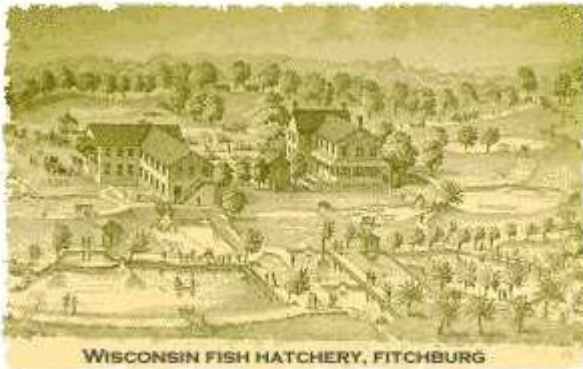


From the June 1998 issue:



State fish hatcheries have had a long run

How the hatchery program hatched.

Stephen J. Gilbert



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Before 1870, fisheries work in Wisconsin was carried out by private hatcheries and aquaculture hobbyists. Gentlemen like Alfred Palmer of Boscobel, H. S. Dousman of Waterville, and N. K. Fairbank of Lake Geneva ran small hatching facilities and independently distributed fry to stock private ponds and local waters. They mainly raised and stocked brook trout, collecting eggs from local, wild fish. These aquaculturists closely guarded their fish-rearing secrets and published little on the topic.

The decision to stock fish in state run hatcheries brought enormous changes to Wisconsin lakes and streams stocking expanded the natural ranges of brook trout, lake whitefish, lake trout, walleye, bass and muskellunge. Those efforts and the introduction of non-native species forever changed fish communities around the state. Not all of the state's well-intentioned efforts had favorable results; carp, for instance, were stocked in most counties that were within reach of rail lines by 1888.

By the end of 1874, the newly-appointed Wisconsin Commissioners of Fisheries realized that federal hatcheries could not provide enough eggs and fish to meet the stocking needs of all states. In Wisconsin, the commissioners saw opportunity and grandly envisioned using the state's abundant waters to raise enough fish to feed the state populace, if not the entire country.

"... The importance of these lakes to the State as a source of food-supply, can not well be exaggerated. With them well stocked with fish, Wisconsin can never have a famine."

To meet the demands for stocked fish within Wisconsin, the state would need to build its own hatching houses and hatcheries.

Before 1900, fish were artificially raised in two types of facilities: hatching houses and hatcheries. Hatching houses produced only fry (tiny, newly hatched fish). Zinc-lined pine hatching troughs, and later, stackable wire mesh trays held the eggs. These facilities had no artificial ponds or raceways to hold fish, so the fry were shipped as soon as they hatched. Hatcheries had the same equipment, but also had wooden raceways and earthen ponds for holding brood stock and rearing young fish to larger sizes. Brood stock were kept and spawned on site so there was no need to collect wild adult fish each year for this purpose.

Pensaukee -- the first state fish hatching house

In 1875 the commission was concerned about declining whitefish and lake trout fisheries of Lake Michigan. They searched for a hatching house site near rail lines and the lake shore. The hatching house needed a good source of water and adequate building space to house the hatching troughs. The commissioners arranged to use an old mill house on the Pensaukee River, a tributary of Lake Michigan, in the town of Pensaukee. Attempts to rear fish at this site began in October of 1875, but things went wrong from the start. Commercial fishermen who had been contracted to catch lake trout could not find ripe fish to spawn. Nets were set to collect whitefish, but earlier than usual winter weather forced the fishermen to pull their nets in the middle of the spawning run. Heavy rains that winter increased the silt load of the water supplying the hatching house and smothered most of the eggs.

This first failed attempt hardly dampened the commission's desire to raise fish. In 1875, commissioners again asked the Legislature for additional funds to build a hatchery and lawmakers allocated \$10,000.

Nine Springs -- the first state fish hatchery

The selected site was in the Town of Fitchburg, just south of Madison. Forty acres of land were purchased from a Mr. Crawford for \$35 per acre. During the summer of 1876 a hatching house, living quarters, and a storage barn were quickly erected at this site. Two raceways were built for holding fish next to the hatching house. M. D. Comstock, an aquaculturist from Columbia County, was appointed the first superintendent of this hatchery. His salary was set at \$1,000 a year and hatchery operating expenses for the first year were \$1,180.72.

That first summer 2,000 adult brook trout ("speckled" trout) were purchased for brood stock from a private Wisconsin hatchery. These fish were kept in raceways at the Nine Springs Hatchery and spawned in the fall. The temptation of all those trout dinners swimming around the raceways was too great for some Madison residents: 300 fish disappeared that summer. Fish dinners notwithstanding, 200,000 eggs were collected and incubated at the hatchery yielding 179,000 fry. These fish started the stream stocking program in southwestern Wisconsin.

Nine Springs Hatchery was later renamed for James Nevin, Superintendent of Fisheries from 1882 to 1915. It remained the state's only hatchery until the Bayfield Hatchery opened in 1895.

Milwaukee -- a new home for the state's fish hatching house

After the Pensaukee problems, the fish commissioners sought a new location for a hatching house on Lake Michigan. In 1876 the City of Milwaukee offered its North Point waterworks building free of charge to raise lake trout and whitefish fry. H. S. Welsher, an experienced fish culturist from New York, was selected as superintendent. Renovations were quickly made and operations were in full swing by that fall.

Lake trout and whitefish eggs were collected and taken to the hatchery. The following spring, 1,736,000 lake trout fry that hatched were stocked into inland lakes around the state and in Lake Michigan. Of the 6.3 million whitefish fry that hatched, 40,000 stocked into Elkhart Lake in Sheboygan County and the rest went into Lake Michigan.

The North Point site was used until 1880, when urban expansion warranted returning the waterworks to its full capacity. The hatching house was relocated to the basement of the Milwaukee Exposition Association Building at Cedar and Fifth streets where it operated until 1898.

Despite early setbacks, the fish hatchery program continues to grow and modernize. Through the years Wisconsin's hatchery personnel have attempted to raise fish of the highest quality and staff have developed rearing techniques that are used worldwide. Recent renovations of the state hatcheries at Bayfield, Lake Mills, Woodruff, and Spooner show continued commitment to providing anglers a quality, diverse fishery to enjoy.

About the author

Stephen J. Gilbert is a fisheries biologist stationed in Woodruff.