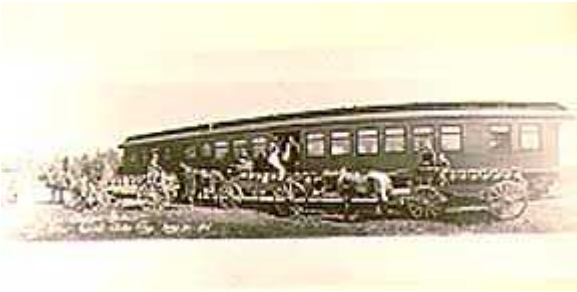


From the June 1998 issue:



## **The Badger Fish Cars & Dr. Fish Commish**

**Fish stocking via rail.**

**Stephen J. Gilbert**



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In 1881, the U.S. Fisheries Commission contracted and built specialized "fish cars" - rail cars that could transport live fish coast to coast for stocking. The Wisconsin Commissioners of Fisheries had been transporting its fish in milk cans that were stacked in standard baggage cars. By 1892 the Wisconsin Commission was shipping almost 45 million eggs, fry, and fingerling fish around the state from its hatcheries. The fish cars seemed a better means of safely shipping more fish, greater distances. In 1883, the State Legislature appropriated \$5,000 to purchase a fancy fish car for Wisconsin fish stocking programs. The appropriation for this pricey acquisition was partly justified to carry Wisconsin fish to the World's Fair (the Columbian Exposition of 1893) in Chicago.

The fish car, named the Badger #1, went into service in the summer of 1893 and remained in use until 1914. In most years the car logged more than 20,000 rail miles delivering fish and fry where the Wisconsin rail system reached. Badger #1 was sold to the Canadian government and its whereabouts today are unknown. A replacement, Badger #2 was purchased in 1912. Its steel construction and sturdy design could travel on modern rail lines and the train held many more fish than its predecessor.

By the early 1930s, Wisconsin's road system was improving and highways reached many areas of the state not served by regular rail service. The Conservation Commission purchased two new fish trucks that could each haul only half the number of fish cans as the Badger #2, but required less handling to stock the fish. As rail transport costs rose, more fish trucks were added to the fisheries fleet, and the end of the fish car era was in sight.

In the mid 1940s, the Badger #2 was sold to a private railroad contractor and turned into a rolling office. In 1960, it was sold to the MidContinent Railway Historical Society in North Freedom, Wis., where it rests today.

**Dr. Fish Commish**

In 1874 the Legislature created three unpaid positions to serve as Commissioners of Fisheries. The first gubernatorial appointees were William Welsch of Madison, Alfred Palmer of Boscobel, and Dr. Philo R. Hoy of Racine.

Dr. Hoy, a physician, was very interested in animal life and started the first fisheries surveys.

His influence is reflected in the commissioners' 1875 annual report: "These investigations" [could provide] data by which we can tell what species of fish would be best to introduce in each individual lake...If all lakes could be carefully surveyed, and every species of animal ascertained that inhabit the waters, or burrow in the bottom, it would be of the greatest interest to science, and of permanent value to the cultivation of fish."

Dr. Hoy, could be called the first state fisheries biologist.

In his five years on the commission, he carried out many lake surveys statewide, none more ingenious than an attempt to inventory southern Wisconsin fisheries in 1876. Dr. Hoy sent questionnaires to postmasters asking them to record lake acreage, maximum depth, bottom type, inlets or outlets, and fish species present in each lake within the postal service area. Thirty-nine questionnaires were completed and returned to the Fisheries Commission.

So the postal service not only delivered the mail, it surveyed local lakes!

### **About the author**

**Stephen J. Gilbert** writes about fisheries for Wisconsin Natural Resources.