

Herman the Sturgeon

By Jim Schepcke

Herman the Sturgeon is a 10-foot-long, 500-pound white sturgeon who has lived at the Bonneville Fish Hatchery since 1998. Now in his eighties, Herman is housed at Bonneville Dam with smaller sturgeons and rainbow trout at the Sturgeon Viewing and Interpretive Center, which has a large pond and an underground viewing area that reportedly draws a million visitors each year. White sturgeons are the largest freshwater fish in North America and one of the oldest, with fossils dating back 200 million years. This Herman inherited his name (and his fame) from his predecessor, who in turn took over from the original Herman. For decades, until 1990, the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, which operates fish hatcheries around the state, exhibited a sturgeon named Herman at the Oregon State Fair.

The practice of exhibiting sturgeons and other fish and wildlife at the Oregon State Fair began in the 1930s, including the display of “a pair of young sturgeon” in 1936. Two years later, the *Oregon Statesman* reported that Elmer the Sturgeon was making his third appearance, and in 1940 the *Capital Journal* reported that Steve the Sturgeon was on exhibit.

The Oregon Game Commission (now the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife) stopped bringing sturgeon exhibits to the fair soon after Steve’s debut, but the *Oregon Statesman* reported in August 1958 that “a 24-year old sturgeon from the Roaring River hatchery” in Scio, would be featured at the Oregon State Fair that year. He (or she) might have been the first Herman. The fish had been caught years before in the Clackamas River by Percy Southwick, the superintendent at the Roaring River Fish Hatchery, where he took the sturgeon to live. Southwick’s daughter Betty claimed that she had been given the “honor” of naming the sturgeon. Each year, Herman was carefully placed in a pond with other fish, where he became one of the most popular fair attractions.

In 1960, Herman barely survived a kidnapping attempt at the hatchery. The thieves dropped him about fifty feet from his pool, where he was found, still alive, the next day. In 1972, Herman was placed in a new twenty-nine-foot tank at the fair. In 1976, ODFW biologists were concerned about Herman’s age, estimated to be around ninety years old. Worried about disease exposure that could occur if he was in a tank with fish from another drainage, they replaced him at the fair with a sturgeon from the Bonneville Fish Hatchery.

There was no announcement that a new sturgeon, also called Herman, would be on exhibit at the 1976 Oregon State Fair, but the *Capital Journal* reported that eleven-year-old Scott Finney, a fan of the original Herman, noticed the difference and outed the imposter. The original Herman was returned to the fair in 1979. By 1982, the sturgeon had become such a popular attraction, the *Statesman Journal* reported, that “the fair officially opened when Herman the sturgeon was unceremoniously dumped into a State Fair pool” after a speech by Governor Vic Atiyeh.

On May 1, 1983, Herman, estimated to be nearing a hundred, was stolen from the Roaring River Fish Hatchery and was never found. On May 11, the Bonneville Fish Hatchery delivered a six-foot-long, thirty-year-old sturgeon named Herman II to Roaring River, and he had his first appearance at the state fair that summer. The decades-long sturgeon exhibit ended when Herman II died during the fair in 1990. Other fish and an orphaned fawn in the exhibit also died that year, which brought to an end live wildlife displays at the Oregon State Fair. Herman did make an appearance at subsequent fairs, but as a human in a Herman costume.

In 1998, ODFW partnered with the Oregon Wildlife Foundation to build a home at the Bonneville Fish Hatchery for a Columbia River sturgeon—the third Herman the Sturgeon. The foundation raised over \$350,000 to build an 85,000-gallon bedrock and plexiglass tank with an enclosed viewing area. In 2024, at a birthday party for Herman, held each June since 2018, Tim Greseth, the director of the Oregon Wildlife Foundation, praised the Sturgeon Viewing and Interpretive Center for motivating visitors to become “advocates for cleaner water, cooler water, and better environments for everybody.”

Sources

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