



*Tom posing with a shipment of fresh oysters for the Milwaukee Sentinel,
February 20, 1992. Photo by Michael Sears, used with permission.*

I

The Story Behind This Book

Joe Kutchera

The story of my father's first photography exhibit—and this book—begins at his funeral in April 2016. My mother, brother, sister and I sorted through thousands of photos, selecting the best ones to display during the visitation with one board of images from each segment of his life: youth, family, travel, and work, from his many years at Empire Fish Company, a Milwaukee-based wholesale seafood distributor and retail store. At the last minute, we also decided to bring two volumes of portraits of the employees of Empire Fish that my father took during the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

Among our many family and friends who attended, Naomi Shersty, a Milwaukee-based photographer, curator, and instructor at Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design (MIAD), came as a guest of my friend Xav Leplae. She perused the two volumes of portraits and fell in love with them, especially the photos of the women with the 1960s hairdos. Naomi asked to borrow Volume One to show Debra Brehmer, gallery director at the Portrait Society Gallery. Both saw a tenderness and warmth towards the subjects that is atypical of employee portraits, especially from an owner of a company. Debra agreed to host my father's first photography exhibit—*Faces of a Fish Empire*—posthumously, along with two other Milwaukee photographers, Art Elkon and Blyth Renate Meier, five months after his passing.

My father, Tom Kutchera (1932–2016), former owner of Empire Fish and amateur photographer, created this collection of employee portraits over a period of 30 years.

Preserved in family photo albums, these portraits honor the individuals who supplied Milwaukee's numerous Friday night fish fries. Through his affable and compassionate lens, his portraits celebrate those who do not often get commemorated: the production workers behind the scenes.

Dad bought his Leica 35mm camera while serving in the U.S. Army in Germany during the mid-1950s. He taught himself photography during his two years abroad and returned to his hometown of Milwaukee to begin working in the family business, Empire Fish. He worked with his father Harold, his uncle Elmer, his aunt Mable, his cousin Jerry, as well as many other family members. He incorporated his love of photography into his work by taking portraits of Empire Fish employees from the 1960s until he retired in 1995. Sometimes he pressed the shutter after catching them mid-action or even after telling a joke in his quirky, improvisational style. And with others, he asked them to pose, more thoughtfully, but usually on their way to do something else.

Always a "Renaissance Man," Tom furthered his knowledge of photography, art, and literature outside of work by reading widely. (I remember him telling me that he learned a great deal from the eleven volumes of the Time-Life Art/Photography Collection, published in 1977.) After his retirement, Dad named himself the "Parish Photographer" at St. Benedict the Moor Parish, capturing portraits of its church council, deacon, and priest (some of which still hang in its entryway today).

Naomi Shersty curated the exhibit and the photos you see here in this book. For the opening party, we recreated the atmosphere of an Empire Fish Company picnic during the 1960s, including his photos of one such event.

The story does not end there. My father left behind a manuscript he wrote about the history of Empire Fish, based on conversations that he had with his father (my grand-

father). In reviewing it, I realized that not only did the story capture the company's history but also Milwaukee's history and the evolution of food distribution in general. For example, see the photo below of a wholesale fish delivery via sled during the late 1950s when a snowstorm shut down Milwaukee's streets. Roger Griebenow, pictured here, worked for Empire Fish for 38 years, from 1949–87.

The manuscript became a baton, passed from one generation to the next, starting as an oral history with my grandfather, then documented on the written page by my father. And finally, I edited, updated, and fact-checked the contents of this book. Thus, the collection of portraits along with the manuscript became what you now hold in your hands as well as a catalog for my dad's photo exhibit.

The story also captures the demise of commercial fishing on Lake Michigan, which has almost entirely disappeared, especially in the southern half of Lake Michigan. Empire Fish began over a century ago as an integral part of an ecosystem of fishermen and fish dealers. But today, after a century of over-fishing combined with waves of invasive species, Lake Michigan has become a "liquid desert" with a drastically reduced fish population.

Numerous invaders have appropriated the lake. During the 1940s and '50s, the eel-like sea lamprey literally sucked the life out of lake trout, like vampires dethroning a king. Billions of alewives (a fish in the herring family) proliferated in the 1950s and '60s,



Roger Griebenow delivers fish via sled during a snow storm.

edging out native fish, then washing up on beaches in pungent droves that required bulldozers to bury the mass graves of rotting carcasses. Zebra and quagga mussels native to the Dneiper River region of the Ukraine first appeared in the Great Lakes in 1989. Now these tiny bivalves carpet the bottom of the lake in the *trillions* — more than there are stars in our galaxy! The mussels filter-feed the water so well that divers who once could barely see three feet in front of them now have crystal clear viewing of Lake Michigan’s shipwrecks. The only problem is that these shellfish now cover the wrecks themselves. Mussels have literally sucked the life out of the lake, gobbling up the tiny organisms that native species used to feed on. Round gobies, native to the same places mussels originated, have joined their kin in the Great Lakes. The small but pugnacious fish have edged out natives and proved problematic in their own right. Some species have not yet established themselves in the Great Lakes, but threaten havoc from the doorstep, namely, Asian carp. Invasive species have turned the food chain upside down, and there may be no going back.

Lake Michigan is the fourth largest freshwater lake in the world by surface area, the sixth by volume. And unlike the other four Great Lakes, it is the only one situated entirely within the United States. A hundred years ago, commercial fishermen could make a living harvesting whitefish, lake perch, chubs, and lake trout from our waters — netting hundreds or even thousands of pounds of fish per day. But today, commercial fishing on Lake Michigan is all but extinct.

Jones Island, part of Milwaukee’s harbor, was once a commercial fishing hub inhabited mostly by Kashubes from the Baltic Sea, in what is today the country of Poland. Historians estimate that commercial fishing in Milwaukee began in the 1850s. The Milwaukee Harbor Commission’s 1917 annual report shows that Milwaukee’s fishing catch peaked in 1913 with 2,328,340 pounds of fish (out of a data set between 1909–16).

Overall, Lake Michigan’s commercial fishermen caught an average of 41 million pounds of fish annually during the early 1900s. But then fish stocks began to decline. By 1938, Wisconsin’s commercial fishing industry generated over 2,000 jobs but yielded only 14 million pounds of fish out of Lake Michigan a year. The last fishermen in Milwaukee, Alvin Anderson, and his son, Dan, made their final trip from Milwaukee in 2011 on their commercial fishing tug, the Alicia Rae.

At its zenith in the 1930s, Milwaukee had as many as fifty fish companies (including retail markets, wholesalers, and fishermen), which sold fish mostly from Lake Michigan and the Great Lakes. But today, Empire Fish has become an endangered species itself as one of the only remaining fish companies in Milwaukee.

My father’s photo exhibit started out as a cathartic experience for me, a creative outlet to process my father’s passing. But the further I dove into the project, the more it became an exploration of Lake Michigan’s environmental history as well as an acknowledgment of the loss of jobs and community from the many fish businesses (and fishermen) that have disappeared from its shoreline.

Local historians believe that the word “Milwaukee” comes from an Algonquian word, “Millioke,” meaning “Good/Beautiful/Pleasant Land,” and/or the Ojibwe word “omi-nowakiing,” meaning “Gathering place by the water.” These indigenous words evolved into “Milwaukie” and then into its final spelling that we know today, Milwaukee. Empire Fish once had a direct connection to the generations of commercial fishermen that gathered along Lake Michigan. But today they have all but vanished.

And so, this collection of portraits, photographs, and the history of Milwaukee’s oldest fish company serves as an artifact of a community that has passed on, as well as a testament to the dramatic change that has taken place in Lake Michigan.