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The Legend of Big Mo

Camp Waupaca was founded in 1951. The first year the counselors and campers worked on the camp grounds as well as recreating there. The first years campers rode the train from Chicago to Appleton and transferred to a bus for the rest of the journey. Camp Waupaca campers had a train car reserved for them. To be selected as one of the counselors to ride the train was known as the "Waupaca Curse". Joe Rosen and Skipper Kuklin took turns on the ride and often joined the counselors in keeping our boys out of the train cars of girls camps who were also headed for camp or Chicago. The usual trip had the following incidents; a) a soda fight, b) a sandwich stuffed in some one's face, c) an apple or orange smashed against the window, d) at least one case of motion sickness (Did you take your motion pills?), e) a moon shot out the window in Milwaukee, f) some one lost on the train for several hours, and f) either a first fist fight for the season or the last licks of summer.

What does this all have to do with Big Mo? The summer of 1952 a new nature center was established in what was a shed on the site of the craft building. One of the boys captured a small turtle and kept it there. At the end of camp he wanted to take it home, but Skipper never allowed anyone to take animals home from camp. The boy was determined that he would find his turtle the next year and carved an "M" on its back with his pocket knife before he released it into the lake.

The next year on the way to camp he kept bugging Skipper about Mo the turtle. Getting a group of the younger campers together, Skipper began the legend of Big Mo.

This is the story as I first heard it from Barry Shanoff and others.

You don't really want to find Mo this year. He was just a baby snapper when he was in the nature center. Over the winter he has grown and is now "Big Mo". He is about as big as a barrel is round with a neck as big around as the totem pole and a snapping mouth big enough to bite an arm off. If you see him in the lake, don't try to catch him.

Nate Metzger was practicing paddling with a canoe just last week and saw this huge turtle with a "M" on his back. He decided that he would try to catch it. When he chased it, instead of running or diving the turtle turned and took a bite out of the canoe paddle. When Nate began to paddle away from the turtle, the turtle chased the canoe and left an impression of his mouth in the aluminum. After chasing Nate half way across the lake, the turtle raised his head above the water and hissed and roared, then dove under.

When he came on the shore, Nate told the others of his experience and showed them the broken paddle. "We have to do something about that turtle before the campers get here," he exclaimed. So the counselors each got into a row boat or canoe and started a hunt. There was an tennis net laying near the courts. They used this to try and make a net to capture Big Mo.

Dragging the net in the water they circled the area where Big Mo had last been seen. The counselors drew the net tighter and tighter until the net started to drag them around the lake. Big Mo was in the net pulling six row boats and four canoes around the lake. "He'll get tried," someone yelled. The boats kept circling around and around the lake and going faster each time they went around. "We'll get him," Herb Beller shouted. "If we can train him we can use him to pull water skiers," Dan Martin exclaimed.

About the tenth time around Stratton Lake, the counselors were getting tired but Big Mo was still swimming strong. It seems that the turtle was getting annoyed by his human tormentors, because he tore a hole in the net with his mouth and escaped.

After that Big Mo has stayed away from people and has only come after them when they are hunting small turtles or chasing him. It seems all the small snapping turtles in Stratton Lake are his children and he means to protect them. If you see small turtles in the lake, it is best just to leave them alone. You never know when their big daddy, Big Mo is lurking near by.

Each counselor since that time that told the story of Big Mo changed it to fit the situation. I have always preferred the story as I first heard it. There were some very big snapping turtles in the lake that would sometimes be spotted. Each time this happened some young camper would claim he had seen Big Mo.

In 1957 Winfield Stern and I butchered a huge turtle that Winfield caught in Stratton Lake. He made a great turtle stew. If it was Big Mo, he was one fine turtle especially at the end. Winfield cleaned and polished the shell and displayed it on a wall.