



Transcript
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Michigan Radio Stateside Interview with Mark Harvey and Dan Austin | Fish Car

Cynthia Canty: You might have heard the phrase, "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bike." But, did you know, in the 1880s, leaders in Michigan decided that, in our state, fish needed a train? It's Wednesday! Time to talk our state's history with our partners at the Michigan History Center, and of course, today we are happy to welcome back State Archivist Mark Harvey. So Mark, a fish train? Really?

Mark Harvey: Yeah, a fish train.

Cynthia Canty: What was going on in Michigan for the folks in Lansing to say, "We need a fish train"?

Mark Harvey: This was before there were any state departments, there were just commissions. So, we had the Michigan Fish Commission. And this is right at the tail end of our logging boom, when Michigan was a leader in providing pine lumber for the country. So, all that logging activity had really degraded the landscape and had done a number on our pristine rivers. So that, combined with this east coast sportsman named Charles Hallock, he published a book in 1873 called *The Fishing Tourist*, and he devoted an entire chapter in that book on his trip to Michigan, and the wonders of angling for this peculiar fish called the grayling that not too many people knew about. And Michigan instantly became a hotspot for sportsmen, and you combined the logging degradation with sportsmen now flocking to Michigan to fish with pretty much little regulation.

Cynthia Canty: So there was kind of a supply and demand problem?

Mark Harvey: Yeah, it was so popular that the Grand Rapids-Indiana railroad renamed themselves "The Fishing Line" just to appeal to sportsmen. So, it created a resource problem.

Cynthia Canty: Ok, so they needed to get fish out there into the waters? Why would a fish train be the best way to do that?

Mark Harvey: The soundest scientific method of repopulating fish was through the hatchery system, and as early as 1867, private individuals were rearing fish. The state caught up on that in the 1870s and opened their own hatchery buildings. It was not cost effective, though, to open up a hatchery in every county. We have 83 counties, so simple economics meant that we have to have a few hatcheries and distribute the fish from there. You couldn't do that by horse and carriage. That's not efficient. This is pre-automobile, and even when we had the automobile, we didn't have the infrastructure to distribute the automobile. So, rail was the only option.

Cynthia Canty: So the fish train car: Tell us about that. How was it designed?

Mark Harvey: The first one was commissioned in 1888, and the fish commissioners contracted with the Litchfield Car Company out of Illinois, and they built a custom railcar. It was a baggage car that they converted for transporting fish. So, you know, it had sleeping berths, it had room for milk cans of the fish fingerlings for distribution. It's very similar to what I've read about logging camps. You know, there was a cook, and they traveled around the state. They usually averaged around 25,000-30,000 miles a year, and they would just connect with existing passenger lines and be one of many cars, and they would be dropped off at different points around the state to distribute the fish.

Cynthia Canty: So this was a full time thing? This wasn't just "We're going to send them out, do it, and we're done"?

Mark Harvey: Yeah, it was every year starting in 1888. There was a succession of three different railcars and it ended in 1937.

Cynthia Canty: Why? What brought about the end for the fish train?

Mark Harvey: By 1937, we had our second actual fish car, the "Wolverine," which was a converted Pullman car. In '37, that car served its usefulness, and the expense of commissioning a new one versus the fact that we now have a really good road system and trucks that can handle large loads, it was more cost-effective to distribute by automobile than by rail.

Cynthia Canty: Does the fish train car still exist? Can people see it?

Mark Harvey: So, it was scrapped in 1937. The actual interior components of the Wolverine, the people that worked on the train were so passionate about it, they saved the interior components and installed them in the employee's dormitory of the Parris

State Fish Hatchery. They could still live in the car in their dormitory. Then, between 1998 and 2002, the DNR and MSU worked on a project to recreate a replica of the Wolverine at the Odin State Fish Hatchery, so people can go there and see a replica of it based on the actual components of the Wolverine. The original components, after they were taken out of the Parris State Fish Hatchery dormitory, were donated to the state museum, and it's currently on display in the special exhibit, The River That Changed the World, until July 29th, 2018. So, sort of yes and yes.

Cynthia Canty: But it certainly does seem that these fish traveled in style in their fish cans.

Mark Harvey: Well, I don't know about "in style," they were in converted milk cans and they would have to be aerated so that the oxygen levels were maintained, and it was really hard work. But again, there was this fraternity on that train. They even had a designated cook that traveled with them.

Cynthia Canty: And overall, did the effort work? Were they able to stock Michigan's waterways with enough fish to keep the tourists happy?

Mark Harvey: Over time, I think the estimate now is that there have been billions of fish planted, and we still have fish hatcheries and we still propagate fish across the state. You know, starting in 1959 when organizations like Trout Unlimited sprang up, there's also, for certain rivers, the way to keep fish populations stable is to protect the habitat, not just put hatchery fish in there. It's a combination, a combined approach, and we are still doing it and it still works.

Cynthia Canty: Mark Harvey, the Michigan History Center. Thanks, Mark, for taking us down the fish train track!

Mark Harvey: Thank you!