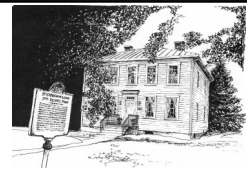


IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Paddlefish Ranching at Grand Valley: The Background Story (Part II)

Bethel, Ohio is the operational center for Big Fish Farms, and it is home for the Koerner family. Previous residents of Bellevue, Kentucky, they moved in 2013 to a 10-acre farm in Clermont County. There is a 2-acre pond which is where brood stock (females and males) live. Beside it is a pool, with water that circulates 7 times daily. This is where the newly harvested paddlefish are kept for a day before being taken to the nearby processing plant. Here the fish are humanely dispatched. The female's eggs, called berries, are removed. Once extracted, they are picked over with tweezers to remove fatty particles, then washed and cleaned, drained through a screen, and cured with salt and packed into tins. Both males and females are cut into filets to be sold as meat. The caviar is kept in a special refrigerator ready for sale. A pet food company picks up the carcasses, wasting nothing. Other byproducts are used for compost and gardening purposes. Additionally the Koerners have an orchard and a large garden. They raise ducks and chickens and sell free range eggs.

Big Fish Farms had 1000 acres under contract at one time, but it currently ranches about 600 acres. There are 3 lakes in Ohio and 2 in Kentucky. Interestingly, all the lakes have an eagle presence. A typical annual harvest is 300 – 500 paddlefish. Koerner does not reveal the locations of most lakes. When the paddlefish are young, catfish and heron can be predators. As they grow larger, this problem diminishes. The fish can exercise in a natural environment and consume products of the lake. At maturity (about 10 years old) a female fish which weighs 40 pounds and is about 4 feet long will provide 2 or 2½ pounds of caviar. The largest paddlefish Renee has ever harvested was 80 or 90 pounds – huge! She had to be brought into the processing room in the bucket of family tractor. Labor is seasonal and about 4 -5 people are employed as crew during fall and winter months. Renee keeps careful notes of all her activities so that those who follow her when she retires from “reservoir ranching” will be successful.



Paddlefish at Grand Valley

Multiple agencies are involved. The USDA and the FDA are governing bodies for food production. The Department of Natural Resources in Ohio and Kentucky regulate the aquaculture process and transportation permits. Propagation permits for the key (fish babies) are necessary. And there are special authorizations for gear like nets and hauling large fish. For almost 20 years, Renee Koerner has solved various logistical issues and honed her skills as an entrepreneur in the caviar and fish business.



Big Fish Farm's caviar is dark gray to olive green in color. It is available at local eating establishments. Renee's friendship with Jean Robert de Cavel led to her caviar being at Pigall's, JR's Table (both now closed) and Le Bar au Boeuf. Mita's and the Wodka Bar have it on their menu. The former chef at Orchids who now is at the Cherokee Country Club in Atlanta orders regularly from Renee. She also supplies several restaurants in New York. The caviar is for sale at Hyde Park Gourmet and Sen in Findlay Market. Plus she ships through her website to customers all over the continental U.S. Prices range from \$60- \$360 per tin. Paddlefish meat was a hard sell early on to local chefs, but since the Pandemic, home cooks have steadily ordered it online at \$9 per pound.

The paddlefish at Grand Valley have been harvested every year since 2020. Each successive year the catch has been larger. The Village of Indian Hill received 20% of the cost of the bulk price per pound. In 2020, it was \$1802, and in 2023 it amounted to \$13,093. Total revenue to Indian Hill from paddlefish ranching thus far is over \$23,000. Grand Valley's North Lake, South Lake, and the cut through that connects them are the habitat for the fish. According to Rick Babcock, Grand Valley Preserve manager, quite a few people have seen paddlefish. They swam up beside kayaks, and once one rammed into Rick's boat. Fishermen have accidentally snagged a few. Assistant City Manager Jon West said that 331 paddlefish have been harvested, so about 660 are still swimming around Grand Valley. One additional benefit to ranching is that the water quality has improved as the fish have consumed zooplankton in it, thus filtering it. City Manager Dina Minneci stated that the project has been a public private collaborative, with benefits for both Indian Hill and Big Fish Farms. An agreement to extend this relationship until 2029 was passed in January 2024 by Council.

Renee Koerner's endeavors have shown that the Midwest is capable of a truly fine cultured caviar product. Her favorite part about the enterprise is growing food in a nontraditional way that causes no harm. The website reads “At Big Fish Farms, we are dedicated to sustainably raising and ranching the amazing American paddlefish.” And that has been accomplished. Big Fish Farms has received positive press about its slow grown free-range caviar from local and national publications. Indian Hill residents who taste Big Fish Farms delicacies might be consuming a locally grown product - a unique one from the Grand Valley Preserve.