. Method of measuring to be same as used by Field & Stream Contest.

Only one Prize to be paid out for the 1957 season. As soon as the RECORD is broken this offer closes. In case of ties, money will be divided equally. THIS OFFER EXPIRES AT CLOSE OF MUSKIE SEASON IN 1957, IF NOT TAKEN BEFORE.

FISH CAN BE TAKEN BY ANY LEGAL METHOD IN ANY WATER IN THE WORLD!

- NO QUESTIONS ASKED! FULL PAYMENT GUARANTEED! -

ABOVE MUSKIES ON DISPLAY AT **SPRAY'S BAR** **RICE LAKE WISCONSIN**

Spray's reward poster. No one ever collected

Of course Spray may not have known that the fish had been immediately skinned for mounting and therefore couldn’t fulfill his rule of being *...weighed, examined and measured at SPRAY’S BAR by Lou Spray of Rice Lake, Wis.,* but he *knew* the fish couldn’t fulfill another of his rules of being *...at least 5 ft. in length or over (this for obvious reasons) ...*

In March of 1987 I received a letter from “Peteresox” ‘The Duluth Sleuth’ (Peter Haupt) with a change of mind after he had done some more digging into Malo’s fish. Peter related this.

At this time I cannot endorse the Malo (fish) as 100% clean.

Upon broaching the subject with some area old timers (perhaps 6 or 8) all but one claimed the fish came from elsewhere. Most said the Winter dam...My own gut feeling is that it came from elsewhere. My reason is color. All photos & Flaim’s statement indicate a dark, drab fish. The fish in M.E.C. (Middle Eau Claire Lake) are as vividly marked as any I have seen anywhere in Wis. Even large ones. I saw a photo of a 47 3/4 lber at the...resort I mentioned & it was bright as a young fish – like a 30”er...Again — it’s the color that bothers me the most...I feel far more

unsettled about it then I did 10yr ago when we began snooping around & when I began fishing the lake.

Perhaps *Field & Stream* had been correct in rejecting the fish but for the wrong reason! However, this new information that the Malo muskie was taken illegally during the off-season and frozen, while plausible, *must be dismissed* until such time as an eyewitness or participant comes forward with a notarized affidavit, which according to my sources is still possible.

Another popular story related by Peter Haupt in his 1987 letter, said (a former game warden) *...went to see it* (Malo's fish) *& was suspicious of a float plane parked at the resort dock for several days.* Others swear that Malo had taken his fish illegally, elsewhere, and was on an obscure muskie lake to make the pick-up from the plane and bring the fish in. It sounds far-fetched but so goes the stories of big muskies.

Malo's muskie was listed by the NFWFHF as an "Unofficial" record at 70-pounds in the conventional angling division from 1987 to 2007, when it was removed from their record book without explanation. When queried about this by Dale Bowman, outdoor writer for the *Chicago Sun Times* the NFWFHF told him Malo *...is no longer being listed because it is unofficial.* Was this yet another move by John Dettloff to leave Louie Spray alone at the top of the list and not diminish the aura of the claimed weight of Spray's record vs. the higher claimed Malo fish weight of 70-pounds? And if this is so, he didn't even need an "investigation" to get rid of Malo's fish from the record book! I've been told that Dettloff interviewed one of the "poachers," which explains to me why he has had little to say about the Malo fish over the years...he *knew* of Spray's involvement with this fish and the *supposed* poacher...the same one *said* to have provided Louie Spray with his 1939 record...and didn't want the connection made!